

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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First Things First

“O Nobly Born, O you of glorious origins, remember your radiant true nature.... Trust it. Return to it. It is home.”¹ This is the Tibetan Buddhist way of expressing the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: “We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every being.” The poetry was lost in translation, but we got the meaning right. And here's Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk: “Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that *each one is* in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”

Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, Catholic ... I could go on. And it occurs to me that I should go on, since I confess to you that, on several occasions during and after this election season, I have experienced what I would call a First Principle Emergency: a failure to see the inherent worth and dignity of every being, let alone to affirm and promote it. Even when people vote against their best interests, I really do know better than to say that they're stupid. Our intern minister, Rebecca Froom, says her partner's mom has a sign on her refrigerator that says, “I am a Quaker. In case of emergency, be quiet.”²

I've told you before that, in the 1960s, spiritual teacher Ram Dass had two photographs on his altar: one of Neem Karoli Baba, his beloved Hindu teacher; and one of Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense and a primary architect of the Vietnam War. I regret to inform you of my spiritual shortcoming, but feel that I must: there are many, many people's photographs I cannot imagine putting on my altar. Sorrowfully, I suspect that I am not alone. Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki once said to a student, “You are perfect just the way you are. And ... there is still room for improvement!” Perhaps,

¹ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

² Thanks to Alec Aman's mom, Sally!

together, we can do better.

Let's turn to Buddhist teacher and psychologist Jack Kornfield, and specifically to his book, *The Wise Heart*, a first principle bible.

Jack Kornfield tells this story³:

“In a large temple north of Thailand's ancient capital⁴, [now known as Bangkok,] there once stood an enormous ... clay Buddha. Though not the most handsome or refined work of Thai Buddhist art, it had been cared for over a period of [some seven] hundred years, ... revered for its sheer longevity. Violent storms, changes of government, and invading armies had come and gone, but the Buddha endured.

“[In the 1950s], however, the monks who tended the temple noticed that the statue had begun to crack.... After a stretch of particularly hot, dry weather, one of the cracks became so wide that a curious monk took [a] flashlight and peered inside. What shone back at him was a flash of brilliant gold.⁵ Inside this plain old statue, the temple residents discovered one of the largest ... most luminous gold images of [the] Buddha ever created in Southeast Asia: five [and a half] tons of solid gold. Now uncovered, the golden Buddha draws throngs of devoted pilgrims from all over [the world].”

Here is Jack Kornfield's commentary: “In much the same way, each of us has encountered threatening situations that lead us to cover our innate [goodness. Just as the golden Buddha had been forgotten,] we, too, have forgotten our essential nature. Much of the time we operate from the protective layer.” Today, I invite you to join me in a consideration of looking and seeing beneath the shell – shining a light through the crack in the armor – and so expressing our inherent worth and dignity, and honoring that of others.

Robert Johnson, a Jungian analyst, says it is difficult for many of us to *believe* in our goodness; we'd sooner let our worst fears and thoughts define us. He writes, “Curiously, people resist the noble aspects of their shadow more strenuously than they hide the dark sides.... It is more disrupting to find that you have a profound nobility of character than to find out [you're] a bum.” We are *so much more* than frightened and damaged, but “our

3 Thanks to Jack Kornfield for this sermon! All quotations from Jack Kornfield are from his book *The Wise Heart*, excerpted in Melvin McLeod, *The Best Buddhist Writing 2009*, pp. 1-11

4 Thailand's ancient capital was called Sukhothai.

5 Another less romantic story has it that the statue was being relocated to Wat Traimit and fell from the crane, revealing the gold.

belief in a limited and impoverished identity is such a strong habit that, without it, we are afraid we wouldn't know how to be.” To express the truth of our inherent worth, to live in celebration of others' inherent dignity, would change us radically ... and change the world. You know these prophetic words from spiritual activist Marianne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, ... talented, fabulous? Actually, who are [we] *not* to be?”

“You are a child of G*d. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of G*d that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in every [one of us]. And as we let our own light shine, we ... give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence ... liberates others.”⁶

To honor our own and others' inherent worth and dignity does not include ignoring deficits. To respond to a First Principle Emergency does not include making ourselves “foolishly vulnerable to unstable and perhaps violent individuals.” To begin, we can simply acknowledge suffering – suffering from ignorance and fear, or, as Buddhists express it, suffering from “greed, hatred, and delusion.” And then some fundamental shift in perspective is in order.

One way to shift perspective is to imagine a person as a small child – vulnerable, and perhaps frightened. This is a practice that takes a tremendous amount of willingness, and courage. When my wife, Kem, was determined to move beyond the wreckage of her father's ruinous, ruined life, she meditated with an image of him as a small boy. This was during a three-day retreat; she sat and sat, through the terrible storm of feelings with the faith that the child – the innocence, the vulnerability, the gold beneath the armor – is there in all people, if we are willing to shine our light and see. At last, her heart opened in compassion.

When she returned home, she found an astonishing message on the answering machine. Inexplicably, her father had emerged from his long estrangement, and was looking for her.

“If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement in unhealthy states,”

6 Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*

said the Buddha, “I would not teach you to do so. But just because it *is* possible to free the heart from entanglement in unhealthy states do I offer these teachings.”

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, whose wife and parents died in the Nazi genocide, wrote, “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances....”

When we meet other human beings and honor their inherent worth and dignity, Jack Kornfield writes, “we help those around us. Their hearts resonate with ours in exactly the same way the strings of an unplucked violin vibrate with the sounds of a violin played nearby. Western psychology has documented this phenomenon of 'mood contagion' or limbic resonance. If a person filled with panic or hatred walks into a room, we feel it immediately, and, ... that person's ... [negativity can] begin to overtake ... [us]. When a joyfully expressive person walks into a room, we can feel that state, as well; ... when we see the goodness of those before us, ... [their worth and dignity] resonates with [our own]....” Nelson Mandela said, “It never hurts to think too highly of a person; often, they become ennobled and act better because of it.”

Resonance. Jack Kornfield continues, “In India, when people greet one another, they put their palms together and bow, saying *namaste*, [meaning] 'I honor the divine within you.' ... 'I see what is holy in you.’” I see the gold shining beneath the armor of clay. “When we bring respect ... to those around us, we open a channel to their ... goodness.... When we [honor] what is holy in another, ... we transform their hearts.”

This is how the Dalai Lama moves through the world. He invites us to do likewise. Several years ago, just before His Holiness left a hotel in San Francisco to return to India, he told the management that he'd like to thank the hotel staff in person – “as many as would like to meet him.... On the last morning, a long line of [housekeepers] ... and dishwashers, cooks and maintenance [workers] ... secretaries and managers ... [gathered in the] circular driveway at the hotel entrance.... [His motorcade waited while the Dalai Lama] walked down the [long] line of employees, lovingly touching each hand, vibrating the strings of each heart.”

My spiritual companions, “O Nobly Born, O you of glorious origins, remember your radiant true nature.... Trust it. Return to it. It is home.” Finding a crack in the clay armor and shining a light onto a person's inherent worth and dignity is a spiritual discipline, a spiritual practice. When we experience a First Principle Emergency, let's

engage that radical vision. It is not easy, but it is possible. Let us press our palms together, and seek to honor the sacred in every being. And may our liberation liberate others.