

# **THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT YOU I DON'T LIKE ABOUT ME**

A Sermon Preached by Sarah Lammert

All Souls Unitarian Church, New York  
July 13, 2008

Two Buddhist monks were on a journey to a distant monastery when they came to a river. There on the bank sat a young woman. "I beg you" she asked, "could you carry me across? The current is strong today and I'm afraid I might be swept away." The younger of the two monks remembered his vows never to look at or touch a woman, and so he simply crossed the river without a glance at the woman.

The older monk showed compassion, and although it was difficult he allowed the woman to climb on his back and he carried her to the other side.

After some hours of walking in stony silence, the first monk could no longer contain his anger at the second. "How could you look at that woman?" he fumed. "How could you allow yourself to touch her, let alone carry her across the water?" "You have put our reputation at stake!" The first monk simply smiled at his companion. "I put that woman down way back there at the river bank, but I see that you're still carrying her."

It is amazing, how much we can learn from difficult people. In fact, if life is a school where we are sent to learn, difficult people are the faculty members. As the Dalai Lama often says, the people who are easy for us to love do teach us something – but it is the truly difficult encounters we have in life that help our souls to grow.

In the story about the monks, the younger monk perceives the older monk to have horribly transgressed his vows, and in the process reflecting poorly on him as well. From another viewpoint, one might recognize that the older monk has his priorities straight – he can adapt his behaviors in the real world so that his compassion is lived out.

The woman might have perceived the younger monk to be haughty and uncaring – the way he swept past her and ignored her pleas for help. From another viewpoint, he was simply inexperienced and trying to live within his narrowly prescribed sense of

propriety. But notice who in the story ends up carrying the burden – not the woman, who is helped, and not the older monk, who seems able to live in the present moment. It is the younger monk who carries the burden of anger for several hours until the older monk helps him to see things from a new perspective.

How many of us are carrying around burdens like that? How many of us are loaded down by our negative opinions of others and their actions – probably people whom we perceive to be difficult, offensive, ignorant or just plain wrong? Maybe today we are having a good day; a benevolent day. It's Sunday, and we're sitting in a room full of relatively decent people. There are enough chairs for everyone, and we all have hopes of some good coffee and conversation after an hour of music, prayer, community and words to reflect upon. Still, all it takes sometimes is a cellophane wrapper being crinkled or a cell phone going off, and our sense of inner peace is shattered! Who are these bluckity blucks, anyway? If it is this easy to spiral down into annoyance at a Sunday service, how often are we walking around laden with our feelings and judgments – right or wrong – about those difficult others?

Mark Twain used to say: “Nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits.” Perhaps the person who is driving us crazy is mirroring back something we don't like in ourselves – something that we need to address about our own shadow being. Perhaps an encounter weighs on us because it uncovers older, suppressed feelings that are painful – feelings we might need to work through in order to be freed from a limiting past. Perhaps the person really just is plain malicious or evil, and we have something to learn from them about the power of compassion to overcome such trials. In every case, difficult people have something to offer us, if only we can get far enough past the anger and frustration to find an opening in our own hearts.

One man that really used to drive me crazy was a very talented painter who shared many acquaintances with me. He thought he was better than most people, so I decided, because he used to do that annoying thing that superficial snobs always do – every time I'd run into him at one function or another, he looked right past me, scanning the room for more important people to talk to. It was like I was invisible. I'd been introduced to him at least half a dozen times, and each time I met him again it was like he had never even seen me before – he never remembered my name because clearly I didn't rate on his social status meter.

Then one day, after officiating at a very small, intimate wedding ceremony held on a veranda by the side of a small river, I was enjoying the sunshine, and the warm glow of friendly conversations at the reception, when in walked this gentleman. “Oh brother” I thought to myself when I spotted him, “Here we go again with the ‘nice to meet you’ and the disinterested conversation.” Well, wouldn't you know, he actually remembered who I was, and we sat down and talked for what seemed like hours. I learned that the reason he seemed so distracted all the time was that his partner was dying of AIDS, and he stayed up most nights tending to him. He was exhausted. Getting out anywhere was a rare thing, but in general when he did get out he felt overwhelmed and unable to focus.

I had completely misjudged the situation due to my own insecurities. Had I once simply said to him, “You seem distracted, is everything OK?” I might have not only made a friend much sooner, but also been able to provide some compassionate support to him.

Since that day by the river, “Jim” has become a cherished friend. Although they weren’t officially UU, I became “Phillip’s spiritual confidant through many hospital visits in his last months. When Phillip died, I conducted his funeral, and a year later, I sat and read Walt Whitman to Jim as he recovered in the ICU from a heart attack brought on, I believe in part, by simple raw grief. Now, Jim has moved to the Southwest to find inspiration for his incredible paintings, and just to start a new life. We keep in touch, and I hope to visit him there some day. All this, from someone I found incredibly irritating.

The kicker to all of this, was that not long after that break through event where I really got to know Jim, I found out that I had done the very same thing to someone I had been introduced to on several occasions, but whose identity I could never seem to remember. Every time I had met this woman, it had been at a faculty party for my husband’s department, and what she didn’t realize was that I usually was meeting something like 30 new people, all of whom intimidated me a little because they were smart, talented art professors and I was just, well, me. When she finally had the courage to tell me how annoyed she felt that I hadn’t remembered her, we were able to talk and laugh about all of our quirky perceptions and insecurities.

Oh, the tangled webs we weave! While I do not deny the presence of truly hateful people on the earth, I feel I am safe in guessing that at least 90% of the people we deem to be difficult, mean, needy, or just plain annoying are actually just either distracted, exhausted, or insecure. None of us are at our best when we are stressed, ill, or intimidated, and usually that very thing that we judge most harshly in others, if we are brutally honest, is a characteristic we ourselves share with the object of our derision. I get annoyed with poser, hypocrites and liars. Yet I myself pose, lie and act hypocritically. [I know, it’s hard to believe coming from a minister! And, I try to act honorably, and to clean it up when I fall short!] Even doing our best, we all are capable of the worst that we see in others, and like it or not we are all imperfectly human.

Despite this most of us spend a lot of time judging others; inventing incredible scenarios for ourselves about other people and their bad thoughts or behaviors. I can’t tell you how many times, as captain of my club tennis team, for example, I had women who are normally self-reliant, rational people, get their feelings all tied up in knots because they read things into other people’s words or actions. One example was a time I had to substitute a player into a doubles match because one of the players had a sick child at home. I thought that the reaction of the original doubles partner was odd when I told her someone else would be playing with her, but it wasn’t until days later that she called me, clearly upset, to ask if it was true that her original partner didn’t want to play with her because everyone thought she was a bad player!

Talk about carrying the woman from the river along the hot dusty road! And yet, this is something we humans do, and it is simply a part of our learning process. How many

times have we read something negative into a situation that really wasn't true? How long did that thought torture us before we got up the courage to talk about it? Might we gentle our own paths to self-awareness and spiritual growth by taking a slightly different approach? What if we said thank you for the difficult encounters, and tried to look at them through the lens of possibility – for the deeper lessons and insights we could gain?

Author Mark Rosen writes in his book Thank You for Being Such a Pain,

Most of our spiritual lessons are not easy, obvious, or comfortable. The hardest ones are the ones least likely to be learned voluntarily...Because spiritual growth demands that we overcome our character flaws, and because it is so challenging to do so, we need a special teacher.

The teacher would have to be someone who would shatter our incorrect feelings, frozen beliefs, and self-delusion. Someone who would help us break free of our current, limited understandings. Someone who could uproot the very things in life that we are most invested in holding on to and keeping the same. Someone who causes so much pain that we finally out of desperation must begin to make the necessary changes that we have resisted for so long.

It would have to be a difficult person.

I'd like to make two caveats to my own argument. Psychologist William James once wrote "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." The other side to this is knowing what not to overlook. First, perhaps due to addiction or mental illness, some of us have family members or acquaintances whose behavior, while not intentionally cruel, has become so harmful to our own well-being, that we are forced to severely constrict or cut off further contact with that individual. There is a difference between embracing the lessons to be learned from merely difficult people, and putting up healthy boundaries with individuals who are truly toxic.

And second, there are those rare individuals who are truly just despicable, immoral, or cruel. Rabbi David Wolpe says of such individuals:

Those who commit terrible deeds are not monsters. They are human beings who have done monstrous things. If they truly were beasts, they would be blameless. They are human and responsible because they have betrayed their humanness.

If you encounter someone who deliberately engages in harmful, violent, destructive acts, and justifies these acts by projecting a warped sense that the victim is deserving of such treatment and thus lacks the ability to feel remorse, it is best to remove oneself from that person's sphere of influence. Such people cannot be reasoned with, placated, or avenged.

There will be times through collective action, when such "evil" will have to be faced and overcome, but this is not usually achieved through individual valor.

This all may seem obvious, but when the face of malevolence is also the face of one's sibling, spouse, mother, father, or a person in authority who has abused their trust, there is a tendency to blame oneself for the treachery, and to try over and over again to try to ameliorate the situation. This is why the cycle of abuse is so difficult to break.

I remember well the case of a woman who was staying in a local women's shelter after being beaten within inches of her life by her husband. Yet she returned to this man, much to the consternation of the staff at the shelter, and a few days later he stabbed her to death. The staff could only offer her a way out – they couldn't force her to take it.

Abuse has a twisted logic all of its own, and a magnetic force that is difficult to break.

Just as we need to remove ourselves quickly and avoid all future contact with a person who truly has a malicious intent, we need to be very cautious before labeling someone who is merely difficult as evil.

Again from Mark Rosen:

Giving someone the benefit of the doubt means that you are willing to consider the possibility that you don't have all the facts and might not be seeing the whole picture. It means that you are willing to extend to the other person your silent goodwill until all the evidence is in. It means that in your personal life you practice the same principle that applies in a court of law. Difficult people are innocent until proven guilty.

I suspect that all of us have a lot to learn about dealing with difficult people. There are lessons in every challenging encounter – lessons of forgiveness, of forbearance, of maintaining a sense of grace and humor, and lessons to learn about the sides of ourselves we don't want to examine. Mark Rosen says that "learning from others requires humility," and perhaps this is a good place to begin. If we can admit to ourselves that we aren't perfect, and if we can allow our defensiveness to abate just a bit, we will begin to discover the hidden fruits of wisdom in seemingly aggravating circumstances. If we need some help getting there, the best people to talk with aren't the ones who will just agree with us or even gang up against the identified "bad one." The ones who will lovingly challenge our false assumptions will ultimately be more helpful.

I started the service today by quoting the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a Unitarian, who wrote these words:

*If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each person's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.*

It would be nothing short of a miracle, if we could truly disarm all hostility. Peace begins in each human heart when we learn to accept our own faults, and then those of others, until our compassion grows wide enough to embrace all of humanity. It doesn't mean we become floor mats to be walked all over, but it does mean that we learn to hold it all in our hearts in appropriate humility.

May we leave our burdens at the riverside. May our hearts be open, our minds inquisitive, and our lives transformed. Remember that pain often comes out as anger. May we seek first to understand, then to be understood. And may we walk in peace.

Amen