

“I Need, I Need, I Need, I Need, I Need.”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

9 August 2015

Note that sermons are written to be spoken, and do not always follow conventional grammar, paragraph structure or timing. Minor changes may have been made to the text, for clarity.

I need...I need...I need, I need, I need, I need, I need.

Why does it feel so good to say that?

I think that for me, it's because, when I was a kid, I didn't express my need.

I grew up in the Kingston Unitarian Fellowship. Every week in youth group, we did check-ins. What was your high of the week? What was your low of the week?

I never really shared my low of the week. I never said, “I was lonely,” or “Someone was mean to me.”

Sunday mornings were the safest community space I had growing up. I knew that they honoured my inherent worth and dignity. I didn't know if there was room for my need.

In the movie *What About Bob*, Bill Murray plays a character who is very good at expressing his need. And it soon becomes clear that he has many needs. Psychiatric needs. Physical needs. Social needs. Perhaps even spiritual needs. And of course all these needs are related.

Bob's need to express his need is so strong that he follows his psychiatrist on vacation. In my memory, he gets off the bus, drops his luggage onto the dusty ground, and humbly says “I need.”

But when I rewatched the movie, that is not what happens. Rather, he gets off the bus and starts yelling, “Dr. Marvin! Dr. Leo Marvin!”

I imagine that this New Hampshire vacation town hasn't had this much commotion since the last Presidential primaries.

When he spots Dr Leo Marvin, he runs up to him. He puts himself right up under Leo's face and says “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! I need! I need! I need! Gimme! Gimme!”

This is not the vacation that Leo had had in mind.

Leo orders Bob to go back home to New York, and then, somewhat rankled, Leo drives his own family the short distance to their cottage.

But the trouble that Bob causes has barely begun. He does not go back home, but rather shows up at the side door of the Marvin family cottage. He promises to leave, but comes back again, and again, and again.

Leo is exasperated. In addition to Bob's highly inappropriate behaviour, Leo also has to deal with his son Ziggy's fear of death and his daughter Anna's fear of missing out on her teenage years. For Leo, that is too much trouble, too much need.

He shushes them all, because he has a bigger need. The television show Good Morning America is coming to interview him about his new book, and he needs the interview to go smoothly.

But Bob won't leave. Bob ends up on camera. Bob ends up destroying Leo's professional image. Leo has a breakdown, and by this point the movie has become a farce.

Leo comes to believe that the only way to get rid of Bob is to kill him.

Bob escapes from the dynamite, the dynamite accidentally blows up Leo's house (nobody was injured), and to add to the trouble, Leo's sister falls in love with Bob and they get married.

Poor Leo. If only Bob had kept his need to himself.

In our culture, -we- can feel a strong pressure to keep our need to ourself. Many of us were raised to believe that having need was selfish. My Granny once gave someone a very high compliment, saying "He never thinks of himself."

Can anyone relate to that?

In some cultures, people are taught to only express their need indirectly, so as not to cause any trouble or embarrassment. There's a Jewish joke, and it's true in other cultures as well, there's a Jewish joke that goes like this:

How does a Jewish mother say that she wants to sit down?

She says, "I'm fine, I'll stand."

With so much work to do to save the world, we may believe that our own needs are insignificant and should be ignored. We're fine. We'll keep standing, keep working. If we realize how tired we are, we may stop helping others.

The musician Carolyn McDade tells the story of coming home from yet another social justice meeting (I got this anecdote from Fredric Muir's Berry Street Essay). On her way home from the meeting, Carolyn acknowledges to a friend that she is exhausted. She feels dried out, like cardboard that has been in the attic for too many years.

The way I imagine it, she stumbles in the door of her home, collapses in her living room, raises her arms and hands to the sky, and calls out, "I need, I need, I need."

Carolyn has abandoned her strength. She's in trouble. Her home is no longer her sanctuary.

Some of us want sanctuary when we come -here-. We want to feel safe, and strong, and together. We don't want to highlight our need, or feed our need. We want to feel like we have worth and dignity.

[*Pointing to someone*] You have worth and dignity. [*Pointing to someone else*] You have worth and dignity. We all have worth and dignity.

But we don't always act that way. Sometimes we are not acting as our best selves. Sometimes our actions, or our thoughts, show that we are in spiritual need.

Perhaps we swear at someone in traffic. Perhaps we take out our frustrations on the wrong person. Sometimes we make poor lifestyle choices. It can be tempting to cover up and deny our undignified spiritual underbelly.

Unitarian Universalism lost a potential member because we don't explicitly welcome the undignified parts of ourselves. This happened down in the States. The author Nadia Bolz-Weber grew up in a Christian church that she felt wasn't walking its talk. They were preaching the golden rule, but they weren't following it. So she went looking for a spiritual home elsewhere. She ended up finding the Unitarians.

She ended up deciding that she couldn't be a Unitarian. Unitarians are too good, too hopeful. She didn't feel like she fit in.

Yes, she had moments of deep goodness, moments of channeling a positive force in the universe. But she also had moments of raw selfishness, spiritual deprivation, spiritual need. I won't go into the details of the behaviours she would get up to, but let's just say that she could be the type of person who would eat the last cookie in the cookie jar, even if she had already had her share. It was bad.

It can be scary to try acknowledging that side of ourselves. Expressing our spiritual need can be messy, like in the movie *What About Bob*. We're not all experts, and you might need an expert to help with your need. Or people might be too busy to help you. It can feel safer to just keep our needs to ourselves.

But our needs can gnaw at us. We -need- to express our need. We -need- to express our need. We -need- to express our need. Our needs are going to come out, even if it only happens at committee meetings.

In the movie *What About Bob*, Bob's need bursts forth during the Marvin family vacation, and it transforms the Marvin family. When Bob expresses his need, it lets the spirit in.

10-year-old Ziggy overcomes his fear of death by becoming immersed in Bob's joy for life. When the social masks come off, Ziggy realizes that life can be fun. Same with Leo's daughter Anna. Whenever Leo would have a serious talk with her, he made them both talk using hand puppets. Apparently this is a psychiatric tool. But Bob was comfortable communicating person-to-person, with no need for an intermediary or a social mask. His authentic presence let the spirit in.

And what about Bob? Did expressing his needs cure him of his problems? No, he still needed Leo's expert help, and a bit of luck. Expressing his need wasn't a cure-all. It caused a lot of trouble. But it also let the spirit in.

And what are we here for if not to let the spirit in?

What good would it do if we clothed the naked, fed the hungry, brought world peace, and improved reality television, what good would it do if we did all these things, but didn't let the spirit in.

We need to let the spirit in. Not just into our best selves, but into our whole selves, including the parts that need.

When the musician Carolyn McDade came home from yet another social justice meeting, and collapsed exhausted in her living room, she collapsed onto her piano bench, and sat facing the keys. She tuned into her need, and decided that it was time to express her need.

"Spirit of life," she said, "come unto me."

"Spirit of life," she sang, "come unto me."

I imagine she said, "Please, oh please, sing in my heart, my heart needs you."

She expressed her need, and it turned out that the spirit of life could handle it.

Now, I don't take the lyrics of her song too seriously. When I sing *Spirit of Life*, I'm not reciting doctrine. But the song works for me. When we express our need by singing that song, something shifts in the room. We let the spirit in.

Leonard Cohen would take it further. When you're feeling cold and broken, the spirit might just sing *Hallelujah*.

James Taylor doesn't go that far. In his song Fire & Rain, he expresses a need, but he doesn't mention if anything good comes of it. After a friend dies, he calls out, help, help me make it through another day.

That song is meaningful to a lot of people. That song lets the spirit in.

Singing the blues lets the spirit in.

We can express our need. The spirit of life can handle it.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we turn on the fire hose of need, and aim it at the Pastoral Care Team. That wouldn't be fair, and I'm much more of a gradualist than that. I'm simply asking, how would our self-identity shift if we were more open about having need?

Mark Mosher DeWolfe said, "we are whole, even with our missing pieces." Our whole lives includes our need.

Most of us are already used to expressing need. We do it in our monthly Journey Groups, for example, and I've experienced very heartfelt connections in the men's group. And I like to jokingly thank all my friends who are polyamorous, for all the research they do into expressing need.

But for some of us, it would be a change of identity to see ourselves as people with need, people who express our need, people who learn from our need.

If it would be meaningful for you, try this. Or do it just for fun. Turn to someone near you, allow a big smile on your face, and say, "I need, I need, I need, I need, I need."

And now turn to someone near you and say, "I honour your need."

Feel good?

Now, we're not promising to fulfill your need. We might be busy, or exhausted, or we might not have the skills you need. But honouring your need is a positive step. It lets the spirit in.

How would your self-identity change if you were to see your weakness or oppression as a source of wisdom? Jean Vanier said, "I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes."

Has that ever been your experience?

Some people cultivate their weaknesses, their needs. There was a time when, all around the eastern Mediterranean, monks were flocking to the desert to live a life of hardship and deprivation, a life full of need, in order to fully let the spirit in. In the forests

of southeast Asia, many Buddhists found it easier to detach from their need by exaggerating their need.

Jon Kabat-Zinn teaches the practice of the body scan. You tune into every feeling in your body, in every part of your body. If there is joy, you feel the joy. If there is pain, you feel the pain. They say that pain can be lessened simply by putting your attention on it, breathing the spirit into it. The body scan focusses your attention on your internal need.

Who would we be if we more deeply honoured our own need?

For one thing, we could relate more intimately to the planet. The planet is in need. The environment is in need. We can say to the environment, We're here to help. The environment might be like, Help? You don't even get me. What do you know about need?

If we connect with our own need, we can relate more intimately to the Black Lives Matter movement. It's not enough for us to say, We're here to help. We need our own need to be wrapped up intimately with the needs of Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter. We need our social justice work to be spiritually connected to our own need.

When I talk about Unitarian Universalism, I talk about need. I -need- love at the centre of my life. I -need- justice at the centre of my life. I -need- community at the centre of my life. I -need- diversity at the centre of my life.

I need, I need, I need....I need.....I need.

Closing Words

You are part of the interdependent web of all existence. ALL of you is part of the interdependent web. Not just your beauty. Not just your generosity. Not just your compassion. All of you. Your troubles. Your fear. Your fallibility. Your habit of taking the last cookie, even if you've already had your share.

All of you is part of the interdependent web of all existence. All of you has dignity. When the spirit of life moves through you, it moves through all of you.

If you are in spiritual need...WHEN you are in spiritual need...you can express that need, you can call out to the spirit of life...Spirit of life, come unto me, sing in my heart, sing in my gut, sing in that part of me that needs needs needs.

You can express your need. The spirit of life can handle it.

Go in peace.