

“The Seven Deadly Sins: Envy”

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July 19, 2009

Those of you who are familiar with this church may be wondering, what’s all this about the Seven Deadly Sins?

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we don’t usually talk a whole lot about sin. It’s not a big focal point in our theology, not today and really not much throughout our history.

Back in the 19th century, our Unitarian ancestors rebelled against their Calvinist brothers and sisters who loved to talk about the terrible depravity of human beings, detailing all our sins and how richly we all deserved to be punished. After sitting through a few too many such sermons, our Unitarian ancestors started preaching a different message: people are actually pretty good. They said, you know, most of the time we do our best, and most of the time our best is actually pretty good. It’s not that they thought people were perfect, but they’d heard about the horrors of sin up to their eyeballs. For them it was time to make a different point about the inherent goodness of human beings.

Meanwhile, on the other side of our religious family tree, our Universalist ancestors agreed with their neighbors that people were in fact pretty messed up. People did sin, constantly, all the time. But what *they* said that was so amazing was, it’s OK—God loves us so much that we’ll be forgiven, no matter how badly we mess up. Their message was about universal salvation,

forgiveness and mercy for every single person.

Ever since then, the Unitarian Universalist tradition hasn't had all that much to say about human failings: the tendencies we all have to act badly, the ways we fall short of our ideals, what the Christian tradition calls *sin*.

“Sin” is one of those words that tend to make us a little nervous.

We tend to associate it with the very broadest stereotypes of hellfire-and-damnation Christianity.

If pressed, we'd say, yes, we acknowledge that people are imperfect.

People sometimes do bad things—sometimes *very* bad things.

But, systematically, as a tradition,

we don't have a whole lot more to say about it.

But when we look at the world we are living in—

certainly when we look inside our own selves—

we are going to find emotions, behaviors, passions there that are not serving us very well.

We're going to see anger there.

We're going to see envy and greed and self-righteousness,

all mixed in with the kindness and generosity and love

that are absolutely there too, inside us and everyone else.

And just because we don't talk about those parts of us a whole lot, it doesn't mean they're not there.

Actually, I believe the less we're upfront with ourselves

about all the ways we fall short of the way we want to be,

the less power we have to actually *be* the way we want to be,

to *make* a change for the better.

Our tradition has always taught

that we have the *power* and the *responsibility* to improve ourselves—

to become the best people we can be—

by looking deeply within ourselves

and using the power of our will to change what's getting in our way,

what isn't working inside of us—to do better.
And to do that, we have to be honest with ourselves
about what is actually happening.
I'm a big fan of honesty when it comes to our spiritual life.
I've found it very liberating
to name the reality of what's happening inside us.

And, after all, our religious tradition is all about the search for truth,
wherever it may be found—the search for *reality*,
however much it may differ from our expectations
or how we think things should be.

At the same time, here we are in the middle of summer,
and to me it feels like the perfect time to be a little playful,
to try something a little new, a little out of the familiar.
A while back I asked a few people from church,
“What do you think—would you want me to preach
on the Seven Deadly Sins?”
The main reaction I got was this sense of “Oh! Yeah!
That's different!”
It was like people woke up, kind of, and got curious.
There was a playful little spark of energy there.
And that spark is what told me to go for it.

Let me say just a quick word on the Seven Deadly Sins as a whole.
They sound like they might be from the Bible, but they're not—
at least, not exactly.
The Bible has some very juicy lists of various virtues and sins,
but the modern list of the Seven Deadly Sins comes from
the year 590, when Pope Gregory the Great drew up the list
partly based on those earlier Biblical sources.
So this is mostly a Roman Catholic thing,
though it sure has captured the imagination of many non-Catholics,
myself included.

Now, I personally don't feel very attached to the word "sin" myself. I do like the original meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words that we usually translate as *sin*—*het* in Hebrew, *hamartia* in Greek. Those original words actually mean "missing the mark" or "failing to hit the target," like in archery. That makes a lot of sense to me, understanding sin as simply not getting it quite right, not living a life that is perfect the way an arrow, perfectly shot, hits the target. The Buddhist understanding of human failings helps me too. According to Buddhist teachings, what Christians call *sin* is really a problem of ignorance, a false understanding of reality. I'll say more about this as we go along in our series.

For now, the bottom line is, we really do struggle with the not-so-great parts of ourselves—including the main event for today: *envy*, the famous green-eyed monster, what Harold Coffin called "the art of counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own"—that longing, which practically everybody alive has felt at one time or another: that resentful longing to possess something that someone else has, which has been denied to us—that voice that asks, "Why not me?" The essence of envy is a combination of "discontent, resentment, and desire"¹: a feeling of discontent within ourselves, about our own life, combined with resentment over what someone else's life looks like, and a desire to have what that other person has.

Envy can strike over just about anything there is on this earth. We might feel envy over someone's new stuff: our friend who just got the new iPhone, or a new car. (I myself am deeply familiar with Prius envy!)

¹ American Heritage Dictionary, quoted at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/envy>.

Envy starts young and keeps on going.
I remember when I was five years old
and bitterly envious of my younger sister
because I had to wear clunky orthotic shoes for my flat arches
while *she* got to wear cute little Mary Jane shoes with a buckle.
And when you get to high school—what a hotbed of envy that is.
If you have never envied your best friend’s new boyfriend
or girlfriend, if you have never envied the “popular kids”
for the way they smile and laugh so easily
and make glamorous plans with each other over the weekend,
if you have never envied the kid who gets better grades
or plays better or who gets the lead in the school play—
you can count yourself very lucky indeed!

As we get older, envy may take on some new guises.
We envy other people their jobs, their successes,
their ability to age with fewer wrinkles than we have,
even their peace of mind.
But no matter what the trigger,
that mixture of desire and resentment and discontent is deadly
not only because it feels so awful inside
but because it is such a poison to our relationships.

So how are we to uproot envy in our lives?
How can we overcome it?
Let me suggest two ways, one very traditional and one very personal.
The traditional prescription for envy
is to cultivate kindness and love for others.
In Roman Catholic theology, each of the Seven Deadly Sins is paired
with a contrasting virtue.
The virtue paired with envy is *kindness*,
practicing compassion and love for your neighbor.
Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* has a beautiful way of putting it:
“Love is the medicine

that casts out the venom of envy from our heart.”²

Now, this was a little counter-intuitive to me when I first heard it. Anyone who has a brother or a sister, or a very close friend, has probably discovered envy and love can go plenty well together! But kindness is a special sort of love that calls us to an imaginative sympathy for what other people are going through, both the good and the bad. The kindness that casts out envy is very like one of the Buddhist virtues, the lovely virtue of *mudita*, or sympathetic joy. *Mudita* means finding joy in other people’s joy. The Dalai Lama puts it like this: “If our happiness depends on our own well-being, it is limited. If it can be uplifted by the happiness of others, we increase the possibilities by six billion!”³

If you are struggling with envy for a particular person in your life, you might try picturing them in your mind and practice sending them thoughts of kindness and compassion. You could send them a blessing, like “May you be happy.” And then imagine all the people who love you and want you to be happy sending you those same good wishes. It’s quite a wonderful feeling.

But, if this is too hard right off the bat, if you find you can’t really work up a feeling of kindness for that person, you might add an intermediary step. There’s a wonderful proverb that goes like this: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” *Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.* And, you know, that really is the truth. That person you think has it so easy, that person you can’t help but envy,

² Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Parson’s Tale,” from *Canterbury Tales*.

³ Paraphrased by James Baraz, “Awakening Joy Monthly Practice Letter #8: Connection with Others,” 2008.

if you could only get inside their mind and their heart,
you would surely find they have their own struggles and hardships.
That is true for everyone, I guarantee. I think of an acquaintance
who is extremely successful in his profession.
He's really good at what he does,
and he's so outgoing that he makes friends wherever he goes.
Definitely the kind of guy many people might envy.
But some years ago he lost his young child to a sudden illness.
When you know that about him, how can you help but be kind
and wish him all the happiness that flows his way?

The thing is, we are all walking this same earth
where people do struggle and suffer.
Eventually every one of us is going to have to face death one day,
no matter how fancy our car is
or what a great job we have
or what good shape we're in.
Every one of us is going to meet sorrow as well as joy.
That is a reality of our existence in this world.
When we really know this in our hearts,
how can we be anything but kind to each other?

Yet, for some, even that knowledge might not be enough
to overcome those feelings of envy,
comparing ourselves to other people and even wishing we were them.
Let me speak very personally for a moment.
I've struggled with envy myself over the years.
When I've gone through times of sadness and frustration,
I've found myself wishing for things my friends had.
When I was single, I envied my friends who were happily partnered.
When I was a student, I envied friends who were making
lots of money and could so easily afford nice things,
even though I was on the path I had chosen.
Before I found out what I was supposed to be doing in life,
I envied anyone who had it figured out already.

Practices of kindness and compassion helped me,
but they weren't enough.

What is saving me from envy now
is exactly what life has been trying to teach me, and that is *trust*—
trust that what we are given is the right thing for us to have,
and the life we are living is the life we are meant to live—
trust that the way we have been created
is the way we are meant to be,
that there is a meaning and a beauty and an integrity to *every* life.
In the light of this trust, envy is nonsense.

Ralph Waldo Emerson put it like this:

“There is a time in every man's education
when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance:
...that he must take himself for better, or for worse...”⁴

I would go even further and say,
what my life has been teaching me is that what life gives me freely
is much better and more wonderful
than what I used to think I wanted.
During the dark times of sorrow and fear,
this might sound counter-intuitive, maybe even offensive.
Only you can say if this is true for you also.
What I can say for myself is that, time and time again,
when I've struggled with wanting something and haven't gotten it,
at the time it felt like a bitter disappointment.
But eventually, looking back,
every single time, thought it might take a long time,
I see I've been given something else instead
that is so much better than what I thought I wanted.

Here's one example that's near to my heart.
When I graduated from college as an English major,

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance.”

I took a summer course on the publishing industry,
and there I met my first post-college roommate.
During the course I heard about a job
at this small liberal publishing house called Beacon Press.
I looked into it, and the more I found out,
the more I just fell in love with this publisher.
I wanted that job so much. I knew it was the perfect thing for me.
And then my roommate got the job.
That was a hard thing. I was so envious of her.

I never did find a publishing job I loved
the way I think I would have loved that job at Beacon.
I found a pretty good job at a university press.
I liked it pretty well and I was pretty good at it.
But it didn't feed my soul.
Eventually I began taking voice lessons and loved them.
I got more and more serious about my singing, and eventually
my boss at the university press let me drop down to half-time
so that I could study at a music conservatory.
Now, conservatory was really hard, and most of what it taught me
was that I was actually not cut out to be a professional singer.
That was a very difficult time in my life.

But one good thing came out of it.
I was encouraged to audition for a job as a paid singer
in a church choir on Sunday mornings.
I did the audition, and I got the job.
It turned out to be with a Unitarian Universalist congregation.
That was my first exposure to Unitarian Universalism,
and like so many others, I felt right away that I'd come home at last.
Here I am now. I am deeply happy to be where I am,
but I could never have planned it on my own.
I wouldn't have known what to ask for.
Ironically, I found out later that Beacon Press,
that wonderful publisher I so wanted to work for,

was one of the publishing arms
of our Unitarian Universalist Association.
Knowing myself, I'm pretty sure if I'd gotten the job there,
I still never would have darkened the door of an actual church,
and it would have taken me much longer to figure out
what I was *really* supposed to be doing.
At the time I was so envious of my roommate
who got what I thought was my dream job.
In retrospect I am just filled with gratitude that my life is mine
and I get to live it.
The future is hidden from our eyes,
but the past has not failed me, and I choose to trust.

That's a piece of my story; it's my experience.
Others have lived through much greater trials
and come out still saying *yes* to their lives.
Only you can say if something like this is true for you too.
But I hope and wish for you that it will be.
May the life you are living unfold in great beauty.
In the words of the song,
let us "give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way."
May we wish for every person's happiness and envy none.

So may it be.
Amen.