

## The First Principle Project – by Nikki J Hunt

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For the past several years, a group of UUs has been working to officially change our first principle from “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” to “the inherent worth and dignity of every being.” This group formed the First Principle Project and are working their way through the UUA steps for amending our bylaws. This June at General Assembly, delegates will vote on whether or not to send this proposal to a 1-2 year study commission.

What does it mean to be human in a multi-species world? In many ways, this question is at the epicenter of the First Principle Project. Changing our first principle from “every person” to “every being” is much more than a shift of one word. This simple change invites us into a deeper, more complex conversation about what it means to be human, how we understand the divine, and why we are here.

When I was five, my mother taught me how to catch butterflies. There were patches of clover in the stretch of green between the apartment buildings where we lived. She said I had to be able to be very still on the outside and on the inside too. I remember the first time I caught a butterfly. I was thrilled, feeling the soft flutter of wings on my palms. I could open my fingers a crack and peek inside. Sitting there in the sun, smiling at my accomplishment, the soft fluttery touches slowly drew me in until I was able to really feel the little life between my hands.

And I realized how frightened it must be! My mother had warned me not to touch its wings or it might not be able to fly, and not to hold it too long. But once I connected with the butterfly as a being and not just an entertainment, I could no longer ignore its fear. Then I understood why I had to let it go. Over the next few weeks I caught a few more, but eventually the joy I felt in this new skill paled in comparison to the echo of pain and fear I felt in the desperate flutter of butterfly wings.

I learned some important lessons about being human that day, beyond realizing that I could feel a connection with insects as well as with my mother and other humans. I learned what it felt like to hold the power of life or death in my hands. And I learned that power comes with responsibility.

We live in a tumultuous time. Many of us are challenging the system of domination with its reliance on power-over. Many of us are working to shift away from a world rooted in oppression to a world where flourishing is nurtured for all—for individual humans, for human communities, and for the earth and all the many beings that live here with us.

Much of the chaos and crises that explode across the daily headlines are directly connected to this struggle to birth something new.

Because this something new would benefit everyone, we have a hard time understanding why anyone would stand against this ideal. Why would anyone be against flourishing for everyone?

I offer that the difference goes back to what we believe about human nature. Are we humans basically good or are we basically bad? How we answer this question leads to very different societies.

If we believe that humans are basically bad, then things like obedience-based education, and punishment-rooted criminal justice make sense. In this world view, human nature needs to be firmly and clearly controlled, and it is a lack of appropriate and adequate control that results in poverty, drug use, crime, homelessness, and all of the other problems of our modern world.

If we believe humans are basically good, then obedience and punishment smothers and harms the divine spark born in each of us.

My understanding of human nature basically arises out of a mix of what is called process theology, and science. Process theology says that we are all a part of divinity and, as such, are co-creators with God. This means that we all play a part in creating this world every day. Process theologian Catherine Keller says, "In the image of the creator we are invited to a creative responsibility—an ability to respond in appreciative relation to the others, human and nonhuman. To respond not just dutifully but resourcefully, in the flow of creativity and in the beauty of grace."

Unitarian Universalists also value science as one of the sources that informs our understanding humanity. So what does science say about human nature? From what I have read, on the whole, we humans are born with the potential for both good and evil. The relationships we develop and the environment we collectively create plays a large role in whether we act for the good of others or whether we act in ways that harm and oppress others.

In *Trauma & Evil: Healing the Wounded Soul* minister and psychologist Jeffery Means says, "While the embryonic self is innate and ordinarily contains the capacity to organize experience, it requires a matrix of relationships within which to develop and mature to its potential. This means that the structuralization of the human mind grows out of human

relationships... Relationships and connection with others is more basic and necessary for our survival and development than is pleasure”.

I learned one beautiful way of summing this up from Rev. Ben McBride at a PICO training last year. He shared with us a part of traditional Zulu culture. In greeting each other one would say “I see you.” And the traditional response is “Because you see me, I exist.” This understanding of our interdependence is reflected in our seventh UU principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Which brings me back to that butterfly and our first principle. I am called to use the power that I have responsibly. We are all called to use our power responsibly. Our UU principles exist as a guide for how we can do this. It is subtle, but the inherent worth and dignity of every *person* elevates humanity above other forms of life.

I see in this an unconscious reflection of the power-over domination model that permeates our society. This is the model that gives humans dominion over the world, and we have seen how well this dominion has fared—it has given us poisoned water in Flint Michigan, the Tar Sands wastelands in Canada, massive species extinction, and more. This model is also the model that supports some humans having power-over other humans which we see in racism, sexism, classism, homophobia. It is a model rooted in fear and obsessed with control.

Speaker and writer Winona La Duke says, “One of our people in the Native community said the difference between white people and Indians is that Indian people know they are oppressed but don’t feel powerless. White people don’t feel oppressed, but feel powerless. Deconstruct that disempowerment. Part of the mythology that they’ve been teaching you is that you have no power. Power is not brute force and money; power is in your spirit. Power is in your soul. It is what your ancestors, your old people gave you. Power is in the earth; it is in your relationship to the earth.”

What would our world look like if we stopped believing we are powerless? What might we create if we used power-with to grow a world where everyone’s divine spark was supported and nurtured? What would our world look like if we saw nature as our partner instead of our competitor?

First Principle Project Director Rev. LoraKim Joyner says, “This work of living out our principles is never easy, for our principles are not an acceptance of the reality under which we live with imperfect justice and compassion, but a vision for which we ache and long.”

When we open up and let go of trying to control the world—that is where co-creation begins. Words matter. Changing our first principle from “every person” to “every being” would open us up to a sharing of power—with each other, with the earth and with the divine. What will you create today?