

Arduous Love:

Finding Peace and Relevance in an Unsettling World

Many years ago when working as a special education teacher, I had student, Shawn, who was very bright and very autistic. He barely spoke. But when he did, he used pithy phrases that made me smile. One phrase was “bad reality.”

For example, he accidentally dropped his sandwich on the ground. His only comment was, “bad reality.” He wanted to go outside, but it was raining: “Bad reality.” His pencil broke: “Bad reality.”

Today there are trends in our country and world that are bad realities. But they don’t make me smile.

For example:

Climate Change

We’re pumping so much carbon into the atmosphere that each of the last five years has been the warmest on record. A tiny rise in average global temperature is not a problem by itself. But heat is energy. And more energy in the atmosphere means more energetic, unstable weather. And that is a problem: frequent and stronger hurricanes, flooding, cyclone bombs, atmospheric rivers, droughts, wildfires, and other extreme weather.

Bad realities.

Pandemic

We humans didn’t cause COVID-19, but we’re making its effect worse. Some people don’t like vaccines and masks. I get it. But nature doesn’t care about our personal or political sensitivities. It is what it is. As the teacher Byron Katie says, “When we fight reality we lose, but only 100% of the time.” We’ve lost thousands of people

unnecessarily. It’s crazy.

Bad reality.

Grievance Politics

Speaking of crazy...

When we’re relaxed and happy, our minds are clear and perceptive. When we’re grumpy and intoxicated with complaints, our effective intelligence drops. We become a little crazy. When we focus on blaming others more than finding common solutions for all of us, we become stupider.

Grievance politics feeds a downward spiral away from democracy and toward autocracy and political gridlock.

Bad realities.

Merry Minuet

These remind me of “The Merry Minuet,” a song by Sheldon Harnick popularized by the Kingston Trio back in the 1980’s. Some of the specifics are dated but the overall sentiment is still relevant.

It begins:

*They’re rioting in Africa,
they’re starving in Spain.
There’s hurricanes in Florida,
and Texas needs rain.
The whole world is festering
with unhappy souls.
The French hate the Germans,
the Germans hate the Poles.
Italians hate Yugoslavs,
South Africans hate the Dutch.
And I don’t like anybody very much!*

Bad realities.

Arduous Love

This morning I'd like to talk about arduous love. It is similar to Thomas Aquinas's arduous good, but is more explicitly engaged.

The various bad realities we face have solutions. Many people are approaching them with creativity, imagination, technical innovation, life-style changes, and more.

But behind the specific issues, humanity needs arduous love. With more love in the world, these problems are easier to fix.

Even so, the work can be hard. Arduous love is more than a flowery sentiment. The Latin word for heart is "cor." And "cor" is also the root of our word "courage." Arduous love is an outflowing of the heart which is grounded in the real world, sees our beauty without being blind to our imperfections, is not faint hearted, and has the courage to act persistently even when the going is rough.

A shorthand for arduous love is an open heart and good boundaries: having compassion for others and being willing to take sharp objects out of their hands if they are hurting others or us.

Bad realities need arduous love. It is the core of Jesus's teaching: "Love your neighbor as thyself." And it's also the core of the Buddha's teaching: "Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule."

Lucy and Roger return to the theme of love often. And rightly so.

Action

As I said, what we need is not love as a thing but love as a way of engaging. It has three movements: *Turning toward; relaxing into; and savoring.*

Grievance Politics

Let's apply these three to our collective lives by focusing on one illustrative bad

reality: grievance politics.

Grievance politics is the collective equivalent of what in an individual would be called a narcissistic borderline disorder. To treat a narcissistic borderline, we need both an open heart and good boundaries: arduous love.

But before going into the psychological parallels, let's unpack grievance politics itself. It's an incredibly dangerous trend because it lauds the opposite of love. Rather than understand the dynamics of suffering, it blames someone else. Rather than relaxing tension, it fans the flames. Rather than savoring the good stuff, it pokes a wound. Rather than openheartedness and respectful boundaries, it spawns conspiracy theories.

Cyber Ninja

For example, consider Cyber Ninja.

As I was first gathering my thoughts for this sermon, Cyber Ninja was making its final report. As you may remember, the Republican party of Arizona supported Donald Trump's claim of election fraud. So they hired the firm to conduct an audit of the Arizona election. Cyber Ninja had no experience in elections, but they supported Trump's grievances. They spent five months stumbling around and finally brought a report back to the legislature.

The news commentator, Rachael Maddow, described the report as an "own goal." "Own goal" is a soccer term for scoring a point for your opponent by kicking the ball into your own goal. She showed a video of a goalie picking up the soccer ball and kicking it down the field. A strong headwind reversed the flight of the ball and blew it back into the goalie's own goal, scoring a point for the other guys.

Bad reality.

The Cyber Ninjas reported that Biden had won by more than the official tally: 100 more votes for Biden and 200 fewer for

Trump.

Own goal!

However, they smiled happily, skipped lightly over their factual findings and elaborated new, unsubstantiated conspiracy theories that Trump had won even if their count agreed he hadn't.

In made my head spin.

Imprint of the Chair

This reminded me of what my old therapist and mentor said about narcissistic borderline people. They don't sound crazy. Each sentence they speak seems clear and rational. But their conclusion can make your head spin.

My mentor used to say that if, when talking with a client, she could feel the imprint of the chair on her back, she knew she was probably talking with a borderline. That's how they make us feel.

At a rally that night, Trump claimed the recount showed that he won by a large margin. Everyone cheered. It was a bald lie. I could feel the imprint of the chair on my back.

Bad reality.

Narcissistic Borderlines

Now let's look at the psychological parallels.

Typically, as children, narcissistic borderlines were abused verbally and perhaps physically. They felt terrible inside. But they were also told they were wonderful and special.

Eventually, the gap between how they felt and how they are told they should feel became so great, that their feelings shut down. It's like what happens when we get a terrible physical wound: Our body can only register so much pain before it goes numb. These children don't consciously decide to numb out. But their feelings shut down.

As they lose the capacity to know their

own feelings, they also lose the capacity to empathize with others. They don't choose to become narcissists. But they lose the ability to think about others with depth. The term "borderline" refers to difficulty seeing beyond their own borders.

A full-blown narcissistic borderline is unlikely to seek help. They don't think they have inner problems: It's the people around them who are messed up.

I've been a psychotherapist on and off for a total of about 20 years. I never saw a full-blown narcissist. But I worked with many moderate narcissistic borderlines.

Developing a therapeutic relationship typically takes a long time. They might test my boundaries over and over. They might show up 15 minutes late for an appointment and expect a full hour. I explained carefully and heartfully that I had another client and couldn't go over. And yes, they were responsible for paying for the full hour.

If I was too harsh, they would go away. If I was too soft, they wouldn't trust me, get bored, and go away.

If I could stay with them, in time we'd settle in and the underlying trauma would surface. When they started grieving what had happened to them in the past, I knew the deep healing had begun.

Both an open heart and good boundaries were essential.

Collective Disfunction

With this background, let's go back to grievance politics.

These days, we have fewer agreed upon facts. We listen to news outlets that support our biases. To keep us on-line longer, social media tailors the information they send us to support whatever grievances we are vulnerable to.

I'm not saying that everyone with political grievances has a clinical thought disorder. But if different people have

different information, we have a collective information disorder. This is the equivalent of a narcissistic borderline society where we are less likely to have empathetic thoughts about people with views that differ from our, and more likely to think they're crazy.

People who believe Trump won tend to think Biden supporters are out of touch and people who believe Biden won tend to think Trump supporters are daft.

Collective information disorder makes it easier for narcissists to get elected to public offices.

100%, not 50-50

Collectively we all need both open hearts and good boundaries. It doesn't work to have a 50% open heart and 50% good boundaries. We need 100% of both.

Turning toward with an open-heart means listening to news sources and people with whom we disagree. Even when the rhetoric is thick, we try to hear sympathetically what they experience: we listen deeply. Then, without being patronizing we reflect back what we hear and see if we got it right. We use good listening skills.

Relaxing with good boundaries also means that if we have a different point view, we say so. "I think I have a different way of looking at this. Would you like to hear?" We don't punch back, but we do stand our ground. And we speak in practical, down-to-earth terms rather than rhetorical flourish.

"Yes, election integrity is important, but you can't get that by taking the right to vote away from others."

"Yes, you have the personal right to be unvaccinated and unmasked. But you don't have the public right to infect others. If you won't take simple precautions to protect others, you can't fly on airlines or wander around public places. You have to stay sequestered."

"Yes, you can file lawsuits to support your claims of election fraud. But if you don't have concrete evidence to back it up, you'll be sanctioned. If you file frivolous claims, you will be sanctioned."

If we aren't willing to take the sharp objects out of the hands of misguided actors, we risk getting so frustrated that we drop out or lash out. That's not helpful. And by letting them get away with hurting others, we enable injury of the innocent. Not helpful. Bad reality. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. We support both.

Starfish

Arduous love includes turning toward with an open heart, relaxing into with good boundaries, and savoring. Savoring means self-care and building caring communities.

You may be familiar with the story of the starfish that washed up on a beach where they were drying out and dying. One guy was picking up some and throwing them back into the sea. His friend said, "You can't save them all. What difference does it make to pitch a few back?" The man held up the next starfish and said, "It makes a difference to this one" and threw it into the waves.

None of us can do everything; that's a formula for burn out. Yet all of us can do something. We don't have to wear ourselves out trying to save every starfish. But we can all play a part in promoting the collective good. We can do this by:

- Taking care of ourselves so we can take care of others.
- Monitoring the imprint of the chair on our backs.
- Not trying to go it alone: Building supportive communities with people we trust to stand firm in love.
- Looking deeply into our hearts when we are tired or worn and seeing what seems most true and important. This

strengthens the courage of arduous love.

Summarizing

To close, let me summarize the essence of arduous love.

I have never met Donald Trump or Joe Biden. All I know about them has been filtered through the minds of people in the media. Or through the minds of people I know who have probably not met them either.

The work of arduous love does not begin with complete strangers. It begins with the people we know firsthand, including ourselves. Can we see in us the light of goodness and heart?

If not, we're deluded and need to look with more depth and kindness.

At the same time, can we see in us the potential for doing harm? If not, we are

deluded and need to look with more depth and fierceness.

Arduous love sees both the light and the potential for darkness.

Arduous love is an outflowing of the heart which is grounded in the real world, sees our beauty without being blind to imperfections, is not faint hearted, and has the courage to act persistently even when the going is rough.

Adrienne Rich put it this way:

*... gentleness is active
gentleness swabs the crusted stump
invents the more merciful instruments
to touch the wound beyond the wound
does not faint with disgust
will not be driven off
keeps bearing witness calmly
against the predator, the parasite
I am tired of faintheartedness.*