

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

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So, it had been a perfectly uneventful flight home to Toronto.

A few years ago,
with my headphones on,
I was looking out the window
at a bright, sunny summer day,
when suddenly, I was covered in water,
and all around me people were screaming.

Those moving about in the aisles were being tossed to and fro.

The flight attendants demanded everyone immediately buckle up –
as if anyone in that moment really needed extra encouragement.

For what seemed an eternity,
the plane bucked wildly with loud, creaking noises
that made us all wonder
if it might just come apart at any moment.

Though I've experienced my fair share of bumpy flights,
I can tell you this was a truly terrifying ride
I hope never to repeat.

While I knew—on a rational level—
that this bout of turbulence wouldn't bring down the plane,
in the thick of things,
it took me a good long while
to find any comfort in that technical bit of knowledge.

In the moment, I wanted something beyond
technical assurance that all would be well;
frankly, I very much wanted to be in control.

Now, I doubt that having me step into the cockpit
would have made anyone else feel more comfortable—
and there's absolutely no reason that it should.

I have no business sitting at the controls of an airliner,
especially one that's actually aloft.

But thinking back on that wild ride,
I recognize that it wasn't so much control that I craved in that moment,
as much as a desperate desire to not feel so very powerless.

Of course, there was little to nothing I could do.

Buckled into my seat, my only job that afternoon
was to ride out the turbulence,
trusting that those with far greater knowledge and skill
were doing the best they knew how
to get us through this rough patch
and back on the ground in one piece.

But, how hard it can be
to give over our trust at such moments.

How amazingly difficult it is
even to relinquish our illusion of control.

How hard it can be to entrust ourselves to others,
and just sit there all strapped in with our feelings of vulnerability.

Yet, it is something life has a way of asking of us time and again—
to place our own well-being in the hands of others.

It's not always an easy thing to do for many of us.

In years past, I've led a course
called "Living for a "Good Death."

Each time I've led it, our conversation has eventually turned
to what, for many of us, is the uncomfortable knowledge
that there will likely come a time for each of us
when we will be forced to depend on others—
a time when we must entrust our very lives
to the loving care of family, or friends, or even strangers—
to medical professionals who will look after us,
when we can't quite look after ourselves.

What I've learned from these many wonderful conversations through the years is that Unitarians, by and large, really detest this idea—and are willing to consider doing just about anything to avoid it.

We take great pride in asserting our independence,
at being the captains of our own destiny,
at exercising our freedom,
and calling the shots that affect our lives.

There's much to be celebrated in maintaining such fierce resolve;
in our determination can be seen something
of the indefatigable force of life itself.

But, a constant need for control
can come at a steep cost to the soul.

My colleague Barbara Merritt names this need
as our “fantasy of omnipotence.”

She tells the story of a Baptist colleague of hers,
who had served a long and very successful ministry
nearby to her congregation.¹

The man was well loved by his church,
and well respected in the community.

And then one day, in his mid-fifties,
he was given a devastating diagnosis
and just a few short months to live.

Barbara had a chance to talk with him
during the final days of his life
and one of the things he said to her was striking:

He said, “I've come to realize

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Adapted from a telling by Rev. Rob Hardies in his sermon “Accepting Our Limits, Facing Failure,” January 12, 2003. All Soul's Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C.

that there are only two things in this world worth controlling:
our own health and the health of our loved ones.”

“And [the truth is that] we can’t control either of them.
So why do we always pretend like we’re in control?”

“Why are we so proud?” he asked.
“Why are we so proud?”

We humans are, indeed, far from omnipotent,
and, of course, even on our best days, never will be.

A lesson taught to us in so many ways
over these past five months,
as we’ve had to grapple in stunning new ways
with what we’re able to control, and what we’re not.

While there is, to be sure,
much that is within our power in this life—
and often more than we dare to even recognize or act on—
there is also so much that is simply not.

The art of living is to be found, of course,
in our being able to discern the difference,
to sort out which is which.

To be able to recognize when we’re not in control.
When we can’t be in control.

And to be able to admit it and accept it,
so that we can move on to manage what we actually can.

And here’s why this matters.

Whenever we get wrapped up in the “fantasy of omnipotence”
we risk missing the difference
that we might actually be able to make with our lives
because we can’t clearly see
what is truly within our control.

When we get so caught up in the illusion of control,

we can easily lose sight of the power we actually do possess.

It's worth asking, then,
why we so often trade our power to control the things we can
for the false hope that we can control
what is well beyond our reach.

The illusion of control is so seductive
because it promises to spare us from pain and hardship.

Yet, these are promises that Control can never keep,
for, in the fullness of time,
sorrow and suffering visit every life.

There is an old Buddhist story told by the Dalai Lama
of a woman named Kisagotami,
who suffered the death of her only child.

Unable to accept the pain of such an enormous loss,
she ran from person to person, seeking some medicine
to restore her child to life.

She had heard that the Buddha had such a cure.

So, Kisagotami went to the Buddha, paid homage, and asked,
“Can you make a medicine that will restore my child?”

“I know of such a medicine,” the Buddha replied,
“but in order to make it, I must have a specific ingredient.”

Greatly relieved, the woman asked what he required,
confident she would find it.

“Bring me a handful of mustard seeds,” he said.

The woman immediately promised to procure the seeds,
and was bounding out the door when he added:
“But the mustard seeds must come from a home
where no child, spouse, parent, or servant has died.”

The woman agreed and began going from house to house

in a frantic search for the tiny seeds.

At each home the people agreed to provide her with the seed,
but when she asked if anyone had died in that household,
they all nodded their heads “yes,”
and apologized for not being able to help.

In the end, unable to find a home free
from the suffering of death,
Kisagatomi finally realized she was not alone in her grief.

She was at last able to let go of her child’s lifeless body.

She then returned to the Buddha,
who said to her with great compassion,
“You thought that you alone had lost a son;
[but] the law of death is that among all living creatures
there is no permanence.”²

As the Buddha taught,
the human condition is shot through with suffering.

And, while it can occasionally be avoided,
whenever we try too hard to protect our lives
by doing anything and everything we can to keep suffering at bay,
the quality of our lives begins to diminish.

Randy Becker, a fellow UU minister,
has shared a story that moves me deeply.

He says that: “In 1995, when my younger daughters were 18 and 14,
their 20-year-old sister was killed by a drunk driver
going the wrong direction on a highway.

“In the aftermath of Ericka’s death,
I longed for a way to retroactively have kept her safe

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Dalai Lama and Cutler, Howard C., *The Art of Happiness*, New York: Penguin Books, 1998, p. 133.

and to proactively keep [her sisters] secure.

“I wanted to be sure that I would never feel again what I was feeling from the profound loss I was moving through.

“As I pondered deep foundations ([of] theology) to inform my feelings and actions, I began to realise that fulfillment of my wish (of total safety and security) would mean [an] almost absolute restriction of my daughters’ freedom.

“In the name of [trying to keep] them safe, I would, in effect, be killing their futures, [and] killing them.

He goes on to say that:

“the theology I found which helped me past that chilling possibility was one that allowed me to let them get on with their lives:

to drive [on the highway],
go away to university,
do the daring things which young people do,
mak[ing] their mistakes,
risk[ing] their lives,
and in the process, be[ing] alive.

The theology, which he says sustained him through such heartache, has four simple points:

- + We can’t control what will happen to us,
but we can control how we react to whatever happens.
- + The energy spent on [gaining] security
is energy that is unavailable to us for living our lives.
- + A life lived in fear is not a life [fully] lived.

+ There can be meaning on the other side of anything.

He says that eventually coming to embrace this wisdom required that he own the fact that he couldn't control everything.

And, it forced him to ask himself some tough questions about how his "control issues," his relentless striving after safety and security, might actually be diminishing his life.

He questioned whether he was protecting his ability to live, or just protecting his feelings against the painful possibility of yet another loss.

In choosing to move from death to life again, he had to learn to differentiate between "being scared," which is a short-term, situational experience, and "living in fear," which is a chronic and soul-numbing condition of being.

I find in Randy's powerful testimony, some of the most meaningful and practical theology I've ever come across.

+ That while we cannot always control what life hands us, we can control our response.

+ That in holding too tightly to our lives, we can let them slip away.

+ That fearful living isn't living at all.

+ And, that even after the greatest loss we can imagine, it is still possible to rebuild our lives with meaning and with purpose.

It is a theology grounded in the beautiful paradox that abundant life is to be found not by holding on, but by letting go of whatever holds us back from life itself.

And, so it causes me to wonder—and maybe you, too—
at how different life might be
if this were a lesson we didn't have to learn over and over again.

But, such learning, it seems,
is the real and ongoing work of being fully human.

And that learning is certainly part of our lives in this pandemic,
as we hold the tension between managing reasonable risks
without succumbing to a life lived only in fear.

While each of us has to run a different set of calculations
given our personal circumstances—
 about whether to ride the bus,
 whether to go into the office,
 whether to send the kids to school,
 or whether to visit relatives—
my hope is that we will make the decisions
we each need to make
based on what is truly ours to manage,
and then let the rest go.

When I was in divinity school, Elisabeth Sifton,
the daughter of Reinhold Niebuhr, the great 20th century theologian,
spoke in a course I was taking.

She provided us with a wonderful window
 into the social ethics of her father.

But, most interesting was learning that his famed Serenity Prayer,
that well-known supplication of twelve-steppers everywhere,
was actually slightly but substantially altered
to arrive in the form well known today.

But the original words were these:

 God grant *us* the *grace* to
 Accept with serenity that which we cannot change

The courage to change what *should be changed*
And the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

It is a prayer of discernment,
a prayer about controlling what we can
and accepting that which we cannot.

Composed in the midst of World War II,
its original focus not so much on the individual
but on society as a whole,
Niebuhr's prayer was a tool for honest soul-searching
about what truly matters, even in difficult days.

And, so, I believe, it is a prayer for us all,
in these trying times in which we live.

As we carry with us anxieties that touch
our bodies, our wallets, and our future,
let us endeavour to accept with serenity
that which we cannot control,

to find courage to change
what should be changed,
if it be within our power,

and to find the wisdom we most certainly need
to know the delicate difference.

So may it be. Amen.