

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“How to Keep Our Hearts Open – In Hard Times”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 30, 2018

Sermon

These are frightening times for many of us.

The effect of all the stresses going on in society right now is to amplify feelings of anxiety and dread. On a personal level, this isn't very healthy for us. Being chronically anxious can undermine trusting relationships. It also unearths all kinds of unresolved experiences and feelings from the past. The Kavanaugh nomination, for example, can bring up a lot of traumatic memories, especially for women, that old white male senators are not likely to appreciate or understand.

And in a more general way, instability in our world today increases our worry about what life will be like for our children and their children. All this anxiety has a significant corrosive effect on our national unity. The polarization in Congress is about the worst it has been in years. The Kavanaugh nomination has brought it all to a head as the Supreme Court has become deeply enmeshed in the culture wars being fought between progressive and conservative values.

So why can't we all just get along?

One place to lay the blame is on the messy process of evolution.

Evolution began with single cells that were autonomous. We'll never know when the first cell discovered it could eat another one, but life forms have been preying on each other ever since. You see it in the many, many levels of defenses we have to protect ourselves from threats. Delightful as it is to enjoy existence, we must be constantly alert to death threats from every direction, whether accidental death from being hit by a truck or from predators bigger than us or from tiny micro-organisms and viruses that want to take over our bodies and turn us into germ factories then kill us.

Evolving life forms discovered, early on, that cells that joined together for mutual support and common defense had evolutionary advantages. They survived better. Complexity has demonstrated its advantages ever since. Not just within a single organism. Cooperation between organisms is even more successful. The most successful, adaptable species are communal ones like ants, bees, termites, crows, buffalo, and Meerkats to name just a few. Humans are on the top of this social heap, the most successful, adaptive species – maybe too successful as we reshape the entire planet for our purposes. The ability to connect beyond the self for the good of the whole builds powerful community. That strong community majorly assists in survivability – evolution's prime directive.

But that success is not without danger to the individual. Honey bees must give their lives to sting an attacker. Ants are like cells in the whole colony with little independent sense of self. The cohesion of the whole requires the sacrifice of individual autonomy.

And when we translate that to human community under a corrupt leader who doesn't value the individuals in a group, those individuals are in danger of losing themselves in the leader's quest for power and influence and self-glorification.

This is an important driving force explaining why we've evolved a triune brain. The reptilian brain is where our impulses live, especially fight, flight, and freeze – all fear based reactions. The mammalian brain that evolved next allowed us to form into families and tribes, connected in familial love that bonds kinfolk together. It drives our loyalty to those whose DNA is similar to ours.

The cerebral cortex is the latest of evolution's innovations that has been spectacularly successful in human beings. This is the brain feature that gives us the self-awareness to transcend fearful impulse response and the urge to merge into and follow the crowd so evident in teenagers. When fully developed, it gives us the ability to choose actions wisely that are protective or allow us to vulnerable to facilitate relationship building. It is the balancing part of the brain guided by a sense of fairness and risk-taking for greater reward.

A healthy society guides the development of impulse control and healthy relationships to serve the greater good. The great religions help us move beyond our tribal attachments to recognize participation in a much larger community than our tribe can be mutually beneficial. Over the last several thousand years, religions have helped to successfully bridge differences of tribe and regional identification with the vision of a universal faith.

What societies and religions have yet to figure out how to do is develop an effective universal faith that unites us across language, belief, culture, class, color, gender, sexual orientation, physical attributes and ability.

So today, basically, we are out of balance. Thankfully, religions do have resources to offer in this regard as a source of balance. They show us how to humble ourselves before a higher good, usually expressed in our culture as a mono-theistic god. Saying the Shema or the Lord's prayer, speaking the sacred name of Allah with reverence, lighting candles and offering alms, prostrating oneself, saying the rosary, speaking in tongues and praising Jesus can all be effective ways to bring people together and focus them beyond themselves on a greater good.

Unfortunately these spiritual practices don't work for a lot of UU's, or they MIGHT have worked at one time until they had a bad experience in in their place of worship. Or the theology that infuses the words may have stopped making sense and dissipated their power to move their hearts.

Growing up at a very humanistic time in our Unitarian Universalist history, I didn't have access to much in the way of ritual and prayer as an emotional or spiritual support. I thought I was above that kind of superstitious nonsense. Being a very rational person, I didn't need this kind of crutch to be a good person. I just needed to think things through then do the right thing. The heart element of religion wasn't important to me as a young person.

That was the case until I started to explore different kinds of religious experience. As I did, I encountered powerful experiences of religious love that were new to me. In the 1980's, I hung with the American Sufis in the Mendocino Woods in California surrounded by towering redwood trees for a week in the summer at Sufi camp. I chanted the name of Allah over and over using different sacred phrases while being supported by beautiful music, standing shoulder to shoulder, arms interlocked in a circle with a hundred other worshippers in what is called the zikr, the ceremony of remembrance of Allah. I experienced moments of merging with that circle I'd never felt before. It was an intense intimacy of connection that wasn't personal and drew me beyond myself. Basically

the Sufi rituals blasted my heart wide open. I interpreted it as a fundamentally human experience that these rituals could access to stimulate my social evolution and self-transcendence.

In my religious exploration, the practice I most deeply connected with this human capacity to connect beyond the self - in a way that was most compatible with my Unitarian Universalist identity - was Buddhist loving-kindness meditation.

Now many of you have probably heard me extolling the virtues of Buddhist mindfulness meditation. Developing mindfulness is a beautiful, liberating way to train the mind. Meditation techniques teach us to witness the process of how the mind works independent of the content of personal experience. It helps us learn to choose wisely wholesome, helpful responses to what happens in us and around us rather than reacting in unwholesome, harmful ways.

And the Buddha realized that along with this primarily mental development process, meditators needed another component that cultivated a feeling of warmth and social connection. In the analysis of observing mental processes, one can get a little disconnected from other people, seeing them as objects of consciousness. All that cerebral cortex work needs to be paired with the mammalian process of connection with others through loving-kindness practice.

I like to think of loving-kindness practice or metta meditation as cultivating the experience of what it feels like to be enlightened. That prized feeling of oneness the mystics often celebrate is a feeling of deep connection to all that is. That kind of experience isn't something that randomly happens just because of luck or fortunate birth. That kind of feeling can be directly cultivated by practicing metta meditation as we did during the period of spoken meditation today.

The way to cultivate metta begins by recalling an experience of loving-kindness in the past. It doesn't have to be some overwhelming oceanic experience that most of us haven't had. It can be a very simple, basic experience like holding a kitten or a puppy. Many of us have this loving experience witnessing the birth of a child. Mothers can get a big dose of this loving experience bonding with their babies with the help of oxytocin, the love hormone. Perhaps we've received a moving act of generosity or offered generosity to another that has warmed our hearts.

This quality of love might initially be connected to another being but then it generalizes beyond that person. The Buddha taught metta in steps of progressively larger circles beginning with the self. And when I speak of the self, it doesn't love our personality or habit patterns but rather this physical body, this body, mind, heart system that supports our existence. Having loving care for this body can come from a place that is expansive and generous rather than possessive and analytical.

The next circle of care can be our immediate family, those who are near and dear to us, our circle of close friends. These are the people to whom we have deep, ongoing personal commitments. The next circle out would be that larger circle of our community we identify with, our tribe, those again that we have a sense of common values and purpose. The hardest circle I think is the widest one, the identification with all beings. I find loving horse flies and mosquitos along with my wife and son and wishing them all well, stretches me. I'm stretched loving some of our elected officials in Washington DC right now.

This is where we can actually practice our first UU principle of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Metta meditation goes directly to this and asks us to exclude no one from our

circle of concern. Is this possible? I think so. Is it easy? No way. That is why it is called a practice. We can practice it and in the process gradually be changed by it. And maybe others are changed too. I don't know if sending loving kindness to Trump will make him a kinder, more loving person to those who are different from him, but if it might work, I'll give it a shot.

A cautionary note on this. If you are experiencing abusive behavior by another person, metta may not be what you need. One can resist and stop another person from initiating harmful actions toward you or someone else from a place of care rather than a place of anger or hate. The present and future harm to the perpetrator of violence is enormous. Interfering with that violence and stopping it, also stops that person from harming themselves as well as their intended target.

If you'd like to explore the benefits of loving-kindness meditation further, join me Monday, tomorrow night and we'll go deeper into the Buddhist ideas, how they work and what benefits they offer.

For now, I end with my own testimony of how powerful this practice has been for me. If you wonder how I stay mostly even tempered, available and responsive, metta meditation is part of my regular daily spiritual practices. In a sense, my ministry began with an intense experience of metta that stimulated my religious exploration. I continue to learn how to love you better while keeping my balance and not compromising my integrity and appropriate boundaries between me, my family and our congregation. And no leaps of faith or adoptions of belief are required.

In times like these, our hearts can stay open, vital and available to serve the good of ourselves and society. I'm here to tell you, Buddhist metta meditation methods can help.

Benediction

May I remind you that the Buddha wasn't the only religious teacher who wanted people to love each other. Abraham and Moses certainly wanted the tribes of Israel to get along. For Jesus the greatest commandments were to love God and love one's neighbor. The Prophet Muhammad taught love, kindness and compassion to his people, and was seen to be the most loving, kind, and compassionate of all of them.

I close with a little direction from the Buddha on the value of lovingkindness:

“Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will develop and cultivate the liberation of mind by lovingkindness, make it our vehicle, make it our basis, stabilize it, exercise ourselves in it, and fully perfect it.’ Thus should you train yourselves.”

I encourage you to consider doing likewise!