

Every human has some inherent worth

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London Free Press, November 15, 2014

A good ethical principle would be to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I do not claim originality in stating this position because I have borrowed it from a religion called the Unitarian/ Universalists who include this aim as one of their seven guiding ethical principles.

In fact, I think it is a difficult position to adhere to, or even to accept intellectually, although it may well be the same position that some other religions state in slightly different language. When we think of the worth and dignity of every person, our minds sweep through a broad range of the human spectrum from the people we admire most to those who represent the worst people we know. If the ethical principle had stated that we should promote the dignity and worth of those fellow humans with whom we agree, or people who are nice to us, or people who are part of our family, or our group, or our religion, it would be a much easier principle to follow.

Our minds are drawn to those who are evil, lazy, stupid, or otherwise undesirable people who present a problem for many of us in accepting this ethical principle. So what are we to think of a three-time murderer like Paul Bernardo or his ilk? I choose Bernardo because he is known to many Canadians, but I could easily have chosen from a list of other undesirable Canadians. Are we really to respect Bernardo and promote and affirm his worth and dignity because he is after all part of humanity? Yes, I think we ought to do our best to follow the principle of respecting his worth and dignity. He is, after all, not a rock or a tree, but a human who has not reached his human potential to act and live freely within the human community.

So what do we owe to Paul Bernardo? First, society owes him a fair trial, a competent lawyer, and clear convincing evidence supporting his innocence or guilt as a murderer. If while in prison, he were to express some interest in reading a book to gain more knowledge of Canadian society, or learn about art or music

or justice we should encourage him in these directions. If he was interested in learning a skill or a trade or a socially useful pursuit, he should be helped to do so. If he should indicate any self-worth or self-dignity we should encourage him in those directions too.

Our prison system should give him protection from those of his fellow prisoners who would, ironically, like to kick and club him to death to convince themselves that they are not like him.

Should Bernardo ever be let free in our society? Probably not. We do not yet know what made him behave and think as he does. Nor do we know how to cure him. But we should feed him and let him exercise and not punish him with unhealthy conditions. We should not stone him to death in a public display of our negative feelings about him. We should not amputate his hands nor do other violent or torturous acts against him.

There is an old adage that states that we can tell a lot about a society by the manner in which it treats its prisoners. If Canadians were to abandon the principle of respecting the worth and dignity of our worst citizens our whole society would be worsened by moving in this direction. As Canadians we would lessen our own civility by returning our justice system to the harsher punishments of years ago.

Historically speaking, it has only been in recent times and only partially, that society has begun to accept women as having equal value to men, that homosexual relationships could be granted equality with heterosexual relationships, or that physical or mentally disadvantaged could be respected for their inherent worth and dignity. It is also only recently that children are respected in worth and dignity with adults or that people of colour are respected as equal to Caucasians, and the list goes on. Fortunately, in Canada, society has moved towards considering the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but we're not quite there yet.