

Oops! I Did It Again

*A sermon by Rev. Peter J. Luton
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Reading

A Sufi Story

This morning's reading is from the Sufi Tradition. It is about Nasrudin. He was a renowned teacher and mystic in the mid to late 13th Century. He encouraged spiritual growth by playing the fool and using his wit to remind us who we are and what is truly important. Here's an example.

Nasrudin was now a very old man looking back on his life. He sat with his friends in the tea shop telling his story.

“When I was young, I was fiery. I wanted to awaken everyone. I prayed to Allah to give me strength to change the world.

In mid-life I awoke one day and realized my life was half over and I had changed no one. So I prayed to Allah to give me the strength to change those close around me who needed it very much.

Alas, now I am old and my prayer is simpler. ‘Allah,’ I ask, ‘please give me the strength to at least change myself.’”

Sermon

I was in seminary so long ago that most of my knowledge about pastoral care and mental health has come through daily advice columns like Dear Abby, whom I began studying in high school. I was in the church youth group and worked as a custodian at the church during high school and knew then that I wanted to be a Unitarian Universalist minister.

Anyway, Abby retired and Amy succeeded her. I didn't miss a beat. I still read *Ask Amy* in *The Seattle Times* every morning after the comics and the rants and raves and before I find the six differences in the two pictures. Reading *Ask Amy* makes me feel so healthy, ...except when I recognize myself in the letter writers' complaints and conundrums. It seems that people have a lot of trouble with spouses and partners, boyfriends and girlfriends, parenting, parents, grandparents, co-workers, neighbors, weight, body image, PTSD from childhood abuse, domestic violence, alcohol and drugs, and debt.

Usually Amy's sage advice boils down to "Whatever you're doing, stop it! You can't make anyone change how they think, feel or act. You can only change how you think, feel and act. So stop trying to make everyone conform to your crazy-ass notion about how things should be and blaming them when they don't."

Amy has little patience for people who persist in unhealthy or destructive patterns of behavior. When the issue is domestic violence, Amy doesn't mince words. She expresses compassion for the writer, and then says, "Stop thinking he'll change. You have to create a safety plan and get out." Amy tells the writer that she has choices, that she can change her life and break the cycle of abuse.

Amy is like the psychiatrist in *The New Yorker* cartoon years ago. The client is lying on the couch and the psychiatrist has just whacked him upside his head with the heel of his hand and says, "How's your life look now?" The caption reads: How to know when your psychiatrist started in TV repair.

The key to changing oneself and one's life, it would seem, is actually to change, to do something different, try something new, alter the way we think and to challenge our conscious and unconscious assumptions about what is possible, proper, and permissible.

I don't believe in horoscopes, but that doesn't stop me from reading them sometimes. In the current *Cascadia Weekly* my horoscope said: "DO not be too timid and squeamish about your actions," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. "All Life is an experiment." I'd love to see you, (continued the expert) make that the operative strategy in the coming weeks. According to my analysis on the astrological omens, now is a favorable time to overthrow your habits, rebel against your certainties, and cruise through a series of freewheeling escapades that will change your mind in a hundred different ways. Do you love life enough to ask more questions than you ever asked before?"

Well,....

Changing is hard. It requires persistence and practice. What do they say? It takes 10,000 hours of practice to master a new skill? Who's got the energy for that. Yet there is much to be said for persistence. Try, try again and all that. There are times, however, when persistence isn't called for, when it is, in truth, counter-productive. Albert Einstein is incorrectly credited with saying: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." Insanity is a serious disorder and not a joke, but you get my point about persistence.

I haven't drunk alcohol for a bunch of years now, maybe 20. I stopped because I finally figured out that no matter how often I tried to have just a single glass of beer or wine, every time I woke up in the morning with a raging and nauseating headache. These weren't hangovers. I know what a hangover is from college. These were more like migraines. For years I recognized the connection between having a drink and feeling like a proverbial pile of fecal matter, but I kept thinking, "Well, maybe this time that won't happen." But it did. Every time. Oops! I did it again.

Sometimes couples enter counseling with the diagnosis "they're driving each other crazy." This usually presents itself as one person's refusal to change or "be fixed" by the other. Sometimes

when we fall in love, we will overlook or discount certain traits and characteristics of our beloved under the assumption that we can fix “that” later. But, as we know, I can only change myself and not anyone else. And so, the problem doesn’t so much lie in the other person but in our own assumptions and behaviors vis-à-vis their assumptions and behaviors.

When we take a long, hard and honest look at our lives, we discover patterns of behavior and thought weaving through our lives. We look back into our family history and these patterns appear in our parents and grandparents, all over the family tree.

All sorts of patterns—sad patterns of addiction, abuse, separation or suicide emerge. Behavioral patterns—rules about how to show affection, anger, and respect, whether we’re allowed to say what we think or desire, how we express disagreement, if we express it at all! Patterns about family roles—the wild kid, the good kid, the invisible kid, who does what for the household, who does what with the kids, how and how often people talk or play or fight in the family. Patterns of self-talk, how we think about ourselves, whether we see ourselves as basically good, or bad, deserving of good things and happiness or unworthy of any kindness or inner peace. And we repeat these patterns in our own families and friendships...often unconsciously, often consciously but unquestioningly. Little surprise that we feel emotionally and spiritually powerless, miserable and stuck in relationships, in life, in work, in general.

Once, when I was flirting with this self-awareness, my therapist made to me watch the movie *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. (He didn’t actually make me watch the movie, remember no one can make you do anything. I chose to pick up on his suggestion.)

Bill Murray plays Phil, is a conceited, wise-cracking Pittsburgh weatherman, who has to go to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to cover the annual groundhog celebrations in that quaint and otherwise obscure hamlet. He’s accompanied by Rita, his way-too-chipper, cute, new producer, and Larry his goofy misfit, but good natured, cameraman. On the great day, he wakes up in the Punxsutawney Inn at 6:00 a.m. to Sonny and Cher singing “I Got You Babe” on the clock radio. He and his crew rush to get their report for the evening news and to return to Pittsburgh before a big blizzard strikes. But, the blizzard hits hard and forces them to spend an extra day in Punxsutawney. That extra day turns into eternity as somehow, Phil is locked into a space/time loop. He can’t escape Groundhog Day. He has to relive it again and again and again, Like perpetually rolling the boulder up the mountain.

After a few days of confusion and anger, Phil decides to experiment and have fun with this not so new reality. He realizes that since there is no tomorrow, he is free of all restraints and accountability. He can do whatever he darn well pleases. He behaves, shall we say, badly, using and abusing people, causing trouble and pain and havoc.

That’s satisfying in a way but soon Phil really does want out of this Punxsutawney hamster wheel. He tries harder, throwing every obnoxious, manipulative tool he has in limited his emotional and behavioral toolkit. Nothing changes. He despairs. One day, he kills himself. Day after day after day he kills himself. He keeps thinking one of these times it’ll work. But it doesn’t. Sonny and Cher greet him each new morning.

Phil decides that Rita is somehow a key to escaping the meaninglessness of his repetitive life. If he can get her to love him, she will save him from his monotonous, empty existence. (We often look to other people to fix our lives, to save us, don't we? Make me happy, please!) Phil proceeds to try to make Rita fall in love with him. He fails, repeatedly, because his real love is only for himself. She is his object, his goal, a thing in his life rather than a unique and worthy person in and of herself.

Now he gets truly desperate and tries something completely different. He tries to be good, really good—saving lives, doing random acts of kindnesses and such for all the citizens of Punxsutawney. He's going to earn his way if not into heaven, at least into tomorrow, but tomorrow never comes.

Until one Groundhog Day, Phil succeeds in living the perfect day. It ends with him truthfully telling Rita that no matter what tomorrow morning might bring, today he is happy. That is what he needed to learn, because somehow, miraculously, it breaks the cycle of reliving the frustrations of Groundhog Day.

Phil turned a corner when he began to experiment with new ways of being alive. A switch flipped for him when, while acting good to earn a reward, compassion stirred in him. He cared about a homeless guy. Initially he cared about the homeless man to make himself look good and feel better about himself, but the repeated act of caring cracked open an undiscovered reservoir of joy in him. He began to care for the sake of caring, and that was soul satisfying. He actually wanted what was best for the other person, not what would advance his personal agenda.

As is the way of the spirit, Phil had to lose his old, cynical, invulnerable self in order to discover a deeper, caring self. Phil's genuine kindness and compassion ultimately shone through. Phil broke the cycle of emotional and spiritual emptiness by becoming his deeper, hidden self—a caring, compassionate soul.

Easier said than done, I know. But not as hard as we might imagine and fear. Let go of what does not bring you joy and peace. Let go of judgement of self and others. Experiment with a new way of being in the world. The stories and behaviors that served us well when we were six or sixteen no longer serve us well when now that we are twenty-six or fifty-six or seventy-six.

Ralph Waldo Emerson also said that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen, philosophers and divines." What is a foolish consistency? I'll tell you: Repeating thoughts and behaviors that kill your soul, frown on your joy, stifle your growth, leave you angry, frightened and without hope. So for heaven's sake! Stop it! Stop looking for bad luck and knocking on wood.

This day and every day, may you know peace.

Shalom. Salaam. Namaste and Amen.