

“Beliefs to Abandon”
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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Happy New Year, everyone. You know, one of the things that I like about getting older (or should I say, “One of the FEW things I like about getting older”) is that every once in a while, I learn something about myself that’s helpful. Several years ago, my nephew, who was 14, was accused of a terrible crime that he did not commit. It’s a complicated story, which I won’t go into right now, but it was a very tough time for his whole family.

I was working for my nephew’s parents, my brother and sister-in-law, so every day I’d ask them for the blow-by-blow update. After a few weeks of this, I realized that I was getting really stressed out. I had a constant ache in the pit of my stomach and I was having trouble concentrating. My first thought, was, “Well, of course you’re stressed out. Look at what’s going on with Tommy.” My second thought was, “Do you have to feel this way?”

My answer kind of made me go, “Whoa!” What I heard myself saying was, “Yes, of course you have to be upset and stressed out. You CARE, don’t you?” It was one of those “ahah” moments. “Wait a minute!” I said to myself. “If I were less upset, would that mean I cared LESS?”

Well, that answer to THAT question was pretty obvious. In this little talk with myself, I had managed to expose the fallacy of a belief I didn’t even realize I had held. That belief was, “I have to be upset to prove that I care.” From that point forward, I began to consciously focus on having a calmer state of mind. I still checked in with my brother and sister-in-law on a regular basis. Because, of course, I DID care –a lot!

So, why do I want to talk this morning about abandoning a belief like this? It doesn’t seem very religious, or even spiritual –not like questions of some other beliefs, like the belief in God, or the inherent goodness or evil of humanity, for example.

Here's the thing: If I had doggedly continued to "hype up" my level of upset by seeking out every gory detail and by obsessing over the unfairness of it all and the potentially awful outcome for my nephew, if I had continued down that path, I would have stayed stressed out and fearful. When I'm in that state of mind, I'm separated from my higher power --what I understand as a force of love and life that would have me care for myself as a good mother would do.

Because it's only in a calm and serene state of mind that I can really tune in to the world around me and be open to what the universe has to offer me --and what I have to offer the universe. What we believe about how to live our lives is actually intimately connected with our spirituality.

The way I see our life purpose is that whatever we are doing or thinking, we are constantly preparing ourselves to be a force of good in the world --on some level. And that preparation involves removing whatever is blocking us from reaching our full human potential.

I learned to weave this week. And in the process, I made a connection with a weaver in British Columbia named Lynne who runs a rehabilitation center for llamas. She says, "Your words, actions and donations make a difference. Whether it's an organization serving hundreds of thousands of people around the world or a tiny organization saving abandoned llamas - your support truly makes a difference."

I like this. It's not so much WHAT we do, it's that we contribute to the world in some positive way.

And another thing about life --I believe that we are meant to enjoy life. Not every minute of life, of course. But the world is filled with beauty, kindness and love. "The hummingbird's wings. The excitement of thunder. The rainbow in the waterfall." (Mary Oliver) Our perception of these qualities can lead us to deep feelings of awe and wonder. these moments can be spiritual experiences for some people. If we are holding onto beliefs that get in the way of our ability to feel good about the time we're spending here on this planet, we're missing out.

THESE are a couple of reasons I think it's worthwhile spending a little time thinking about our beliefs. The "little" beliefs. Those "rules" or "guidelines" to guide ourselves that may in fact, be blocking us.

Let's take a look at a few other common beliefs that we might want to abandon. And then I want to save a little time at the end for you to share about any discoveries you may have had in your own lives having to do with beliefs that you decided to abandon. I'm indebted to author and speaker Martha Beck for identifying some of these beliefs.

"Problems are bad." This is what we learned in school. Remember all those stupid math problems? Our job was to solve them as quickly as possible. But in real life, we NEED problems. I was talking yesterday with a singer-songwriter friend, Reggie Harris, about how so many creative geniuses, like songwriters and artists, have led troubled lives. It seems that it is in the problem, and the discomfort that goes along with it, that the seeds of creativity grow best. Not always, but often enough.

How many of us have experienced, say, a job loss, which helped us figure out a more satisfying career? Or a bad relationship, which taught us a lot about the meaning of love? Or some other problem, which turned out to be a stepping stone to something better?

"Success is the opposite of failure." Actually, success is built on failure. I wove my first rag rug last week. For the warp (explain) I used black fabric and for the weft I used a light purple. If the weaving is done correctly, the warp (the black strands) are almost completely covered. Well, there were quite a few spots where the black warp called out, "Here I am! Really obvious!" At first, I was annoyed with myself for making all those mistakes. I was going to have to look at that rug every day, because I was going to put it on the floor next to my bed.

Is there another way I could look at those black spots, I wondered. OK, this was my first rug ever. Of course it wasn't going to look professional, because I was a beginner. I realized that each of those black spots represented my learning, each of them was saying, "Hey, I'm learning to weave!" and all of a sudden I almost felt proud of those spots.

If we're devastated by not instantly succeeding at something new, we're robbing ourselves of the chance to learn from our mistakes. Studies show that people who worry too much about mistakes give up easily and people who are OK with doing badly soon learn to do well.

"It's important to stay happy." If we believe this, we'll go to almost any length to avoid painful feelings. The truth is, giving ourselves permission to feel whatever we feel is the foundation of well-being.

"If only such-and-such would happen, then I would be happy." If we only had that dream house, a different job, a different partner, different neighbors, a new car, new furniture, a face lift; if only we could lose weight, buy a new wardrobe, travel more...and on and on. If we place our ability to be happy outside ourselves, we are giving our power away. True happiness comes from within.

"It matters what other people think of me." Martha Beck says that she had to confront this belief when she began reading blatant lies about herself on the Internet. What she read upset her. When she complained about the situation to a friend, her friend said, "Wow, you have some painful fantasies about other people's fantasies about you." Beck realized that the comments really had nothing to do with her, which was very freeing. She suggests imagining what we would do if it absolutely didn't matter what people thought of us. "Got it?" she asks. "Good. Never go back."

"We are responsible for others' feelings." If we find ourselves tiptoeing around trying not to upset someone, for example, that's a sign that we're operating under this belief. We can only be responsible for our own feelings and behavior. If someone chooses to react negatively to us, that is their responsibility.

"Loss is unbearable." No one is saying that loss isn't difficult. But losses aren't necessarily cataclysmic if they "teach the heart and soul their natural cycle of breaking and healing." (Beck) I think of some people in this congregation and what they've gone through. They are living proof of the falsehood of the belief that "loss is unbearable."

May we all open our hearts to the truths that will set us free.

