

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“A Complaint Free Challenge”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore January 3 2016

Readings

Exodus 16:8

And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you, in the evening, meat to eat and, in the morning, bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him — what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord.”

Matthew 7:1-2

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Ephesians 4:29

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Qu’ran 12:86

I only complain of my suffering and my grief to Allah

The Buddha’s description of skillful or right speech can be found in the Abhaya Sutta which is a discourse with Prince Abhaya. The summary of his teaching is as follows:

[1] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has sympathy for living beings."

Sermon

We come into this world with a cry of complaint as we draw and release our first breath. No one warned us that leaving the womb would be so uncomfortable squeezing through the birth canal. Suddenly we're in the world. The sensation of that first breath must be an unpleasant surprise. And then to have to breath, not just once but again and again for the rest of our lives! Not just breathing but we must find food, water and shelter on a daily basis or risk an unpleasant and painful death! Is this what we signed up for at conception?

No wonder complaining seems deeply embedded in human consciousness. I love Lily Tomlin's quip, "Man invented language to satisfy his deep need to complain." And what pleasure and emotional release we get from whining and kvetching! Who would want to question this almost God given coping mechanism?

I think we might all be guilty of questioning it's value because much as we might enjoy complaining and criticizing, who really enjoys listening to others go on and on about their complaints? I sure don't. Yes, when offering pastoral care, I'm a good listener and empathizer, offering supportive comments. Yes, I appreciate helpful feedback about my performance so I can better serve our congregation. But there is way too much complaining and way too little stepping up to do something about it here, there and everywhere else in the world.

As you heard earlier, I couldn't find any world religion that celebrates and affirms complaining. Moses leads his people out of Egypt and what do they start doing? Complaining. Jesus' disciples are always complaining that they don't understand what Jesus is saying or doing. The Prophet Muhammad said, "If you do not complain to any fellow creature, you will be the most honorable of men."

The religious tradition I've studied the most has been Buddhism. The path to awakening and liberation from suffering he advocated he called the Eight Fold Path. One of those steps is called "right" or "skillful" speech. The intention is to use one's

speech to help end suffering in other people and in ourselves. For the most part, complaining, criticizing and gossiping doesn't advance that cause.

The most destructive form of complaining happens when two people complain about a third person, usually behind their back. This behavior is incredibly destructive in families, groups, organizations and institutions. There is even a name for it: triangulation. Just about every credible therapist or institutional consultant will go to great lengths to describe how this kind of behavior actually inhibits healthy change rather than stimulates it.

I hope I've said enough at this point to discourage you from thinking you can advance your growth and development as a caring, loving, compassionate and wise human being by increasing the amount of complaining you do.

So if complaining mostly leads to more suffering for ourselves and others, how do we stop doing it? The ways that have been helpful for me, so far, are the tools I've gotten from Buddhism for practicing right speech and from nonviolent or compassionate communications. They have been very helpful, even liberating, but I haven't been successful so far at ending my complaining habit. I need stronger medicine.

So when I heard about the Complaint Free World initiative from Bethany Gonyea, I quickly recognized the program's potential to actually free the participants of the habit.

Here's the back story.

The Rev. Will Bowen, minister of a Unity Church in Kansas City, Missouri, was looking for a way to encourage people to make positive changes in their lives. As he reflected on measurable ways to take action that would make improvement noticeable, the muse came to him with a really great idea.

Here is a basic problem dealing with how our minds work. What we focus our minds on with our attention has a way of shaping our reality. The more energy we put into a habit, the stronger it gets. If we put a lot of energy into negative habits, we're likely to reap a negative result. But if we put a lot of energy into developing positive habits, we're more likely to get positive results. No guarantees of course, but statistically and empirically, we get better results with positive habits and worse results with negative habits.

Bowen had read a book when he was young that pointed out an interesting coincidence. It takes about 21 days for a hen's egg to hatch into a chick. It also takes about 21 days to create a new habit that will likely become integrated into our behavior. Putting this

together with the idea of wearing a wrist band from Lance Armstrong's Livestrong campaign, he came up with an ingenious plan.

One Sunday morning, he passed out purple wrist bands to members of his congregation with very simple instructions. Put the band on one of your wrists. If you catch yourself complaining, criticizing or gossiping, just switch it to the other arm. The challenge is to see if you can keep from moving the band from one side to the other for a day, then a week, until you can keep it on one side for 21 days.

Bowen was amazed at how wildly popular this was. And this was back in the summer of 2006 he came up with this idea. His initiative continues today with literally millions of people who have ordered wrist bands from him. Now you don't need a wrist band to do this. You could move a coin from one pocket to the other, or some other marker back and forth. What is important at first is paying attention and catching yourself in the complaining behavior.

So again, catch yourself complaining, criticizing or gossiping, then move the band and start again. Only what you speak out loud to another person counts. You can think complaining, criticizing or mean spirited thoughts all you want ... to yourself. Yet, what many quickly notice is that the less you say that is negative, the less you actually think!

Over time, Bowen noticed four distinct stages in this challenge. At first, people are moving the band back and forth multiple times a day. They realized quickly how unaware they are of criticizing, complaining or gossiping behavior. Only when it comes out of their mouths and they hear their words hang in the air, do they realize what they are doing. This is the unconscious incompetent stage.

This stage is followed by the conscious incompetent stage. The person begins noticing the intention to complain before it happens and stops it, but in an erratic way so complaints continue to slip out. I notice I say things that I hadn't called complaining before but now recognize it as such. This is a very frustrating stage because consciousness is kicking in but inconsistently. The new habit is just beginning to take root.

The next stage is the conscious competent stage. At this stage the person is now monitoring their words before they speak and able to catch and resist the impulse to criticize and complain. The person can now choose alternate ways to communicate their thoughts that are more constructive and less alienating.

The final stage is the unconscious competent stage. The habit is so ingrained now, the natural and automatic choice is constructive, affirmative and compassionate communication.

For some people, going 21 days without complaining takes a long time, eight to twelve months. For others, the practice is quicker. For many people, three to six months is more like it. And this need not be a dis-incentive. If it takes that long, the habit will be even more firmly established when you get there.

So what do people say about accomplishing this goal? You can read their testimonials in Bowen's book, titled as you might expect, "A Complaint Free World." (the library has a few copies) Here are a few quotes to entice you to take the challenge:

Cathy Perry, a substitute teacher, writes:

This challenge helped open up my eyes to the complaining that I was doing. It was really a process of becoming aware of my thoughts and words. As soon as I realized what I was really focusing on, I was able to change my thinking about myself, about others, and about situations that I encountered every day. It's been a transformation from my daily litany of "I'm tired," "I don't get enough sleep," and "There's never enough time to get anything done" to sleeping well and feeling good.

Don Perry, bridge designer, says:

I now realize that much of my anger and complaining stems from my insecurity at my job ... This realization has helped me come to terms with the fact that I can't control everything that happens at work or in other parts of my life and that complaining won't help the situation. I found that the less I complain about it, the less I worry about it. Letting go of that obsessive worrying has helped me enjoy time at home more and simply become more relaxed.

Marcia Dale, church office manager, adds:

I have found that, even though I am very busy in my daily life, things seem to flow more smoothly. Some "friends" that I used to spend time with have drifted away because without something to gripe about, we don't have much to say to each other. But that opens up space for more blessings. The increased peace I feel is amazing!

Okay, now you've been enticed by the benefits of eliminating complaining, I do want to acknowledge there are times when complaining might be appropriate. The definition

of complaining refers to words that communicate grief, pain, or discontent. As anyone who has gone to a counselor knows, sometimes it is very helpful to unburden ourselves after a significant loss or acute discomfort. But for most of us these moments are rare and confined to a therapeutic situation or pastoral care relationship. Chronic daily complaining usually makes our lives more miserable rather than less.

The other common concern about curbing complaining has to do with the state of the world and society. There are many injustices and examples of oppression to be witnessed and critiqued - so the thinking goes. If people don't speak out against all the wrongs in the world and fight them, things will get worse and worse as the strong and powerful abuse the vulnerable and the weak. As someone advocating for social change myself, I'm very sympathetic to this concern.

Bowen, as a Unity minister, would likely argue that if we want to change the world, we have to first change ourselves. The problems of the world will begin to change when we become more compassionate, loving and generous people, interacting with others in healthy and respectful ways.

Sadly, there are many people enthralled with the pursuit of wealth, comfort, pleasure and power who see other people as instrumental means to their ends. These are not compassionate, loving or generous people. Or if they are, they limit that expression of their heart to those who are like them, to the members of their tribe, not to humanity as a whole. Others are consumed by hate and wish only ill will and destruction on those they consider their enemies. And there are many, many people who aren't paying attention to their actions causing enormous harm due to their often willful ignorance of the results of their actions.

The question though is how to meet these harmful people in the world. Meeting greed, hatred and delusion with more negativity isn't likely to change the hearts and minds of those being demonized. Basically, complaining isn't the best way to stimulate effective social change. Maya Angelou puts it this way "If you don't like something change it; if you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain." Social action that affirms positive inclusive values motivated by compassion for those who suffer is much more effective, energizing and more likely to make the positive difference we seek.

And to be an effective social activist is the work for a lifetime. To be effective, one needs to work on changing one's inner world while at the same time seeking change in the larger, outer world. I like how Eckhart Tolle puts it:

Complaining is not to be confused with informing someone of a mistake or a deficiency so that it can be put right. And to refrain from complaining doesn't necessarily mean putting up with bad quality or behavior. There is no ego in telling a waiter your soup is cold and needs to be heated up—if you stick with the facts, which are always neutral. “How dare you serve me cold soup ...? That's complaining.

What I'm advocating today with the complaint free challenge is a compassionate method of communication that stays connected to the inherent worth and dignity of the person or persons we're interacting with. And remembering the Buddha's guidance, unless the words are beneficial to both parties, silence is the better choice.

And even when the words are true, factual and beneficial, one needs to be mindful of whether this is the right time to share them and whether the other person can hear what we have to say.

So your Albany UU staff has already decided to take this challenge. I'm already much more aware of my speech and starting to see the benefit in my life and in my relationships. This is one of those challenges that will unfold differently for each person. Each person will move at their own pace based on the communication habits they currently have and the ones they have inherited from those around them and the home in which they grew up. This is not a competition.

But if enough of us take this challenge, it may have great benefit for our congregational life. So if you don't want to do it for yourself, you might consider doing it to benefit the health and vitality of our congregation. The benefit will be not just for ourselves but also for the all the lives our congregation touches.