

Get Rid of Dust and Soot
First Unitarian Church, February 26, 2012
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This week began the season of Lent, which we love because it means it is time for the Unfish Fry! I also like the idea that Lent, L.E.N.T., means: Lets Eliminate Negative Thinking. Through Easter I will be wearing a bracelet as a way of reminding me to not complain. This is something I have done a couple of times over the past decade. Each time I catch myself complaining I will move the bracelet and see if how many days I can go without having to move the bracelet: not complaining. I take part of my inspiration from Willam Ostler, often named the Father of Modern Medicine, who said: "Things cannot always go your way. Learn to accept in silence the minor aggravations, cultivate the gift of taciturnity and consume your own smoke with an extra draught of hard work, so that those about you may not be annoyed with the dust and soot of your complaint." Taciturnity means being resistant to talking. To complain is to verbally express dislike or dissatisfaction about things; it is a way of kicking up the dust of our anger, the ashes of our regret, and to sully the air with it. Complaining rarely improves anything. Alone, it does not inspire other people to improve or change. Even if it indirectly spurs someone to action, it is not pleasant. As the saying goes, "There is no situation so bad that it cannot be made worse by adding a little guilt". Most importantly, complaining clouds our minds: obscuring the sunlight of wellness not with life giving rain, but with the dust and soot of complaint. Our religion is about making life better and as a Russian proverb emphasizes: "If you want to clean the whole world, start by sweeping your doorstep."

This sermon is about choosing to not complain. In part this is because our actions can inspire others. For example, in Monty Python's Flying Circus I once saw four Yorkshire gentlemen enjoying fine wine. The first commented how, in years prior, he would have been lucky to have the price of a cup of tea, and certainly never such fine wine. A second responded, "Oh don't I know it, I would have been lucky to afford a cup of *cold* tea." A man then volunteered how poor his childhood house was. "House," responds another, "you were lucky to live in a house. We used to live in one room, all twenty-six of us, no furniture, half the floor was missing, and we all huddled together in a corner for fear of falling." The first man replied, "Well, when I say 'house' it was only a hole in the ground covered by a tarp, but it was home to us." Another interjected "We were evicted from our hole in the ground..." The complaining got worse and worse until one of the men loudly declared "I had to get up in the morning at ten o'clock at night, half an hour before I went to bed, drink a cup of sulfuric acid for breakfast, work twenty-nine hours a day down in a mill, and pay the mill owner for permission to come to work. And when we got home, our dad and our mother would kill us and dance about on our graves singing Hallelujah!" There was much dust being kicked up there.

One special form of complaining is criticism, pointing out the faults and mistakes of others. Done poorly it has the power to drag down the human spirit. Thus, complaining is a spiritual issue because it can determine the nature of our relationships, showing clearly what we value and how we spend our energy. It is easy to name what we don't like and try and cut it from the world. It is much harder to make criticism constructive, to elevate evaluation and make it a servant of strength and well-being. Though he could be withering in his criticism of hypocrisy Mark Twain said, "The trade of critic... is the

most degraded of all trades,” as it was in his time so it is also in ours. Matthew Arnold, another writer, held this definition of good criticism: “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” I like that because I know that even when not meant to be cruel, even when expected, it can be hard to hear criticism, and it is always depressing to hear complaints. At worse, destructive criticism can cause us to doubt ourselves to paralysis. I have been told before how early in my life as a Minister I almost lost my voice, my will to speak before others. This was because of relentless criticism. There was nothing I could do to please some in my congregation. Then a different group of people, who understood how to give constructive criticism and to elevate evaluation, gave me back my voice.

In his book, *A Complaint Free World*, Rev Will Bowen (UCC of Kansas City, Missouri) titled his first chapter “I Complain Therefore I am.” In the book he says there are five reasons that we complain. The primary reason is to get attention and a sense of connection to others. Many people will start a conversation by sharing a complaint. Sometimes complaining is an attempt to gain control of others, to get them to do things for you or to turn against someone else. Often it is used to avoid action. Another reason for complaining is to excuse poor performance. Such is the Cardinal who swings at a ball and misses crying “the sun got in my eyes”. The last reason for complaint is to make ourselves feel superior, as in “If I were the King of the World”.

Choosing to not complain is part of healing. The first goal of the healer’s pledge is to “do no harm,” but complaining is about spreading pain and suffering. The Buddhist goal is to end suffering, not share it. The man who complained about the weather to Maya Angelou’s grandmother, in the reading this morning, wanted sympathy but the continual seeking of sympathy has a cost: it slowly poisons a person’s days and relationships until they are all tainted with dissatisfaction. It is called commiserating, but what kind of connection is that? To commiserate is, literally, to share the misery. It is not inspiring or caring or grateful, it is increasing the suffering.

I once heard a speech by the Mayor of Youngstown, Ohio, Jay Williams. He shared how his community developed a new vision of themselves leading from rust-belt to renewal. During the process he came to identify some as the CAVE people, that is, Citizens Against Virtually Everything. Naming them thus is kind of a form of complaining, but it is also an admission that one cannot stop the complaints of others. It is also a way of noting that complaining harms the work of a community making it harder to improve the situations and build hope. I understand that some feel their role in life is to complain, but the cost of that role is to be surrounded, like the *Peanuts* cartoon character Pig-Pen, with a cloud of dust and soot. Soot is the cold remains of a fire. Here it is the fire of anger. Angry when we feel we have no power we simply complain.

So how do we get rid of dust and soot without becoming vapidly nice? To be brief: stop complaining, use “I” statements, get permission before you evaluate, seek to elevate, describe what “better” is like, and be positive.

To stop something you have to notice you are doing it. Once you become aware of complaining you will be amazed at how common it is. Once you are aware of your complaining you can stop it and replace it with something else. If I go one full month, without moving this bracelet I will be amazed. In the meantime I will have improved the lives of those around me.

As we head into the election season you can be certain that complaining and criticizing will increase exponentially, attack ads and all. According to Rev. Bowen, studies have revealed on average more than half of us complain between fifteen and thirty times a day. Now I understand that we must share our hard and hurtful experiences, and sympathy is good; but we can share our experiences in ways that are not complaint.

Begin by taking responsibility for your words. When describing someone's actions or work, use "I" statements. I know it is a hard discipline to learn, but very much worth the effort, because it clarifies the mind. Instead of: "You make me angry" say, "when you do that, I feel angry." Thus, you take ownership of your reaction. Instead of saying, "You are doing this all wrong," say, "I don't like the way you are doing this." "I" statements are about owning your words and reactions rather than assuming your opinions are those of God or objective Truth itself. "I" statements give more accurate information and help the persons you are criticizing be more responsible.

Likewise, evaluation is needed, but not always when you want to give it. Most people don't want to hear criticism at all, and they probably don't want to hear it from you. W. Somerset Maugham the famous writer noted: "People ask you for criticism, but they only want praise." I have been to writers groups where this is the norm, to praise only and speak no ill. Encouragement is good, but we should ask to be critiqued. So, if someone tells you it is your job to criticize then learn to do it constructively. The good critic always distinguishes personal reactions and feelings from objective criteria of evaluation. Eckhart Tolle wrote about this in his book, *A New Earth*, made this clear:

"Complaining is not to be confused with informing someone of a mistake or deficiency so that it can be put right. And to refrain from complaining doesn't necessarily mean putting up with bad quality or behavior. There is no ego in telling the waiter your soup is cold and needs to be heated up – if you stick to the facts, which are always neutral. "How dare you serve me cold soup...?" That's complaining."

The point must be repeated, don't give advice or criticism unless it is asked for, and if you must give it, then seek to elevate not to berate. The point to remember about criticism is that no one wants criticism alone. The good critic will focus not on the mistakes of the past, but the vision of a better future. As the author Joseph Addison said: "A true critic ought to dwell rather upon excellencies than imperfections, to discover the concealed beauties of a writer, and communicate to the world such things as are worth their observation." In other words, the good critic makes you an artist in whatever you do. Some of the people who gave me back my preaching voice were in Toastmasters International. There we learned how to evaluate with a style that was jokingly referred to as a "praise sandwich". One began with what was praiseworthy, whatever was the strength of the speaker we focused on that and said "Keep doing that". If the speech was worthless one might even comment on how good they looked, professionally dressed, or something like that. Then, even if there were sixteen things wrong with the speech, we were to choose one thing to work on, one thing we thought the speaker could definitely improve. Then, we would go back to the strength and emphasize, "Keep doing that". If you are in the position to evaluate use "I" statements and describe what the path to "better" is like. Be positive. A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, better yet is two spoonfuls. Just don't forget the medicine.

As it is with criticism so it is with complaint. As Maya's grandmother said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain." A friend of mine once told me a story about her divorce. Only a few years into their marriage, and only months after her second child was born, my friend learned that her husband had been carrying on an affair with a friend. She was devastated. Everything she believe about herself, about him, about their future, about family, all unraveled. During that time she became very bitter. As the divorce proceeded, and afterward, she got to complaining and commiserating with her friends. Anything that irritated her she shared. Soon all things in her life, including all of her relationships, were tainted with grief and sorrow and resentment. Then one day a friend of hers noted how unhappy she was and when my friend asked for advice her friend said, "I think you are stuck in your resentments. What you need to do is to also remember all of your blessings. I think you should begin a gratitude journal. Each day write down something you are thankful for". My friend decided this was a good idea so she got a journal book and on the first day wrote, with a little poison in her pen, "I am thankful that I have more room in my closet". It was a good thing, but with an invisible asterisk to a complaint. For a week or so her entries continued like that. She resented all the work of having to be a single parent through the week, but eventually she realized that she was deeply glad to have her daughters in her life and did not want to forget that. So she wrote their names in her gratitude journal. Soon she was noting specific things that they did, or that her parents or friends did, for which she was truly thankful or little things like a good dish of gourmet ice cream. Other elements of her life, large and small, began to appear in the journal. One day she wrote "Three bright goldfinches playing in a puddle". The more that she focused on what was good in her life, the less bitter she became. The more she noticed how much she had the less grief she felt about what she had lost. Her health improved. The sorrow and irritation of her life did not go away; it simply stopped being what most defined her life and spirit.

So, I encourage you to give up complaining; for a day, for lent, for the rest of your life. Be positive, share facts and use "I" statements, seek to elevate and encourage, attend to excellencies, increase gratitude for what is good. If nothing else this practice will help you become more aware and complain a little less. At best you will become more healthy, happy, and content. If you are better, that makes the world a little better as a consequence. "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain." Rid your life of dust and soot.

BENEDICTION: From Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, 2:14-15, 16a, 4:8 NIV

Therefore, my dear friends... Do everything *without complaining, or arguing*, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault... [and] shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life... Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things.