

“A Gentle Curiosity”

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Many of us who are Christian or who were raised Christian and still follow some of the traditions know that Lent began this past week. Tuesday was Shrove Tuesday, or Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras—traditionally the last night for eating rich foods and releasing high spirits before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of fasting and prayer, the season of Lent.

Lent begins 46 days before Easter, or 40 days when you don't count Sundays. On Ash Wednesday many Christians attend special services focused on turning away from sin and toward God, and they have their foreheads marked with ashes, to remind them of the words that according to the book of Genesis were spoken by God to Adam, the first man, in the Garden of Eden: “By the sweat of your face will you earn your food, until you return to the ground, as you were taken from it. For dust you are and to dust you shall return” [Gen. 3:19, New Jerusalem Bible].

If you were here last time, two weeks ago, you heard a very short version of my take on what happened in the Garden of Eden—that Eve was *meant* to eat the forbidden fruit and to give it to Adam; that their eyes were *meant* to be opened, to be the whole human beings that we are; and that the story of their punishment and exile from the Garden is a story that people created to explain why our lives are sometimes so difficult and our world so broken. As human beings we are amazing creatures—we can be so compassionate, so noble, so creative; and yet we can also be so destructive, so unthinking, so cruel. How can that be? The creation story in Genesis is one attempt to answer that question. We were perfect once, it tells us, and then somebody really blew it. And that makes sense because we know life to be like that. We are good people, we have every good intention, and then we mess up, we blow it.

For Christians, the forty days of Lent—a word which, by the way, refers to the lengthening of the days—are a period of fasting, penitence, and prayer, a time set aside for acknowledging our human limitations and cultivating the good, the sacred that is also in us. It is a time of spiritual renewal. The forty days alludes to the stories in the Christian Gospels in which Jesus was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness—the harsh desert of Galilee—to to be tempted by the devil. Keep in mind that two thousand years ago, people often perceived angels and demons to be at work in situations where today most people simply perceive human nature. And so when I read the stories about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, I think that they are telling us something about the inner life of Jesus—that different parts of his mind or his heart or his emotions were in tension with each other, and in conversation about that. When Jesus was fasting, and the devil said “If you are Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves [of bread],” and Jesus answered “Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God,” I think Jesus was dealing with the question of how much this fast really mattered to him. He was undertaking a spiritual retreat, a rite of passage common to holy men at the time, a journey of the spirit, before beginning a life of healing and vanquishing unclean spirits. The temptation to do something easier was surely strong at times. But Jesus said, in effect, “No, I am set on this path. I will keep going.” In other words, Jesus was taking a careful look at himself, in relation to what

he felt called to do with his life, and he was working through some of his own questions and conflicts about it.

And lest you think that the story ends there, that Jesus was done now with inner conversations, I don't think so. The story in the Gospel of Matthew says "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels appeared and looked after him" [Matt. 4:11]. But if Jesus was fully human, as Unitarians have always believed, and as is totally consistent with the Christian doctrine that he was both fully god and fully man, then he was always subject to questions and doubts. The Gospel of Mark, which tells a much shorter version of the story, says simply that Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" [Mark 1:13]. Both together. The Gospel of Luke says "Having exhausted every way of putting him to the test, the devil left him, *until the opportune moment*" [Luke 4:13; italics mine]. Until the next time.

The stories all agree that Jesus devoted forty days to this self-examination, but biblical scholars tell us that it was probably not a literal forty days but that the word "forty" was often used to mean many, or a time sufficient for its purposes. Jesus devoted the time that it took to do the job, to bring it to completion *for the time being*, until he would want to do it again.

Here we have a clue, I think, to a Unitarian Universalist observation of Lent: a time set aside for self-examination; a time to look at the questions and conflicts that we each have about our lives; a time to consider both our limitations and our aspirations; a time to develop our spiritual muscle, our ability to feel grounded and centered and purposeful and good.

Now if you've looked at my sermon title in the bulletin, you may be wondering what curiosity has to do with all of this. I think that curiosity may just be the best approach for us to take toward self-examination. We can name our weaknesses pretty well, most of us. The things we don't like about ourselves, the ways in which we're afraid we don't measure up. We know the places we don't want to go. Some of us have had a lot of experience with feelings of guilt, and perhaps even with penitence and self-denial. But what we're not real good at, often, is being gentle and non-judgmental with ourselves. And believe it or not, it is our negative judgments of ourselves that often hold us back. A gentle curiosity toward ourselves might help.

I have a favorite teacher on such matters, a woman by the name of Pema Chödrön, an American Buddhist nun who is known for her teachings on meditation and her interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism for westerners. In a book called *Start Where You Are*, written in 1994, she lays out her basic theme: that by training our minds we can see ourselves (and others) with honesty and compassion, and can live lives of openness, connection, and freedom. And seeing ourselves with honesty and compassion means seeing all of ourselves, both what we label as good and what we label as bad, both our best qualities and our difficulties and our problems and our pain. Only if we are willing to be open and compassionate toward these supposed negative parts of ourselves can we really feel what it means to be human, and recognize our kinship with all beings. As Pema Chödrön puts it, "If we are willing to stand fully in our own shoes and never give up on ourselves, then we will be able to put ourselves in the shoes of others and never give up on them." But standing fully in our own shoes comes first, and yet it is possible to live a lifetime without ever doing that, because we can get to feeling so hopeless about those unwanted parts of our selves or our lives that we only see them as obstacles and we try our best to not see

them at all. We actually run away from them. Really, when you stop to think about it, it's an act of aggression toward ourselves. When the fact is, those unloved parts of us are very likely our best way forward. They are exactly the raw material we need to really open our hearts.

What if we were to take an attitude of gentle curiosity toward ourselves? An attitude of wondering just what are the various bits and pieces that make up our unique selves. An attitude of wanting to know how we're really feeling, or what we're trying not to feel. An attitude of noticing things about ourselves. Gently. A gentle curiosity.

It could be a spiritual practice. Something that you do regularly, and with some discipline—that's the practice part—and something that would take you deeper in life.

To take this a step further, listen to these words from another of Pema Chödrön's books, *The Wisdom of No Escape*:

There's a common misunderstanding among all the human beings who have ever been born on the earth that the best way to live is to try to avoid pain and just try to get comfortable. You can see this even in insects and animals and birds. All of us are the same. // A much more interesting, kind, adventurous, and joyful approach to life is to begin to develop our curiosity [*our curiosity!*] not caring whether the object of our inquisitiveness is bitter or sweet. ... To lead a life that goes beyond ... always wanting to make sure that everything turns out on our own terms, to lead a more passionate, full, and delightful life than that, we must realize that we can endure a lot of pain and pleasure for the sake of finding out who we are and what this world is, how we tick and how our world ticks, how the whole thing just *is*. If we're committed to comfort at any cost, as soon as we come up against the least edge of pain, we're going to run; we'll never know what's beyond that particular barrier or wall or fearful thing" [p. 3].

The implication, of course, is that it's growth, new experiences, new life that is beyond that barrier. It's a richer, fuller, more joyful life. Not a life without discomfort, but a life with more joy.

Now, one caveat. The point of this kind of mind training that Chödrön talks about is not to change yourself, and make yourself a better person. The point is to be inquisitive about yourself, to learn more about who you already are, and to befriend who you already are. That is the whole point. Don't take an attitude of curiosity and then get discouraged because you've discovered something you don't like. Be glad to understand yourself better. Because what you are right now is exactly what you need to lead a completely fulfilling life. The body you have, the mind you have, the emotions you have, are all exactly what you need. Our wisdom and creativity and genius is so totally mixed up and intertwined with what we might call our weaknesses or neuroses that we do ourselves violence when we try to disown those parts of ourselves. Instead, we need only become more awake to who we are, more curious about ourselves.

But at the same time, as you become more open and compassionate toward yourself, you will change. Things in you will relax, or ripen, or be restored. You will become wiser and more sensitive. You will become calmer and more grounded. You will become more daring and

creative. You will feel more compassion toward others. And you will have a very interesting time doing it, because the world will seem less worrisome and more fascinating.

Could this be what Lent can mean for us? A gentle curiosity and openness toward ourselves that slowly but surely leads us toward more groundedness, more wisdom, more compassion? These are certainly the qualities we see in Jesus of Nazareth, who took the time he needed in his wilderness.

We have so many ways of thinking about God in this church, including not at all. But if God is any sort of a being or intelligence that desires the best for humanity, or if God is the power in relationship, or the process of growth, or the spirit of creativity, these are certainly the qualities that would align us with God.

In the spirit of Lent, then, in the spirit of turning away from what you could call the sin of aggression toward ourselves and turning toward what is the best that we can name or point to, in the spirit of compassion, let us befriend ourselves with a gentle curiosity.

Amen, and may it be so.