

Appreciative Communications & Relationships Short Sermon

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Our worship committee asked me to speak about appreciation in communication and relationships. I always get nervous coming up here; even after many times public speaking. I think its because of how close to my own values this space and community is.

I thought I was going to find this easy, but I was surprised. This turned out to be a hard subject, taking a lot of reflection, thought and time. Something that doesn't seem to connect intuitively, and it was not until this morning that I was finally able to articulate my ideas, though as I sifted through these concepts I began to realize that there seem to be some amazing opportunities for me as a Unitarian Universalist here, a practice that seems to offer ways to bring me closer to the principles upon which my action all my life has been based, and focusing on drawing out this practice for the past couple of weeks seems to be changing my experience of sharing, listening and communicating with people. It has been helpful, and deepening.

Something that has continuously come up, is a memory of a metaphor one of our co-advisors in the youth program here gave me that spoke to me as a Kung Fu practitioner.

He had been reading a book, which I do not remember, about how our mind is like a garden...the things that grow there, are what we plant, what we cultivate...so if we plant or cultivate angry, judgmental thoughts, if we focus on what we do not like, what irks us, then that grows within us...if we focus on what uplifts us, which we value, and enjoy, if we even just practice the challenging effort of truly accepting people and ideas with which we disagree, that grows within us.

As a Kung Fu practitioner, the idea reached me, and stayed. I know, from tens if not hundreds of

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thousands of hours of practice, that even those things which seem completely impossible, like breaking river rocks with my bare hands, jumping and spinning through a tornado kick into a graceful crouch, or reacting with a planned, designed movement, efficient and capable, are possible if I stay with it and practice with small, consistent effort. I can walk today because of that understanding. It has had a profound impact on my world.

Perhaps I think that one of the most wonderful realizations to come from that practice, is that I believe I can change even how I react. I have done it. I can actually change my instinct. Master Cheng Tsang Lu says to his students, “You need make a-natural...instinct...” It was years of practice before I really understood what he meant; he meant to change our instinct through gentle, constant and diligent practice. We needed to be very diligent, pay attention to every hand position, our balance, where our body weight was positioned....we didn't have to stress, or work fast, or be powerful, or even start with a sense of coordination or grace. We just had to practice, carefully, each small movement. He was very demanding and very clear.

Now, as I reflect upon appreciation in our relationships, I think about that practice. I heard yesterday that our Unitarian Universalist Faith calls us to a “Holy Curiosity”...a “Holy Curiosity”...a sense of the sacred and meaningful as we question. I also learned that when we are engaged by a question, our very instinct changes. Our brain chemistry is actually shifted into the more evolved portions of our brain, where we biochemically focus in areas where we react less and reflect more...so that, to me, sounds like a process that can shift our reaction, something sacred to me...

I think it is our nature as seekers that calls us into this sacred space of questions. Our on-going commitment to diversity, diversity of thought, race, sexual orientation, identity, ideology, we are called to value and respect the full range of the human experience. As we commit ourselves to accepting

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diversity, we commit to listening to each person with respect and dignity, even when we strongly, maybe violently disagree. I think that practice sounds as difficult and as rewarding as good Kung Fu. Sounds to me like when we open ourselves up to a belief, and a practice that everyone can teach us something, that every exchange, even the most challenging, is an opportunity to shift into this sacred space of Holy Curiosity, where we appreciate and question.

Another very important element of Kung Fu practice sustains this idea that we are called to practice not only that which we do well, but that which we do poorly. The path to good, strong kung fu is paved with careful diligent practice of that which we find the most difficult, frustrating and challenging. That is where we cultivate the most trans-formative elements of kung fu practice...for it is in those things that we find the most difficult, the most disturbing and frustrating, that we stand to gain the most, so I have grown to deeply appreciate that which I find very, very difficult.

Appreciation is a way of valuing something. It is the practice of living gratitude. Appreciative Inquiry teaches us ways of looking at systems and relationships based on what we do well, what we value, not what doesn't work. Now you might believe, "well, we have to deal with the problems...and that sounds like it ignores them" - but Appreciative Inquiry does not tell us where its to be used, like Kung Fu lore cannot tell us what we will find challenging...it just provides a practice we can utilize to grow, when and how we use that practice is up to us.

So, we do, we do have to deal with problems. Every day, all the time, we do. Sometimes we come into our practice unable to even stand on one foot. Thing is, if we come back to that idea of practice, and the understanding that what we practice is what will grow within us, and within our minds, then consider which we would rather grow? The problems? Or what we do well, what we appreciate, what we value?

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That's the basic premise of Appreciative Inquiry, and I think it connects us back to this sacred idea of our Holy Curiosity, giving us tools we can use, even in conflict.

Appreciative Inquiry is all based on questions;

- What do I value? For what do I feel grateful?
- How can I use that?
- Appreciative Inquiry – an organizational practice the 4D's
 - Discover: What do we value? Where are we grateful? What are we good at?
 - Dream: What do we hope to have? Where would we like to grow?
 - Design: How can we use what we value?
 - Deliver: How can we repeat what we do well?

Then, we apply those ideas, those tools to the challenges we face. We rephrase them as “I Want” so for example, if we face the problem of a speaker or teacher who didn't connect with our congregation, instead of facing the problem of “people on the pulpit who don't fit” we re-frame that problem to “we want people at the pulpit who fit” and we ask “how can we create more of that?”

It sounds like a small, subtle change, though as I learned in Kung Fu, I think the devil is truly in the details, hiding there, waiting for us to practice and cultivate that which does not sustain us...plus, when we focus on how we can practice to reach for what we want, instead of what is not working, that sustains us.

So maybe, in our relationships, in our communications, this practice of appreciation can help us make small adjustments in perspective, those small movements in balance that help us cultivate the kind of

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reactions, the kind of response we, as Unitarian Universalists seek.

By asking questions like “what do I value,” “what do I want,” and “how can I sustain more of that” in our relationships, even during our disagreements, perhaps we can shift our consciousness into those deeper parts of ourselves, seek that Holy Curiosity where we appreciate even that diversity that challenges us, where we listen deeply even to those people with whom we find ourselves frustrated, angry or hurt, as well as those people with whom we find ourselves intuitively connected, and we can open space for the sacred in our communication and our relationships, cultivating reflection and response, growing more of learning and deepening into our minds, our hearts and our souls.

I know that to me, it sounds like a practice worthy of building good Kung Fu.