

Changing Ourselves
Sunday, January 23, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
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This week my email alerted me to the fact that someone had posted a quote from American journalist and author Elizabeth Gilbert. The quote reflected beautifully this week's service theme.

"Some years ago, I was stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. Traffic was barely moving. The bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated with one another, with the world itself. Two men barked at each other about a shove that might or might not have been intentional. A pregnant woman got on, and nobody offered her a seat. Rage was in the air; no mercy would be found here.

"But as the bus approached Seventh Avenue, the driver got on the intercom. 'Folks,' he said, 'I know you have had a rough day and you are frustrated. I can't do anything about the weather or traffic, but here is what I can do. As each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don't take your problems home to your families tonight, just leave them with me. My route goes right by the Hudson River, and when I drive by there later, I will open the window and throw your troubles in the water.'

"It was as if a spell had lifted. Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight. People who had been pretending for the past hour not to notice each other's existence were suddenly grinning at each other like, is this guy serious?

"Oh, he was serious.

"At the next stop, just as promised, the driver reached out his hand, palm up, and waited. One by one, all the exiting commuters placed their hand just above his and mimed the gesture of dropping something into his palm. Some people laughed as they did this, some teared up but everyone did it. The driver repeated the same lovely ritual at the next stop, too. And the next. All the way to the river.

Gilbert continues, "We live in a hard world, my friends. Sometimes it is extra difficult to be a human being. Sometimes you have a bad day. Sometimes you have a bad day that lasts for several years. You struggle and fail. You lose jobs, money, friends, faith, and love. You witness horrible events unfolding in the news, and you become fearful and withdrawn. There are times when everything seems cloaked in darkness. You long for the light but don't know where to find it.

"But what if you are the light? What if you are the very agent of illumination that a dark situation begs for?. That's what this bus driver taught me, that anyone can be the light, at any moment. This guy wasn't some big power player. He wasn't a spiritual leader. He wasn't some media-savvy influencer. He was a bus driver, one of society's most invisible workers. But he possessed real power, and he used it beautifully for our benefit.

"When life feels especially grim, or when I feel particularly powerless in the face of the world's troubles, I think of this man and ask myself, What can I do, right now, to be the light? Of course, I can't personally end all wars, or solve global warming, or transform vexing people into entirely different creatures. I

definitely can't control traffic. But I do have some influence on everyone I brush up against, even if we never speak or learn each other's name.

"No matter who you are, or where you are, or how mundane or tough your situation may seem, I believe you can illuminate your world. In fact, I believe this is the only way the world will ever be illuminated, one bright act of grace at a time, all the way to the river."

Think about that bus driver. He has responsibility for this grumbling, angry, miserable crowd. It would be quite natural for him to be angry and miserable himself. Maybe he was. The first thing he had to change then before he could make his kind gesture to the others was himself.

Years ago, a seminary professor lecturing on the New Testament story of the Good Samaritan asked us to consider why we called the story the "Good" Samaritan. He said the Samaritan may not have been the kind of man we consider good. He might have been upset about this bleeding man by the side of the road taking him out of his way. He very well may have been fearful that he too would be robbed and beaten. The point of the story is not that the Samaritan was good but that he performed a kind act. He was what Gilbert calls, "the very agent of illumination that a dark situation begs for...", and as, she says, "anyone can be the light, at any moment."

In my file folders of stories and readings is this quite old one. "She hurried to the pharmacy to get medication, got back to her car and found that she had locked the keys inside. The woman found an old rusty coat hanger on the ground. She looked at it and said, 'I don't know how to use this.'

"She bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes a beat-up old motorcycle pulled up driven by a bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag. He got off his cycle and asked if he could help.

"She said, 'Yes, I've locked my keys in my car and my daughter is sick. I must get home. Can you use this hanger to unlock my car?'

"He said, 'Sure.' He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was open.

"She hugged the man and through tears said, 'Thank you, God, for sending such a very nice man.'

"The man heard her little prayer and replied, 'Lady, I am NOT a nice man. I just got out of prison yesterday. I was in prison for car theft.

"The woman hugged the man again, sobbing, 'Oh, thank you, God! You even sent me a professional.'"

What the bus driver, the Samaritan, and the ex-car thief had in common was not that they were inherently good or nice men, but that when they saw a need they acted positively. No one has to become a saint before they can do some good in the world. The Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung said, "We cannot change anything until we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses." Suppose Gilbert's bus driver had turned around in his seat and snapped at the crowded bus and told them off. I expect that the result would not have been positive. He needed first not to remake himself into someone else but only to get himself under control in the moment.

For several years I had been telling myself and my daughter that I needed to lose some weight and doing nothing about it. Then in 2008 I had my thyroid gland removed and was not started on thyroid medication until a month later. Without the thyroid hormone I gained ten more pounds in that month. That was my

decision point. I went to what was then called Weight Watchers and over time lost forty pounds or so. But Weight Watchers itself has changed its name to WW. A few months ago, they put out a video made by a doctor who assures people that if they go to the doctor because they think they have the flu and all the doctor talks about is their weight they should find another doctor. WW leaders regularly tell people not to be harder on themselves than they would be on a friend. Losing weight while still having a negative body image and a disordered relationship to food is not helpful or positive change.

In this week's Braver/Wiser email health care chaplain Dr. Andrew Tripp writes,

"January is a triggering month. Resolutions abound to lose weight, to diet, to shame the added softness on our flesh from holiday indulgence. Our cultural fatphobia rears its ugly head, and those of us with long term relationships with our obesity receive yet again messages about our failure for not being thin. Years of disordered eating, unhealthy relationships to our bodies, and painful experiences judge our present flesh.

"The message about my body weight is incessant. Every time I visit a doctor, they ask about my weight even though the visit and my weight are unrelated. I was over 200 pounds when I was in the fifth grade and haven't been less than that since. I've had people in professional settings ask if I knew I was overweight, and had coworkers get uncomfortable because my slacks showed my thighs.

"It doesn't matter that I exercise seven to eight hours a week; that I'm the super heavyweight masters powerlifting record holder in my state; that I'm competitive in strength athletics with people twenty years younger than my middle-aged, Santa-looking self. The world often just sees fat. Yes to the notion of folks being healthy at every size, but to understand that my humanity and my abundant flesh both demand dignity is to embrace fat liberation.

"I am beautiful. I have curves and a comfortable embrace. My child loves my big arms and broad shoulders. He often sits on my stomach, and I delight in the way my body provides for his comfort and pleasure. My partner adores my shape and wants me to be active and healthy, but not chase the dated dream of diminished size on the scale when that would coincide with unhealthy relationships to food.

"Self-love is much more powerful than self-acceptance, and my self-love is for this fabulous and amazing body that inspires joy in my family and can rock peacock and zebra patterned tights while lifting. For every soft belly, for every tiger stripe stretch mark, for every inch of dimpled skin we put on parade at the pool or the beach: we are here. We are beautiful. We are sacred."

I return again to Audre Lorde, who said, "Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness."

So, if you want to change yourself or someone or something else, remember that guilt is not the way, shame is not the way, negativity is not the way. You do not have to become someone or something you are not. You must only make kind choices for yourself and others moment to moment.

Carry with you these words from Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman, "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world" (and yourself). Blessed Be.