

Why Is It So Hard to Ask for Help

delivered October 14, 2012

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I recently saw a news article titled, “Many Americans Too Willing to Ask for Help!” Now, since you’re possibly having a double-take on the title, I should tell you that this news article is from *The Onion*, which, for those of you not familiar with it, is a satirical news journal that attempts to make fun of virtually everything. Here’s what the article says:

“Many Americans are too willing to ask for help! A National Institutes of Health study released Monday revealed that Americans are excessively, almost pathologically eager to seek help for various personal, psychological, financial, and organizational problems. ‘American citizens are four times more likely to seek counseling than Canadian citizens, eight times more likely than the British, and 900 times more likely than Germans,’ said [the author] of the study. ‘In addition, they seek help an average of seven times faster than citizens of other nations, sometimes only a few hours after they undergo any emotion or experience that could be interpreted as negative or problematic.’ A related study showed that Americans are nine times less likely to seek help for medical matters, such as high cholesterol or colon cancer screenings, but 85 times more likely to ask for second helpings.”¹

Humor is of course funny because it either exaggerates the obvious or because it exaggerates its exact opposite. This story is clearly an example of exaggerating the opposite of reality. Because in our culture there has been and is a virtual epidemic of NOT asking for help!

What is going on here? Why is it so darned hard for so many of us to ask for and receive help?!?

About a week after my family and I moved into our new house this past August, I finally got an opportunity that I had been waiting for. About a year ago, my husband had convinced me that we only needed ONE bookshelf because I didn’t have that many books that I needed access to during my year of hospital chaplaincy. While he was right, I have been yearning ever since to expand our bookshelf collection and get the rest of my books out. I had my chance as soon as he and my daughter left for a week visiting California while I was starting up my new job here. I had already been scheming and had looked up the time that my local IKEA furniture store opened. I dropped them off at the airport and went home and waited for the time that the store opened. Now IKEA is very “self-service” oriented, which probably only contributed to my overall issues with this visit. I went in and got my little piece of paper to record furniture catalog numbers and aisle and bin numbers and went onto their show floor. There were my

¹ <http://www.theonion.com/articles/report-many-americans-too-willing-to-ask-for-help,5335/?ref=auto>

shelves – exactly the color as the one we have at home! I dutifully wrote down the number and without realizing it made the strategic mistake of picking the wrong shelf – the one I had in mind was something like 10 inches deep, and the one that I wrote down was 14 inches deep! That’s a much heavier shelf!! Down onto the so-called “self-service” floor I went. There were my shelves, in all their long and heavy glory. Did I ask anyone for help? No. Instead of asking the friendly looking bright yellow clad IKEA employees that kept walking by for a hand, I spent quite a while contemplating how to get not one but TWO boxed up bookcases onto my cart. I did it, by the way. Then I checked out and got them to and into my car, again by myself. Now in case I’m thinking that it’s a gender thing – I do have to admit that “I am woman, hear me roar” did run through my head on the way home—in case I might try to claim a gender bias in my help seeking, my behavior ends up challenging that as well. While I struggled to get both bookcases out of my car and into my house, without help, my female neighbor had come out of her house and sat in her car for a long time. I have no idea why, but it is entirely possible that she just didn’t want to miss this show that I was creating. And all the time, I couldn’t bring myself to ask her for a hand either.

The shelves are now up in my living room. What do I feel when I look at them? I definitely feel some pride and satisfaction – a look-at-what-I-did-myself kind of thing. But I also wonder whether I would feel much differently about them if I had asked for a little help at some crucial moments. My back would certainly feel differently. And sometimes when I look at them I feel a decent sized twinge of guilt at their reminder of my own self-sufficiency gone overboard.

One of the developmental goals into maturity and adulthood IS the development of some measure of self-sufficiency. There are many fabulous strengths that go with this: self-determination, self-motivation, resilience, persistence, tenacity, resourcefulness, the ability to multitask. These are all great strengths! The challenge is finding the balance between these very useful strengths and this extreme version of ultra-self-sufficiency. Clearly I still have a long way to go in finding this balance myself, given my recent IKEA experience!

Asking for help I see as being on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are the things that one can typically do oneself – this is what we’ve developed our resilience and resourcefulness for, what our life experience has shown us that we can easily handle. They’ll be different for everybody. For me it includes things like cutting my family’s hair, changing locks, and apparently carting bookcases home.² And at the other end of the continuum are things that are impossible to do ourselves that we have no hesitation in asking for help with. Again, these are different for everybody. But in-between these two ends is a HUGE gray area! A gray area where we could ask for help, but don’t.

² This actually belongs in the gray area. ☺

What's holding us back? What's keeping us from asking for that help??

What's going on inside of our own images of ourselves, our own values and independence, and our own fears that keep us from being vulnerable, that keep us from admitting that we could use some help?

I hear the word "strong" a lot.

Let me tell you a story that Joyce DeArmond wrote about her parents.³

My father was a large man, six-foot-four and muscular. He radiated such authority that, as a child, I was petrified of displeasing him. You simply did not cross this man and get away with it. My mother was the opposite — petite and outgoing, just the woman to complement my hardworking, dignified father. Together, they threw card parties with friends, hosted large family gatherings, and went dancing till the wee hours. I thought they were perfect for each other.

So, at the age of twenty-five, I had trouble dealing with the fact that my parents were divorcing. My dad moved into a sparsely furnished efficiency, and I went to visit him the following weekend. He seemed out of place in the tiny, cramped space and looked miserable, though he was too proud to admit it.

"I'll take care of your mother," he told me, "and make sure she has everything she needs." His eyes slid away from mine, embarrassed. "What about you?" I asked. "Are you OK?" "I'll be fine." I fought back the tears and stood up. "Well, I'd better get going. I have to drive back to the city tonight."

"OK." I could see he was debating whether or not to speak. Finally, he asked, "Joyce, would you do something for me before you go?"

"Of course, Dad. What?"

He walked to the tiny kitchenette, opened the fridge, and took something out. "Would you show me how to make a hamburger?" he asked sheepishly.

My father's idea of a meal when my mother wasn't home had been a bowl of bread and milk. I pushed away my sadness and smiled at him. My big, strong father needed my help.

In Joyce's story, strength was equated with not needing help and so her Dad was "sheepish" when he asked for it. His being a "big, strong father" meant the opposite of needing help, to both of them.

³ http://www.thesunmagazine.org/_media/article/pdf/328_Asking.pdf

I encountered this identity of being strong and independent a lot while I was serving as a hospital chaplain. People who wouldn't admit their own nerves or fears when facing something like open heart surgery because they had to be STRONG for someone else. And I could tell they were nervous! One man whose family was too far away to be able to visit prior to his heart surgery – he wasn't willing to admit how lonely he was or to say what he really needed was someone to sit with him that morning before he went in. He wasn't willing to name his need and to ask for help in meeting it! So I imposed myself on him and sat for over an hour waiting – they were late coming to get him for surgery – we sat and watched a golf tournament on television. In that hour I learned more than I ever knew before about eagles and bogeys and I think there was something about an albatross too. In the end, he talked about how relieved and comforted he had been because of the help of my sitting with him while he was waiting. But the truth is that I wonder if to do it over again whether he still would have avoided asking for help and instead talked about having to be strong and get through it himself!

This identity of strength gets in the way of asking for help. Another identity that gets in the way is that of being a “helper,” one who gives help rather than one who receives it. In the book *Help is not a four letter word*, here's what author Peggy Collins says about this:

Many self-reliant people recognize the need for interdependence and readily embrace the values of cooperation and collaboration to achieve the goals and meet the needs of others. They eagerly offer their time to work for the greater good. The problem is that when the need is personal, self-sufficients have a double standard, “It is okay for others to accept aid [particularly my aid], but I can take care of myself.” In this situation, their actions of going it alone do not match with their value of collaboration.⁴

I wonder how true this rings for many of us – both here in this congregation and in Unitarian Universalism as a whole. Many have helping or collaborative professional roles, helping through relational identities, and also participation in social service and social action. There are many ways to live into these values of collaboration, but so many times from only one side, that of the helper. How often have you said to yourself, either consciously or unconsciously, “I can't be the one asking for help. I can take care of myself.” It's okay to help ourselves – just look at the proliferation of self-help books these days – but asking someone else for help, that's entirely different.

We've been talking about wonder this month. I found a study that connects wonder with giving help. It was done by Stanford University's graduate school of business and went about showing

⁴ Peggy Collins, *HELP is NOT a Four-Letter Word: why doing it all is doing you in*, ix.

that experiencing a sense of wonder and awe made people more generous with their time.⁵ I never would have thought to connect these! Their rationale is that wonder and awe lift someone out of their typical perception of time and therefore make them more generous to give it to others. Let's take it a little bit further than this – when I think of wonder and awe, I think of feeling a sense of connection with something that's greater than myself. And this is the spring that generosity and helping and cooperation come from – this greater sense of connection. But then, couldn't the flip side be true as well? Could a sense of connection from experiencing wonder and awe and amazement lead us to draw from it? Could wonder inspire a greater willingness to ask for help? Now that's something I'd like to see a study on!

Every time we come and worship here, and every time that we come together in a small group here, we are connecting with something greater than ourselves. Just by our coming together, we are CREATING that something. My colleague, the Rev. Julia Older, with whom I served as an intern in Redwood City, California, she had a way that she ended every benediction. She always closed with the reminder that “you are never all alone.” She said that every single time. Over time it had become a cherished phrase in the congregation. She and I once joked that it was nearly a motto because it was the single most repeated phrase in the congregation and it would be impossible for her to stop saying it!

The truth is that we can't make it through life alone. There are many things in our gray area of what we're not quite willing to ask for help on that we COULD ask for. And our lives would be so enriched by our asking. This is why we come together as religious community. To laugh and have others join in our laughing. To cry and have a shoulder to lean on. To be able to speak and to be truly heard. To be able to reach out when we need support and find that it is there for us. This is the reason of religious community. Because here, you are never all alone. Blessed be.

Now I invite you to rise in body or in spirit and let's sing a song that is fairly well-known, Lean on Me. #1021 in the teal hymnal. But as you sing it, remember that you are not only singing these words to those around you, but also they are singing them to you.

Benediction

We all do need someone to lean on. Both when there is a huge load or crisis but also through many of the everyday moments in our lives. Let's find ways to lean on one another. Come and talk to me, to any of our pastoral care visitors, there's our home team that helps with rides and meals and cards, there are the many small groups here, our food pantry, and of course one

⁵ Melanie Rudd, et al. “Awe Expands People's Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being,” <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/08/10/0956797612438731.abstract>.

another. If you need a warm word of encouragement or a listening ear, give it a try and ask for it! We can be here for one another. Because, here, we are never all alone. Blessed be.