

Behind Enemy Lines
Rev. Victoria Ingram
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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In this morning's meditation, we asked to "become quiet enough and still enough to notice the deep call within us". Many Unitarians consider that place of presence as essential to spiritual practice, to opening up to the possibility of encountering inner wisdom, a feeling of sacred peace, moving beyond our thoughts, or simply resting in the now.

It is a living practice that can help us reconnect with our sense of purpose and commitment to action that helps us "lead the lives we feel most called to live". The power of meditation is one of the reasons we include a time of quiet in our worship. But some of us don't find meditation particularly accessible or helpful. Some of us find that entering that quiet state seems to open a mental door to intrusive, irrelevant, or negative thoughts, which create an outcome far from peaceful, serene, or fulfilled. We are the beneficiaries of thousands of years of knowledge of spiritual practice, from far flung places around the globe, ancient religions and established strategies for connecting in some way to something deeper within us, to universal energies or truths, to power beyond our own limitations. Followers of various wisdom traditions have used meditation, of inner quiet, to attempt to move beyond the limitations of the mind, the body, and the senses.

Over one hundred years of psychiatric exploration, scientific advances in neurobiology, discoveries of life-altering psychoactive medications, and theoretical interpretations of what happens in our brains, we still don't know fully how that organ that resides between our ears does what it does. Scientists have made strides in understanding the roots of mental illness, of dementia, of autism, but in many cases we have only found ways to better manage these conditions as opposed to eradicating them because we have yet to find out what really causes them.

While we live with them every moment of our lives, we really don't know our minds, our brains, at all. A therapist I saw many years ago gave me the inspiration for today's sermon title. She said that when we are in our minds and thoughts, it can feel like we're behind enemy lines. She was telling me that I shouldn't trust as truthful every thought in my mind. At the time, this was a radical and revolutionary bit of feedback. Until then, I'd believed that if I thought it, it must be true.

But our minds are complex and don't always follow rational paths. There's a lot going on in that mass of cells and nerves and chemicals. We don't really know from where and how some of our thoughts, impulses, impressions, and interpretations arise. And without focused practice and intention, some of them come to us unwanted and unbidden. Some of our thoughts can frighten, worry, or shock perhaps because we don't like to think of ourselves as "that kind of person".

And, surprisingly, our thoughts lie to us all of the time. Dr. Amen says “just because you have a thought has nothing to do with whether it is true. They lie a lot, and it is our uninvestigated or unquestioned thoughts that steal our happiness.”

We wake from sleep remembering dreams, sometimes comprehensible and sometimes not. We try to figure out what they symbolize, what wisdom or guidance they may be trying to communicate. But often our dreams are filled with images, unknowns, impossibilities, and mysteries we cannot explain or understand.

We are consciously committed to being peaceful, respectful, and accepting of others, but confronted with a person or persons we find challenging, we find ourselves experiencing thoughts of anger, frustration, or fear. Our mind and body react to these thoughts by preparing to fight or flight, freeze or appease. We may find ourselves torn between the person we want to be and the person we find ourselves becoming in the moment.

Our minds are always at work, not only accomplishing the tasks of keeping us alive, but processing information and input from the world around us. Through life experience, we become somewhat unaware of our responses in the “usual” situations we encounter. Something we experience as novel may cause us to stop, gather more information, and adopt a more analytical approach. However, much of the input to our minds we will respond to rather automatically, bypassing a thoughtful examination of its validity, reliability, consistency and accuracy.

So, if all of our automatic responses were positive and life-affirming, then our mental systems are working pretty well and our lives feel good. We are happy, self-confident, and empowered. However, from my experience, there are a lot of us who hear a different kind of voice in our heads, one that leads us to experience self-doubt, worry, nervousness, and a sense of powerlessness to make change. In this case, those automatic thoughts are not contributing to our happiness, success, or self-esteem.

Since I don't think we would consciously choose to be miserable, these automatic thoughts must be formulated in our brains, drawn from feedback from others, perceived personal failures, and flawed interpretations of what is happening to us. Then, these thoughts come to us, seemingly from nowhere, and intrude on our well-being. They impact our ability to enjoy being ourselves, to fully express our personhood, to find joy, satisfaction, and connection.

In the quoted text I shared this morning from Dr. Daniel Amen, he refers to these as ANTS - automatic negative thoughts. After years of research, he says they are normal, but that having them repeatedly impacts our mental well-being and is a clue we need to do something to adjust our thought patterns. You can find out more about his work on-line.

He suggests the following steps to help bring our negative thoughts more firmly into our consciousness, allowing us to examine them and then make choices about how we can

alter these patterns. First, take a few minutes and write down your automatic negative thoughts. Writing them down brings them into focus and putting them on paper not only gets them out of your head, but give us a more objective place to start our work with them.

Secondly, take a look at what you've written and examine it for trends or themes. For example: do our ANTS seem to reflect an "all-or- nothing" pattern, thinking that things are either all good or all bad. Perhaps they indicate that we consistently compare ourselves negatively to others. Or, maybe we have a pattern of only seeing the bad in a situation.

Many years ago I had a consultant friend who identified another thought pattern as "shouldy musturbation" - when our negative thoughts always include the words "should", "ought to", or "must" language that leads us to feel guilt and emotional pressure. Maybe you notice that your ANTS tend to shift the blame and responsibility to others, allowing you to identify as the victim and therefore feel powerless.

Patterns of how we think about ourselves, others, and the situations of our lives helps us identify where we need to make changes by using these five questions to get a more objective view of what's going on in our minds.

Question One: Is it true?

Question Two: Is it absolutely true with 100% certainty?

Question Three: How do I feel when I believe this thought?

Question Four: How would I feel if I couldn't have this thought?

Question Five: Is the opposite of this thought true or even truer than my original automatic negative thought? How can I turn this thought around to be true?

Finding an alternative POSITIVE thought gives you a meditation mantra or concept to implant into our mind to combat the negative messages we've been giving ourselves. It helps to start shifting the automatic nature of our self criticism to feel freer, less anxious, and less trapped in past hurts or losses. Then, we can start focussing on how we have succeeded, where we have done good work or deeds, how we are special and unique in the world, and how we are loveable and loved.

If we do this mental work, will we still experience anxiety, fear, suspicion, or sadness sometimes? Well, yes we will. We need to pay attention to the signals of our minds for our safety and well- being, too. Thinking positive thoughts about the bear who is running toward you in the woods will not result in a good outcome. It is not in our best interests to underestimate risks, take a ho-hum attitude about our health, or make bad decisions. Our goal is to develop honest, clear, and reliable thought processes.

We can rewire our brains with practice, focus, and effort. Any new skill takes time, repetition, and attention to master. It's valuable, because each of us is worth the effort to minimize feelings of anxiousness, maximize our potential for joy, and optimize our sense of well-being. We can learn train ourselves to reduce or eliminate our automatic

negative thoughts to have a more accurate and impartial assessment of the situations of our lives. And, we can improve our ability to think more positively, generously, and open-mindedly in the process, opening up new possibilities in our lives.

We're never too old, or too young, to start shaping our thoughts and training our brain to aid us in feeling lighter, freer, more hopeful and confident. I wish you blessings on living your life more fully and realized as you wish it to be.