

“Dealing with Disappointment”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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I was, you might say, a curious child.

As a kid, the build-up to Christmas
was usually more than I could bear.

By the end of November, I would be rifling through
drawers and closets in search of hidden Christmas gifts.

It got so out of hand that Santa Claus resolved early on
not to bring any gifts into the house that hadn't first
been hermetically sealed in tamper-proof wrapping paper
and bound tight with meters and meters of Scotch tape.

For good measure, Mrs. Claus saw to it
that each package was adorned with a booby-trapped bow
that I'm now fairly certain
was crafted from something closer to razor-wire than ribbon.

Yet, in time,
even these efforts proved an inadequate deterrent
for my inquiring little mind,
as I soon perfected the delicate art
of performing reconstructive surgery
on the packages into which I had taken a peek.

Eventually, having exhausted every conceivable security measure,
Santa resorted to an ingenious strategy:
labeling all of the gifts under the tree
with a set of cryptic names
my brothers and I couldn't possibly decipher.

One year we were Superman, Batman, and Spiderman.

Another year, our gifts appeared bearing the names:
Cinderella, Snow White, and Wonder Woman.

On Christmas morning, when all was to be revealed
a little nametag buried deep in the toe of our stockings
informed us of the name of our holiday alter-ego.

Needless to say, I was outmaneuvered.

Not knowing which of the gifts were eventually to be mine,
the thrill of trying to decipher
what treasure each held inside was gone.

Yet, I wish I could say that it was only curiosity
that drove my investigations.

When I look back on this time,
I realize that I was at the age
when Christmas begins to lose some of its magic.

Already skeptical about Santa,
I had begun to uncover the painful truth
that even a Christmas tree surrounded by a mountain of gifts—
including most everything I asked for—
could leave me with feelings of disappointment.

It's not that I wasn't grateful for what I received.

It's just that I was learning tough lessons
about life's longing after things, and experiences, and relationships
that are only very rarely fulfilled to the exact specifications
of our made-to-order demands.

In other words, I was learning
some of my first lessons about disappointment.

In the year or two I was sorting all of this out as a child,
I think my peeking into the packages
was an early attempt to manage my expectations.

If I knew what to expect, if I wasn't surprised,
I thought I could somehow guard against disappointment.

Now, of course, this approach only partially worked
because I never considered lowering my expectations.

For a time, I kept alive the hope
that the magic might somehow return,
even while bracing myself for the likelihood that it never would.

If I had been raised a Buddhist rather than a Baptist,
I might have known that it was
my attachment to a particular outcome
that was fueling this vicious cycle of raised expectations
being later deflated by reality.

But I trust I might also have learned
that much of life involves balancing the challenges
that come with the cards that life deals to us.

It is a delicate balance, this tension between our expectations
and their potential to be either fulfilled or dashed
by forces often beyond our control.

Holding this tension in balance is hard work.
But it is the work of being human.

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As we near the end of a year unlike any other in our lifetime,
it is worth asking ourselves how we balance
the hope we have for our lives
with the inevitability of life's disappointments—
especially now as so much of what we knew to be our lives
has been upended by the pandemic.

Disappointment is, of course, something known to us all.

It's often experienced in different ways,
but over time, and certainly over a lifetime,

our lists of failures, hurts, and woes, when tallied up,
end up looking much the same.

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I love how UU minister Patrick O'Neill
describes our difficulty in coming to terms
with the inescapable changes and challenges
that are part of the human predicament:

Here is how it is supposed to work [he says]:
We are supposed to be adults about this business
of making life transitions.

We are supposed to understand and accept
that life comes to turns in the road.

Friends move on.
Children grow up.
Elders pass away with time.
The world changes.
Good things happen.
Bad things happen.
To everyone.
Success is sweet.

Losses hurt.
Good-byes are hard. And inevitable.
The price we pay for allowing others into our heart.

Life includes heartbreak and sorrow and regrets,
along with laughter and friendship and love.

[But,] the love is what counts most,
it's what tips the scales
between a worthwhile life and a tragic one.

Our wounds are supposed to heal
and we're supposed to forget the pain.

We're supposed to act brave,

though secretly, everyone is terrified at some time or other.

We're supposed to believe
that it'll all work out for the best someday,
that for every door that closes, a new door will open.

We're supposed to grow old gracefully, and happily.

We're supposed to die peacefully, in our sleep,
surrounded by those who love us.

[But,] here[, he says,] is how it really works:

People tell us all this when we're young,
but we don't really listen to the parts we don't want to accept.
[That is,] until we [have to] live [through] them.

Then we complain that no one told us
how hard this was all going to be.

We're supposed to take our hits
and keep our dignity and our wits about us at all times,
but the truth is life is often lived in a full state of panic,
with all dignity thrown to the winds.

We lose it sometimes, all of it:
our dignity, our composure,
our confidence, our tempers,
our self-respect, our friendships.

Some wounds don't heal.
Some do, leaving ugly scars.

Not everyone gets to grow old. Or be happy.
Sometimes doors just close.

[But,] the love is what counts most,
that part [holds] true;
it's what tips the scales between a [life
that is] worthwhile and [one that is tragic].

In all of this, I, of course, agree that love is what counts most.

It's something that we all seem to remember most of the time,
but in my work as a minister,
it is the thing I see people most prone to forget
when difficult changes bring disappointment to our doorstep.

And that is why, I think,
that disappointment packs such a powerful punch.

It can divert our attention away from what truly matters,
often distancing us from the very love we need
to overcome life's hurts, even sometimes
inviting us down the unhelpful path of anger and resentment.

I've seen disappointment do its most insidious work
when it leads us to believe that all is lost,
and that the sacred ties that bind our lives one to another
are well beyond repair.

We allow disappointment to win
when we sacrifice on its altar the future of our relationships
or the hopes and dreams that give our lives meaning and purpose.

Disappointment may, indeed, at times, spell a dead end,
but it also often provides the gift of hard-won wisdom
that can be ours for the taking.

If we will only heed that wisdom,
taking from it whatever bittersweet lesson is to be had,
life's disappointments can often bring unexpected blessings.

In this way, disappointment can lead us to deeper living.

Writing at the turn of the eighteenth century,
Joseph Addison put it this way:

“Our real blessings often appear to us
in the shape of pains, losses and disappointments;
but let us have patience” he said,
“and we soon shall see them in their proper [light].”

The patience that Addison refers to
implies the passage of time,
and while time certainly can help,
it also must be said that time alone won't heal everything.

Healing from disappointment demands something more of us,
and I think that "more" comes from our values.

At the heart of our faith as Unitarians is, I believe,
an abiding hope for reconciliation and restoration—
for *tikkun olam*, for the healing of the world,
to borrow a phrase from our Jewish friends.

Our first and seventh principles—
which uphold the dignity of the individual
and the sanctity of the web of life—
call us to a quality of relationship
that can overcome disappointment
with forgiveness, and acceptance, and grace.

These can be loaded words—
and they are very human words
that speak to a willingness to move ahead together,
even amid heartbreak and hurt,
by saying "yes" to life as we go.

By not letting our disappointments have the final say.

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I've been recently mulling over
some wisdom from Theodore Parker,
who, some two centuries ago,
said that disappointment is the "salt of life."

Considering the various qualities of salt,
I've marveled at the many ways his statement still rings true.

Much like salt, disappointment does, indeed,
give flavour to our lives.

And, as we all know too well,
it can also sting, burning into a wound like little else.

But, there is also a preservative property to salt,
and I daresay to disappointment, too.

I see that preservative potential in all that I've just said
about forgiveness, and acceptance, and grace—
in the commitments we make in our hearts
to pick up the pieces and forge ahead
when all might otherwise seem lost.

I do think the Rolling Stones got it right on this one:

We can't always get what we want,
but we can, very often, with some work, get what we need.

This is a lesson to carry with us
through this strange season of our lives,
as we navigate the thousand little losses
that have come with the pandemic.

The story of how we thought
this leg of our life's journey would play out
has been radically rewritten for each of us.

And while there have been some silver linings
and unexpected blessings from this ordeal,
it's also challenged us and changed us,
with many disappointments along the way.

We are hopefully near or even beyond
the halfway point in this global crisis.

The coming months will be a test of our endurance—
and of our commitment to the well-being of everyone around us.

No small part of this test,
of making it through this time as best we can,
is spiritual in nature.

For it ultimately comes down to our ability
to find the inner peace to carry us through these difficult days.

That means being real about our predicament.
Accepting our disappointments and grieving our losses.
Even while we work to save what can be saved.

It means coming to terms with the challenges of change.
And with the loss that comes with deep disappointment.

And from all of that, summoning from a deep sense of peace
the strength to carry on.

Many different religious traditions
speak to finding this type of peace,
but none to my mind as powerfully as Buddhism,
with its sense of equanimity.

Equanimity is not a detached indifference,
but an unshakeable evenness of mind,
no matter the surrounding circumstances,
that is achieved through intention
and regular spiritual practices that deepen our capacity
for mindfulness, compassion, and loving-kindness.

In these trying times, my hope for each of you
is that you find the balance of equanimity
to carry you through.

That amid the changes now upon us,
you are able to find peace,
accepting life's losses as they come,
and letting go of its disappointments.

For such a peace is a wondrous gift in any season,
no matter how well its wrapped.

Amen.