

Better Living through Lower Expectations

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In a recent TED talk, the psychologist Jeff Wolf writes:

“Barry suggests, tongue-in-cheek, that the answer to happiness is low expectations. Could the answer be that happiness is found in NO expectations? While low expectations would mean you’re seldom disappointed, it also speaks to a person’s self-worth; I do not deserve more or better. Having no expectations doesn’t diminish my sense of worth and it does more than reduce disappointment; it allows joy and contentment in all circumstances.

If I work a long day and expect dinner on the table when I get home, I am disappointed (and possibly angry) when the expectation is not met. If dinner is on the table, it is merely what I expected. I may exchange pleasantries and say “Thank You”. But

the experience is completely different if I had no expectation and found that someone had thought of me and taken the time to prepare a meal for me. My gratitude is real. My enjoyment is real. The experience of the meal is increased.

When I expect nothing, I am more than just “not disappointed” when I receive. I am pleased and thankful, even for the smallest things.

This reminded me of a quip that my friend Rev. Howard Dana, formerly minister in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, used to always share, “Better living through lower expectations!” It was a recognition that in ministry, and in church life in general, a lot of our unhappiness with the way things are tend to be self-imposed. Which is not to say that we intentionally make ourselves miserable. We are not necessarily conscious of doing this to ourselves. But so often our unhappiness stems, not from some objective yardstick, but our own unspoken disappointments in the way things have turned out.

As we heard in our reading this morning, psychology is learning that happiness as a feeling and mood is deeply dependent on our expectations. We are not always able to affect

the outcome of everything that happens to us in life. But we are able to shift our expectations, given enough practice and awareness. Indeed this insight into the human mind is as old as the Buddha himself. The Buddha recognized desire as the root of our suffering; desire for good things to stay and for bad things to go away. Unfortunately life does not conform to these desires because everything is always changing. When there is a discrepancy between our desires, our spoken or unspoken expectations, and the way life turns out to actually be, our experience is suffering. Or in more modern translations – it is “dissatisfying.” Who knew that the Buddha and the Rolling Stones had something in common? Neither could get any satisfaction!

Yet does that make things better? Once when I was young, probably about ten or so, I participated in one of those week long summer camps that the YMCA has. We did all kinds of cool things like swimming, and sports and cooking. One day we did a kind of arts and crafts thing. The leaders of the camp, I guess you could call them the teachers, said that we were going to have a contest. Who could make the best looking rocket or spaceship out

of cardboard, pipe cleaner, aluminum foil, and Quaker Oats boxes? We spent the whole morning gluing together these materials in order to make our ship. I remember trying to somehow attach a cardboard cone to the end of a Quaker Oats box to make it look like a rocket. I don't exactly remember what it looked like, but I remember not being particularly pleased with the result. I just couldn't get cardboard and Elmer's Glue to come together to make the rocket that I had in my imagination. Somewhat disheartened, I submitted my rocket along with all the other children in the class.

What was the result of the contest? I got first place! No its true – "First place for NASA's choice" was the name of the award. I remember that because it motivated me to look up what "NASA" meant, since I had never heard of it until then. I was pretty happy. My expectation had been fairly low – I was not very happy with my rocket. It did not live up to my expectations. But it had met someone else's expectations for first place; and that definitely made me feel happy.

Well here is the part of the story I haven't told you: all the spaceships that were made that morning got first place! Everyone won. "First place for a trip to the moon" or "first place for meeting aliens" that sort of thing. Now this was in the eighties, and it was really my first time experiencing the "everyone is a winner" idea. In fact, it was a new concept for most of my peers as well. We kept harassing the teachers. "So whose really was the best rocket?" Who won? Someone had to.

Low expectations meant we were all happy. But it also felt sort of cheap; like we hadn't really accomplished anything. Fast forward thirty years to this past fall, when my boys played in flag football, ironically at the local YMCA. Nowadays the culture of "everyone is a winner" is far more pervasive particularly among young kids. There are good reasons for that of course. "Losing" tends to discourage kids from participating in sports in the future. Everyone loses sometimes, but young kids can take it kind of hard. The whole point is to learn the game, enjoy it, and keep playing. I suspect the "everyone is a winner" culture is also an attempt to tamp down the competitiveness of the parents too. And don't go pointing the finger just at us Dads – I saw some

pretty competitive Moms out there on the sidelines. Because let me tell you, even though there was no scoreboard or rankings the parents all knew. The team my boys were on went undefeated this past season. How do I know? Because the parents kept track of every game, every touchdown, every pass, every flag grabbed and missed. Sure we had fun. But expectations do something: they spur us forward to achieve greater things.

As Stephens points out in his article that I read earlier, achievement is a great thing. Expectations help us get there. And they can also make us very unhappy when we fail to live up to them. Make no mistake we inevitably fall short of our expectations of ourselves. And if we fall short, then you can just about guarantee that other people will fall short of our expectations. Achievement and happiness both turn on our expectations. Though not inevitable, but very often, they become mutually exclusive.

Certainly that has been the case in church. This notion of expectations is important to recognize as First Unitarian Church is on the eve of a new ministry. You see our expectations of

ministry are set early on. Sure some of you may have expectations of ministers based on your previous experiences of past ministers. You may have come during Bob or Patrick or even John's time here. Certainly a good number of you have begun attending during my tenure, or Barbara's or Michelle's. These experiences of ministry can set a precedent of sorts for our expectations of ministers-yet-to-come. But I think it goes back even further, and deeper, than that.

Everyone's expectations of ministry are shaped and brought into being by their very personal emotional needs. Often these are unmet emotional needs – things you and I didn't get elsewhere and so we turn to the minister to provide them for us. It is classic transference and projection for those of you familiar with psychoanalysis. My favorite description of this came from my beloved colleague Barbara Gadon. She once said that people look to their minister as "Sexy, Daddy, Jesus." Ah Barbara and her earthy descriptions of things. No but it is true. Some people might look to a minister as a surrogate parent and expect the minister to provide the approval that they never received from their own mother or father. Or they might assume that the

minister will withhold approval, love, or forgiveness just as their parent had in the past. In some cases all those sermons about love touch off romantic, amorous, or even lustful feelings. We don't often like to talk about that, but it is important to acknowledge that it happens. In the past few years the UUA and the UU Ministers Association have been openly talking about how pervasive ministerial misconduct has been; particularly in the late 20th century. Sweeping it under the rug does more harm than good in the long run. And finally there is the "Jesus" expectation. While I may have the beard for it, I don't have hair anymore! But this certainly happens in UU churches. Ministers become symbols, vicars, stand-ins for God. If you don't believe me, just ask someone in need of pastoral care during the final days and moments of their lives. There is a yearning for the minister's presence that just can't be equaled by others. That is an expectation in an hour of need. People may accept the minister as divine sounding board or reject it, based on their prior experience of the religion of their upbringing.

Now "Sexy, Daddy (or Mommy), Jesus" are not the only unmet emotional expectations one has of a minister. They are

probably the three most common, but not at all the only ones. People have seen me as a son, a mentor, a mentee, a little brother, a younger brother, an employee, a CEO, a boss, a colleague, and a friend. Note that not all of those are negative. Indeed, as in the case I mentioned of the person in need of pastoral care, projections onto the minister actually help us do our job. It is a fundamental aspect of ministry. People project their stuff, their unlived lives, their unspoken expectations onto us because they need to. That isn't always a bad thing, but it can be difficult from the minister's perspective.

There is an old anecdote, which may very well be apocryphal. It tells of a pastoral psychologist who was giving a lecture to a group of psychiatrists. The speaker had a foot in the world of psychology and a foot in ministry. He was speaking to pure psychiatrists, and was lecturing on what it is like to be a minister of a church. He told them, "Imagine that all of your patients showed up to your office all at once every week. That is what it is like to be a minister in a church every Sunday!" I just love that image; it makes me smile. The thought of 300 or so people rolling into some poor psychiatrist's office. Meanwhile he

or she has to act out all of the different roles and narratives that those patients insert them.

So yes, the expectations one has of the minister is very personal. So called objective criteria for ministerial evaluation turns out to be something of a pipe dream. I learned this past year that there is no evaluation better than the search process. It is the ultimate. But even that is merely replacing the unmet emotional needs, and unspoken expectations of one congregation for another. As one colleague put to me a few months ago, quoting the second Godfather movie, "This is the business we have chosen!" Want everyone to like you? Then go work at Disneyland. Ministry is not the place where that will happen.

Why? Because of those pesky expectations. Yes the better we can manage and even lower our expectations the happier we will be. But you know, what if happiness, our own or others, is not the most important thing? You have often heard me preach that the church cannot and should not be in the satisfaction business. Effectiveness, relevance, living out the calling of our UU tradition, these things should be more important to the

church than a transitory moment of personal happiness. To achieve that we need something like objective goals, something to set our hearts and minds towards. That inevitably entails desires and expectations. If we want to win we have to keep score.

I know very well what that feels like. This year the Executive Team worked out the tactics for the strategic plan and reported on them quarterly to the Board. We included our progress, resources used, accountability, next steps, and even challenges and roadblocks that got in our way. Personally, the Board and I undertook a six month assessment of the ministry that had very explicit goals and objectives. Now it's your turn! This church will begin the developmental ministry phase that also has clear goals that this congregation needs to achieve. Having expectations of ourselves and our church may not lead to happiness but it might lead to achievement. It paints a vision of a path forward. My prayer is that this congregation will once again take advantage of the opportunities placed before you. This next stage of the ministry here provides a unique opportunity to examine, and hopefully correct, a number of dynamics within the church that historically have not served you well. The good news

is that you will be in the more than capable hands of Rev. Roberta Finkelstein. I will resist the temptation of building up your expectations of Roberta. After all, this sermon is entitled “Better Living through *Lower* Expectations.” However, I will say just how pleased and excited I am for all of you that Rev. Finkelstein will be serving this church as developmental minister.

At the end of the day, I think we are left in the same position that Alice was in Wonderland. On one side of the mushroom we can eat it and grow large. We can set our expectations high and if we achieve them then we will have done something truly great; though we very likely will be miserable in the process. Or we can eat the other side of the mushroom and grow small, lowering our expectations so that every moment is seen as a gift, a moment of grace, no matter what it may hold. Happiness would be in the palm of your hand, though I don't know how motivated you would be to change what desperately needs to change. The trick, over the next three years and beyond, will be knowing when to eat which half of the mushroom.

May you have high expectations for yourselves in order to achieve your dreams. May you have low expectations of yourselves so that happiness is around every corner. And may you be blessed with the discernment to know which path to follow. Amen Blessed Be.