

“Good Intentions”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Online Service via Zoom
30 January 2022

"But that wasn't what I meant."

Many of us may have said that, at one time or another,
when we've unintentionally said something
that harmed someone else.

Because we spill things accidentally.

It can be a reflexive, defensive response.

To excuse our behaviour because we meant well.

To focus on our intention rather than the impact of our words or actions.

As we grow and mature in our spiritual lives,
and as we deepen in community,
we can become more skillful at recognizing
when we harm others even when we don't intend to...

And we can learn to take responsibility and make amends
more easily.

§

Let me start on a personal note.

My husband and I have been together a long time,

and in the early years of our marriage, I think it's fair to say that we struggled sometimes with these issues.

I've shared this sermon with Dave in advance, by the way, and he's supportive of me sharing these examples with you.

Especially early in our relationship, if either of us unintentionally hurt the other, we weren't exactly swift at acknowledging our impact.

Speaking for myself, I'd often justify what I had said or done, while minimizing his hurt feelings.

I sometimes would defend myself by focusing on the circumstances that led me to behave poorly...

Such as, "I was really tired when I said that," or "I was feeling really stressed" or something along those lines.

It's a common pattern, in human conflict.

We tend to attribute our own actions to outside circumstances and forces beyond our control...

whereas we often see other people's actions as a result of their character.

It has to do with what social psychologists call "attribution theory."

Many of you may know a lot more about this than I do.

When I first heard about it, in a course on conflict resolution, it helped me understand so much about myself and my relationships.

In short, it was a game-changer.

Attribution theory explains how we make judgements

about human behaviour--often linking others' actions to their personality traits--

And not taking external circumstances--or intentions--into account at all.

That was a trap we could fall into.

We could say to ourselves--or perhaps to sympathetic friends or listeners-- "He is just selfish!" instead of "he's been under a lot of pressure at work lately."

Or "She is just a careless person" rather than "she didn't get much sleep last night because our toddler was up half the night."

Meanwhile, when it came to our own behaviour, we were more likely to chalk it up to the situation, rather than owning our own parts in the conflict.

We thought there were very good reasons for our own mistakes, but that the other person should be able to behave better.

Needless to say, these distorted ways of seeing ourselves and each other just entrenched our conflicts further...and it took us many years to learn healthier patterns.

Eventually, and very happily, we did.

Also, because of other factors in our early lives, each of us tended to feel the unintentional harms of the other very deeply.

Both of us were quite likely to feel hurt in various circumstances...

...and both of us were likely to feel shamed when the other person said we'd hurt them.

As you can imagine, living peacefully in relationship was very difficult for us.

It was something we had to learn...and we spent a long time doing that, with many helping professionals and also some clergy along the way.

§

I've started this sermon by talking about unintentional harm through a personal lens...

But of course, it's a subject deeply connected to our ongoing work in anti-racism and anti-oppression.

For example, good intentions can be a key factor in what are called "microaggressions."

The many words and actions that cause harm to people in marginalized groups, often in indirect and unintentional ways.

Often, microaggressions are a result of good intentions... and yet, they can have a very negative impact.

For example, someone might comment on another person's accent or hairstyle that differs from their own, in a misguided attempt to make friendly conversation...

But the unintended impact is that the person feels "othered" or diminished in some way.

Especially as a white and privileged person, it's important that I learn how my own well-intentioned words can sometimes cause harm...and how I can do better.

Next week, Donovan Hayden will be with us to speak in more depth about how we can live into the 8th Principle.

...which calls us to individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions.

I'm looking forward to learning more from him.

§

Whether we're trying to cultivate healthier relationships at home, or learn how to do our part in undoing patterns of injustice, it's helpful to have tools we can use.

One of my favourite tools, which may be quite familiar to some of you but which came to me only recently, is made up of three simple words:

Ouch. Oops. Whoa.

Here's how the writer Annalise Griffin described it in *Forge*, an online publication on personal development.

"If you say something that comes out wrong, that you suddenly realize [makes others uncomfortable], or just sounds different hanging in the air than it did in your head, you say 'oops.'

If someone else says something that hits you in a way that feels bad, you say 'ouch.'

If the conversation is moving too fast, you're not following a line of reasoning, you aren't familiar with a concept [...] or you just want to slow down, you say 'whoa,' and ask for clarification."

She goes on to say:

"The point of this tool is to signal a clear set of values: Mistakes are normal, harm can be mended, it's okay to not know something, and accountability is a shared responsibility."¹

§

Here's how another writer, Leslie Aguilar,² helpfully describes "ouch and oops."

"When you accidentally squash someone's toes (I hope it's never intentional), the natural thing to do is to get off their toes and apologize – immediately. It may sound like this, *"Oops, I'm sorry."*

Then, make sure you haven't hurt them [that is, not in not a way that requires further care and attention, I'm adding to her words here] and – very important – don't tread on them again.

It's the same thing when you figuratively step on someone's toes. Have you ever said something that is unintentionally offensive – an "oops" you wish you could take back? [...]

When this happens...you can take action to recover from your communication misstep."

The recommended next steps after an "ouch" are to **accept** what has happened, **acknowledge** the impact, **apologize**, and **adjust** one's behaviour in the future.

Sometimes, also, it's important to **ask** for more information, in order to understand what went wrong...

¹ Annaliese Griffin. "Three Words You Need for Your Next Hard Conversation" in *Forge*, Aug 10, 2020 <https://forge.medium.com/three-words-you-need-for-your-next-hard-conversation-a3e2090d043d>

² Leslie Aguilar, *Ouch: That Stereotype Hurts, Communicating Respectfully in a Diverse World*.

Or to slow the whole thing down with a well-timed "whoa".

Of course, just saying these simple words doesn't mean there isn't more to talk about.

Very often there's a lot more to talk about!

But they create a container within which dialogue can take place, in many situations where harm can occur.

Thinking back to earlier stages in my life,
I wish I'd known about "ouch," "oops," and "whoa."

§

It's been suggested that during the pandemic, all of us,
to greater and lesser degrees, are living through a period of trauma.

This makes all of us more vulnerable to being hurt...
and perhaps also, more likely to cause harm.

For anyone with a pre-existing history of trauma,
as a result of belonging to a marginalized group,
through inter-generational trauma,
or through painful events happening early in life...
it's helpful to have practical tools
to help name the hurts that happen
and prevent additional ones.

An attitude of loving compassion towards others
and ourselves will recognize that mistakes are
part of being human.

In fact they are necessary in order for us to learn and grow.

When we learn to listen, instead of label,
we can teach and learn from each other.

It seems to me this might help us build a culture of peacemaking...in which we can live into our first principle that recognizes the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" and our third principle of "justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

And speaking again of the 8th Principle...

It's worth saying, too, that a significant "barrier to full inclusion" can be perfectionism:

Being rigid and unforgiving in our assessment of ourselves and others--often with the very "good intentions" of improving the world.

In our quest to co-create a more just and peaceful planet,
we are always well-served by vulnerability, honesty and humility.

The Toronto songwriter and poet Robert Priest has a song called "If It Wasn't For Stumbling."

The chorus goes:

"Oh yes it's humbling to always be stumbling
Sometimes I crumble when I fall.

It sure is humbling, but if it wasn't for stumbling
I would hardly walk at all."

Robert gave me his permission to quote his wise words today.

§

In this short talk about unintentional harms today,

I've focused mostly on "small" things...which of course can have huge impacts...

Microaggressions in the social justice context...

And everyday "ouches" that arise in every relationship, sometimes leading to defensive "ouches" in return... when a wiser response would be "Oops...I'm so sorry."

Of course, much larger evils in this world are caused by people who do have intent to harm...and by those who were taught hatred by those who came before them.

This is, of course, a much larger subject and one which I'd have limited skill to address.

But I can say that as a human family, we share responsibility for all the great harms that are inflicted on one another, whether as a result of good intentions or bad.

And that each of us, in the smallness of our sphere, can grow a little more each day in the direction of peacemaking, reconciliation, healing and love.

Earlier this week, the world marked Holocaust Remembrance Day, and I've been revisiting the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, the revered Israeli poet who lived from 1924 to 2000.

He was described as "a philosopher-poet in search of a post-theological humanism"...which perhaps explains why this poem can be found in our UU compilation of readings, "Lifting Our Voices."

It's called "The Place Where We Are Right."

"From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

§

As we all continue to grow and change...
in our own way and in our own time...

May we be open to the digging up of the trampled yard
within us and all around us.

May we learn to dance with our mistakes as well as our achievements.

When we do our best but still fall short...
When we spill the milk we intended to savour...

May we know that even then--
Even now--

We are precious and worthy...
We are held in the sacred embrace of relationship...

And we can always,
today and evermore,
begin again
in love.

Amen.

§