

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“When the Yule Log Won’t Light”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 3, 2017

Call to Celebration

The Nicest Gifts I Ever Got (by the Rev. Clarke Dewey Wells)

During this season of gift giving, a good exercise is to make a list of the best gifts we ever got. That will tell us what is important, for ourselves and for people we want to give gifts to.

While I remember a Daniel Boone hat and a magician set with special affection, the nicest gifts I ever got are in quite another category; the carillonneur at Rockefeller Chapel who let me strike one of the largest tuned bells in the world during his playing of *Ein Feste Burg*; my mother giving me a complete Shakespeare for my 14th birthday; coach Al Terry saying, ‘Little Wells, grab your bonnet,’ and permitting me to enter as a freshman into my first varsity football game; a beautiful lady on a ship when I was still an acned teenager who kissed my face all over and told me she thought I was handsome; Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman telling me he had thought for several hours about a question I had raised and responding with a written answer the next day in front of the whole class; night after night my father playing catch with me in the back yard until it got so dark we couldn’t see the ball; a Unitarian minister in Kalamazoo who put his arm around me after my father died and kept it there for a long time; a friend who flew several hundred miles to visit me when I was sick; a buddy who went to see three movies with me on the same day.

The nicest gifts people have given me have been enabling, confirming gifts, bestowing understanding and self-esteem, help in time of trouble and delight for ordinary days.

Meditation

The idea for this poem came as she was travelling to Madison, Wisconsin, to attend the Governor's inaugural ball. On her way to the celebration, there was a young woman dressed in black sitting across the aisle from her. The woman was crying. Miss Wheeler sat next to her and sought to comfort her for the rest of the journey. When they arrived, the poet was so unhappy that she could barely attend the festivities. As she looked at her own face in the mirror, she suddenly recalled the sorrowful widow. It was at that moment that she wrote the opening lines of "Solitude." It was first published in a 1883 issue of The New York Sun.

Solitude by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone;
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.

Sing, and the hills will answer;
Sigh, it is lost on the air;
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
But shrink from voicing care.
Rejoice, and men will seek you;
Grieve, and they turn and go;
They want full measure of all your pleasure,
But they do not need your woe.

Be glad, and your friends are many;
Be sad, and you lose them all,
There are none to decline your nectared wine,
But alone you must drink life's gall.

Feast, and your halls are crowded;
Fast, and the world goes by.
Succeed and give, and it helps you live,
But no man can help you die.

There is room in the halls of pleasure
For a large and lordly train,
But one by one we must all file on
Through the narrow aisles of pain.

Readings

from Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*

Depression is the flaw in love. To be creatures who love, we must be creatures who can despair at what we lose, and depression is the mechanism of that despair. When it comes, it degrades one's self and ultimately eclipses the capacity to give or receive affection. It is the aloneness within us made manifest, and it destroys not only connection to others but also the ability to be peacefully alone with oneself. Love, though it is no prophylactic against depression, is what cushions the mind and protects it from itself...Love forsakes us from time to time, and we forsake love. In depression,

the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance...

Life is fraught with sorrows: no matter what we do, we will in the end die; we are, each of us, held in the solitude of an autonomous body; time passes, and what has been will never be again. Pain is the first experience of world-helplessness, and it never leaves us... (p 15)

Perhaps depression can best be described as emotional pain that forces itself on us against our will, and then breaks free of its externals. Depression is not just a lot of pain; but too much pain can compost itself into depression ... It is a tumbleweed distress that thrives on thin air, growing despite its detachment from the nourishing earth. It can be described only in metaphor and allegory. (p 16)

Animal models for suicide are imperfect since animals presumably do not understand their mortality per se and are unable to seek out their own death. You cannot long for what you do not understand: suicide is a price humans pay for self-consciousness, and it does not exist in comparable form among other species. Members of such species can, however, hurt themselves deliberately, and they frequently do so if subjected to excessive vicissitudes. Rats kept crowded together will chew off their own tails. Rhesus monkeys reared without mothers begin self-injuring actions at about five months; this behavior continues throughout life even when the monkeys are placed in a social group. These monkeys appear to have lower than normal levels of serotonin in crucial areas of the brain ...

I was fascinated to hear of the suicide of an octopus, trained for a circus, that had been accustomed to do tricks for rewards of food. When the circus disbanded, the octopus was kept in a tank and no one paid any attention to his tricks. He gradually lost color (octopuses' states of mind are expressed in their shifting hues) and finally went through his tricks a last time, failed to be rewarded, and used his beak to stab himself so badly that he died. (p 256-7)

Sermon

That's one sad story isn't it? The poor neglected octopus kills itself!

I didn't appreciate this song until I read the passage I quoted for you from the book (*The Noonday Demon* by Andrew Solomon). That image of the octopus going from being the center of attention in the circus to a neglected tank after the circus disbanded is heartbreaking, isn't it? He continues to do his tricks hoping someone will notice and appreciate his talents until finally he gives up on his audience and his life.

The story is an indication of just how self-aware cephalopods can be. Even though they don't have a bone in their body, they are very intelligent. They do have a sense of play, can juggle and open jars to remove the contents. They have been known to climb aboard fishing vessels, open lockers and

feed on crabs, a favorite food. In captivity, they have been known to escape from their tanks to visit other octopuses or scavenge for food in another aquarium. One was observed breaking the aquarium glass with a rock to escape and direct a stream of water at a light to short it out. Squid can communicate with other squid by changing color, with different colors on the right and left sides to communicate different messages to the squid on either side.

That image of the octopus essentially losing his job in the circus seems symbolic to me of the times we live in. In these rapidly changing times, I think of the skilled workers in their 50's whose jobs have either been automated or sent across the border. Many of them have lost their meaning and validation as their job disappears. These workers must retrain for jobs that require them to compete with younger workers. Many go the route of disability as a path to early retirement, a retirement without a sense of recognition or achievement from their work lives.

Seasonal social isolation can happen this time of year too. One can be out of step with the joyful spirit that many have as they make their house as fair as they are able; trim the hearth and set the table. The festive lights, the decorating trees, the many candles lit to brighten the gloom or commemorate the Hanukkah miracle, the pleasure of shopping and buying that special gift for a loved one, all these seasonal activities and enjoyments leave some feeling disconnected. The joys others are experiencing amplify for them the sense that something isn't right. What is going wrong isn't so much happening "out there," though there is plenty to be alienated from due to the commercialization of the season. The real problem is something is going wrong, "in here."

Depression is different from the holiday blues. I've had the experience of having a difficult time getting in the mood for Christmas. But I don't experience the key signs of depression: chronic sadness or depressed mood and diminished pleasure or interest in activities that have been sources of enjoyment in the past. Other signs include:

- significant weight gain or loss
- sleeping much more or much less than usual
- fatigue or decreased energy and
- decreased ability to concentrate, think or make decisions.

The most significant signs of depression are feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and recurrent ideas about death or suicide. The qualitative feeling of being depressed is very different than feeling out of sync with the holiday season. One of the most devastating feelings of being depressed is a sense of hopelessness.

Depression isn't an anomaly of our fast-paced modern existence or an urban lifestyle. It shows up in all cultures around the world. It has shown up throughout history too. Aristotle observed and accurately described the symptoms of depression. He thought it a biologically based problem that

could be treated with remedies that could be taken by mouth rather than appealing to a deity for relief.

So we can't exactly blame the holiday season for making people depressed ... but the holidays can trigger someone who already suffers from depression to take a dive. One of the maddening questions to ponder is trying to understand why some people get depressed and others don't. The loss of a loved one, a relationship or a job, an injury or health problem, moving to a new location or any of a number of stressors are known to contribute to the onset of depression. Changes that come with the aging process can trigger the first experience of depression too. Sometimes there is no obvious reason for the onset of depression. Some people can go through horrendous stress and not get depressed. Others with relatively mild experiences of loss can descend into a crippling depressive episode. Lots of research is being done, but so far there isn't any one understanding of what causes depression.

We just know it happens, and once you've been depressed it is likely to happen again. And once someone is depressed, it can be very hard to climb out of it.

Fortunately, today we do have a selection of psychotropic medications that are very effective at breaking the downward cycle of depression and help people return to normal functioning and enjoyment of life. Unfortunately, all of these medications have side effects, some of which, like the loss of libido, can be very unpleasant. But the distressing alternative of a relapse keeps people taking their medication.

What can be paired with the medications is talk therapy. Unfortunately talk therapy alone usually can't bring someone out of a clinical depression, but it can help most people when they are climbing out of the pit of despair. And it has been shown that talking can help prevent relapse.

The reasons for this come out of recent research in how depression actually works. Depression is a mood based disorder. As we have evolved, our emotional responses have been critically important for our survival. If a tiger appears in our path or an angry man with a stone ax starts running after us, a panic attack is highly appropriate. We need the extra oxygen in our blood and adrenaline energized senses and muscles to be ready to fight or flee or freeze. We certainly don't need that kind of reaction when a fire truck zooms past us on the highway or awakens us in the middle of the night.

The problem is our perceptions of reality combined with our memories can inwardly stimulate all those emergency alarm bells in our heads to go off that then trigger the full blown physiological response in our bodies. If I have an unresolved conflict with someone during the day, I can replay that conflict at night and re-experience all the emotions I felt the first time. And if my physiology is tuned in a certain way by habit or by biology, my reaction may get stronger rather than diminish over time. In the middle of the night, that imaginary tiger is virtually sitting on my bed ready to go for my throat and the panic button gets pushed again and again.

Reading about how reactive our bodies are to stress and how we hold on to those stressors reminded me of the noble truths the Buddha taught. Being a lifeform has stress built in that can't be eliminated. As social beings, we will have stress in our relationships. We will lose the ones we love if we don't die first. Our bodies are going to get sick and gradually deteriorate over time. Whether we want it to happen or not, life is going to have challenges that will entail physical, mental and emotional anguish. That is truth number one, an honest and unflinching observation of the human condition.

Truth number two is that we mal-adapt to this reality. The ways we adapt make things worse not better. In the experience of depression, this mal-adaptation makes things a whole lot worse and exacerbates the condition.

A lot of research is being done right now about this process of mal-adaptation. As people start feeling depression coming on, they typically start analyzing the situation they are in looking for a way out. Self-judgment and blame can easily follow. The problem is that having negative feelings toward oneself can activate the same body processes that one might need to fight, flee or freeze. This can activate the depressive mechanisms that cause a downward spiral which stimulates more negative thinking and self-talk. Sleep problems, lack of energy, aches and pains, guilt, joylessness and depressed mood accelerate the downward spiral that feels like a prison that can't be escaped generating even more negativity.

Research is showing that this downward spiral can be interrupted in the earlier stages of depression by skillfully changing how we think. And the tool that the scientific and therapeutic communities have discovered that can reverse the spiral is one that the Buddha discovered 2500 years ago: satipatthana or mindfulness practice.

One of my favorite expressions is: Don't believe everything you think. This is the mistake we regularly make, especially in generating the critical self-talk that makes us feel worse. The practice of mindfulness can help us witness the experience of consciousness. Mindfulness can be thought of as kind of a meta consciousness.

Think of watching a movie in a theater. If the movie is really good and exciting, you forget about your body and get absorbed into the movie. But if someone comes in late and squeezes in front of you, it breaks the trance of the movie and you are suddenly back in the theater aware you are watching a movie. That moving from being in the content of experience, the movie, to stepping outside the content and noticing yourself watching the movie is the key liberating process of mindfulness.

You can be just as absorbed in the sensation of an itch that drives you crazy as watching a movie. And you can become self-aware of itching as a bodily process. You might think of it as stopping the movie projector and looking at each frame individually to see how the effects are done, how the sound was edited, how the background and lighting were set to provide an illusion. This can also be

done with an itch, seeing that it is just a sequence of body sensations that arise and pass away. Just as you can do that with an itch, one can also recognize the composite nature of emotions as valuing experience as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. And most importantly for depression, thoughts can be recognized as impermanent bubbles floating through the brain and interrupt being lost in the inner movie script.

Once we develop this ability to see ourselves sitting in the theater of life rather than being absorbed in the movie, we can stop letting whatever appears in our minds control our existence. Through mindful awareness, we can start developing disciplined, skillful and healthy responses to what appears in our minds. When we are thus mindful, we can stop colluding with inappropriate self-critical thinking. We can choose to stop trying to solve all our problems at 3:00am in the morning.

Unfortunately, mindfulness is a quality of consciousness that is not always present. And when someone is in the middle of a major depression they may not have access to developing it. Medication may be the only way for them to climb out. And mindfulness may not work for everyone to help them cope when they have recovered from a depression to keep it from coming back. Fortunately research is showing that many people can effectively use mindfulness based techniques to prevent themselves from relapsing into depression and greatly improve their quality of life.

What was frightening for me as I researched depression this week was recognizing my familiarity with the thinking of depressed people. Solomon quotes a study of subjects who played a video game and then were asked to estimate the number of targets they hit. The depressed people were highly accurate and the non-depressed folks guessed many times more. Those of us in touch with reality and the threats all around us can easily be weighed down by them.

Yet I also know another experience of being human through mindfulness that is free of those threats. It is a blissful experience of being itself independent of whatever movie I'm living in. Having access to that present time experience of being itself helps keep me out of the pit of depression and I hope it can help you as well. If you want to learn how, come to one of my meditation workshops in January, February or March.

Benediction

Somehow We Survive by Dennis Brutus

Somehow we survive
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.
Investigating searchlights rake
 our naked unprotected contours;
Over our heads the monolithic Decalogue
 of fascist prohibition glowers
 and teeters for a catastrophic fall;
Boots club the peeling door.
But somehow we survive
 severance, deprivation, loss
Patrols uncoil along the asphalt dark
 hissing their menace to our lives,
Most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror,
 rendered unlovely and unlovable;
sundered are we and all our passionate surrender
But somehow tenderness survives.

May the tenderness of our hearts not be crushed by depression
 and may the love found here, bring it back to life.

There is more love somewhere and let us find it.