

Striving for Imperfection: Toward a Spirituality of Messiness

Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Unitarian Universalist Church, June 14, 2009

Let's start with an exercise today. Think of someone you wish you didn't have to deal with, someone who is inconvenient in some way. This person irritates you. They mess things up. Your life would be so much tidier, cleaner and simpler if they moved away or died or something. Got someone in mind? Who are some of your inconvenient people?

Now, take a minute to thank those people for being your inconvenient truth. They have something fabulous to offer you, namely a messy life full of imperfection – yours and theirs.

You could be forgiven for thinking that a messy life full of imperfection is not fabulous. After all, there are entire shelves in bookstores dedicated to helping us clean up our acts. My favorite of these is entitled, "File, Don't Pile." My mother owns it. I probably should as well. And when we think about imperfection, we are likely to think either about our character flaws or, depending on what kind of church we grew up in, about our sinfulness. Mulling over our character flaws is more likely to make us wince than smile, and as for sin, that concept is why a lot of us left other religious traditions and became Unitarian Universalists. Striving for imperfection, envisioning messiness as spiritual, is pretty counterintuitive to our chosen faith. But I believe it need not be so.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase, "perfection is the enemy of done," especially if you have ever worked on a creative or academic project. I learned it while working on my dissertation, which was going to be perfect, by God, even if I never finished it. Fortunately, wiser heads than mine prevailed and I finished the dissertation. It was not perfect by a long stretch, but boy was it done. So – perfection is the enemy of done. Today I would like to propose that perfection is also the enemy of life, and more specifically that perfection is the enemy of a spiritually rich life. Accepting our imperfections and being open to messiness are a crucial part of being liberal religious people, even though imperfection and messiness make life harder. In fact, these are spiritual values precisely because they make our life harder. I see them as values because they foster humility and patience in us, and because they help us learn how to live in community.

First, humility. This is one of my favorite spiritual values because I am so very bad at it. My arrogance engine goes from zero to sixty in five seconds – I've checked. And arrogance and a sense of perfection seem to be related, since my arrogance gets fed whenever I think about how great I am. In contrast, reflecting on my imperfection is a humbling experience. It keeps me close to the earth, grounded, connected to other people. The word humility, in fact, comes from the same root as a word that means earth. Staying close to the earth means that when pride goes before a fall, the fall isn't very far because the pride isn't very tall.

Humility, by the way, is the opposite of humiliation, even though both words come from the same root. If humility is the practice of staying close to the earth, humiliation is the experience of having one's face ground in the dust. The phrase, "the bigger they come, the harder they fall" describes what happens when mighty pride – when arrogance – goes before a fall. Ouch. Sometimes I think of my spiritual development as falling practice.

I don't think that humility means that I must hold tight to my imperfections, to bronze them like baby boots and lock them into my life for good. Acknowledging imperfections with humility simply means acknowledging that there is still room for growth, that while I may know this rose will open, I also know it has not opened yet. My fear may burn away but so far, I'm still lost in its fog. And my soul has not yet unfurled its wings, though I sense it trying. Perhaps the reason to value imperfections is simply that they are the truth of things right now, and we can't change what we don't first accept.

The same is true of life's messiness, I suspect. Some people have more patience for coloring outside the lines than others, but all of our lives have at least some degree of messiness. Our bodies are messy, naturally. We are drawn to some people and disturbed by others, and it is the very rare – or extremely rich – person who manages not to be around anyone disturbing. Even Adrian Monk, the obsessive-compulsive detective on the TV show *Monk*, who hates messiness and disorder above all else, must deal with it at length every episode; these encounters provide the show's laughs along with his case-solving insights.

It's one thing to acknowledge the reality of messiness and another thing to love it. As a compulsive tidier, I'm better at acknowledging the messiness than I am at loving it. But I suspect that it may enrich our lives to respond to messiness with humility, because messiness may simply be another kind of imperfection. Dirt, after all, is just matter out of order, food on my shirt instead of in my mouth, paint on the floor instead of on the wall. Think again about the person who came to mind in our opening exercise, the one who disorders things for you, who is an irritant. Perhaps what bothers you about that person has to do with their imperfections, your imperfections, or both. Perhaps you can respond to both their imperfections and yours with humility, and in so doing come to increase your comfort with them – and with yourself.

One way to increase our comfort with imperfection and messiness may be to become more patient than we are now. I don't know about you, but I readily recognize impatience in my response to people's flaws as well as in my own obsessive-compulsive tendencies that arise when faced with life's unwanted messiness. And when I am most impatient is also usually when I'm feeling self-important. A sense of humility seems to increase my capacity for patience as well.

I got to test this theory first-hand when I flew back to Colorado Springs this past February. I had been on an emotionally difficult business trip, I was tired, and I just wanted to be home. On the final leg of the trip, I was sitting across the aisle from a working-class man who used a very large wheelchair, and the flight was delayed almost an hour while the flight crew tried to figure out how to get his wheelchair into storage. At first, I was very impatient, especially because the man responded by joking loudly about the crew's incompetence. Over time, his comments became less funny and more abrasive as he got increasingly defensive about the role his wheelchair seemed to be playing in the flight's delay. I said nothing, but got more irritated at him myself.

And then something changed. I recognized how awkward this must be for him. And I began to see us as if from a God's eye view, the self-important college administrator and the man who had many strikes against him. I realized that I was annoyed with him simply because he was acting as

though it were perfectly reasonable that his needs as a passenger were just as important as all of our needs. I stopped feeling so self-important. I stopped seeing him as so different from me. We were both just passengers on a flight, despite our differences in social class and physical ability. And our fates were bound up together for the moment. If I were him, I realized, I would surely respond the same way. I began to empathize with him, and suddenly I realized that my impatience was gone. This man, my inconvenient truth for the day, helped me take a very small step closer to being the person I want to become.

Our fates are bound up with our inconvenient people, those whose imperfections bring out our imperfections. We can help each other learn humility and patience when we build community with one another. Communities are opportunities to practice living and accepting our imperfections together. Communities are inevitably messy, the result of people with different experiences and strengths colliding in an enclosed space and time. You can find this beautifully expressed in Anne Lamott's writing and in the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, but you don't need to pick up a book or watch a movie. Messiness and imperfection are right here in this room, right now, all around us. And how could it be otherwise, for we invite everyone, every single person to "come, come, whoever you are."

The messiness and imperfection of community can be profoundly frustrating. I've left my share of Unitarian Universalist churches over it, a sign of my own lack of humility and lack of patience. But we need communities to remind us that when we think we have lost the way, it is not so; the way leads on. We need communities to gently rebuke our various temptations: to look for another way, to retrace the track, to simply stand still, to get caught up in nostalgia, to worry about futures we cannot control. No one else can keep to the way for us, but we cannot, and thankfully do not have to, keep to it alone.

I mentioned the issue of sin at the beginning of this talk, and it is worth spending just a minute on it. Sin may be the single Christian concept most deeply rejected by Unitarian Universalists who grew up Christian, and with good cause, given how Christianity has come to use the term. But the word "sin" derives from a Greek word that simply means "to miss the mark." Let me say that again: sin is just a synonym for imperfection. In other words, once you strip away the Christian story of salvation, sin is indeed our birthright, but only in the sense that imperfection and messiness are our birthright. I'm not asking that we reclaim the word, but I do think we have an opportunity to make its yoke lighter and make it less fearful.

The Christian tradition has a lot to say about sin, but the most valuable insight I have ever seen about it comes from the decidedly non-Christian lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich, in today's first reading. Listen again to her "Transcendental Etude:"

"No one ever told us we had to study our lives, make of our lives a study as if learning natural history or music, that we should begin with the simple exercises first and slowly go on trying the hard ones, practicing till strength and accuracy become one with the daring to leap into transcendence. And in fact we can't live like that: we take on everything at once before we've even begun to read or mark time, we're forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement, the one already sounding as we are born."

Perhaps the reality to which the idea of sin points is nothing other than the insight that we are forced to begin in the middle of the hardest movement. I find that a simple truth, not a soul-destroying ideology. And therefore, perhaps I will start quoting Adrienne Rich when I argue with evangelists on the street.

Can we learn to give thanks for imperfection and messiness, the inconvenient truths of our lives? Can we learn to cherish this community and all communities to which we belong all the more because they help us learn to meet these inconvenient truths with humility and patience? I hope so. I wish for all of us all the imperfection and messiness we need to help us become the people we hope to become. Amen and blessed be.