

INHERENT WORTH AND DIGNITY

These days my thoughts during the work week tend to be consumed by Family Mediation. Part of the reason for this is that I am now doing more of it, both because of the sheer amount of time I spend each week at the Welland courthouse, where I work out of the inhouse mediation office, and because I have taken on a relatively large number of cases. I am now in a position where I spend a significant amount of time interacting with a lot of people I would not have in the past.

Family mediation has proven to be quite a bit more challenging than I had originally thought. Working with people is always more demanding than any course or practice session can teach you. You are faced with real-life situations and reactions that are sometimes totally foreign to you. It takes a long time to learn how to handle them so that you can maintain control over the mediation. I find this particularly difficult because I have no background in counselling or therapy; my background is in law but, to complicate matters further, I am not a lawyer, so I am quite limited as to how I can use my knowledge of the law. What I mean by that is that I am not allowed to give clients anything that resembles legal advice, even though I am expected to provide legal information to them; this is tricky and rather like walking a tightrope.

More challenging are the people I deal with on a daily basis. Welland is in the poorer part of the Niagara Region so the clients we cater to are either chronically unemployed or underemployed, have a family history as social assistance recipients, addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, mental

health issues, sometimes criminal activity, frequently Children's Aid Society involvement in their families or their own lives...in short, poverty and all its effects are the hallmarks of the lives of many of the people I work with. Coming from what I characterize as a middle class background and having led a somewhat sheltered life, most of these things are quite unfamiliar to me. My lack of knowledge and experience with these things are a distinct disadvantage for me.

As a Unitarian, I am committed to the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. I believe that my life and the lives of these people are interwoven into the same web. Everyone is my neighbour, as in "love thy neighbour". I don't believe that they are "other," that they are scum of the earth and deserve to have the problems that they have because they are lazy or shiftless and have just brought these problems on themselves. I feel compassion for these people and I want to help them. I don't blame them for the lives they lead and I try to be understanding, holding the notion that "there but for the Grace of God, go I". These sentiments come out of my Sociology background as well as I spent many years being taught and mentored by left-wing, social-activist professors, one of whom left me with the lasting thought: "There is no *them*, it's all *us*".

That said, I, like many of my middle-class counterparts at the courthouse, struggle with the attempt to reconcile our helping roles with the actual people we are trying to help. Our clients are often querulous, cantankerous, and ill-mannered. They behave in ways that are contrary to what many of us have been taught is appropriate. For instance, I have heard many people emerge from a free 20-minute session with a Family

Law Advice lawyer grumbling, "Well, *that* was a waste of time!" If they have to wait longer than they would like to, they get huffy and let you know in no uncertain terms that they feel offended by the "lack" of service they are receiving. I have witnessed occasions when people come out of the Legal Aid office, having been turned down for funding because they do not fit the criteria, shouting at the poor clerk who is not responsible for setting the standards, "So what am I supposed to do now?"

Many mediation clients do not show up for their appointments and don't bother to contact me to let me know they cannot or do not wish to come, even after I have made a special effort to accommodate their schedules. Many do not respond when I call them and leave messages. Some of them try to use me to further their own cases, even though they are explicitly informed that mediation is not to serve that end. When I try to make an appointment for them during the times I am working at the mediation office, they become impatient and agitated, letting me know that that time does not fit their schedules. They make no effort to try to rearrange their schedules even after I tell them that I simply do not have any alternative times or dates. The unspoken message I feel that I am getting is: *you fix it for me, you make it happen.*

A statement I once read while I was researching a paper on social inequality as a student often echoes through my mind: *poverty impoverishes people as **people**.* It's not ennobling in any way. It's not the Waltons sitting around the family table on their mountain during the Depression, all loving and supportive and rising above their lowly conditions. Being poor diminishes people as human beings. They are less

caring of others and more self-interested – probably because their experience of society is that others don't care about them. They don't want to accommodate authority figures because authority often works against their interests. They have little or no stake in the system so they don't care about fitting in and working within the confines of that system. Of course, these are sweeping generalizations that do not apply to all poor people. They don't even apply to all of the people I deal with in mediation. But they do represent patterns that appear in my experience and can be cause for frustration and anxiety. I am trying to help them but they are, rather perversely, working against me.

Just as with Family Mediation, I used to think that the Unitarian Universalist principles were easy to adhere to. I was so wrong! The first principle is the most basic upon which, arguably, the remainder are built and it is the most demanding to live up to. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each individual. Inherent worth means each individual, because he or she is a human being, is born with the same value. No one has to do anything to earn this. No one can lose it, no matter what they do.

This idea is surely rooted in the Judeo-Christian notion that we are all God's children. The Enlightenment reinforced that we are all born equal. The French fought a revolution to establish that principle in their society. It is an important notion to those of us in the West. No one of us is better than the other as a human being. But it is extremely difficult to practice. Especially when we compare individuals. There are those whose behaviour is so reprehensible that it is hard to keep in mind that they *are* human.

Others devote their lives to such saintly acts that it's just as difficult to believe they're *just* human. Are these two categories of individuals equal in their worth? We say they are. Hitler and Gandhi had the same inherent worth...and dignity, which goes hand-in-hand with respect. Hitler and Gandhi...Luc Magnotta and Mother Theresa – they each deserve respect and they are equal in their worth. It is incredibly challenging to even say such a thing because it goes against the grain. It feels kind of irritating, in a way. However, no matter how much we may admire or despise what they do in their lives, our first principle calls us to recognize that their *lives* are worth the same, even if their actions are not. Our first principle obliges us to do whatever we can to help those whose dignity has been damaged by the conditions they have had to live with, to do what we need to do to help them restore it.

My sociology background informs my Unitarian beliefs by helping me to see that each and every human being comes into this world as an innocent babe and is thereafter significantly shaped by the conditions under which they live, how they are raised, the people that interact with them, the society and its rules and regulations for them, and so many other factors. They learn to be the individuals they become. Society may construe to diminish their dignity but they fight back. We *all* fight to maintain some kind of sense of self-worth, even if it's founded on negative ideals (e.g., I'm meaner than a junkyard dog. Or I am the best rip-off artist around.). No matter how much we hate what they do or have no tolerance for it, we still have to bear in mind that they deserve to be respected as human beings and they have the same worth as we do. As Unitarians, we can never forget that foundational first principle because it means that we

continue to stand up for others as well as ourselves. We strive to improve social conditions so that all of us can better our own lives and our children's lives so we can live up to our true potential. The first principle reminds us to do what we can to enrich people as human beings because that benefits all of us in the web of existence.

It also inspires us to believe in redemption. Because we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even those whose behaviour is shameful and dishonorable, we have the hope that they can be redeemed, with the right assistance and intervention, we may be able to help them lift themselves out of the conditions that contribute to their actions and give them the ability to change their behaviour for the better.

Finally, I think the first principle's primary importance is that it fosters *care* in us. It calls upon us to keep caring about people, no matter who or what they are. No matter how frustrated, irritated, "shocked and appalled", if we believe in that principle, we can never turn our backs on people and write them off. We must keep them within our circle of care.