

Deep Dive Sunday
2025.11.30

Our First Principle:

**Navigating Difficult Conversations
With Worth & Dignity**

Our First Principle: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Worth & Dignity

Our first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person even those with whom we disagree. Building on last Sunday's handout, this packet provides you an opportunity to further reflect on how to apply the first principle of Unitarian Universalism when having a difficult conversation with someone you don't understand and whose opinions you often oppose.

Ten Tools for Worth & Dignity in Difficult Conversations (This is a short form. A longer form appears on Page 8)

1. *Deep Listening* (Rogers) Reflect back what you heard before responding.
2. *Ask Open Questions* (Pirkei Avot) Intend curiosity over victory.
3. *Commit Not to Persuade* (Buddha) Aim for understanding, not conversion.
4. *Regulate Before Responding* (Neuroscience) Reclaim calm with a few slow breaths.
5. *Values, Not Positions* (Arendt) Ask what value someone is protecting.
6. *Know When to Step Back* (Stoicism) Wise restraint keeps dignity intact.
7. *Identify Common Ground* (Christian tradition) Peacemaking begins with shared humanity.
8. *Protect Relationships* (Bowen) Calm is contagious.
9. *Kind Boundaries* (Jainism) Limit harm by limiting escalation.
10. *End with Gratitude* (Positive Psychology) Gratitude lowers reactivity.

A Case Study for Group or Individual Reflection

Setting:

Christmas Eve dinner at the home of two long-time Methodist churchgoers, a quiet suburban house with candles burning in the windows. The table is full: ham, potatoes, rolls, the whole family.

Characters:

Carla (48) – a lifelong Methodist, deeply sincere, values clarity and tradition.

David (50) – her husband, conflict-averse, peacemaker through carbohydrates.

Margaret (72) – Carla’s mother, gentle, anxious about any hint of family conflict.

Zoe (17) – Carla’s daughter, observant, quietly exploring her own spirituality.

Alex (45) – Carla’s brother; a Unitarian Universalist and the sole UU at the table.

What Happens

Dinner has reached the soft lull after the main course. People sip cider, forks rest, and conversation becomes more reflective.

Carla looks across the table at Alex with an expression that blends curiosity and worry.

Carla: “Alex, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. I don’t mean this in a bad way, truly—I’m just confused. Is Unitarian Universalism actually a religion? Or is it more like... a discussion group with candles?”

Margaret inhales sharply through her nose.

Zoe looks up, her eyes moving between Carla and Alex in anticipation.

David immediately offers more rolls, as if carbohydrates can absorb tension.

Alex sits back slightly, caught off guard. He has answered versions of this question many times before, but never on Christmas Eve with everyone watching.

Alex: “Well, yes, it’s definitely a religion. We—”

Carla interrupts, leaning forward earnestly.

Carla: “But you don’t have a creed, or even one set of beliefs everyone shares. How does a church even work without that?”

Alex pauses. His first impulse is to defend, the second to educate, the third to retreat.

Zoe is still watching, wide-eyed.

Alex: “For us, the people and the beloved community are the core. We come together through a set of shared principles rather than a shared doctrine.”

Carla frowns, thinking hard.

Carla: “But isn’t that... confusing? I don’t mean you personally. I really just don’t understand how people know what they believe.”

Margaret reaches for her water glass as if it might become a shield.
David asks if anyone would like more sweet potatoes.

Carla continues softly, sincerely:

Carla: “It matters to me because it matters to you. I just want to understand. Where is God in all of that?”

The room is quiet.

Zoe leans forward slightly, hopeful.

Alex takes a breath, trying to decide what to say next.

This is the moment the case study explores.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

Please begin your discussion by going around the table and introducing yourselves – name, number of years a UU, and community in which you live. Then, as a group, take each of the seven listed tools in order and discuss how Alex might employ them in the case study. It is likely that you will not be able to discuss the complete list in the time allotted. That's okay. There is no test or prize! You have the remaining tools and discussion questions to consider at home.

1. Deep Listening

What might Alex hear beneath Carla's words if he listens for the *value* Carla is trying to protect? (For example: clarity, certainty, spiritual coherence, family unity.)

2. Open Questions

What open, non-defensive question could Alex ask in return to keep the conversation curious rather than argument?

3. Not Persuading

If Alex resists the urge to "defend" Unitarian Universalism, how could he share something true and meaningful about his faith while shifting the conversation toward mutual understanding instead of convincing?

4. Regulating First

What could Alex do internally (breathing, posture, pausing, blessing) before responding so his words come from steadiness rather than reactivity?

5. Values Over Positions

What value might explain Carla's discomfort with creedless religion?
What value might explain Alex's comfort with it?

6. Notice When the Conversation Isn't Safe

What signs might tell Alex that the conversation is no longer fruitful or emotionally safe—for himself or anyone else at the table? What could stepping back with dignity look like?

7. Name Common Ground Out Loud

What shared hope, longing, or core spiritual concern could Alex name to reconnect the relationship in the moment?

8. Protect Relationships Over Debates

What choice could Alex make that lowers the emotional temperature, allowing connection to remain stronger than disagreement?

9. Boundaries with Kindness

If the conversation becomes overwhelming, what gentle, non-harming boundary could Alex set that preserves connection without shutting Carla down?

10. End with Gratitude, Even in Tension

What could Alex say at the end of the exchange that expresses sincere gratitude—perhaps for Carla's curiosity, sincerity, or care—regardless of whether they agree?

Reflection Questions

These questions are designed for quiet journaling or personal contemplation during the Deep Dive or at home.

1. What conversation topics bring up tension for you?

Why?

2. Which of the ten tools do you use naturally?
3. Which of the ten tools challenge you?
4. Consider an actual conversation that you had with someone you didn't understand or whom you opposed. What value might that person be protecting?
5. In that conversation, what value of your own did you want to protect compassionately?
6. What reminds you that dignity is inherent—not earned?
7. What blessings might you offer to those with whom you disagree?

Spiritual Practices

Practice One: Pause–Breathe–Bless–Respond (This practice gives you a moment to compose your thoughts and choose an appropriate tool.)

Pause: Stop talking and place a hand on your chest.

Breathe: Take a slow deep breath in, hold it for a second, then breath out slowly and deeply. Repeat several times.

Bless: In the moment, quietly offer a blessing. It can be for yourself, for the other person, for your relationship with another person, or for the entire room. Examples of such blessings are listed on page _____.

Respond: Ask a question, name a value, set a boundary, or step away.

Practice Two: The Evening Examen for Worth & Dignity (This practice rewires awareness over time—inviting deeper compassion, steadiness, and clarity.)

At the end of each day this week—with acknowledgment, but without judgment—sit quietly and reflect on three gentle prompts:

1. When did I honor someone's worth today? (Maybe with patience, curiosity, or kindness.)
2. When did I forget someone's dignity, including my own? (Maybe by disregarding or dismissing them.)
3. What intention do I want to carry into tomorrow? (Choose a simple phrase such as: "I will listen," "I will be steady," or "I will protect my dignity and theirs.")

Chart for Spiritual Practice of Examen

Day	Honor Someone's Worth	Forget Someone's Dignity	Tomorrow's Intention
Mon			
Tues			
Wed			

Day	Honor Someone's Worth	Forget Someone's Dignity	Tomorrow's Intention
Thurs			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Blessings for the Moment

Centering blessings for oneself

- “May I stay rooted in compassion.”
- “May clarity rise within me.”
- “May I respond from wisdom, not fear.”
- “May I remember the worth of everyone at this table, including myself.”
- “May I stay soft enough to listen and strong enough to stay true.”

Blessings directed toward others in the conversation

- “May this conversation land gently for him/her/them.”
- “May he/she/they feel safe, not threatened.”
- “May curiosity open between us.”
- “May he/she/they know they are valued, even in disagreement.”
- “May his/her/their heart(s) be at ease.”

Blessings for the relationship at risk

- “May we meet each other in goodwill.”
- “May understanding grow, even if agreement does not.”
- “May this moment deepen our respect.”
- “May connection remain stronger than confusion.”
- “May this family be a place where we both belong.”

Blessings for all those who are present

- “May peace settle over this table.”
- “May everyone here feel held and unharmed.”
- “May this gathering lean toward love.”
- “May the next breath bring calm to all of us.”
- “May kindness prevail here tonight.”

Handling Holiday Conversations Across Difference (Grounded in Wisdom, Research, and Deep Listening)

1. Begin with Deep Listening

Psychologist Carl Rogers taught that real understanding happens when we listen “with acceptance, empathy, and genuineness.” Before responding, repeat back what you heard in your own words. It slows reactivity and signals respect.

Source: Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 115–120.

2. Ask Open Questions

Rather Than Make Assertions Jewish ethical tradition teaches that *machloket l’shem shamayim*—“argument for the sake of heaven”—is grounded in curiosity rather than victory. Questions keep conversations human where statements can harden into walls. Source: Pirkei Avot 5:17.

3. Commit Not to Persuade

The Buddha advised that speech should be “true, timely, and gentle”—and also “spoken with a mind of loving-kindness.” If your goal is to convert the other person, your heart will betray your words. Source: Anguttara Nikāya 5.198.

4. Regulate Your Nervous System Before You Respond

Contemporary neuroscience shows that strong disagreement can trigger the amygdala—the brain’s alarm bell—reducing our capacity for reasoning. A slow breath buys back your prefrontal cortex. Source: Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind* (Guilford Press, 2012), 139–141.

5. Shift from Positions to Values

Philosopher Hannah Arendt warned that political arguments collapse when we treat opponents as enemies rather than fellow citizens. Asking “What value are you protecting?” moves a conversation from defensiveness to shared humanity. Source: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175–178.

6. Notice When the Conversation Isn't Safe

In Stoicism, the virtue of *sophrosyne*—wise self-restraint—includes knowing when to withdraw from unproductive conflict. You can excuse yourself without surrendering your integrity. Source: Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.

7. Name Common Ground Out Loud

Christian tradition frames this as peacemaking: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” Finding a shared hope, fear, or love redirects the energy of the interaction. Source: Matthew 5:9.

8. Protect Relationships Over Debates

Family systems theory reminds us that anxiety spreads quickly through a system, but so does calm. You can be the regulating presence that keeps the holiday table from becoming a battlefield. Source: Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Jason Aronson, 1978), 466–470.

9. Set Boundaries with Kindness

Jain ethics hold that *ahimsa*—non-harm—applies to speech as well as action. Setting a limit (“Let’s pause this for now”) prevents harm to both parties. Source: *Acaranga Sutra* 4.3.

10. End with Gratitude, Even in Tension

Positive psychology research shows that gratitude enhances resilience and lowers emotional reactivity. Ending a hard conversation with “I’m grateful we can talk, even when it’s difficult” shifts the tone for the whole holiday. Source: Robert Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 67–83.