

# OUR WORDS, OUR DEEDS

Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Presentation

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## OPENING WORDS

**Change** - by Thea Voutiritsas

*“If there’s one thing that’s guaranteed in life, it’s that change is inevitable. Whether we’ve planned for it or not, life has a way of surprising us. The best we can do ... is take those unexpected turns as opportunities for personal growth, self-reflection, and new beginnings.”*

## WORDS FOR REFLECTION

**Rebirth** by Alex Elle.

*“There will be moments when you will bloom fully and then wilt, only to be born again. If we can learn anything from flowers it is that resilience is born even when we feel like we are dying.”*

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This is the day we make resolutions; try to start anew with a clean slate. I find, as perhaps do some of you, that my resolutions are well meant but often soon forgotten. So rather than pretend that I am really going to exercise every day, loose 20 lbs., and clean up ALL the files in my computer I thought perhaps a more general and foundational set of “I will’s” would be a better choice. Therefore, the subject of this talk is about the words in our service, what they mean and how can we make them real. I have chosen our **welcome statement**, because it seems like a wonderful summary of what we are all about.

*“We welcome all who seek a liberal religious experience.  
We affirm the worth and dignity of everyone.  
We advocate for the freedom of belief, and  
we encourage the open search for truth.”*

There are important words in this statement, such as: **welcome, liberal, worth and dignity, freedom, and truth**. However, I suspect

that, like me, you may be so used to hearing them that we don't think about their original meaning or their path to us.

For instance, the word **WELCOME** comes from old English **willa**, and meant *pleasure* which was combined with **cuma**, the word for *guest*. So together welcome meant *a guest that will give pleasure*.

I think we actually do this. We are welcoming. And we take pleasure in being open about who we are. We try not to be judgmental. Our lack of dogma helps us to be this way. (*I will let you be you if you will let me be me.*) We are genuinely interested in one another's views and values. We get pleasure in one another's company. We seek harmony; and whatever else we may be or may believe, we are all humanists.

The word **LIBERAL** comes from the Latin word: **liber** which meant *free*, and also *book*; so it meant *suitable for a freeman who has the time to be literate and educated* as compared to the word **servus** which addressed the requirement to work, as a peasant: ie *in service to....*

What does Liberal mean in today's world? Liberalism is typically defined in terms of the primacy of individual liberty. This embodies 2 concepts: **individualism** and **liberty**. As core principles, these apply to all humans; they are **universal**. This in turn supports the idea that every person has an innate moral **equality** by virtue of being human. Universalism also supports the concept of **pluralism** which is a commitment to the toleration of diversity of belief and culture.

Political Liberalism is based on the rights of the individual, as well as equality before the law based on the consent of the governed. In practice **LIBERALISM** often is implemented where Community Needs rule over the Individual's needs. Conservatives call this **SOCIALISM**.

The words **WORTH & DIGNITY** have similar meanings but different sources. **WORTH** comes from the Proto-Indo-European word **wert** which meant *valuable*. While dignity comes from Latin **dignitas** which meant to have merit, to be honored, respected.

Our open approach to the individual search for truth, speaks loudly to the importance of the words 'worth and dignity.' We are each free to take the religious path we chose. We support one another in those

quests. We do not denigrate different approaches or conclusions. We see an inherent worth in such pursuit. We recognize each other as equal humans that deserve respect, and thereby, we honor each other.

The word **FREEDOM** comes from the old English **freedom** where **freo** meant *the state of free-will (not enslaved) as well as a connection to other people by bonds of kinship or affection*. **Dom** meant *territory, as in king-dom*. Together the word meant *free from dominion or serfdom*.

Again, I see this as very much us. We value the worth of others' beliefs; we recognize the right to freely express who we are as individuals. Accept, for this right of religious freedom, we do not require any other steadfast beliefs to which we all must adhere.

And finally, **Truth**. This comes from the proto-Indo-European **dreu** meaning *firm, solid, steadfast, faithful*. If we have any religious dogma it is the firm belief that we each have the right to seek TRUTH as we understand it. There is not **a Truth** or **the Truth**, there is simply Truth, as we each see it. This is the religious freedom we celebrate.

These six words seem to me to be critical in defining who we are.

While the word CONSERVATIVE is not in our welcoming statement, I felt I should at least try to give equal time and thought to the concept of CONSERVATISM. Republican congressman Mike Johnson's web site lists 7 Core Principles:

1. Individual Freedom;
2. Limited Government;
3. The Rule of Law;
4. Peace through Strength
5. Fiscal Responsibility;
6. Free Markets; and
7. Human Dignity

In comparing these two **isms** it is noteworthy that they appear to agree on at least 3 important principles: Individual Freedom & Liberty; Human Equality & Dignity; and Universalism.

An obvious difference appears to be that Liberals are more Socially focused and Conservatives are more Capitalistically oriented. However,

when one looks more closely, the interpretation of defining words can really influence how these isms are actually implemented. Here are a few of the specifics and my review of the Conservative point of view.

1. **INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM** – this is the unalienable right of life, liberty, the free exercise of religion, the ability to own property, build wealth and to defend ourselves and our families. *Review: This seems to undermine the premise that we are a Christian Nation while emphasizing the importance of power which is often used as a tool to enforce fundamental Christian dogmas.*
2. **LIMITED GOVERNMENT** - Legitimate government operates only by the consent of the governed and its purpose is to secure the individual freedoms in the least intrusive way possible and at the most local level possible. *Review: We must ask what is least intrusive, where & when is intrusion applied, & for what reasons?*
3. **THE RULE OF LAW** - To maintain ordered, liberty and a civilized society, virtue should be encouraged and justice administered equally with transparency and accountability being keys to good government. *Review: Where is the transparency or accountability?*
4. **PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH** – The primary obligation of the federal government is to provide for the common defense. *Review: The key word here is ‘defense’ but as the saying goes “the best defense is a strong offence” so this word can be and is often misleading.*
5. **FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY** – Reduce the national debt, balance the federal budget, evaluate and update entitlements, eliminate fraud, promote pro-growth tax reforms and permanent tax reductions. *Review: This also sounds good but these words are frequently ignored or interpreted in ways that are grossly unfair.*
6. **FREE MARKETS** – Keep government out markets and trade. Allow innovation and economic expansion to create more jobs and upward mobility. *Review: There is no recognition of the damage from Greed which must be controlled for the good of all.*

7. **HUMAN DIGNITY** –Every human life has dignity and value; every person should be judged by their character. Marriage and family are primary institutions of society of which religion and morality are vital cultural components. Public education should emphasize the virtue of hard work as a pathway out of poverty, and everyone who plays by the rules should get a fair shot. Review: *Whose definition of marriage, whose morality, whose rules, and what is the definition of character and fairness.*

I would add an 8<sup>th</sup>:

8. **STABILITY** – Revere the past and the status quo and oppose change. Preserve what we have. Review: *Not all change is good but the idea that change shouldn't happen is blind to facts of nature. One can't support growth and not support change.*

My suspicion is that most, if not all, of you know from experience how these conservative definitions have been implemented in ways that belie their apparent stated intent. And therein lies the rub.

However, I am not a LIBERAL; Sandy will deny this vehemently. Nor am I a CONSERVATIVE. I have beliefs that fit in both camps.

- I had my own business and I believe that HARD WORK will be rewarded but I don't think everyone gets a FAIR SHOT.
- I think that government should be as unintrusive as is reasonably possible but I know that greed for Wealth and Power is destructive to many individual freedoms.
- I think all individuals have inherent worth as humans and therefore have a moral dignity but I also believe that Good Community (i.e., Government) is necessary to protect everyone's rights.
- And I believe there are things in our history that should be revered and protected as well as bad things that should be recognized and changed. Innovation should be encouraged and new ideas tested.

What do we do when friends or family members insist that their beliefs must apply to us all; when alternate facts are used and no rational

research is taken or accepted to validate or refute them; when important discussions yield only loud arguments and acrimony; when we see foundational elements of our democracy being undermined by the highest court in the land but we dare not discuss this, how do we act to preserve that which we know is critical to the three common core principles that both Liberals and Conservatives seem to agree on:

Individual Freedom and Liberty;  
Human Equality and Dignity; and  
Universalism?

Liberals see that these 3 core principals are being sacrificed to avoid what Conservatives see as rampant. Socialism.

Conservatives are afraid of losing their power and that their beliefs will be tossed in the trash.

As a result, there is little or no room for discussion, understanding and recognition where and how apparently incompatible values. Came to be. It seems that the only choice is to fight like hell and to forget what will be lost in the fight.

I often feel this way but actions based on this feeling come from fear and lack of understanding. Why do my Conservative friends believe what they do? Where did this come from? How is it a very real reality for them? I know that they are good people and as a humanist I must look for, find the dignity and worth they rightly deserve. I often find this unbelievably hard to do, so much so that important discussions on core value topics are now assiduously avoided. I want to have these discussions but my aggressiveness concerning facts result in a battle rather than a conversation.

A few weeks ago, Henry mentioned, I believe in his Joys and Concerns, a poem I wrote about this dilemma. I would like to read it you now.

# aren't we all kin

I just want to talk, my friend, and listen too,  
hear your thoughts, and ask of you  
where your beliefs abide, what's their form,  
then share mine to find a common norm.  
What causes this anger and belligerent hate?  
We must deal with such before 'tis too late.

It's in our nature to protect kith 'n' kin  
to oft see others as filled only with sin,  
but surely we both know this isn't true  
we all are flawed and all humans too.

Do I come across as arrogant and elite,  
do you feel I judge and am not willing to meet  
upon the field of friendly discourse  
where we can share without pain or remorse?  
The problems we both can see,  
it's the answers where we so disagree.

I must accord that the solution provides  
recognition of the needs on both sides,  
but the same must apply to you as well  
lest we each remain in our own little shell.

So join with me please, in earnest debate  
and let's see if we can defuse this terrible hate.  
I will do my best to keep an open mind,  
our job both is an agreeable path to find.  
I will really try to understand thee,  
will you try to really hear me?

Roger Wells

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And I think this Visual joke summarizes the situation as far as religious believes and freedom today.



I stopped talking to extended family members about anything that I thought was important and I decided that I would stop attending the monthly gatherings of my male friends. But these people are family and friends. I love some of them. I know that if I were in real need any



one of them would come to my aid. How am I properly recognizing their worth as human beings?

I tried the following: when the situation was calm and friendly and a logical opening for some topic of discussion presented itself, I would ask “what do you believe?” in as gentle and unaggressive way as possible, asserting that “I’m not looking for a debate or an argument or even a discussion I am just interested, really.” After trying a few times, I got a response and then asked kindly “why do you believe this?”

By doing this I hope that over time my previous aggressive persona will diminish and my friends and family members will see that I am genuinely interested, and want to really understand and that I recognize their worth and right to dignity.

I haven’t yet been asked what my beliefs on the same topics are, or why I have those beliefs, but hopefully before I die that will happen at least once. This is a long-haul approach. I will still vote my beliefs as I am sure so will they but if the anger can be diluted to the point that it is no longer felt necessary then there is hope. This approach is non-violent and is based on kindness and generosity.

### **CLOSING WORDS:**

Three short quotes worth thinking about:

*“It takes generosity to discover the whole through others.”*

Jacques Cousteau

*“I care not for a man’s religion whose dog and cat are not better for it”*

Abraham Lincoln

*“Generosity could be as contagious as the zombie plague as long as enough people were willing to be carriers.”*

Jonathan Maberry.