

# I Keep Getting Upset

Offered by Brian Kohn on Sunday, February 28, 2016  
Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North

I keep getting upset.

I know I shouldn't. I know I should keep everything in perspective. But I cannot help getting tossed and turned by the frustration I experience; the surprise at the audacity I see; and the disappointment I feel upon seeing people making excuses for attitudes that I know we were taught in kindergarten were wrong.

I shouldn't be surprised. I'm not a stupid guy. I've studied history. I know that for the vast majority of humanity's story we've often found ourselves at each other's throats, or, at the very least, callous disregard for the weak by the strong has been pervasive since we were living in caves. Human civilization's past has been so regularly tainted by such uncharitable behavior that respecting others, caring about others, and protecting others, has been given impressive labels: "Gallantry." "Honor". "Chivalry". The practice of affirming the worth and dignity of those most vulnerable in society is such a recent concept that those who were practicing it prior to the 17th Century were considered remarkable people.

Right or wrong, I often peg the 1670s as the beginning of when humanity started getting significantly better, with regard to these kinds of things. I like using that time period because it is when Spinoza's "Ethics" was published. The big deal about Spinoza's "Ethics" wasn't what it said but rather that it said it. Spinoza's philosophy would pave the way toward depriving the rich, cruel and powerful of the moral justification they would use to rationalize generalized and assorted transgressions against the common good. And there is no denying that classic liberalism grew during the Age of Enlightenment, laying the groundwork for our nation's own principles of compassion for those less powerful.

*It also doesn't hurt that the first time the word "Unitarian" appeared in print in English was during the 1670s. There might be some connection there.*

I have this expectation - clearly unfounded - that almost 350 years into this *Enlightenment*, that even if we, as a society, are not successful in taking care of the most vulnerable in society, that at least we'd all be disappointed by that failure in a similar way. Or, at least, there wouldn't be that many people *celebrating increases* in injustice – at least there wouldn't be many people advocating for and praising the reversal of past increases in equity and fairness.

But there are.

And there are so many people who advocate for regression – so many people who advocate for injustice – that it cannot be as it seems on the surface – what's going on cannot just be a textbook case of evil in practice.

It's very difficult to keep this in perspective. I need to keep in mind the dual nature of the modern age: What we've done is opened the door for people to think their own thoughts, have their own beliefs, and form their own philosophies. These changes in society have been brought about by the incredible advancement of humanity since the late 17th Century.

However, by opening that door to support more humane attitudes, we have also left open the door to thoughts, beliefs and philosophies that seek to legitimize inhumanity. By opening the door that legitimized condemnation of slavery and justifies condemnation of unjust exploitation of the poor, we have also left open the door to efforts to legitimize patently self-serving interests. By opening that door we even have legitimized the efforts to enlist “pawns in the game” to support institutionalized injustice.

As frustrating as that might be.

And it is the frustration that I'm talking about today. I feel such frustration from seeing so much resistance to, so much opposition to, and so much obstruction of, the moving of humanity forward toward a more compassionate and considerate stance; I feel such frustration from seeing so much resistance to, so much opposition to, and so much obstruction of, improving things for those most vulnerable in society.

And it affects me. *Inside*. At an emotional level.

I was reading the news and surfing the web while having breakfast one morning and it occurred to me that I take bigger bites of my bagel when I'm reading something about the budget battles or about Members of Congress fighting over healthcare – I take bigger bites than as compared to the bites I take when I'm reading the latest Hollywood gossip or viewing the latest cute cat videos. My *behavior* is changed just by being exposed to the existence of inhumanity, or even just by being exposed to the existence of callous disregard for others.

I used to be such a news "fan" - if you can believe it. In college, my roommate and several other like-minded guys used to gather around the television at 11:30 to watch Ted Koppel on Nightline. My passion for keeping a close eye the news continued for many years. By contrast, a few times over the last decade or so I've taken a step back and considered the impact that comprehensive exposure to the news has on me. I'm convinced that the impact is often quite negative. Feeling that frustration - taking that larger bite of the bagel - it makes me wonder whether I'm better off avoiding awareness.

The "logical" reaction to my realizing the impact the frustration has on me is to be choosier about my news sources. Maybe I should choose what I take in based on how I figure it will affect me.

They might be hard to find, but I bet there are still news sources out there that mute the extreme aspects of the issues being reported.

However, is it truly “*better*” to hear about some bit of antisocial claptrap that some US Senator wants to bring about, when news of it is watered down and made dispassionate by somber, understated commentators? Or is better to hear it presented by the Senator personally, in all its cold, bald-faced vulgarity, during an interview on some unrepentantly extremist cable network?

Sure: I am personally less afflicted by frustration by drinking in the watered-down version of what others are trying to do in society, instead of drinking from the pure source. But even if it reduces my frustration, isn't such filtering a self-deception? Isn't such filtering a form of self-

bias, bias that would tend to compromise my own convictions because I'm not allowing myself to realize the size and depth of the gulf between my views and those of others?

I think it is a self-deception.

For me, I think the choice is between being fully aware of the stark contrasts, on the one side, and admitting to myself that I simply am not cut out for awareness at all, on the other side. Perhaps I'm not cut out for awareness at all.

But I'm skeptical about the legitimacy of avoidance, as well.

One of the most vigorous aspects of the good work our church does and the good work our faith does is getting the word out, getting people engaged, getting people to feel passionately about helping heal our world. The Green team seeks to inform us about the harm being done to our planet that we aren't aware of. Our Social Action efforts are often designed to bring us face-to-face with the effects of injustice. Through sermons, UU World and other channels our faith exposes us to detailed and moving descriptions of the horrors of war from which so many people in our world suffer.

Is there a place in our faith for avoidance? Aren't we challenged to stand on the side of love, knowingly and as a matter of strongly-held principle?

I think we are.

So:

- Avoiding the reality of the fundamental conflicts in our society is contrary to our faith's principles.
- Blinding myself to the size and depth of the difference between my values and those of people who resist, oppose or obstruct remedying injustice in society is a self-deception that would tend to compromise my own convictions.
- And... Complete awareness leads back to this strong sense of frustration – this emotional reaction brought about by being aware – the cost awareness inflicts on me, personally – the bigger bite of the bagel.

At the heart of my frustration is the seemingly unresolvable nature of today's conflicts, a reflection perhaps of what columnist Matthew Levendusky refers to as the hollowed-out center. In a piece he wrote in February 2014 he points out the following:

*While the political[ly inclined] can tune into Fox and MSNBC, those who dislike politics also have more options than ever for avoiding it. In lieu of the nightly news—or a televised presidential address—they can watch Sports Center, Entertainment Tonight, or a rerun of The Big Bang Theory. When confronted with a political option, they simply change the channel to something else that they find more agreeable. Even the most popular cable news programs get 2 to 3 million viewers on a typical evening in a country of (over) 300 million Americans. In earlier decades, some of these individuals*

*would have been incidentally exposed to political news and information (by, say, watching the television news at 6 o'clock, when there were no other options). Now that they can avoid news altogether, they know less about politics and are less likely to participate. So the growth of media choice strengthens the extremes while hollowing out the center... (Levendusky, 2014)*

This hollowed-out center means the conflicts in our society tend to have no substantial middle ground. And... Most of what I know about conflict resolution revolves around reliance on the idea that those in conflict are motivated to seek a resolution, a resolution that naturally would be somewhere in that now-missing middle ground. There is remarkably little sound advice for resolving conflicts when standard practices for conflict resolution like accommodation, compromise and collaboration, resolving misunderstandings, mitigating mistrust, deflating hostility, and setting aside negative stereotypes are, themselves, the opposite of what is desired by one side or the other.

What do we do if the core of the matter is non-negotiability, itself? How do we resolve conflicts when one of one side's prerequisites is the elimination of perspectives in opposition to their own? For many groups, it seems to be much less about making progress against problems and issues, and more about doing whatever will foster the group's own power, and to a great extent, fostering the group's own power by doing whatever they can to undercut the power of groups they oppose.

In situations like that, when what is going on is basically about the power rather than what it would be used to accomplish, there aren't clear paths for resolving the underlying conflicts. And if there aren't clear paths for resolving the underlying conflicts, then what hope do frustrated individuals like me have with regard to plotting a viable course between avoidance and awareness?

Those of us who experience frustration like this can heed the words of Rev. Peter Morales. He asks us to think about our Unitarian Universalist religion as the practice of being faithful to what we love, faithful to what we hold sacred, faithful to what moves us at the core of our being. (Morales, 2011) In that spirit, we can find a path forward for ourselves despite the lack of assurance that our efforts will succeed. It's a messy path. But it's okay that it's a messy path. It doesn't eliminate the upset. It just acknowledges that upset is going to happen and focuses it. We need to take action. We can have faith that our actions will help change things - a river begins with a single drop of water - but even if we don't see how... taking the action matters.

In a minute we will sing the Hymn "Wake Now My Senses". Its lyrics can be viewed as an outline of the path forward for those frustrated as I am:

*Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;  
Brighten my pathway with radiance here;  
Mingle my calling with all who will share;  
Work toward a planet transformed by our care.*

(Mickelson, 1993)

I would like to think that whatever we do ...

to exercise the passion of our convictions, ...

to turn our frustrations into action, ...

and to try to contribute to changes that may someday make things better, ...

... I would like to think these things are worthwhile expressions of our souls.

May it be so.

## References

Levendusky, M. (2014, February 3). *Are Fox and MSNBC polarizing America?* Retrieved from Washington Post: <http://president.blogs.uua.org/faith/welcome-2/>

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