

The Myth of Self Reliance

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UFWC

"Question not, but live and labour
Till yon goal be won,
Helping every feeble neighbour,
Seeking help from none;
Life is mostly froth and bubble,
Two things stand like stone---Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in our own."¹

Last week I was very insistent in proclaiming that we have no stated creed or dogma. We have our principles and purposes and values that we stand behind. I also know that there are unwritten universal truths among Unitarian Universalists. These words from Adam Lindsay Gordon seem to sum up what most of us were taught as children and patterned our lives after. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but by all means don't ask them to do anything for you! That would be a sign of personal weakness. That would betray what we think is our pilgrim and pioneer heritage.

How many of us have ever found ourselves driving around in a car, looking for our destination, lost on the road with no idea of where we were, and we were determined to find our way ourselves? There was something in our gut that absolutely forbade our asking anyone for directions, as if the whole world would be aware of our ultimate admission of defeat. "I am an intelligent person, I know how to read a map,".. or "I have been here before and I will find it again on my own!" Does any of this sound familiar to you? I know it to be my experience because I admit to not wanting to ask for help, I can find my way by myself, thank you very much!

How about working with a new computer or a new computer program? It is not working as easily as the commercial or video showed it would. I know what it is supposed to do, but getting it to do that, well . . . We all know how useful computer manuals are, they might as well be written in Sanskrit for all the good they do! Call someone on the helpline? What an odd notion. Oh no, the challenge for me is figuring it out for myself, I will not be beaten by a stupid machine, never mind how many hours or days or weeks it takes!

Being a patient in a hospital bed is a different kind of enormously frustrating and demeaning experience. You lie there totally at the mercy of a group of people that you don't know who are literally trying to control your every function. Your life is no longer in your own hands but in the hands of others and their miraculous machines. You want to continue having control over yourself and because of what ever reason brought you into the hospital, that control has been wrested from your grip.

Getting caught up in the legal system is another avenue leading to frustration where one's will and determination often become useless if not counter-productive to attaining the desired outcome The system takes over and one's fate is in the hands of others.

The common thread that runs through these instances is that helplessness, self-doubt, feelings of anger and fear overtake our consciousness due to loss of control. In some instances, they are

trivial, in some overwhelming. Self-reliance and control have become cardinal virtues in our society. Independence is lauded as the pinnacle of achievement. Within our own Unitarian Universalist tradition, we tout ourselves as being a population of independent thinkers and doers. What I find myself looking for more and more is the tangible reality of that "interdependent web" we often talk about. Where do we really promote interaction and involvement in each others lives? When we think about helping others is it always the "less fortunate" or are we also aware of the needs physical, emotional, and spiritual within our own church community?

When I originally put this service together long, long ago, the process was both interesting and illuminating. I combed through our traditional Unitarian Universalist hymnals and collections of readings trying to find material that had to do with community and the concept of asking for help. We have many offerings on 'celebration and praise,' 'the life of integrity', 'freedom,' "love and brotherhood', "peace,' "commitment and action," and on and on, yet there is nothing that exemplifies the validity of extending oneself to another when we are in need. We certainly extoll reaching out to those in need but seem to forget or deny that reaching out when in need is an acceptable thing to do. Instead, we have hymns entitled, "Be Ye Lamps Unto Yourselves" and an oldie "Gird on Thy Sword, O Man". What does this tell us of the subliminal message that has been handed on to us? And even the new hymnal has "Lean on Me" extending an invitation for someone else to look to me for help, which I am more than happy to give.

We emerge from a heritage that extolled the principal of self-reliance. Emerson wrote an essay on the subject and without exploring its context and contents, we have taken the concept of self-reliance as gospel. Well, I'm here to tell you that self-reliance, as everything else in life requires moderation and wisdom in its practice. When Emerson wrote of the subject, he was trying to deliver the message to his contemporaries that reliance on God was not going to solve the problems on earth. One needed to learn to trust the revelation that came from within the individual soul, not just the words from a book. We do have some control over our own destinies. There is a saying I learned years ago that goes "Faith can move mountains but it helps to bring a shovel."

Self-reliance was a foreign concept to a population that was convinced that their fate was pre-ordained by a Calvinist God who had elected a select group of people for salvation. This population hung on every word of its charismatic preachers. One hundred fifty years ago the people needed the prodding of an Emerson to stretch their minds into thinking for themselves, in many ways they were not unlike the following of the fundamentalist Bible preachers of today. But those who really listened to Emerson were ready to take off on their own and begin to explore and look for their own answers, something that we Unitarian Universalists have been doing with great passion ever since.

In our zeal to pursue self-reliance, many have either forgotten or have never learned how to ask anyone for help. We don't have hymns within our tradition that say "Father, to Thee We Look in All Our Sorrow", or "What a Friend We Have in Jesus", or "Our God to Whom We Turn." For the most part, we do not follow the words of the psalmist in lifting our eyes to the hills from whence comes our help. Many of us deny or even protest the existence of any kind of god at all and find the idea of turning to a god for help in time of need at best superstitious and at worst repugnant. We mostly turn instead to reason, to our inner resources, and sometimes, to one another. If we have only each other to turn to, what finally motivates us to ask for help? It seems to me, it requires either a devastating experience that so disables us that we have no choice, or in some instances it takes someone to teach us how to ask and not feel guilty, beholden, selfish, or stupid. I learned how to

ask for help at 12 step meetings where the mantra was “Don’t drink, or use, or eat, or whatever. . . . go to meetings, and ask for help!”

I learned the hard way, there was no one in my family to teach me how to ask for help. To the contrary, I was taught that I was less than adequate if could not take care of myself and my own needs and the needs of others around me. Admitting weakness or lack of ability to do something was unacceptable. I reached a point, in fact several where I had to ask for help and it was an extremely difficult thing for me to do. As it turns out, the people that reached out to were not especially burdened by my requests, I was the one with the weight of my needs perched on my shoulders, The amazing thing about that first experience of asking for help is that it made the next time easier, and the next time after that, and the next time after that.

Asking for help. A simple concept that at times can seem an insurmountable obstacle. The greatest challenge, the most difficult kind of help to ask for is purely and simply requesting someone's presence through a difficult time, or just having someone to talk to, someone who will listen and not judge, not offer opinions or suggestions, just listen. We are pretty good at asking for legal help because we don't expect ourselves to know the law. Were not bad at asking someone to help us move, after all that takes muscle and usually a large vehicle that we may not have. Medical help we may seek if the pain is intense enough and we don't know how to fix it. In general, professional help is relatively safe to ask for. After all, the professional comes in, does his or her work, gets paid for it and then they are out of our lives. We expect to pay a financial price which may or may not be painful to us, depending on our circumstances. But asking for help, for aid from a friend, an acquaintance, having a personal interaction that will lead to others, letting someone into our lives, showing them that we are vulnerable, that we have a need that we alone cannot fulfill, that's different story. Dare we admit to ourselves or to another human being that we do not have all the answers, the talents, the strength that they may have assumed we did? We think there is a great deal of risk involved in that proposition.

We then come to the question of when is it appropriate to ask another person for help. Years ago in my ministry, we had a tragedy in Brattleboro, VT that left many of us traumatized, our first instincts were to turn inward or turn outward with anger and fear. Being a part of the community and a part of the experience, my instincts took over. What I tried to model for the community then and try to continue to do is this: in times of need, focus and figure out what you need and ask for it. We did a communion ceremony in which platters of cheese, fruit, chocolate and other goodies were passed around the room. The people were instructed to pick from the platter but to have their neighbor give it or feed it to them. It was not unlike the story with the chopsticks but in a more figurative way. Most of us don't recognized our own needs, especially when they are acute. We have to deliberately focus and discern our needs when we are dealing with crises, traumas, losses. We also need to recognize that in those times of need we are less likely to be able to meet these needs by ourselves. Fortunately, it is during these times when people appear wanting to help. Many don't know what to do and are more than willing to step up when asked. Just this last week, my mother in Los Angeles woke up with chills and a sharp pain in the back of her leg. My brother in MA called me, I called her and got no answer. We got hold of a friend of hers who went to her house and waited 20 minutes for my mother to make it to the door. Her friend, Roz, called 911 and my mother is now in Santa Monica Hospital with a broken kneecap—her replacement knee broke! My mother didn't call for help, we had to do it for her. But her friend was glad to help and would have been angry had she not been called. Many of us are in a position to be able to help. And want to be asked!

I would like to return to that pilgrim and pioneer image mentioned earlier. We have obviously come a long way since the days of the earliest settlers. We may think of those hearty people as being exceedingly self-sufficient, In truth, no one ever made the trip alone. The early pilgrims that crossed the Atlantic came together in boats. They established their communities together. The ultimate punishment for high crimes was banishment from the town or village. When the explorers and pioneers traveled west, they did it in groups Their survival as individuals was totally dependent on their survival as a group. In times of trouble the wagons circled, they came together to combine their strength. They survived to leave us with their legacy. So how have we forgotten that? How is it that we think that the pioneering mentality means we are all on our own?

One of the most exhilarating experiences I have had from watching a film ever, was in a movie made a long time ago called "Witness." It was in a scene where an entire Amish community came together for a barn raising. One young couple was starting their life together and had a need. All of the families came together. They brought tools, food, materials and smiles. There was a job for everyone, no one was too young or too old. All of these people gathered cheerfully to help their friends. They all knew that if they had a need, the community would show up for them too. It was a great social occasion. Yes, it involved hard work, but so does life. At the end, the couple had a barn, the community had a feast and all were satisfied. The joy and intensity of community spirit that was projected there is one that we in our contemporary society seldom see. We may be able to capture some of it in Habitat for Humanity projects or when a disaster strikes and the community comes together to help one another. But we don't witness it or practice in on a regular basis in our lives.

Think about how good it feels to be able to give. Would you want to deprive your friends of the warmth of giving? When we insist on toughing it out ourselves, when we deny our friends the opportunity of helping, everyone loses. I don't know that it really is better to comfort than to be comforted. I choose to believe that we all need to do both.

We have all chosen to be a part of a community. We are part of the communities in which we live, but we are also part of this congregational community. May we have the courage and the faith to be able to reach out to one another when we are in need. Reaching out requires risk. Faith answers that risk, faith in one another, faith that we will get what we need, faith that we will not be turned away. We have a Caring Committee that hopes to expand it's membership and its mission. For those who wish to help, thank you. And for those in need of help, please ask. We all have a fundamental need to be of use, to be able to make a difference, even a small one. That is the true aim of community.

May we choose to live in a heaven where we feed each other and are fed by one another rather than a hell where we starve for lack of the ability to feed ourselves.

¹ Adam Lindsay Gordon, "Ye Waerie Wayfarer, Finis Exoptus, Stanza 8" from Bartlett's Quotations.