

# Connecting

*Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship*

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines  
a Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
1800 Bell Ave  
Des Moines, IA 50315  
www.ucdsm.org / 515-244-8603



2024 Feb

## Equity

### Chalice Lighting

Words of Cesar Chavez: “We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community. Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”

### Check In

How is it with you today? How has the last month been?

### Equity in the Proposed U.U.A. Article II Bylaws

#### Section C-2.2 Values and Covenant

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these values are: . . .

**Equity.** We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The five other values named, with 2-3 sentences on each: interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, and generosity.

## READINGS

*Read these pieces with a pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.*

### **Inequality Is a Problem**

A Guide to Economic Inequality  
AmericanCompass.Org 2021 Apr 27<sup>2</sup>

1. Inequality in America is wide and getting wider.

Using the Gini coefficient, a basic measure of the dispersion of incomes, American inequality has been rising steadily for 50 years and is at its highest point of the post-World War II era. Inequality is higher in the U.S. than in any other developed country—closer to the level of Mexico or Costa Rica than to the OECD median.

2. The major problem is not the ‘wide’ but the ‘wider.’

A society with high levels of inequality can still be one where everyone is getting ahead. In America, that is not the case. Inequality is widening because the economic growth of recent decades has been unevenly shared, with the vast majority of gains going to those already at the top. Over the past 50 years, household incomes have grown three times faster for the top quintile than for the middle quintile.

3. As a result, only the wealthy are accumulating wealth.

With income growth concentrated at the top, middle-income households have not successfully accumulated savings in recent decades, which also means they have not shared in the gains from rapidly rising asset values. Over the past 30 years, top-quintile households gained nearly \$500,000 in liquid net worth on average (after excluding the top 1%), while households in the middle quintile saw their debt rise faster than their financial assets.

This is not the widespread prosperity that market capitalism is supposed to generate, and it is not an outcome that Americans at any income level should accept.

Compare the typical American household at the median income to one further up the income ladder. According to the Census Bureau, our typical family saw its income grow from \$58,000 in 1989 to \$69,000 in 2019, after adjusting for inflation. A family at the 80th percentile saw its income grow almost twice as quickly, from \$107,000 to \$143,000.

This pattern repeats throughout the income distribution, with the higher income tiers pulling away from those lower down.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://americancompass.org/economic-inequality-guide/>

The Census Bureau calculates a standard measure of income inequality called the “Gini coefficient” and finds that it has been rising steadily in America for decades. Inequality is higher now than at any time since World War II.

The problem with rising inequality is not that some people are doing well, but that others are falling behind. It suggests that our economy is failing to spread prosperity and that our gains are not being widely shared.

The longer such trends continue, the greater the threat to our social fabric, our political solidarity, and the legitimacy of our free-market system.



### **Inequity Poisons Us All**

Joanna Cheek, MD<sup>3</sup>

Social inequities hurt everyone. We are in this together: The inequities experienced by some will poison everyone’s health, even the most privileged.

Simone Schenkman and Aylene Bousquat, researchers at the School of Public Health at Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil, compared countries around the world to evaluate the role of inequity in determining health outcomes. Their 2021 study showed that countries with the most inequity of income, education, and health dimensions—regardless of the country’s wealth—had the worst health outcomes.

Living in an inequitable country doesn’t only affect those with the least privilege; it harms those at the top, too, they found. They concluded that policies that lead to inequities are “a disastrous political choice for society.”

Not only do the inequities lead to poor health outcomes and lower life expectancies for everyone but also higher levels of mental illness, substance use, incarceration, segregation, disrespect, violence, social distrust, and poor cohesion, they showed. “Inequity deteriorates the whole of society and not just the marginalized groups,” they concluded.

Scientists now understand how inequity harms our health: because it’s stressful for everyone, says Robert M. Sapolsky, professor of biology and neurology at Stanford, who researches how stress damages our biology. “Basically, more unequal societies have a worse quality of life,” he says. “When inequality increases, everyone’s health suffers.” Inequality creates stress, and stress creates the “double-edged biological sword” of inflammation, continues Sapolsky.

Molecular biologist and Nobel Prize winner Elizabeth Blackburn joined health psychologist Elissa Epel to study how stress affects the health of our telomeres—the bits at the end of our chromosomes that protect our DNA from damage. And, once again, one of the big

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<sup>3</sup> From: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/its-not-you-its-the-world/202305/inequities-poison-us-all>

stressors we face is inequality, which they found to shorten the telomeres of those on both the top and bottom of unequal societies.

In medical school, we learned risk factors for illnesses—being Indigenous, for example, was listed as a risk factor for a vast number of health problems, from type 2 diabetes to depression. But it is not an inherent characteristic of being Indigenous to be vulnerable to these health conditions. The health disparities between certain cultural or racial groups can often be explained by the intersecting social and structural determinants of health, such as intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, socioeconomic status, colonialization, exposure to environmental toxins, and access to health care and other resources.

“To wonder why some things settle in some bodies and not others is to begin to ask questions about power, injustice, and inequity,” writes Rupa Marya, a physician and associate professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and Raj Patel, a public health researcher and professor at the University of Texas, in *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*.

As the world faced the pandemic, we uncovered the shocking injustices and inequities that we’d been observing for decades, this time in the graves of people who lost their lives to COVID-19. “Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) were over-represented, their bodies subject to inflammation of all kinds, long before the SARS-CoV-2 virus ever settled into their lungs,” argued Marya and Patel. “Not only the lack of access to health care, but systemic social and economic disenfranchisement rendered their bodies more susceptible to Covid when it hit,” they add.

Severe COVID-19 and other inflammatory-mediated conditions are more common in oppressed groups because of the cumulative burdens of toxic stress. And the majority of these stresses are involuntary. No amount of “self-care” or advice to reduce stress or focus on one’s health can erase the weight of systemic and intergenerational oppression.

Inequality hurts us all, but it gravely harms the health of those who are most oppressed. That’s why social justice is the most important medicine I can prescribe as a physician. Rather than putting Band-Aids on the illnesses caused by inequities to individuals, we need to heal the larger systems that are making them sick.

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## The Harms Wreaked by Inequality

Meredith Garmon

Various studies in various ways show that when inequality is greater, violence goes up, trust goes down. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett write in their illuminating study, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*:

“At the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume, and with little or no community life.”

All those conditions of modern life – anxiety, depression, unsure friendship, consumerism, lack of community – are connected with inequality – either as cause or as result, and often partly both. Wilkinson and Pickett go on to write:

“The unease we feel about the loss of social values and the way we are drawn into the pursuit of material gain is often experienced as if it were a purely private ambivalence which cuts us off from others....As voters, we have lost sight of any collective belief that society could be different. Instead of a better society, the only thing almost everyone strives for is to better their own position – as individuals – within the existing society.” (4)

When we're all in it for only ourselves, there's increased political polarization. This is not a life of spiritual wholeness.

When you compare nation to nation, there's no correlation between wealth and life expectancy or mortality. No correlation. Rich countries have about the same life expectancies and mortality rates as relatively poor countries, until you get into the really poor end of the spectrum. As long as a nation has per-person income above about \$9,000 a year, further increases do nothing to increase life expectancy. That's the nation-to-nation comparison.

But when we do a zip-code-to-zip-code comparison, we get a different picture. The poorer zip codes have higher mortality than the richer zip codes. If you took several of the poorest zip codes, created a new island in the Pacific, put them all there, maintained their per-person incomes as they were, made a new island nation of them, they'd have decreased mortality. They'd be fine. But because they live near the wealthier areas, they perceive that difference. They see all around them the inescapable fact that they live in a society that is set up to work for others, but not for them. They are reminded daily that they are not in a society of mutual care.

And *that* wears them down much more than relative material deprivation.

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Q: *In what ways are you conscious of the effects of on your life of our nation's inequality?*

# Equity Goes Beyond Equality

Meredith Garmon

Anatole France (1844-1924), the French poet and journalist, observed: “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges.”

Of course, the rich don’t need to sleep under bridges; the poor sometimes do. France was illustrating how a law may be equal, yet disproportionately burden lower classes. Recognizing Anatole France’s insight, recent decades have seen a surge in popularity of a particular way of distinguishing between “equity” and “equality.” Herewith some representative samples of the distinction.

A United Way website explains:

“Equity recognizes each person has different circumstances and needs, meaning different groups of people need different resources and opportunities allocated to them in order to thrive. Equality, on the other hand, is giving everyone the exact same resources across the board, regardless of individual or groups of people’s actual needs or opportunities/resources already provided to them.”

Stephen Menendian, posting for Berkeley’s Othering and Belonging Institute, writes:

“Equality means that the law and government treats everyone the same, irrespective of their status or identity. Equity means that, in some circumstances, people need to be treated differently in order to provide meaningful equality of opportunity. Neither ‘equality’ nor ‘equity’ guarantee equality of outcomes. Equity is primarily in service of equality of opportunity, not outcomes. But achieving equality of opportunity requires both equality (formally equal treatment) and equity (situationally different treatment), depending on the circumstances.”

At the Annie E. Casey Foundation website, a post explains the difference this way:

“Equality requires that everyone receives the same resources and opportunities, regardless of circumstances and despite any inherent advantages or disadvantages that apply to certain groups. Equity, on the other hand, considers the specific needs or circumstances of a person or group and provides the types of resources needed to be successful. Equality assumes that everybody is operating at the same starting point and will face the same circumstances and challenges. Equity recognizes the shortcomings of this ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach and understands that different levels of support must be provided to achieve fairness in outcomes.”

Alford Young, professor of sociology and Afro-American studies at the University of Michigan, offers these definitions (per Colleen Murphy at health.com):

Equality: The access to and distribution of a set of resources evenly across individuals.  
Equity: The access to or distribution of resources according to need.

A post at Dictionary.Com dated 2020 November offers this example:

Let's assume I wanted to distribute food to a group of children and adults. If I wanted equality, I would simply give the same amount of food to everybody. If I wanted equity, however, things become more complicated: how do I distribute the food "fairly" or "justly"? Should children get less food because they can't eat as much? Should I give different rations to different people based on how hungry they say they are? Regardless of the criteria I use, my attempt at trying to decide a "fair" distribution and not an "equal" one means I am looking to achieve equity and not equality.

The 7 Principles of Unitarian Universalism were adopted in the mid-1980s, before it was popular to distinguish "equity" and "equality" in the ways now commonly stressed. Nevertheless, our second principle is "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations" – while neither "equality" nor "equal" appear in the 7 Principles.

The proposed new Article II for the UUA Bylaws was drafted in a social context in which the thinking in the above samples is widely emphasized. Thus, our section on "equity" implicitly recognizes that ensuring "fully accessible and inclusive communities" will require that we spend our "time, wisdom, attention, and money" according to need, rather than equally.

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*Q: How can UCDSM better "use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities?"*

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## Flourishing

Our "equity" section says: "We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness." So let's look at what flourishing involves.

### What Flourishing Is and Why It Matters

Amy M. Young<sup>4</sup>

What I've found is that those leaders who have found a way forward are focused on creating supportive workplaces that speak to our fundamental human needs: to have authentic connections, meaningful work, and moments of positive emotions such as awe, gratitude, and joy. And while these things may seem like lofty goals, they're actually based on research from the field of positive psychology that has identified what enables us to flourish. Martin Seligman summarizes this body of research with the PERMA model, an acronym that stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.

The science of flourishing tells us how to create a great life, as well as how to manage stress and burnout.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/202302/what-flourishing-is-and-why-it-matters>

**Positive Emotions:** We need to have moments throughout the day where we feel positive emotions, such as joy, awe, gratitude, hope, and amusement. These emotions provide an immediate energy boost. Frequency is more important than length, so you only need moments of positive emotions scattered throughout the day to be energized and rejuvenated.

**Engagement:** Being fully immersed or engaged in an activity is also an important ingredient for our well-being. Engagement is what happens when we are so focused on an activity that we lose track of time.

**Relationships:** As social beings, we have a fundamental need for human connection. Often it is possible to work alongside others and never really have a meaningful connection. Positive relationships require a sense of mutual positive regard where we feel able to be authentic and feel supported.

**Meaning:** It is important for human beings to feel our lives have purpose and at the end of the day that our activities made a difference. The key here is that the value of our work has meaning that extends beyond ourselves by impacting others directly or towards a larger shared purpose.

**Achievement:** Being able to take pride in something we've done or accomplished is also important. Achievement is about setting goals, committing ourselves to action, and persevering until our goal is accomplished.

What makes the science of flourishing different from traditional approaches is the focus on the optimal state of human functioning—when we are at our very best in terms of well-being, performance, or character. The field of positive organizational scholarship has taken what we know about the optimal state of human functioning to create better workplaces. Flourishing solutions range from small practices that take a few minutes to system-level strategies that involve redesigning the workplace so flourishing occurs as work tasks are accomplished.

And if you're wondering whether this actually works? A 2019 review of flourishing workplace interventions showed that they not only increase job satisfaction and happiness at work, but they also reduce workplace stress and emotional exhaustion. The reason flourishing is useful in addressing negative experiences is that the five ingredients (listed above) are known to renew, rejuvenate, and energize us emotionally and physically.



*Q: What could you do to increase PERMA in your life? What could we do to facilitate greater PERMA among UCDSM members?*



## Dignity

*Donna Hicks says, “Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings.” If we properly understand dignity, then, we can use that single word as short for “inherent dignity and worthiness.” (But we aren’t always in contexts where everyone understands dignity as Donna Hicks does, so we should keep the longer phrase.)*

### The Real Meaning of Dignity Donna Hicks<sup>5</sup>

At about the same time that I realized the powerful role dignity played in resolving conflict, I also became aware that few people understand the true meaning of dignity, and even fewer realize the extraordinary impact it has on our lives and relationships. When I use the word “dignity,” there is always an immediate recognition of the word and its importance, but when I ask people to define it, or tell me what it looks like to have their dignity honored, the conversation falters.

Dignity is not the same as respect. Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings; everyone is born with it. Respect, on the other hand, is earned through one’s actions.

I now speak professionally to help organizations, businesses, and associations build a culture of dignity. I changed the way I helped people resolve their conflicts by starting a dialogue with a “Dignity 101” seminar. Before diving into any conflict, I would sit with both sides and teach them lessons in dignity. When people truly understood what they were discussing, it shattered limits on healing their emotional wounds.

After people learn about dignity, a remarkable thing happens. Everyone recognizes that we all have a deep, human desire to be treated as something of value.

Our shared desire for dignity transcends our differences, putting our common human identity above all else. While our uniqueness is important, history has shown us that if we don’t take the next step toward recognizing our shared identity, conflicts in our workplace, our personal lives, and between nations will continue.

The glue that holds all of our relationships together is the mutual recognition of the desire to be seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly; to be recognized, understood, and to feel safe in the world. When our identity is accepted and we feel included, we are granted a sense of freedom and independence and a life filled with hope and possibility. And when are given an apology when someone does us harm, we recognize that even when we fall short of being our best selves, there is always a way to reconnect. “I’m sorry” are two of the most powerful words anyone can utter.

Dignity has the potential to change the world, but only if people like you help to spread its profound message. Take time every day to remind yourself and those around you the truth

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<sup>5</sup> From: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/dignity/201304/what-is-the-real-meaning-dignity-0>

about how valuable we all are. In fact, we are born invaluable, priceless, and irreplaceable. Simultaneously, never lose sight of your inherent vulnerability. We all know the gut feeling that results from being mistreated or neglected – it’s up to you to honor other people’s dignity. In the process, you’ll strengthen your own.



*Q: How would you assess UCDSM as a community in which people are seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly? Are people here appreciated as inherently valuable?*



### Spiritual Exercise / Questions

Here again are the four questions in this issue of *Connecting*:

1. *In what ways are you conscious of the effects of on your life of our nation’s inequality? (p. 5)*
2. *How can UCDSM better “use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities?” (p. 7)*
3. *What could you do to increase PERMA in your life? What could we do to facilitate greater PERMA among UCDSM members? (p.8)*
4. *How would you assess UCDSM as a community in which people are seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly? Are people here appreciated as inherently valuable? (p. 10)*

**Journaling:** Use each of these four questions as a prompt for your journaling. Come to your group meeting prepared to share some of what came up for you in your reflections.

## For Families

Birch Spick, Faith Formation & Congregational Life Coordinator

When I started looking for this month's stories, I was a little confused how we could tell new stories about equity that are different than the ones we told about justice in October and pluralism last month. All three of these ideas are so closely related, I didn't know what else we could explore! And then I wondered, "How are the people who are reimagining our faith's principles talking about equity?"

What I found is that they draw a line between equity and our current First Principle: to honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people. They write, "We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness." It's one thing to say that we believe everyone has worth and dignity, but how do we live like we believe this? Valuing equity helps us imagine how we uplift one another's worth and dignity. When we value pluralism and know that everyone is different, with different needs and wants, we can start looking for the different things people need to live with worth and dignity. Practicing equity is what we do when we know that everyone will need something a little different to live their best lives, and we work to provide that for one another.

This month, we will read these stories in our Sunday services. In each story, someone does something to honor the inherent worth and dignity of the people around them. Our children will explore them and their lessons more through games and crafts during class. Consider exploring these stories and their lessons at home with these questions.

- Leo Lionni, *A Color of His Own*. In this story, one chameleon helps another chameleon remember it doesn't need to feel alone just because it changes color all the time. *How can we support people who feel lonely because they don't "fit in"?*
- Janeen K. Grohsmeyer, *Belonging: Fannie Barrier Williams*.<sup>6</sup> In this story, Fannie experiences exclusion because of her dark skin, but then builds communities where everyone can belong and flourish. *What can we do to make our community more welcoming to more people?*
- Jessica York, *Game Day*.<sup>7</sup> In this story, a classroom decides the fairest way to choose the games they will play one day. *How can we make decisions that meet everyone's needs and wants?*
- Karen Leggett Abouraya, *Malala Yousafzai, Warrior with Words*. In this story, Malala uses her voice and resources to make sure everyone can go to school. *How can we use our resources to honor other peoples' worth and dignity?*



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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/journeys/session4/132836.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/signs/session14/288076.shtml>

## Check Out

What overall message stands out for you?

## Chalice Extinguishing

Words of Sharan Burrow: “We all need to work together, because there are no jobs on a dead planet; there is no equity without rights to decent work and social protection, no social justice without a shift in governance and ambition, and, ultimately, no peace for the peoples of the world without the guarantees of sustainability.”

*Connecting* is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.  
Next issue: 2024 Mar: Generosity