

What to Do with Your Aloneness

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

May 1, 2011

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Today is May Day, a holiday with a complex history. It is a Pagan holiday that celebrates spring. However it is also a day to commemorate labor struggles. The 1886 Haymarket riots in Chicago attracted global attention when workers were killed by the police. In Europe and eventually the former Soviet Union, May 1 was one of the most important secular holidays of the year. It became a celebration of the worker.

Obviously we don't do much with this now since we celebrate Labor Day in September. But in the former communist countries in Europe, today would have been a huge deal. Communism was a utopian ideal for society, which included but was not limited to, the economic theories of Karl Marx. It was an ideal that looked at society from the macro perspective. It tried to organize people into a collective and intentionally marshal the social and economic forces of society toward the good. However, for all its talk of "the people" there was very little

concern for actual individuals at the micro level. Everything was always abstract and general.

But we don't live our lives in the abstract or the general—we live specific lives as particular individuals. The great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead famously wrote in his book Religion in the Making that “Religion is what you do with your aloneness.” In other words religion is an individual experience. We live our lives one person at a time. Whitehead believed that the actual experience of life by individuals was paramount to understanding the universe as a whole. He was a pragmatist in that sense. For him, religion is an intensely personal experience that is bound by one's unique circumstances.

Thus we have two extremes: the individual as the primary locus of the religious life versus the complex dynamics of the collective. I believe that these two poles form a continuum. To quote Mr. Spock, the needs of the many and the needs of the one. We are always pulled by our need to be in relationship with others, and our need to assert ourselves as individuals. Do we blend into the group, losing our identity but no longer feeling lonely, or do we quote our Emerson, tell ourselves that who so should be a man must be a non-conformist, and go our rueful way, as he would put it, down a solo path? In their extremes it is a hard choice to make. However, we are usually navigating the middle waters. The perfect blend of both worlds would be to be able to be myself in all my individual peculiarity, and at the same time be in

relationship with others as they express their own individual peculiarity. In theory this may sound simple enough, but in practice, it is a razor thin line to walk.

Family therapists encourage their patients to follow this exact advice. Don't withdraw from your dysfunctional family or relationship. That doesn't solve anything unless the relationship has become physically abusive. But do not fall into the trap of simply going along with the flow and letting everyone take you for granted or use you as a door mat. This too perpetuates the problem, and let's other people off the hook from doing the relational work they need to do. The only way forward is to be who you are, think your own thoughts and express your own feelings, and not meet the reactivity and anxiety of others when they try to get you to conform to their opinions. Yet you have to still be talking to them, let them know that you care about them, but don't let yourself be dominated by them. This is a paradox: two seemingly contradictory truths that must be navigated. System theorists call this the "non-anxious presence"—to be present and attentive to your relationships but not to exacerbate the emotional energy coming your way by giving in to the demands of the collective.

It was this exact paradox that Lao Tzu was speaking of in our Ancient Reading this morning. "Therefore the sage puts his own person last, and yet it is found in the foremost place; he treats his person as if it

were foreign to him, and yet that person is preserved. Is it not because he has no personal and private ends, that therefore such ends are realized?” How can this be? How do you have your personal ends accomplished when you didn’t have any in the first place? How do you further your own career without trying to advance? How do you meet everyone’s expectations and be in the satisfaction business while at the same time having your own opinions on how things should be?

Oddly enough this is possible. In his book Good to Great, the business management guru Jim Collins researched what were then the top companies according to his statistics. He and his team analyzed about a dozen companies that had beaten the competition and were taking things to the next level. He poked and prodded these companies with every tool in his tool box. Finally he would interview the CEOs of these companies and ask them how they did it. How did the company, in some cases, triple its stock value just a few years after you came on as CEO? One of the things they found was that almost all of the CEOs of these companies never took credit for the success. They would always talk about the management team, and how really it was all thanks to them. This became so common that Collins started to get annoyed—the CEOs had to have something to do with it! But the only thing he found in common among them was this attitude of putting the team ahead of their ego. Collins called this “Level Five Leadership.” I won’t regale you with the four levels that lead up to this. Lao Tzu named it long

before Collins, “the sage holds in his embrace the one thing (of humility), and manifests it to all the world. He is free from self- display, and therefore he shines; from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged; from self complacency, and therefore he acquires superiority. It is because he is thus free from striving that therefore no one in the world is able to strive with him.”

When Jim Collins was going around taking to other leaders and executives during various presentations about his findings, many of these aspiring Good to Great executives found level five leadership very confusing. Through ambition and cunning most of them had risen through the ranks to get to upper level management. How could they now transform into this self-less person? Ego had gotten them this far, but to make it to this level five, to be the sage that Lao Tzu speaks of, then they would need to access another part of themselves.

Carl Jung taught that there are two parts of who we are. The first is the ego, which Freud had described as selfish, self-centered, competitive, and jealous. But there is another part of who we are, what Jung calls the Self, which seeks compassion, understands our interconnection, expresses our deepest individuality, is creative and embraces new things, sees opportunities where others perceive threats. This Self, as Jung dubbed it, is what the “Good to Great” CEOs were

expressing. Their individual egos were not threatened because they knew that their well being was connected to the well being of the company they ran. Whether a new idea or product innovation came from them or someone on the team did not matter. The individual and the group were in harmonious balance, and the result was a company that beat the odds and the competition. They were unattached and saw things from the broader perspective. “Is it not because the sage has no personal and private ends, that therefore such ends are realized?”

Just like the monk who shined a flashlight into the crack in the clay Buddha, we too can see inside those broken parts of ourselves and find a Buddha of shining gold. We can gain access to the Self; we don't have to be ego's slave. This is why Rev. Barbara and I keep coming back to the idea of developing a spiritual practice. It might be meditation or prayer but it could be any number of things. A spiritual practice is anything you do on a regular basis that puts you in touch with that part of yourself that is inherently loving and wise. Meditation is done not to escape the world. You do it in order to become familiar with the paths that lead to the Self, to that Golden Buddha within you. If you do not walk those paths on a regular basis, how can you hope to find your way there in the midst of your daily life? Which path you take is not important. The point is not how you get there, but where you arrive at. If you are regularly arriving at a place where you can touch your own pain and anger and can simply stay in its presences, then it will

transform into compassion and wisdom. You will manifest your true self and stand before your Golden Buddha. If you can do that for five minutes every morning, then you have a fighting chance of being able to do it when someone cuts you off in traffic. If you can be in that place that manifests the Self, then you will be that non-anxious presence. Without even trying you will be able to express yourself and remain in connection to others. You will balance the communal with the individual. There would be no aloneness.

As St. Francis so eloquently stated in his famous prayer, “O Divine Master grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love.” To be understood, to be loved, and to seek consolation; these are the desires of ego. But to console others, to love them, and to understand them; these are the expressions of Self. If you can live from that place than you would definitely become an instrument of God’s peace.

Jack Kornfield relates this example:

“Some years ago, I heard the story of a high school history teacher... On one particularly fidgety and distracted afternoon she told her class to stop all their academic work. She let her students rest while she wrote on the blackboard a list of the names of everyone in the class. Then she asked them to copy the list. She instructed them to use the rest of the

period to write beside each name one thing they liked or admired about that student. At the end of class she collected the papers.

Weeks later, on another difficult day just before winter break, the teacher again stopped the class. She handed each student a sheet with his or her name on top. On it she has pasted all twenty-six good things the other students had written about that person. They smiled and gasped in pleasure that so many beautiful qualities were noticed about them.

Three years later this teacher received a call from the mother of one of her former students. Robert had been a cut-up, but also one of her favorites. His mother sadly passed on the terrible news that Robert had been killed in the Gulf War. The teacher attended the funeral, where many of Robert's former friends and high school classmates spoke. Just as the service was ending, Robert's mother approached her. She took out a worn piece of paper, obviously folded and refolded many time, and said, 'This was one of the few things in Robert's pocket when the military retrieved his body.' It was the paper on which the teacher had so carefully pasted the twenty-six things his classmates had admired.

Seeing this, Robert's teacher's eyes filled with tears. As she dried her wet cheeks, another former student standing nearby opened her purse, carefully pulled out her worn folded page, and confessed that she always kept it with her. A third ex-student said that his page was framed and hanging in his kitchen; another told how the page had become part

of her wedding vows. The perception of goodness invited by this teacher had transformed the hearts of her students in ways she might only have dreamed about.”

This was a teacher who let the Golden Buddha inside of herself out. By connecting to her students, and helping them connect to each other, she was manifesting the Self. Ego would have yelled and screamed and told them to shut up, that rowdy afternoon. Instead she was a non-anxious presence. She had them do the relational work that they needed to do. The result was a bit of creative teaching that made a far greater impression on her class than merely keeping them quiet for a few hours. She touched the Golden Buddha in them, and they probably kept that piece of paper as a reminder of what it is like to be loved, to be consoled, so that they might be inspired, in those scary moments like being out on patrol, to show a little love themselves.

While I find this to be an inspirational tale, part of me is saddened by it too. Why is it that an affirmation of love and acceptance by one’s peers is so unusual that in those rare instances in which they do happen, we have to hold on to them so tightly? Why aren’t we doing this all the time? It seems to me that in our culture we are too quick to judge and compare ourselves to others too much. We cannot be bothered to say to another person, “I love your sense of humor.” Or “Thank you for your smile, or your laughter.” Simple basic things go unspoken and taken for granted. Meanwhile the person who might receive such a remark is

seething like a desperate starving person for some small affirmation of who they are. These little acts of compassion add up, they are not that hard, and as this story illustrates, they can transform another person's life in extraordinary ways.

But the first step is to set aside our ego, our need to be the best or to be right all of the time, and to finally wake up and see others just as they are. When we can look at them and speak healing words of love, then we are building true community. This is the theology behind the UU notion of the covenant, and when we are able to practice this kind of relationality with each other, then we will be, and are, living the words in our Unison Affirmation that proclaim this to be the beloved community.

May this be so today and every day that this great church comes together to worship and to live. Amen Blessed Be.