



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Emotional Wisdom

The Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

March 15, 2020

As a teenager I was lovingly referred to by some of my friends as “Mr. Worry.” I worried about almost anything: the weather, politics, family fights, schools. I lived by the motto, “expect the worst and if the worst doesn’t happen then be pleasantly surprised.” While this anxiety has lessened some in my life, I still have my share of “what ifs.” This emotion, bordering on fear, has saved my life. Driving across the country on my way to California I noticed some very dark clouds to the west. Something told me to get off the road. The desert is not an easy place to find shelter, but I remembered that underpasses are especially safe, so at the next exit I got off and pulled the car under the highway bridge. Sure enough, a storm erupted with hail and rain so thick you couldn’t see beyond the hood. Then came a roaring sound I had never heard before.

After the storm had stopped, I drove cautiously out from under the bridge through sage brush and debris back onto the highway. Ten miles up the road there was a detour set up by the State Police. When I rolled down my window to ask what happened he said, “Twister up ahead, quite a bit of wreckage, follow the State Highway and you will get around.” I never saw the damage from the tornado but news reports told me that several motorists had died as the tornado crossed the highway.

Daniel Goleman in his book Emotional Intelligence explains that our brains and bodies are designed for a world fifty thousand generations ago; a time on the savannah in which the basic emotions of fear, anger, sadness and joy helped us to survive. When we are fearful, we have a moment of hesitation that helps us decide to hide, fight or flee. If we decide to flee, blood rushes towards our legs, leaving our face cold and blank; those legs need to move quickly. If we decided to fight, blood would flow to our hands and

arms ready for struggle. Likewise, when we are sad, blood flow towards our stomach and throat, allowing us to curl in and recover. Happiness floods our body with hormones such as Oxytocin. Hugs also do this to us. The problem is that we are hardwired emotionally for survival, which often puts those emotions at odds with what our modern world asks us to do.

In our current pandemic world, fear causes us to hoard, toilet paper it seems, which in some strange way follows the loosening of the bowels. But it can also make us distrustful of people we don't know, thus Trump's travel bans, and sometimes our unwillingness to help even our neighbors. The worst thing about our current crisis is that we curl up into our own world for safety, even more so should any of us have to self-quarantine. It takes our rational minds, our higher brain, the neocortex to reason ourselves out of fear and act with compassion and kindness. It's real work but it is our work as people of good will and love. Anger is also an emotion that tends to mistranslate into the real world. Anger can be a tremendous motivator, the old bumper sticker which says "If you aren't angry you aren't paying attention" being one call-out of this. But anger can misinterpret a situation wherein no malice or forethought on the part of someone who hurt you is really evident. Aristotle recognized this thousands of years ago: "Anybody can become angry — that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."

Fear and anxiety have saved my life but those emotions have also kept me back from opportunities that could have changed my life and others for the good. Anger can destroy our lives. I have made no secret of the fact that I have struggled with anger most of my life. Anger and fear are kissing cousins. As a young man I would slam doors, break windows, scream at things (in place of people but just as effective) and go into rages which seemed to completely possess me. Anger cost me my first marriage and almost cost me my second. Only after years of therapy and the patience and love of my

family have I been able to overcome this emotional demon. The cost has been great. And even now in late middle age I still face its rise at some slight intended or otherwise. We have all felt its power: the rage, the things said that were so hurtful, the email reply that we wish we could take back, the road rage that put others into danger. While anger is not always destructive, it is very hard to channel it in such a way to convince others of their wrong, or to keep us moving compassionately through the world. Anger is, more often than not, a hot potato that is more likely to burn our hands than nourish our souls as the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn has observed (in his book [Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames](#)). Anger can express righteousness, but it rarely convinces the other of your righteousness.

In our current crisis, anger is the most toxic of our emotions. Fear is understandable but anger poisons the well, when what we need is fresh and cooling water. I have watched as the media and the population in general seeks to place blame on the government, foreigners and the other political party for the isolation and disruption of this virus. As more than a few doctors have said, this is counterproductive. The virus is here and no matter where it came from, what we need now is science and civic common sense. I know that closing schools is incredibly disruptive especially to poorer families. I know that closing our church to in-person gatherings to virtual ones might seem like overkill, but the reality is that containing the spread of the virus is our best tool to helping us move beyond it. And the sooner we overcome this, the more lives we will save and the better we will become as people. (“How Much Worse the Coronavirus Could Get, in Charts,” by Nicholas Kristoff and Stephen H. Thompson in [The New York Times](#), March 13, 2020)

Anger and fear only stand in our way. Labeling the pandemic a hoax or something that can be cured by prayer is as toxic as the disease. It kills people.

Friends, when I ask us to embrace the angels of our better nature, I am talking about the emotional wisdom of that which we don't often see. Tempering our fear with facts is a start. Just as it is true of anyone who is facing a serious illness, the more we know the more power we have over our fear. We know that social isolation will slow the virus. We know that testing will slow the virus. And we know that checking in on our friends and family and neighbors will ensure that we all survive this crisis - especially those who are more vulnerable to the virus. Emotional wisdom comes when we take our first instincts - those emotional reactions embedded in our limbic brain -- and temper them with rational thought from our higher brains. Emotional wisdom occurs when we engage the power of our better emotions in service of the higher causes of inclusion, love and compassion.

It's not easy to do this. But imagine if we offered a prayer to our president and leaders to put aside their political ambitions and act for the common good. A prayer like this. (Pray). It might seem silly, but prayer is one way in which we connect our more positive emotions to the ideal of a world we seek. In so doing, hope is born.

Over the past week I have been amazed and deeply moved by how competently and compassionately our congregational and local leaders have reached out with warmth and concern. As soon as this started to get worse, local officials stood before town halls and explained the facts of how the virus was spreading and then offered practical and compassionate steps to take. After Westport had its first locus of infection, Jim Marpe stood before town hall and said: "What is important is that COVID-19 is in the community, and collectively we have to take appropriate precautions to protect the health of our friends and family.....no one is at fault that it made its way to Westport." No one is at fault. That little phrase says so much. It says that despite our fears about outsiders bringing this disease to our doorstep, despite our propensity to blame one person or one party (of course it would be a cocktail party where this started -- only in

Westport!), we are all in this together and let's use our compassion, which is the kissing cousin of joy, to solve the problem.

In our own congregation, the staff and leaders of this church rose to the crisis at hand. Immediately, I saw people stepping up with offers to help us with the new technology to connect us virtually as we are doing today. All our committee and group meetings will be on ZOOM, worship is being live-streamed and as we become more proficient at this we will find new ways to stay in touch. (Starting today and at 4 pm every day you will be able to sign onto ZOOM and a minister will offer us an opportunity for those on the call to check in.) More on this soon.

Of course, it is important that all of us do our part to override our emotions of fear and anger and hold up our emotions of compassion and joy. Stay checked in, let us know if you need help, sign up to help and continue to make financial contributions through our online membership program, REALM , oh and don't forget to pledge for next year. This crisis will pass and the extent to which we exercise our better wisdom, is the extent to which we will emerge intact, indeed even healthier than we were when we went into the crisis.

Remember "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel," said Maya Angelou. How you make people feel is the result of how wisely we apply our emotions to those around us. Brilliant thinkers can make terrible bedmates, one friend told me years ago and I think that is true. By learning how to regulate our more negative emotions and extenuate our more positive ones, we advance not only our own moral self-interest but add to the betterment of the communities we are part of.

"Emotional competence is the single most important personal quality that each of us must develop and access to experience a breakthrough. Only through managing our

emotions can we access our intellect and our technical competence. An emotionally competent person performs better under pressure.” –Dave Lennick, Executive VP, American Express Financial Advisers

That competence is at the heart of not only how we respond to this present darkness but in how we make sense of our lives. I have seen this in myself and I have seen it in you and so many others. The wisdom we feel is so much more powerful than the wisdom we think we know. (Repeat)

I offer you this poem from Joyce Rupp:

Once upon a time
a child of happiness danced upon the land,
knew friendship with the earth
and celebrated life
with her love of solitude and simple things.
She grew into a young woman,
whose vision of self was clouded,
clothed with the complexities of insecurity
and the necessity of leaving the hallowed womb
of the quiet earth.
She walked into cities of strangers,
straining her inner eye to catch
the slightest hint of the beauty
that had energized her younger days
when she played upon the earth.

Days stretched into months
and then years went by.
She slowly changed by going deeper,
deeper, into her Center.
Never understanding why the desire
to go deeper was there
but always knowing there was no other choice
than to follow at all costs.

Darkness often loomed up large
 against her searching journey.
 Risk and Truth became her companions.
 But then She met Compassion
 and then Wisdom came to greet her.
 So close, at times, were these companions
 that she wept for their intensity
 and her unworthiness.
 Still, they walked with her,
 and everywhere she went,
 her companions reached out
 and blessed the people of her life.
 She could only kneel in gratitude,
 offering her heart of praise
 to the Divine Companion
 who had faithfully kept the kindling of love
 burning in her heart.

Years after my early struggles as a young man, I met a Franciscan Monk, Brother David. David taught me so much about how to manage my emotions for good. "Your anger is your burden" he said, "and your burden is your love. You need to find a way to turn that burden from anger, to acceptance, and from acceptance to joy. This is what Jesus meant by the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Turning what is heavy on our hearts not into lightness but to the transfiguration of that weight from dark to light." It would take me years to learn that I decide how I react or even if my initial reaction is negative. I decide. You decide. We decide. And how we decide to use our emotions is the ultimate wisdom before us.

We are in the midst of just the kind of transfiguration Brother David was talking about. Where the dark can be made into light and light can illuminate a new way. As the Womanist Theologian Monica Coleman tells it: "Salvation isgritty, localized, and contextual. It is grounded in concrete experiences of the world. It must always look, feel, and taste like something." (from Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist

Theology) That something is where our emotions meet reality. What we do with those emotions is up to us.

Stay strong my friends and stay in touch. You are loved and you are not alone. Amen.