

“How Rational Are We?”
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In our reading this morning, we heard a little bit about some of our Unitarian forebears and how some of them rejected the revivalists’ emotional conversion experiences. The revivals, which started in the 1730s, would gather hundreds or thousands of people together outdoors, to listen to preachers. I was surprised to learn that many of the leaders of the revivalist movement weren’t especially emotive in their deliveries. What was different is that they spoke of having conversion experiences, and emphasized the need to repent for one’s sins and by doing so, to receive divine forgiveness. People wept, some shouted with joy at having been pardoned, and a few were so overwhelmed that they fainted. If we can imagine this on a grand scale, being part of one of these revivals must have been quite a scene! I can just imagine some of our Unitarian forebears shaking their heads in disgust.

I was talking with a Quaker friend of mine the other day. I said, “Quakers believe that everyone is equal, don’t they?” My friend replied, “Yes, that’s true. And because we came up with this idea, we also believe that we’re just a little bit better than everyone else.”

I commented, “Unitarian Universalists also believe in equality. And I think we sometimes also think we’re a little better than everyone else.”

I mean, we have these great principles, like the idea of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person;” and “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations”; and we draw on many sources of wisdom, including “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

That “warning” against idolatries of the mind and spirit; this is a caution not to fall too blindly in love with our own thoughts and what we believe are experiences of the spirit. To do some checks and balances. To listen to ourselves and examine what we are saying. Is it rational? Or is it based on a belief or an idea that is not

really rational, sensible or logical? Those beliefs under which we're operating can be less obvious than we realize.

A couple of years ago, some members of my extended family were going through a very difficult experience that was long and drawn out. I was upset about it, oh, probably for months. One day, I was thinking about the fact that I didn't like feeling upset about this all the time. I wanted to feel peaceful and serene. A clear, small voice piped up and said, "You know, just because you're not upset about something doesn't mean you don't care." Aha! The flaw in my thinking had been exposed! I hadn't realized it before, but I was subconsciously equating caring with being upset. So I stopped being upset and I discovered that I still cared just as deeply.

How do we "heed the guidance of reason" and protect ourselves from falling into "idolatries of the mind and spirit?" If we are committed to growing personally and spiritually, as our religion calls us to do, we become willing to look at ourselves closely and from different perspectives. Becoming willing is the first step. As we gain insight, and courage, and understanding, we change and move in a positive direction. It does take courage.

Sometime last year, I ran across something that I thought was very interesting. It's a kind of tool for assessing how rational (or irrational) our thinking is. I started reading it, not expecting to identify with any of the irrational forms of thinking. Because of course, I'm a Unitarian Universalist, and we're all about being "rational," right? But, I had to admit that I have engaged in some irrational thinking.

The School of thought called Rational-Emotive Therapy developed a list of 17 types of irrational thinking. I want to share with you the list (from Goodman and Maultsby's Emotional Well-Being Through Rational Behavior Training), adding a few comments of my own.

As you listen, you may find it easier to identify these incorrect beliefs with other people than to see them in yourselves. There's nothing wrong with that. Having a way to conceptualize these behaviors in other people in our lives is also helpful, because it can lead to recognition and acceptance of the fact that their minds work differently from ours, and/or it can help us realize that they're really not

saying these things or acting this way to drive us crazy! But, as we all know, it's usually more fun and interesting to analyze someone ELSE's behavior, so we also have to remind ourselves to focus on ourselves and to be honest in our own self-assessment. And if I finish this sermon and you don't see yourself anywhere in here, I'd like to hear from you!

A caveat before I continue: some of the behaviors that I'm going to be describing can also be components of mental illnesses. With mental illness, a person may not be able to control the thoughts or behavior on their own. In describing some of the many forms of non-rational thinking, I am not suggesting that someone with a mental illness should be able to change their thinking or behavior by their own willpower. And if you hear anything as I'm speaking that leads you to feel concerned about your own thinking or behavior or that of someone you love, I encourage you to be in touch with me.

Seventeen Types of Irrational Thinking

1. Inconsistency: The person expects high standards from him or herself or others some times and not at others. A mother sees her child's first report card and says, "You should be getting straight A's. Doing your best in school is very important!" When she sees the second report card, with worse grades, she says, "Oh, well. There are more important things in the world than grades."
2. The Non Sequitur: The person's reasoning has gaps in it –hence, the term, non sequitur, Latin for "it doesn't follow." The person concludes that he or she will not believe what someone says because they have long hair or are late for an appointment.
3. Generalizing from a Few Particulars: The person makes general conclusions based on a few isolated facts, as in the case of deciding that all people belonging to a certain group have qualities that he or she has found in one or two members of that group.
4. Exaggeration: The person describes a moderate failure as a catastrophe or an inconvenience as a terrible problem. "Oh my God! I broke a nail!" (Hyperventilating)

5. Building a Case: The person selects only those observations about someone or something that fit his or her preconceived conclusion – favorable or unfavorable. “I KNEW going to this picnic was a bad idea. The food is terrible, the people are rude, and the bugs are biting me to death. I TOLD you this was a bad idea, but did you listen? No-o!”
6. Shifting responsibility: Instead of assessing responsibility for a given situation to one or more possible causes, the person arbitrarily assigns it to a person he or she has selected or a condition he or she has decided, in advance, is the cause. “Every single time my brother comes over, something else breaks. Last week the dishwasher went, and now the lawnmower won’t start.” Or, “I KNEW this was going to be a bad day when I tripped over the rug first thing in the morning.”
7. Viewing Feelings as Facts: The person believes that because he or she reacts to something or someone in a certain way that is emotional, this means, therefore, that something or someone actually is the way he or she views them. “Every single day my boss says something that hurts my feelings. She’s a very hurtful person.” Well, no. Just because I feel hurt, doesn’t mean that the other person said something to intentionally hurt my feelings.
8. Viewing Memories as Present-Day Realities: The person persists in thinking, feeling, and acting today as if certain past events or conditions were still in effect and still governing his or her behavior. Many fears go into this category. Let’s say I grew up during the Depression and my parents taught me, “use it up, wear it out, make do or do without.” My house is now cluttered with things because, even if they’re broken or I have no use for them, it feels wrong to throw anything away.
9. Perceiving Remote Possibilities as Imminent Probabilities: The person fails to distinguish between these two very different situations. He or she cannot see the difference between “could” and “is likely to.” Many fears and phobias also fall into this category. “Oh, no. He’s had too much to drink and now he’s driving and he’s going to kill somebody with that car!”

10. **Trying to Reconstruct Reality:** The person thinks in the “as if” mode, declaring that a person or situation “should” be different than it is, simply because he or she wants it to be that way, failing to recognize the antecedents for something being the way it is. I once knew someone whose husband died, and the autopsy revealed that his death was a result of not being diagnosed for a condition that could have been cured with a simple antibiotic. Months went by, and his widow simply could not accept his death. “This should not have happened,” she lamented. But it did.
11. **Expecting immediate or Rapid Change:** Impatience in itself can lead to irrational conclusions about the speed of changes in situations in other’s or one’s own behavior. The emotional desire for change interferes with clear perception as to its feasibility and its speed. Take losing weight or getting in shape. Many people give up too soon and decide that the method they’ve been using is ineffective, when in reality they needed to give themselves and the program more time.
12. **Following Established Habit Patterns:** The satisfaction derived from repeating behavior interferes with clear perception as to whether the behavior is personally or socially acceptable. The person reasons that because a behavior was gratifying in the past, therefore, it deserves to be repeated in the future, regardless of consequences. “Yeah, I chew tobacco. (Spit) What about it?”
13. **Assuming One’s Behavior is Externally Caused:** This assumes a direct relationship between outside events and one’s own feelings, thoughts or actions, ignoring one’s own role in creating the behavior. “When my wife walked out on me, she made me so mad that I put my fist through a window. Now, because of her, my hand is permanently scarred.”
14. **Assuming One is Responsible for Whatever Happens:** This is the opposite of No. 13 (above) and is based on the arbitrary concept of self-blame, rather than on an objective weighing of various causes. Believing that one is responsible for everything that happens is also the opposite of No. 6, in which the person shifts all responsibility to other people or circumstances.

15. Perfectionism: The person thinks in terms of “always,” “never,” “have to,” and “must not” with respect to his or her own behavior and others, or in regard to conditions and situations he or she insists be achieved or demands be maintained. He or she does not recognize fallibility as an inescapable quality of human beings.
16. Magical Thinking: The person believes that something will or might happen because he or she dreams, feels or thinks it should, according to some preconceived “system” of ideas he or she has adopted. Superstitions and other arbitrary ideologies are classic examples of the magical ways of perceiving and interpreting the world. Most gambling addicts and many lottery players are magical thinkers.
17. Mindreading: The person believes he or she can “feel” what other people are thinking or that they can feel what he or she is thinking. The person thus imagines many reactions that may be totally at variance with reality. How many of us, in our relationship with a loved one, have, at some time, thought the other person “should” know what we want, without our having to tell them? Yeah. Mindreading doesn’t work so well.

So that’s the list of 17 forms of irrational thinking. If you didn’t find yourself anywhere in this list, well...all I can say is that you’re either in complete denial or you’ve achieved some kind of rational nirvana!

In our reading this morning, I began by saying that the revivals of the 1740s inspired Charles Chauncy to develop a set of three religious ideas. The first was a theology based on logic and reason; the second was critical analysis of the bible; and the last was that “moral aspiration” as the central focus of religion. A colleague of Chauncy’s, Ebenezer Gay, tied together theology, morality and science. He spoke about the work of the laws of nature in the human heart. Reflecting on the discovery of the principle of gravity, Gay suggested that there may be something analogous in human moral development which “inclines and draws [humanity] toward God [which is the] center of [human] perfection.” In other words, that we are drawn toward, in the direction of, an ideal of human perfection.

In a small fellowship like ours, it's easy to get caught up in the details and concerns of keeping the fellowship going. Let us find moments when we can be still, when we can be quiet within ourselves. It is in these quiet moments that we become open to peace, gratitude and spiritual insights which draw us toward the center of our best selves. "Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (Mary Oliver)

May it be so.

There will be a discussion after the service today in the office, starting about 5 minutes after our closing circle. I'll have copies of the Irrational Thinking list for anyone who's interested.

Hymn 345