

Disillusionment:

Compassion and Wisdom When Things Fall Apart

Sunday, February 3, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Speakers: Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

and Worship Associate Frances Myers

Hymns: #347, Gather the Spirit; #86, Blessed Spirit of My Life; Life Calls Us On (Gibbons, Shelton).

Special Music: [Ross Hammond](#), guitar.

Reading

In her book *When Things Fall Apart*, the North American Buddhist nun [Pema Chodron](#) says this:

Things falling apart is a kind of testing, and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together and they fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.

When we think that something is going to bring us pleasure, we don't know what's really going to happen. When we think something is going to give us misery, we don't know. Letting there be room for not knowing is the most important thing of all. We try to do what we think is going to help. But we don't know. We never know if we're going to fall flat or sit up tall. When there's a big disappointment, we don't know if that's the end of the story. It may be just the beginning of a great adventure.¹

Message I—Frances Myers

When my mother was 18 she married a man who was so abusive he pushed her down a flight of steps when she was pregnant with me. To her credit, she left him after that, moved home, had me, and when I was 2 years old met and married the man who I knew as my one and only Dad.... This would have stayed a family secret, but when I was 13 years old, an Aunt who was angry with my Dad...decided that the way to punish him...was to tell me that he wasn't my biological father...and then make certain that he knew...I knew.....Although I knew my parents loved me and were trying to protect me, my world was turned upside down....At 13

I was just trying to figure out "who I was" and now my life story was a lie. This loss of what I thought was true...this disillusionment....made me wary and distrustful of those closest to me.

When I was in my mid 20's, I read a book by Father Bruce Ritter who founded Covenant House in NYC....Covenant House was founded in 1972 to rescue street kids. This book was so inspiring to me that I was called to find ways to help make the world better....that part of my purpose in life was to find ways to advocate for the forgotten and overlooked in our "money means everything society"..... A few years later, in 1990, Father Bruce Ritter was forced to resign from Covenant House after widespread reports that he had committed sexual abuse against several of the young boys in the care of his charity.....

When I heard the news I was shocked and sickened. I questioned my ability to choose my "heros" wisely.....I am sure many of you have dealt with the same disillusionment when the admired and respected.... politician, actor, activist, journalist, coach, fill in the blank....turns out to have been someone who has done things to hurt others.

Now as a parent of adult children.... I have learned that love cannot fix everything.....Love can not cure addiction.....I believed that if I raised my daughters in a loving home that allowed them the freedom to be themselves they would be ok. Even knowing that addiction is a disease.....I thought two loving parents, family dinners and being raised in a UU congregation would ensure that even if there was addiction.....we would find a way to help her beat it. When this did not happen, I felt lost, guilty and disillusioned. I had done everything I thought was right in my most important job as a mom.... But I failed.

Disillusionments, reality checks, hard truths are all a part of life...and as painful as they have been...learning to deal with them has been a spiritual practice for me.

To unravel how I felt about my dad and my identity took finding a great therapist....and being open to understanding my parents, myself, and the harm in keeping secrets. My therapist helped me to see how I can love my parents and be disappointed in them at the same time.

After finding out Bruce Ritter committed horrible crimes...I could have become jaded and distrustful of “do-gooders”....but I decided to believe that for every Bruce Ritter there are thousands of individuals who make a difference in someone’s life.....I would like to think I am one of them and I know many of you sitting here are doing good in the world.

Dealing with my daughter’s addiction, has shown me the benefits of reaching out for help. It has taught me to accept the things I cannot changeand by being open and vulnerable....I have been helpedand am helping others.

As I grow older and become a little wiser, I am learning to be more gentle with myself and others.... We are all just so human and often it is my unrealistic expectations that create disillusionment. I can feel hurt, shocked, angry or hopeless.... But how I react is up to me. I can stay angry, hurt and bitter... or I can move towards love, empathy, understanding and compassion. I choose love.

Message II—Roger Jones

Our Sunday service theme this winter is Sources of Meaning & Inspiration. It’s worth noting that sometimes the hopes or beliefs which have given us meaning or inspiration turn out to be flawed, unfounded or false. Whether as parents, children, partners, or as idealists of any kind, when disillusionment happens, it’s painful! So let’s examine disillusionment, starting with the word itself. To be dis-illusioned means to have an illusion exposed, removed, taken away, knocked off its pedestal. To be disillusioned is to lose something that wasn’t really reliable, was not real in the first place.

According to a spiritual teacher of mine, to be disillusioned is to experience a loss. And, she said, we will experience losses like this over and over in our lives. It could be simple, such as: “I used to believe X was real or true, but now I no longer do.” Or it could be heartbreaking, like: “I thought if I was a really good child, a really good person, nothing bad would be able to happen to me.” Learning such lessons is “like a seed cracking its shell,” she said, “and it’s painful.”

She told me that when we are disillusioned, our spiritual work is the work of grieving. Disillusionment is a kind of death, and sometimes it can have additional complications. Along with feeling angry or sad at the loss, we can feel “foolish or ashamed for ‘believing’ something that turns out not to be true.” Also, she said, we often hold such beliefs unconsciously “until they are exposed by something that ...contradicts them.” We see those beliefs clearly for the first time, just as they are being taken away from us. Ouch.

This has resonance for my own life. When I was a little boy and a teenager, I didn’t realize how much I looked up to a couple of adult relatives. Their support of me was important. As a lonely kid, I treasured their attention and encouragement. When we were together, I craved their delight in my accomplishments. But I didn’t realize that I was putting those adult relatives on a pedestal, or maybe two pedestals. As I grew into adulthood, I began expressing my full self, becoming someone different from their expectations. They didn’t like it.

I came to see how narrow their support really had been, and how narrow-minded. As a boy, I had valued their acceptance, and had thought it was unconditional. Now I saw their support had conditions. One of them tried to constrain my emerging adult identity—perhaps acting out of ignorance or out of fear, which they thought was love and concern. But it hurt. Consequently, one of them came crashing down off the pedestal. The other one fell off some years later. To me, each time it felt like betrayal—a loss to be sure, and a confusing one.

Looking back, I can imagine that when I was growing up, they had put me on a pedestal too. This means that all their attempts to control me were frantic efforts on their part to keep me on that pedestal. So they had illusions too. They had a loss too. Things fell apart for all of us.

The Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says: “Things falling apart is a kind of testing, and also a kind of healing. The healing comes from letting there be room [in us] ...: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”

To make space for joy and relief, we also need to make space for honesty and frustration. Let’s consider some examples from politics. I’ve been deeply disappointed in some elected officials—disillusioned, you could say. Not by the ones I didn’t like, but those who had inspired me, those in whom I’d put my hopes and expectations.

Sometimes, in my grief at such losses, I withdrew from caring and giving so much of myself to the political process. Then I realized that it’s inevitable to be disappointed—the political system of democracy is not perfect. And the political system includes imperfect and flawed human beings, just as any other system does.

Indeed, this is the reason we have democracy—because nobody is perfect, and no single person should be expected to meet all our needs or solve all our problems as a nation. I remember when my father and a few other family members were disillusioned in the 1970s when President Richard Nixon’s dishonesty and corruption were exposed. These family members accepted that he had to resign from office, but it was hard for them. It hurt to be let down by the leader they’d voted for. It shook their faith in their

political system. Other family members, however, didn’t have this experience of disillusionment. They were not surprised at Nixon’s fall; they were relieved. Their faith in representative government wasn’t shaken up when he resigned, it was renewed.

It’s important to point out that many Americans haven’t had an experience of having idealistic beliefs about their government exposed as illusions. They never had the luxury of illusions to lose. They never had the privilege. In particular, this is true for many folks in traditionally marginalized groups in this country, including people of color. As I am learning, if you have regular experiences of your vulnerability in a society, it’s hard to submit to an illusion that it’s a great one, or even safe or fair to you. It’s harder to be let down, hard to be surprised. Angry or scared, perhaps, but not surprised.

Another example: the MeToo movement has unveiled the longstanding epidemic of sexual assault and harassment in this country, to the surprise of so many people. Yet for those who went through such traumas, there is no illusion of safety to lose by these revelations. Perhaps there has been disillusionment on the part of those who felt they could get away with abuse. They lost the illusion that *getting away* with something meant it was okay for them.

When I think about the privilege of having illusions, I think about myself in my first career, which was in state government, back in the Midwest. Since junior high school I’d been thinking about public policy and loving it. I read the newspaper’s editorial pages, argued with people about government and politics, and felt like an involved citizen. After finishing grad school at age 24, I got a job in the governor’s budget office of the State of Illinois. Among other tasks there, I analyzed public assistance programs for poor people. A few years later I worked in a state department of human services, where I managed grant contracts to fund not-for-profit providers in communities around the state.

For an idealistic young adult, these were dream jobs. I felt so engaged in trying to make things better. Over time, however, I encountered selfish people, vindictive behaviors and unethical situations that shocked and upset me.

I was appalled by examples of human greed, self-centeredness, arrogance, dishonesty, and pettiness. How could this happen with people in positions dedicated to serving the public? How could it happen?

Some of the people and behaviors I encountered were not only disappointing or frustrating for me—they upset my idealism. They not only shook my faith in the goodness of community service—they shook my faith in humanity.

This hurt, and I was hurting. At this time of testing, where could I find the space to grieve my lost faith? I knew I wasn't going to find compassion among the people who had let me down. I didn't trust them anymore. Fortunately, I was active in the UU congregation in that city. I had joined it after moving to town. By attending services and working with other volunteers, I got to know adults who were 20, 40, 60 years older than I was. Many of these UUs had worked in the same systems I was appalled by. How could they stand it? How did they survive? After all, as Unitarian Universalists we talked in church about our values—talked about human worth and dignity, about fairness, democracy, and honesty. How could they stand to have those values trampled in their work lives?

At our minister's urging, I reached out to a few of these experienced civil servants. I described my unreal experiences, my dilemmas, my disappointment. And they listened. They took me seriously. They affirmed my disappointment. Of course, what I was confronting for the first time, they had seen for years. They had navigated their way through the hard stuff of their jobs in order to do what they could in service of the greater good. Sometimes they had resisted the way things were, both in risky ways and in quieter ones. I came to see that they resisted what they didn't like in their work life by the ways they voted, the places they chose to give their money to, and by supporting their congregation, which kept their values alive and visible for them.

As I told them about my disappointment and my dilemmas, nobody told me what I should do. Yet they accepted my experience as valid. They affirmed my values as worthy ones. As I wrestled

with disillusionment, they gave me space to grieve. They didn't give me easy answers; they didn't act as if they knew the answers. They just showed me kindness.

Pema Chodron says: "Letting there be room for not knowing is the most important thing of all.... When there's a big disappointment, we don't know if that's the end of the story. It may be just the beginning of a great adventure."

That first career lasted a decade. As I look back, I realize I was destined for disillusionment wherever I was. I was so naïve. No matter where I started out, as an idealistic young adult in my first career, it was inevitable that my faith would be shaken and my ideals disappointed. Wherever I was planted, I would come face to face with human sinfulness, or if you prefer a bureaucratic phrasing, with humanity's *weak performance record*.

This turned out to be a suitable preparation for going to theological seminary. In seminary we discussed human goodness and evil. We read what philosophers and theologians had to say about human aspirations and human folly. We wrestled with ideas of divine intentions for the world and our human free will. In these readings and conversations, I was able to think of real examples from my own experience. That was helpful; it made religious questions relevant.

So I knew about the pain of disillusionment and I saw it as part of our human condition. But to this I now add new lessons I've learned. These have to do with compassion—the importance of our presence and our kindness.

It can be a source of healing to give space for grieving, to allow for the honest expression of loss. This includes the loss of something that wasn't really there in the first place, or at least wasn't as reliable or as firm on its pedestal as we wanted it to be. It can be healing to acknowledge this as both genuine and painful. In the presence of another person's disillusionment—we can show the kindness of allowing space, without giving excuses, easy answers or quick solutions. In the pain of our own disappointment, we can treat ourselves with compassion. Part of doing this might be reaching out to those who have shown themselves to trusted sources of presence and kindness.

In thinking about this service, I looked up synonyms and antonyms for the word *disillusionment*. The synonyms—the similar words—include things like letdown, discouragement, and setback, as you might expect. But what struck me were the antonyms. These words are not *exact opposites* of disillusionment. Instead, they reflect the aim toward healing from it. The opposites of disillusionment are words like peace, calmness, and confidence. The opposites of disillusionment are gifts like assurance and encouragement, like beauty and pleasure and ease. To this we can add, kindness and room for not knowing the answers.

Pema Chodron says: “Letting there be room for not knowing is the most important thing of all.”

¹Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston, 1997: Shambhala), 8.

She writes that “healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.” As we go through our days, perhaps this can be our practice. To pause and breathe, to be open... so that we might be more able to make room for grief and relief, make room for misery and joy.

Not all we have thought was true turns out to be reliable, and that’s a loss, often a painful one. As we go through our days, losses of all kinds may be inevitable. Even so, *we* can choose to be reliable.

By our kind presence with ourselves, we invite healing. By our kind presence with others, we share compassion. So may we strive to live, now and in the days to come. Amen.