

**Thank You For Being Such A Pain**  
*Spiritual Lessons We Learn From Difficult People*  
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker  
Beacon UU Congregation  
October 6, 2019

In arguably his most famous book, Walden, Henry David Thoreau writes: “In my house, had three chairs. One for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society.” If one were to envision such chairs, I’d propose that chair one is a rocking chair of self-knowledge and chair #2 represents a loveseat of intimacy. Chair #3 is a pew or park bench.” This 3<sup>rd</sup> chair is where we’ll sit this morning, as we explore the much-fabled ideal of “beloved community,” and how we might co-create such a thing authentically beyond the hearts-and-flowers, kissy-kissy fantasies of congregational or social togetherness.

As his statement indicates, Thoreau had three chairs for society. We often picture him as a mild mannered, solitary tree hugger who modeled all things natural and spiritual; a woodland sage who epitomized the milk of human kindness. Not necessarily true. Ralph Waldo Emerson surely enjoyed Hank’s companionship, as did other visitors to her pond-side cabin; legend has it that he once hosted twenty people at one time in his wee folksy abode. In Walden, Thoreau claimed he was “no hermit” and liked society “as much as most.”

Yet, Thoreau could be a prickly fellow. He was disagreeable about taxes and railed against the status quo, even spending a night in jail and penning a classic on Civil Disobedience. Yes, good old Henry David had alarms going off in his pocket, too (shocking as this may sound). He was someone’s difficult person. He offended. The same could be said of Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King – individuals who preached loud and long about beloved community, while rubbing many a person in just the wrong way and paying the ultimate price.

As I’ve set out to write about beloved community and difficult people, I’ve harbored all the pat images and ideas in mind – loving one another, loving thy neighbor, hug, hug, kiss, kiss, like that insipid Coke commercial about “teaching the world to sing in perfect harmony” through the magical alchemy of carbonation. Then, as I’ve researched the topic it has become clear that true beloved-ness and authentic community are typically created most fully out of conflict (yes, conflict! Yikes!) that is compassionately and systematically addressed, even though this process usually asks us to grapple uncomfortably with issues or people we deem difficult, those we fear or may even loathe. And it asks us to learn and practice healthy conflict resolution skills (or what one master mediator calls Conflict Zen).

To be sure, beloved community arises from fostering deeply caring, reciprocal relationships, yet we each know how hard it can be to love the ones who set off our alarm bells. We're not all tranquil streams that meet and merge, and that's fine. It's reality. Some of us are more like torrents or riptides and quagmires.

As my humbled colleague Vanessa Rush Southern admits, each of us, including yours truly, is difficult for someone. From our positions in the pulpit or pew, alarm bells are going off in our pockets that some, but not all, other people can hear. And the noise our alarms generate range from a slight din to a deafening blast, depending on the sensitivity of the ear tuned in to our frequency. It can be all too true at times, in the words of the comic strip character Pogo, "We have met the enemy and it is us."

As Unitarian Universalists, we are brought together voluntarily by covenant rather than by creed. We are essentially in the community-building business, not the doctrine-professing business. An old joke suggests all you need to start a new UU congregation is a coffee pot and resentment. This may be so, yet beyond these two elements, we also need to work at breathing life into our covenant through common definitions of such things as "respectful dialogue" and "right relationship."

After all, we are a *religious* community not a club, and our mission is a religious one, no matter how liberal; and at the heart of that mission resides the call to "dwell together in peace" and "walk together in faith and forgiveness."

So, I'm glad I got THAT all figured out for us, lickety split! – peace, forgiveness, loving everyone - easy as pie. Not! According to my colleague Frank Carpenter, walking together in covenant and dwelling together in peace is a rigorous process that never ends and in his words, it "means that we are not scared of our differences or derailed by our difficult people or issues; that we take full responsibility for our behaviors, we talk about them and about ourselves honestly, and that we never forget that we have nothing to fear but fear itself."

I agree with Carpenter that differences and difficulties can be transformative for individuals and for the communities they inhabit. As he points out, in co-creating beloved community, the optimal response to discord is not to fix or solve the problem. Instead, the project is to help transform the individuals involved, in both dimensions of spiritual growth, relationship to self and to others. It means bringing out the intrinsic goodness that lies within each of us, rather than shaming or blaming. When this is successfully accomplished, the conflict strengthens rather than destroys the community. Interim ministry is, to some extent, intended to allow this healthy interaction with conflict to occur.

Process theologian Henry Nelson Weiman called this scheme, "creative interchange," in which individuals express themselves truly and fully to one another, while welcoming and seeking to understand the undisguised individuality of the other." I'm a big Weiman devotee, yet when I'm encouraged to understand the "undisguised

individuality” of the other, all sorts of unpleasant images come to mind, like zombie movies or the SARS virus.

What if the “undisguised individuality” of the person sitting next to me in the pew (or living next door to me, or working in the next cubicle) really turns me off or annoys me, or worse? What do I do then? Good questions. Sure, it would be easy to dismiss, vilify, or ignore that person, but I have another proposal, namely embracing and even learning from these seemingly difficult people, the ones who push our buttons and set off alarm bells, as we strive together to create a beloved community (and a non-violent society) that’s flexible, a bit messy, and brazenly imperfect.

Let’s face it --the presence of all of us blessedly difficult people in a congregation is a given. It may also turn out to be a very good thing, believe it or not! Remember that the oyster doesn’t produce a pearl without grit and friction. Likewise, our beloved community of imperfect souls, by necessity, becomes a laboratory for lived principles and spirituality, tested under various conditions.

One of the resources I found most helpful and fascinating in preparing this sermon is Mark Rosen’s book, entitled: “Thank you for Being Such a Pain: Spiritual Guidance for Dealing with Difficult People.” I don’t know about you, but it’s often hard to envision thanking the people who are the biggest pain my neck (or somewhere lower!) Practicing gratitude is basic spirituality.

And, of course, I wholeheartedly promote our first principle, “affirming the worth and dignity of every person” (as long as folks live up to their own dignity); and our third, “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” But, I’m still human. I’d rather skip it. How about you? Yet, what would we learn and how would we grow without the grit and friction?

Rosen lays out a very compelling argument about how much we gain from intentional interactions with difficult people. Reminiscent of Vanessa Southern’s story, he describes an alarm clock that at first sounds with four very gentle ascending tones. Then, just when we fall back asleep, it chimes with the same pattern again but a little louder. Then, in about five minutes, it chimes more loudly.

Finally, it chimes at full volume and we wake up. Rosen believes the Universe operates this way. When we don't pay attention, remaining asleep, then the signals get louder and louder.

If we are really interested in spiritual growth, we need teachers, even very loud teachers. Rosen writes, "The teacher would have to be someone who would shatter our incorrect beliefs, frozen feelings, self-delusion, and injustice collecting. Someone who would help us to break free of our current, limited understanding. Someone who could uproot the very things in life that we are most invested in holding onto and keeping the same. Someone who causes us so much pain that we finally out of desperation must begin the necessary changes that we have resisted so long. It would have to be a difficult person."

A wonderful illustration of Rosen's radical idea can be found in the spiritual community that G. I. Gurdjieff led in France. One of the inhabitants was an old man who was the personification of difficulty--irritable, messy, fighting with everyone, and unwilling to clean up or help at all. No one got along with him. Finally, after many frustrating months of trying to stay with the group, the old man decamped for Paris.

Gurdjieff followed him and tried to convince him to return, but it had been too hard, and the man said No. At last Gurdjieff offered the man a very generous monthly stipend if he returned. How could he refuse? When he reappeared, everyone was aghast, and on hearing that he was being paid (while they were being charged a tidy sum to be there), the community was up in arms. Gurdjieff called them together and after hearing their complaints laughed and explained: "This man is like yeast for bread. Without him here you would never really learn about anger, irritability, ego, patience, and compassion. That is why you pay me, and why I hire him."

Now -before you all start lining up to become the paid, designated gadfly in our midst, remember two things – One, its not in the operating budget, and two, that each one of us, in varying degrees, may be nominated for this post in the eyes of another, so no one is truly *more* qualified nor totally off the hook. As a result, we share the opportunity and the responsibility to teach and learn similar lessons.

First, we can cultivate the habit of asking ourselves why the person may be difficult. Don't assume you know. Curiosity and openness are important spiritual lessons. People are difficult for a variety of reasons –they have emotional wounds, they have low self-esteem, or they may be experiencing a crisis. Some difficult people are just different from us in temperament or values; others aren't relationally adept. They may be unstable or suffer from a mental illness.

However, the assignment here is not diagnosis and treatment. It's actually more about self reflection. In the words inscribed on the ancient Oracle of Apollo at Delphi: "Know Thyself." How we respond to difficult people provides us with golden opportunities to practice self-regulation and to be accountable for our reactions and projections. As St. Francis famously advises: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

Avoiding judgment is an important spiritual lesson we can learn in community. Notice how easy it is for you for judge others. Notice how often you judge others most easily for the one thing that you judge most harshly in yourself. Fascinating, isn't it? The next time you find yourself focusing on a person's negative qualities, remind yourself to look for the good. It's there.

Managing our anger is another spiritual lesson we learn through our encounters with one another. When your alarm bells go off, try to get some clarity about why you are angry. Anger is always a secondary emotion that masks hurt, fear, loss, heartbreak, or shame. What is the real emotion behind your anger? Know thyself.

Finally, forgiveness is a spiritual lesson we never stop learning and practicing. As I've preached in the past, forgiveness is not something you do primarily for the other person. Rather, forgiveness frees you to open your heart and move forward. It is an inner state more than an outer act. If you cannot forgive others, if you cannot forgive them their difficult-ness, ask yourself why. Know thyself.

As I apply all of these ideas and prescriptions to myself, I can hear the alarm going off in my pocket, too. There are times I wonder at how I haven't gone totally deaf. I must have been clairvoyant (or maybe just realistic) when I preached to my first congregation in 2000, that "we will likely make some mistakes with each other. We are human, after all. I may disappoint you, I may misinterpret, I may not handle every situation just so...but I can promise you, that I will abide. I will show up, I will foster joy, I will open my heart." This is still my vision of ministry and community.

In her book, *In the Company of Women*, Mary Gordon tells the story of a feverish, cantankerous broken old man who wanders out into the urban darkness and finds the lights of an all-night diner irresistible. He enters the steamy greasy warmth of the place, slumps into a stool at the counter and picks up a matchbox. On it is printed: *Ace 24 Hour café – where nice people meet*. Gordon writes that tears came to his eyes for the hopefulness, the sweetness, the enduring promise of plain human love.

Gordon's character shuffled to the Ace Diner, Thoreau found his way to Walden, we've gathered here in this place of glass, wood, and stone, where we "essentially nice people" meet. We come here, hoping to be surprised by love in spite of our failings, and yearning to grow through an ever-renewable covenant of honesty, accountability, and forgiveness. We have our coffee pot and we have our resentment and we have each other, pains in the neck though we may be. Together, we teach and learn spiritual lessons and make a glorious mess in the creation of something we can rightfully and proudly call "beloved community."

Thank your difficult people for being the teachers you need in this life to grow through grit and friction. And then, express your gratitude for those who abide with YOU despite your vulnerabilities and your foibles.

As self-proclaimed wayward monk, Shozan Jack Haubner, reminds us: "The people in your life are not getting in the way of your spiritual practice. They ARE your spiritual practice!"

This is the work of self-transformation, this is the journey of a lifetime. Along the way, pull up a chair, or three. Know thyself, open your heart, and listen for ringing bells of truth tolling in your pocket.

Blessed be. Blessed we.

© 2019 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. All rights reserved. Rev. Zucker and cited authors/sources may be quoted with proper attribution.