

Meeting the Challenge of Discouragement

Right after I was ordained, I had a half-time ministry at Fourth Universalist in Manhattan. It was a small, vibrant community on the exciting, cutting edge of openness to life-style minorities. The congregation was receptive to my sophomoric sermons and my confused but heartfelt pastoral care efforts. I liked it; I tried things; I grew my skills. I simultaneously got postgraduate training for a certificate in Pastoral Care.

This is not the typical experience of my ministerial colleagues. By contrast, after three years of parish ministry in all faith groups, 50% of clergy have left. Think about it—these people spent three years and many thousands of dollars getting a Master of Divinity degree. They studied lots of books, took many courses in theology and pastoral theory, preached some sermons, and counseled people in a hospital or clinic. Their internship was with a seasoned minister. Unfortunately, new clergy usually serve a congregation that's stressed—just starting out or declining and wounded—so the experience is tumultuous. Support networks, real communities for beginning clergy, are very sketchy. Four years after ordination, I started a one-year, part-time ministry optimistically but quickly grew disillusioned and hurt by passive resistance to my suggestions and sermons. There were major financial problems. I had strenuously trained for pastoral ministry by doing sermons at 40 different congregations, studying administration, and taking postgraduate courses, but I was discouraged. I wondered what qualities I should have developed and what skills I should have used better. I blamed myself.

Today, I will describe some results of discouragement in jobs, relationships, and personal well-being. After that brief tour of hell, I will suggest ways we can think about personal reverses and what we might change.

Discouragement. Courage comes from the French for heart, and therefore DIS-couragement is loss of heart for the task at hand, a current lifestyle, a job, or partner. Discouragement is different from mourning and melancholy, as Freud pointed out in a seminal paper. (Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," The Standard Edition, pps.14:237-258.) Mourning is the loss of a person, but severe melancholy is a loss to part of the self. As Freud puts it, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego [the part of us that expresses personality] itself." (pg.246) that feels depleted. Discouragement is the initial response to failures, such as a bad job review, or an angry argument. Melancholy is a result of repeated discouragement—a savage self-criticism, a loss of self-regard resulting in feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, shame, and humiliation. An important piece of self-regard has been denied, and therefore what a person or an activity did for us is missing. We are trapped with cruel, internal self-criticism.

--Maybe you lost the job you thought would be your penultimate achievement, the position that held great promise of fulfillment. The achievements that people respected, admired, and praised were trashed. Fortunately, during the time a past parish disappointed me I had built up an alternative profession—and source of self-esteem. I savored the emotional intensity, complexity, and rewards of psychotherapy.

--You may have lost a treasured relationship. It hardly matters if you dumped them or they you, if you moved, or they moved. The distress at losing the pleasure, growth, and emotional depth the relationship had, or at least promised, is real. The sense of humiliation at being rejected can feel harsh. The embarrassment that you shared a secret—or two or three—and that trust was scorned, can lead to doubting your ability to know who is trustworthy. And where do you go now? It isn't as if relationships are sitting there on a shelf, ready to be plucked and taken to check-out.

--Maybe you got old, or sick, or disabled in an accident. People don't light up the old way, with an erotic shiver, when you enter a room. You hobble or wobble or roll down the sidewalk and people look away--they don't give you the old up-and-down eye scan anymore. You feel invisible.

--Maybe you thought Hurricane Ida's drowning of 25 Old Jackson Avenue was just a conjunction of several natural forces, not (as insurance companies would term it, "an act of God,") but started to wonder painfully if maybe God WAS after us, when time after time alternative sites disappointed. I was discouraged and the New Home Committee was exhausted and maybe discouraged after an OK-but-not-great place for an FUSW home failed. Understandably, almost all members of the New Home Committee said their personal lives, families, and work could no longer be ignored. However, when Lenore Lupie visited another space and lobbied for it, the committee rallied and worked superbly. They threw their hearts into it--seriously considering the legalities, architecture, and special needs of FUSW in regard to yet another new space. I am grateful, as are many of us, for that hard work and dedication.

Is this enough hell, enough pain reviewed? Are you feeling sunk into discouragement and melancholy?

The theme for the upcoming Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, is “Love Unites, Stories Ignite.” This is a great theme, because stories guide us all through discouragement to a better, more emotionally integrated perspective. This telling of our life journeys fulfills the purpose of community. As Jancee Dunn wrote: “Sharing our failures minimizes shame, encourages truth telling and offers people a chance to learn from each other’s mistakes. ‘It normalizes the reality of failure for all of us and is deeply bonding . . .’” (Jancee Dunn, [nytimes.com/well](https://www.nytimes.com/well/2024/02/18/want-to-thrive-first-learn-to-fail/). “Want to Thrive? First, Learn to Fail,”) You may feel so devastated you have lost track of how you have been loved, but the wider context of your life contains those people and places that accepted you.

I know, I’m literally preaching to the choir, because Dr. Paul Gross coincidentally recently wrote about this in the online magazine, “Pulse.” He wrote:

I feel most connected with others not when they’ve shared their triumphs but when they’ve shared their vulnerability—something I can relate to. It brings me closer to them and to my human family. It makes me feel better about who I am—someone who, like all of us, sometimes wishes he were more than he actually is.

[Paul continues] Second, I think we all need places where we can be ourselves within supportive communities—places where people listen, nod, and don’t offer unwanted advice, but simply say, “Yes, we hear you.” (Gross, “Pulse,” 2-18-2024)

Community also gives us the strength to put failure into a wider context. Feeling loved, we are fortified to ask objectively: “What was my goal?” and “What happened?” Love enables us to think that perhaps we are not so bad, not so deserving of humiliation and embarrassment because a job did not work out or a

treasured relationship dissolved. That is how we discover that this disappointment was not the total story. By sharing our whole stories about our triumphs as well as losses, others are stimulated to point out that we are not entirely in control of our lives. Economies soar—and crash. Pandemics damage certain professions and businesses. Your partner has emotional noise and conflicts in the back of their head—just as you do—and is therefore capable of being erratic and irrational. Political winds shift, as the movie “Oppenheimer” illustrates by following the rise, take-down, and redemption of a renowned, reviled, and finally redeemed scientist. Stuff happens in everyone’s story. This is part of the importance of sharing time after sermons, candles of joy and concern, the small group ministries, Men’s and Women’s groups, the writing group, and program groups. Our stories containing triumphs and vulnerability and realistic constraints are heard empathetically and responded to kindly.

Each of us has a story, perhaps not what we anticipated, or demanded, but a story of how we have learned things and made something of our circumstances when we hit a failure point and re-evaluated what we needed, wanted, and could achieve. Perhaps your story isn’t going well, but it is also a story of how you survive, pivot, and persevere despite trauma, troubles, and partial triumphs. It is your particular story, unique among all the 8 million people on earth, about how you have made it thus far and what options you have now. And those stories are more than valuable to us, they teach others important skills and coping mechanisms. People can learn from you, and you, and you—people need others’ stories because they learn what they need to do to triumph over adversity and get good ideas. Most important, these stories help others because they teach that we can move forward through obstacles.

Here's this from the Rev. Dr. Sophia Betancourt, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

As Unitarian Universalists, personal story rests at the heart of what we know about interdependence, justice, generosity, equity, pluralism, and transformation. It invites us to wrestle with how we center love and lean into our common values in everyday life. . . . our interpretations of UU values shape how the stories we tell one another about who and how we are in the world. As a community we have long relied on life experience to guide us in our religious exploration . . .

[She asks] What are the stories that shift and shape your understanding of yourself? What in recent years has caused you to question or reimagine the way that you understand the world around you? Perhaps most importantly, have you had the opportunity to share that journey with someone else—to risk telling your story?

[She concludes with] . . .risking [telling] our stories teaches us something we could not have learned in any other way. Yet taking such risk requires trust. It requires being in a place where we know we will be listened to, and held, in love. A place that allows us to finish the telling stronger than we begin it, because our community will know us more fully, and love us just as much. (S. Betancourt, UU World, Fall/Winter, 2023, pg.4)

The Rev. Dr. Betancourt is a theologian, so she focuses on the content of stories, but I would emphasize the experience of telling and listening. How you feel in the telling of your stories and feeling others' responsiveness changes discouragement and melancholy. Being emotionally present means the telling and listening are reaching what in us needs empathy, celebrating and healing. Let us commit ourselves to both telling and listening empathetically so we may thrive. So be it.