

Off the Hook
Sunday, March 5, 2017

Readings: from *My Search for God* by Desmond Tutu; *Kindness* by Naomi Shihab Nye

During last Monday night's meditation, Brian Sutton told us about the Buddhist concept of shenpa or the hook. We get caught on that hook any time we get pulled from being fully present to the current moment. But shenpa is more than a moment of daydreaming. It refers especially to how we remove ourselves from moments of difficulty or pain.

Feeling criticized and getting defensive? Overwhelmed or anxious? Sad? Do you sit with the feeling - or try to get out of it as fast as you can? Sitting with the feeling is the goal of spiritual practice. Getting out of the feeling is more often our natural human response. And daydreaming may be the least harmful of the ways we remove ourselves.

When feeling criticized, we often respond in anger. When struggling to hold onto a purpose, say sticking to a healthy diet, or refraining from gossip, or being open to trying something new, when it gets hard, we often give in and return to the behavior we were trying to change. When confronted by the pain of others, we often avert our eyes. When any of that happens, we've been hooked. I picture it like the hook of vaudeville days or from the old *Gong Show*, pulling you off the stage in the midst of your performance, but instead of the hook being manipulated by the stage manager, it's your own mind pulling you into the wings.

Take my encounter with the hook on Tuesday morning, for instance. I went into Boston to have lunch with a colleague. I was walking up from South Station to meet her and I was enjoying looking at everything – the people, the buildings, the store windows – I was present – that is until I had to walk past a group of homeless men waiting to get into St. Francis House. Then, my vision lowered to my feet and my mind flew ahead to questions I wanted to ask my colleague. But because I'd just learned the night before about shenpa, I recognized that I'd been hooked – I'd averted my eyes and my mind because I didn't want to see the men's condition. It makes me feel guilty about my comfortable life and my seeming lack of power to change the circumstances which lead to homelessness and poverty for so many of our fellow human beings. Recognizing the hook didn't allow me to solve these problems, but it did give me a sense of connection to these men and kept them and these larger issues in my thoughts this week. It brought me back to seeing the world as it is rather than as I might like to pretend it is. And only when we see reality and see ourselves as part of it can we begin to work to change it.

Though we often don't think of religious practice in these terms, I've come to believe that the purpose of all religious practice at its base is really to help us stay

present to the struggles going on around us that we may engage in the struggles to help one another. This is the idea of ubuntu.

Ubuntu is hard to define in English in part because it's so contrary to the way our understanding of religion has evolved in the West. We tend to see all religious practice as directed to benefitting the individual. Christianity and Islam – about getting into heaven when you die. Buddhism – about attaining your personal enlightenment. Hinduism – about making sure you reach the highest level of being in your next incarnation. Judaism – ah, Judaism doesn't fit neatly into this category, so often those outside its tradition assume it's about getting into heaven too. But none of these religions is really about the individual. All are about transforming human lives for the good of all.

Take the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and around the world this morning Christians are hearing this story. As the gospel of Matthew tells it, immediately after Jesus' baptism when he'd had a powerful sense of God's love, he retreated to the wilderness to consider what this revelation meant for his life going forward. How was he going to respond to this sense of call? In those 40 days of fasting and prayer – that just means a long time – Jesus struggled with the temptation to use his call to take power by any means. In the story, the struggle is personified as the devil. The devil invites him to leave the real world and create another one where he uses miracles to solve all problems. People are hungry? Transform stones into bread to feed them. Worried that working for freedom might endanger your life? Use magic powers to protect yourself. Want to have everything work out the way you want it to? Choose the shortcut of absolute power instead of the long road of love. That's quite a hook. But in the end, Jesus gets off the hook. He comes back to the real world and sees that the shortcuts of absolute power will not bring about the transformation he seeks, of a world where all care for one another as if for themselves; where the concerns of the least matter as much as those of the greatest; where all are empowered to work for good rather than cede power to one person no matter how well-meaning. And in getting off the hook, Jesus also takes up the road which will lead to his death, for in the real world of his day – and often of our own – that is the end for those who challenge the power-holders.

But how has this story been made safe! If you grew up in a tradition which observes Lent, were you asked to take on a Lenten practice of bringing transformation to the world? Probably not. This story has been watered down to be about the individual looking at the behaviors which keep him or her from relationship with God, things like watching too much TV, hanging out on Facebook,

eating candy, drinking coffee or alcohol. Now don't get me wrong – these behaviors can block our journey to wholeness, but we're missing a step. These behaviors are all hooks – ways we use to avoid the pains or losses of real life. But just turning off the TV, taking a leave from Facebook, saying no to candy, caffeine, or alcohol, isn't in itself going to heal us. Getting off these hooks is the first step – the second step is to engage in the world, to practice ubuntu.

In his book on the role of ubuntu in Desmond Tutu's theology, Michael Burton explored the ways his grounding in Ubuntu makes Tutu's theology focus less on the individual and more on the greater good of all. He wrote,

Christianity in North America and Europe tends to buy into the Enlightenment ethos of "enlightened self-interest" and "rational individualism." The individual as free agent is the starting point for thinking about society, and this of course reduces community to little more than a collection of individuals who come together out of self-interest. ...

*The underlying principle of Archbishop Tutu's ... ethics is the African notion of "ubuntu." Ubuntu is a difficult word to translate, but it connotes community, with the understanding that it's impossible to isolate persons from community, that there's an organic relationship between all people such that when we see another, we should recognize ... ourselves and the God in whose image all people are made. Interdependence and reciprocity, not independence and self-sufficiency, are the keys here. As Tutu magnificently says, "A self-sufficient human being is subhuman. I have gifts that you do not have, so consequently, I am unique--you have gifts that I do not have, so you are unique. God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence." (From *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, p. 35, by Michael Jesse Battle)*

Or to put it more simply, Western thought is rooted in the self-understanding of Rene Descartes who famously said, "I think; therefore I am;" while African theology is rooted in ubuntu; "I am because we are, and because we are, I am."

As western religious people, think what difference it would make if we could bring back this larger purpose to our understanding of religion.

- If we could remember as we practice yoga, that it's not an exercise routine. Yoga developed to enable people to sit in meditation for long periods of time. And they meditated not for their own enlightenment, but to keep themselves

off the hook, engaged in the struggle to work with others to transform the world.

- If we could understand that when our Jewish friends and relatives are keeping kosher that they are following these rules not to please God, but to keep themselves awake to the holiness inherent in the everyday and to work from their own awareness to wake the whole world to the divine spark inherent in everyone and everything.
- If we remembered that Islam is not about getting to the pleasures of heaven but about practicing charity and prayer here and now for the good of all.
- If the story we told of the Buddha didn't end with him reaching enlightenment under the Bo Tree, but went on to tell of his getting up from under the tree, opening his eyes to the suffering of the world, and spending the rest of his life traveling and teaching to help others understand and deal with that suffering.
- If as Unitarian Universalists we could move our focus from exploring our individual beliefs to understanding that whatever metaphors we may use, whatever rituals may speak to us, whatever practices we may engage in, all those metaphors, rituals, and practices are designed to keep us all off the hook, engaged together in the work of transforming the world.

In recent years many Unitarian Universalists are taking up again the observance of Lent. In 1960 we ended the long-time tradition of publishing a yearly Lenten manual. But today you can find Lenten reflections offered by many of my colleagues and you can sign up to receive a word of the day under the hashtag “UULent” to which you are invited to respond with a photo and a daily practice to embody it. In that spirit, I'm going to offer something I've never done before - a Lenten sermon series on the concept of ubuntu and how we might bring that larger view into our lives, our church, and our world.

I invite you this week to start by being aware of all the times you get hooked away from the pain and struggle of the present, and when you do, get off the hook, bring yourself back to the real world so that through it you may learn “the tender gravity of kindness.” Perhaps you want to take up a new practice to help you to stay present – or return to an old one – setting aside time to meditate, to read contemplatively, to walk in silence and watch the Earth re-bloom over the coming weeks.

For re-blooming is key to observing this season. The word “Lent” comes from the word “lengthen” and refers to the lengthening of daylight in our hemisphere at this season. At this season, as the earth warms, red buds appear on bare branches;

green spreads across the lawns, and dots of yellows, whites, and purples appear where long ago bulbs took root. Couldn't this lengthening of light and renewal of color also hold for us and for our world?

- Pamela M. Barz

Readings

From *My Search for God*, 1979, by Desmond Tutu (quoted in *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* by Michael Battle)

“Recently a dear friend of mine was arrested and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Because she was the only white woman prisoner it was virtually a term in solitary confinement. She says it was borne in on her that when she had little contact with other people just how utterly dependent in a very real sense she was on others for sheer survival, for retaining a sense of her reality as a person. She realized just how much her family, her friends, her job mates, her church fellowship really meant for her - all things she had come to take as we all do very much for granted. And she has confessed that she knows she could never survive such an experience of deprivation again. I think she underestimates her resources though. But that’s another story. I have referred to her only to underline what I certainly believe about myself - how much in my own spiritual pilgrimage I owe to others. This is not surprising because we have an African idiom which says, “A person is a person through other persons.”

I remember a story that illustrates this fundamental principle of all life, not least of the spiritual life – our dependence on others. There was once a man who was a staunch churchgoer ... He supported most of the activities of his local church. And then for no apparent reason he stopped attending church and became just a hanger on. His minister visited him one wintry evening. He found him sitting before a splendid fire with red glowing coals, radiating a lovely warmth round the room. The minister sat quietly with his former parishioner gazing into the fire. Then he stooped and with the tongs, removed one of those red glowing coals from the fire and put it on the pavement. The inevitable happened. That glowing coal gradually lost its heat, and turned in a while into a grey lump of cold ashes. The minister did not say a word. He got up and walked away. On the following Sunday, the old man turned up in church.”

***Kindness* by Naomi Shihab Nye**

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere

like a shadow or a friend.