



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Do I have to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of everyone?

Clay Nelson © 2 August 2020

I confess I'm having a crisis of faith. Our first UU principle affirms and promotes "the inherent worth and dignity of every person". Reverence and respect for human nature is at the core of Unitarian Universalist faith. It is a noble thought, but my problem is the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

I relate to Calvin as he rages at Hobbes, "It's hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning!" Of course, Jonathan Edwards, a British colonial hellfire and brimstone preacher never bought into the idea in the first place. In his sermon to his American congregation "In the hands of an angry God," he warned, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire." I'd be tempted to channel Edwards except Unitarians gave up believing in hell a long time ago. I'm not certain that was wise. There are times I miss having a hell to which to consign people like "the president who shall not be named".

He would of course not be the only one, he just represents all those who see in him an affirmation of their misogyny, racism, corruption, bullying and just general nastiness. They show no reverence and respect for their neighbour, why should they receive any? To hell with them.

As I was working up a good head of steam over how satisfying it would be to roast them, Rachel pointed me to a review in *The Atlantic* of Aaron Sorkin's play, a dramatization of Harper Lee's classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She had tickets to see it during an all-expenses paid trip courtesy of the International Trade Union Confederation to New York City, but then Covid happened, aborting the trip.

The first line of Aaron Sorkin's stage adaptation is one of quiet confusion. "Something didn't make sense," Scout Finch tells the audience. Sorkin's dramatization is an unexpectedly probing work that refuses to let an American classic go unchallenged. Instead, it stages two trials: One is from the book, in which Scout's attorney father, Atticus Finch, defends Tom Robinson, an African American man accused of rape in 1930s Alabama, and tries to combat the community's entrenched racism.

In Sorkin's play, the other trial is of Atticus' own nobility, and how it doesn't always square with his grander vision of justice. Sorkin uses Scout, her brother Jem, and their friend Dill to cast a wary eye over some

of the book's more idealistic details. That framing encourages the audience to ponder the limits of Atticus's impulse to empathise even with vile racists such as Bob Ewell, a man who's trying to pin his own assault of his daughter Mayella on Tom Robinson.

An important difference between the novel and the play is who the protagonist is. In the book it is Scout. In the play it is Atticus. The problem for Sorkin was that a protagonist has to have a flaw that changes them. In the book Scout's flaw is that she's young, and the change is that she loses some of her innocence. In the play Sorkin wanted Atticus to be a traditional protagonist, so he needed to change and have a flaw ...

It turned out that Harper Lee had already given him one; it's just that when we all read the book in school, it was taught as a virtue. It's that Atticus believes that goodness can be found in everyone. It allows him to excuse such things as bigotry and cruelty. By the end of the play, he realises he doesn't know his friends and neighbours as well as he thought he did, and that it may not be true that goodness can be found in everyone.

Early on in the play, Bob Ewell comes to the Finch house and threatens Atticus, saying, "We've got two ropes." And Jem, Atticus's son, comes out and says, "You want me to respect Bob Ewell?" And he says, "Yeah, there's good in everyone."

There's a scene in the book and in the movie. At the end of the trial, Atticus has lost, he's putting stuff back in his briefcase, and the whole courtroom has cleared out, except for what they call the "coloured section" up in the balcony. Atticus turns around to see that they're all standing silently out of respect for him, and someone says to Scout, "Stand up, Miss Jean Louise; your daddy's passing."

Sorkin argues that the people in the balcony should be burning the courthouse down. They should be out in the street chanting, "No justice, no peace!" Instead, they are docile; they are quietly respecting the guy who I most identify with in the story, the guy who seems like my father, the white liberal guy. We all want to be identified as one of the good ones, and that's what they're saying to Atticus. And I do think Atticus is one of the good ones — it's just a little harder than that.

The play captures the limits of empathy. It has a dark side.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759, Adam Smith observes that when we see someone harmed by another, we feed off their desire for vengeance: "We are rejoiced to see [them] attack [their] adversary in [their] turn, and eager and ready to assist [them]." Even if they die, our imagination does the trick: "We enter, as it were, into [their] body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the

deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, [and] bring home in this manner [their] case to our bosoms.”

In research published by the psychologists Anneke Buffone and Michael Poulin, they found that more empathic people were more aggressive when exposed to the suffering of strangers.

In another study, subjects were first measured for their degree of empathy. They were then told awful stories, about journalists kidnapped in the Middle East, about child abuse in the United States. And then they were asked how best to respond to those responsible for the suffering. The study found the more empathic people are, the more they want a harsher punishment.

Politicians are comfortable exploiting this dark side of empathy. There is a history of this sort of thing. Lynchings in the American South were often sparked by stories of white women who were assaulted by blacks, and anti-Semitic attacks prior to the Holocaust were often motivated by tales of Jews preying on innocent German children. Who isn't enraged by someone who hurts a woman or a child?

Prior to my present crisis of faith I could live in my head and take pride in my scoring very high on scales for empathy, oblivious to its dark side. Reluctantly, my intuition tells me that Adam Smith and the research are right. I'm not happy about it. Being more aggressive due to my empathy does not jive with believing myself more like the noble Atticus Finch who sees inherent worth and dignity in everyone than those who I would like to see become lightning rods. But there it is. Our human nature is worthy of reverence and respect EXCEPT when it isn't. If our human nature always affirmed and promoted the inherent worth and dignity of every person, including ourselves, it wouldn't be a matter of faith. It wouldn't have to be stated. It would just be universally recognised as true. And in that case, the world would be a much better place.