

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
"The Beauty of Needs"
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 20, 2009

Spoken Meditation

So much activity, so many responsibilities
 running, running, running,
 Yes, we do need time, to turn away
 and listen to the voice within.

So, let us pause in our service
 to make space
 to listen to what is moving inside us.

What concerns have we overlooked or neglected?
 What feelings are active in our consciousness?
 What do the feelings point toward?
 Are they happy feelings
 pointing toward needs that are satisfied?
 Or are they unhappy ones
 pointing toward needs that languish unfulfilled?

In the coming silence
 just notice what is happening without judgment
 using your breath as a tether to the present moment
 observing the contents of your mind,
 noticing the connections
 While dwelling with, a spirit of gratitude and appreciation
 for the gift of being itself.

Sermon

It was on a Tuesday evening, a couple of weeks ago, I came home tired from a busy day here, getting prepared for our first Sunday service of the fall season. I noticed Philomena had picked up and eaten some Chinese food and was watching a movie on TV. I put away our half of our Community Supported Agriculture share that Leah and I split on Tuesday then scrounged in the refrigerator, deciding what I'd make for myself. I called to Philomena in our family room, which is next to the kitchen, asking if she liked the new Chinese Restaurant in Altamont where it looked like the takeout had come. She paused the movie after a few seconds and said, with an irritated tone to her voice, "I can't hear you when the TV is on." Suddenly, I was angry.

What happened that Tuesday, as the saying goes, was a failure to communicate. I wanted to make conversation with Philomena and she was enjoying watching her movie. She was irritated at having her activity interrupted. I desired a little sociability with her and got a prickly refusal. Philomena was quite happy enjoying her movie and didn't want to engage in conversation at that moment. I wanted to engage in conversation and resented having to compete with a movie for her attention. I needed some connection. Philomena needed autonomy and enjoyment.

It appeared, on that Tuesday evening, that our needs were in conflict with each other. In an ordinary, nothing special moment, our emotions flared. I could feel my anger build as I reflected on other times Philomena was watching a movie in a moment I wished to speak with her. I resented her seeming unavailability for conversation when I wanted to talk. Our wonderful conversational ability is one of the most satisfying parts of our relationship. My emotions spoke to me powerfully about the strength of my need for connection with my beloved wife ... and it wasn't happening NOW. Core human needs are incredibly powerful drivers of our emotions and our actions. To understand this, just reflect on an infant who cries when she is hungry, when she needs to be burped, when he is wet and uncomfortable and when he is lonely and wants to be held. Helpless infants express these naked needs spontaneously. Grownups have the same needs but hide them so well, we forget we have them, until they cannot be satisfied. And our feelings are the compass that direct us to them. When our needs are being taken care of, we have pleasant emotions. When they are not being taken care of, we have unpleasant emotions.

What appears to be needs generating conflict is the bane of human existence and the source of all drama. There is one cookie and two children reach for it at the same time. Two men desire the affections of the same woman. Two candidates both want to be mayor of a city. Two parents disagree about how late their son may stay out at night. One partner may wish to be sexually active. The other may be tired and want to sleep. The driving question that arises when people come into conflict: Is it possible for everyone to get their needs met?

The case of an infant is quite clear. Their needs must be met. The pain of listening to their crying, and hormonally programmed empathy in mothers, powerfully motivates a quick response. Yet as they grow, and learn to soothe themselves and take care of their own needs, parents allow their own needs to matter more. I don't have to leap up and respond immediately. I can attend to my own need for rest and ease.

Returning to the situation on Tuesday morning, I'm wondering if anyone took my side and identified with my concerns and anger. How many identified with Philomena and identified with her concerns? Did anyone go a step further and decide I was right and she was wrong OR that I was wrong and she was right?

One way we resolve competing needs is through rules. If I want the attractive ring or wristwatch you're wearing, I can't just take it away from you. If something you do appears to me to be offensive, I shouldn't strike you. If I'm attracted to you, I shouldn't touch you without your permission. These general rules create the framework that permit healthy social interaction.

But rules of right and wrong aren't so useful for interpersonal communication. Should Philomena turn the television off and pay attention to my request for connection, say because we are married? Should I refrain from interrupting her and respect her movie watching, respecting her boundaries? I'd assert there is no clear right or wrong answer. She may have been bored with the movie and welcomed a chance for conversation. I may have appreciated her interest in the movie and refrained from an interruption honoring her need for entertainment. Until a need is acted upon, the outcome is unknown. Until the emotions spark and catch fire, even what needs are operating may be unclear. What if I was in great emotional pain from some trauma and needed comfort? What if my need to speak was quite casual and had no energy behind it, like asking where the salt shaker was when I could just as well find it for myself?

That fateful Tuesday evening, the outcome was clear. As my anger grew, I felt my judgment being clouded and my goodwill disappearing. I needed some way to resolve the situation that my rational mind knew was inconsequential but my emotional mind was getting ready to do battle over. My need for connection was strongly asserting itself and demanding action.

Thankfully, I remembered what I learned about nonviolent communication, or NVC, developed by Marshall Rosenberg. A year ago, Philomena and I spent a week together at a training in these techniques. I remembered how simple and straightforward these techniques were, and yet how full of nuance and power they were in practice.

This past summer, I'd returned to these ideas and techniques listening to some recordings of NVC trainings I'd bought for Philomena's birthday at the end of May. NVC trainers Robert Gonzales and Susan Skye have developed some more sophisticated techniques to help people to appreciate and work with their needs. Rather than identifying the need and beginning to look for resolution through requests, which is the normal nonviolent communication method to resolve conflict, they suggested another way to work with needs that I found very inspirational.

You see, many of us have a rather unhealthy relationship to our needs. Many of us would like to pretend we don't have any needs. I recognize it in myself. I'm an

autonomous being, a rugged individualist. I can get along without anyone else's help thank you. I strive to be self-sufficient and take care of myself. Needs? Ha!

Our society is dominated by this kind of thinking. If you're poor it is your own damn fault. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Need health insurance? Get a job. Your employer doesn't offer it? Get a better job. Start your own business if you can't get the job you want. Grow up and take care of yourself so I don't have to is our societies message.

We hear it in the language of wants vs. needs. Maslow's higher order needs for connection and meaning are considered optional wants that can be ignored if inconvenient. Not so much the need for freedom and autonomy however, prized by our individualist culture.

Gonzales and Skye take a different approach to our needs. They elevate them and honor them as spirit filled and life giving. Certainly our need for food, water, shelter, protection from the elements, and safety are non-negotiable and basic to human survival. Yet so are our social needs vitally important, even beautiful. Without our need for relationship and connection with each other, no society could be constructed, from the smallest tribe to the largest civilization. Our need for connection drives us to build great societies that immeasurably improve our quality of life. The need to connect and the satisfaction we feel when we do connect is the foundation for the global world community we are now constructing.

Just as wonderful and beautiful is our **need** for freedom and autonomy. What kind of a life could we have if we remained as dependent as infants with no ability to care for ourselves. Being compelled to serve infantile dependence would be a kind of slavery. Parents are delighted when their child takes their first step, speaks their first word, and ties their shoes all by themselves. I rarely meet a parent wanting their child to stay home once they are grown. We want them to take wing and fly out of the nest.

Not only are needs beautiful in and of themselves, they are universally human. All of us experience the need for food, water, shelter, protection from the elements and safety. All of us experience the need for connection and meaning in our lives. All of us need freedom and autonomy. All of us need pleasure and beauty for good quality of life.

The recognition of the universality and beauty of needs, in ourselves and others, opens the doorway to empathy and compassion. When I can make enough space in my heart to appreciate Philomena's need for autonomy and enjoyment, to appreciate that I too strongly need my own autonomy **and** appreciate how much Philomena respects my need for it, I can begin to move toward resolution of the trouble that has arisen. What stands in the way of my empathy is the emotional intensity of **my attachment to my**

strategy to get my need met and **my resistance** to appreciating and honoring Philomena's needs.

Gonzales teaches dealing with this attachment and resistance is very important in the resolution of conflicting strategies. Because needs are universal and we all have the same ones, they are not really in conflict with each other. The **real conflict** is between different strategies to meet our needs. In reality, Philomena loves communicating with me just as much as I love communicating with her. And I want the autonomy to do what I want when I want **just as much** as she does. That Tuesday night, our strategies to meet our needs came into conflict. And letting go of a failed strategy is painful. It hurts.

Crucial to the resolution process of conflict, says Gonzales, is mourning the unmet need in the present, feeling the disappointment and absence of satisfaction, feeling the pain. Whether or not the need gets met in the future, right now there is hurt, no different from the cry of the infant whose needs aren't getting met right now. That cry still happens in us when our needs don't get met. And when we appreciate the hurt and allow ourselves to feel that pain, gradually it softens and begins to release, loosening our grip and lightening our mood, creating an opening for empathy to arise. This process is independent of what is happening with the other person. It is the work we can do by ourselves to prepare ourselves for attempting to resolve the situation.

Only when I appreciate the beauty of Philomena's needs as well as mine and felt the pain of my unmet need, am I ready to begin to discuss with Philomena ways we can both get our needs met. In NVC this is called making requests. There are many different ways for both our needs to get met, limited only by our imaginations. We just need to be creative in coming up with a variety of ways and find one that satisfies both of us. If I believe there is only one way to get my needs met, that is called, in NVC, a demand. I don't think I'll have to work hard to convince you non-negotiable demands are not effective paths to resolve conflict. It is easy to separate a request from a demand. You know a request is really a demand when the other person says no.

One of the reasons we are resistant to acknowledge another person's need is because we fear we must then do whatever they demand. When all parties' needs are honored and negotiated through requests, now it is more possible for a peaceful resolution to be found.

I've used the example of a small Tuesday evening conflict with Philomena. Small potatoes compared to the geopolitical conflicts that rack the globe. But whether they are conflicts in the bedroom, boardroom or war-room, all are driven by conflicting strategies to resolve basic universal human needs.

Even when you know all about these very effective conflict resolution strategies, practicing them is hard. I was very tempted to go upstairs, nurse my anger and pout hoping to punish Philomena by withdrawing my affection. Instead, I asked her for a time for us to talk. I can't say I was sophisticated in my communication when we did talk, but we got to a resolution fairly quickly that satisfied both of us. Over the last year we've been very impressed by how these conflict resolution strategies have been beneficial in our relationship.

If you'd like to learn more about this form of compassionate communication, please sign up for the workshop we're having on these communication techniques Saturday. I'll be working with Deane Perkins who has been trained by the founder of NVC himself, Marshall Rosenberg as well as Robert Gonzales. Philomena, who brings much psychological training to this work will also lead the workshop with me.

Developing compassionate communication skills isn't just about having a more harmonious relationship with your partner, your parents, friends or children. Peacemaking is deeply life affirming, spiritually uplifting work. I see much suffering and misery in the world today and expect it only to grow in the future as the needs of a growing world population places unsustainable demands on Mother Earth. To muddle through, we'll need all the compassionate communication and nonviolence strategies we can develop. By learning them, using them, being an example for others and encouraging their use to resolve conflict, you can create great meaning in your life and be part of guiding humanity toward a more peaceful, harmonious future.

What is at stake is no less than the survival and evolution of the human species to become stewards of the diversity of life here on spaceship earth!

Benediction

Our mundane, everyday needs
 express life's yearning for being itself.
 Without needs, life would perish
 like an uprooted plant withers in the sun or
 roadkill decays by the side of the road.

Honor your needs and honor the needs of others.
 Appreciate the immense diversity of strategies to satisfy them.
 And please use respectful, empathetic, nonviolent communication,
 to satisfy them in a way that affirms
 the Spirit of Life and the Presence of Love.