

Other People's Autonomy

Readings 'Post Hoc' by Jennifer Maier
 'Beautiful Country' by George Bilgere
 'Following the Road' by Larry Smith

A person we love makes a choice that we don't think is best. Perhaps she's being too aggressive in treating her illness – or not aggressive enough. Perhaps he's not leaving his romantic relationship quickly enough – or is leaving too quickly. Perhaps they are making career decisions that we think will set them on a path toward frustration or misery or poverty. Perhaps she isn't managing her money or her time in a way we think is right. Perhaps his parenting includes too much or too little or the wrong kind screen time or sugar or freedom or discipline. Perhaps we think an elder needs to change their living situation – or is too quick to move out of their home. Or perhaps that person we love is acting in some other way that we don't think is in their best interests and might set them on a path toward future suffering. We then feel a mix bewilderment, confusion and pain. This mix of love and judgement seems to be part of the human condition.

This long list is not to make light of this. It is real. Caring for one another often means feeling pain when the people we care about make the choices we disagree with. A book that was assigned to me on my way into ministry included the line 'one of the most difficult things to carry... is the autonomy of someone else.' Let's hear that again. 'One of the most difficult things to carry... is the autonomy of someone else.'¹ That phrase has echoed in my head for years. Other people having the freedom to make choices that we disagree with does feel like a burden sometimes, does feel like a weight that we carry. It one of the costs of living a connected life, a life that includes meaningful relationships. We care; we see people make choices that are not the same as how we would script their lives; and it hurts. That pain and frustration and sometimes anger is real and has a seed of love at its core. We don't get to be some cosmic scriptwriter dictating the choices of the people we love, no matter how much we love them, no matter how good our ideas are. There is pain in that.

I'm focusing our service on this this morning because this is one of the realities of life and love that I'm struggling with. There is a cliché that preachers always preach the sermon they need to hear. This is definitely true for me this week. Over the past year or so, it has felt acutely painful when people I love make choices that I find bewildering. It's been happening often in my personal life and occasionally in my life with all of you. I've also talked with a number of you who are alongside me in this particular struggle. I'm keeping descriptions vague, as I don't want to be the kind of preacher who preaches thinly veiled sermons to specific church members – and that's not the point anyway. The challenge of other people's autonomy isn't actually about what other people are doing. It is about what's happening in me. My love and desire for control that curdles into judgement. I know I am not alone in living with this.

¹ Hamman, Jaco J. *Becoming a Pastor: Forming Self and Soul for Ministry*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007. Page 6

For the sake of limiting my scope, today I'll only be talking about other people's autonomy in cases where other people truly are autonomous. This is not about times when the people we love are not capable of acting in their best interest. This is not about parenting children. This is not about when we have the legal right to be someone else's decision maker. This is about the other times, most of the times.

So what do we do when the judgement of other people's decisions starts, when we wish we were in control of their lives? We remember what love is. One of my favorite definitions of love, the one I turn to when I am struggling with thinking my ideas are the best ideas for others, is from Anne Truitt, a white American woman who began her working life as a nurse before becoming a minimalist sculptor. In her journal, she calls love "the honoring of others in a way that grants them the grace of their own autonomy and allows mutual discovery,"² Again, that is worth hearing again. Love is the honoring of others in way that grants them the grace of their own autonomy and allows mutual discovery. When we love, we do not seek to control, we do not try to make other's choice for them. We offer them the grace of their own autonomy and in so doing allow for mutual discovery. Because that's what love and connection can be when it is at its best – a chance to learn more about another person and, in so doing, learn more about ourselves. That is only possible when we respect one another's autonomy, when we let others make their choices. Our hopes for control and our judgements that sometimes grow out of them often have their roots in love, but are not, actually, love. They are love gone toxic, kindness that becomes cruelty. Love encourages other's autonomy and recognizes the diversity of human experience, perspective, and paths as a rich gift.

When I am feeling like pain of other people not choosing as I wish they would, I also turn to our Unitarian Universalist principles. 'Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person' is one of my guides. For me, when I start thinking I know what's best for someone else, I remember 'respect their dignity.' I remember that the person I care about who is making a choice that I don't agree with or don't understand is the expert on their experience. Whatever my relevant training or relevant experience, I do not actually know more about other people's lives than they do. It seems like a basic idea, but I need to remind myself of this regularly, embarrassingly. This is especially a pitfall for those of us in helping professions—the educators, social workers, clergy, medical caregivers, psychological caregivers, and others whose work focuses on others' wellbeing. There are so many of us in these fields here. We are trained to care for others and are good enough at it to get paid for it. It is hard to not have our professional skills influence our personal relationships. When someone we love experiences a problem, we might very well have learned about that particular problem on the job or guided someone who was experiencing it. We might even be experts on the problem in general. We need to remember that while we might offer some wisdom rooted in our training and professional experience, especially if asked, the people we care about know more about their experience and might make different choices that we would recommend. In relationship, we relinquish the control that we might have in a

² Truitt, Anne. *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist*. New York, Scribner, 2013.

professional capacity in exchange for greater intimacy and possibilities for mutual self-discovery that are not always possible in a work situation.

We remember that we are not in control of things. I've spoken to you all recently about remembering we are not in control of outcomes, that all we can control is if we are rooted in our integrity and acting out of our most important values. I'm not going to say much, just to name that that theme keeps coming up and will continue to, I am sure. I want to name two things – first, I doubt any of us would actually want the responsibility of making the important choices for everyone we love. That sounds exhausting. That sounds like a lot of pressure. That sounds like a breeding ground for resentment. That sounds like a world in which there would be only grass and no beach.

Second, in this world that is complicated beyond measure, we also can't possibly know what would have happened had the people we care about made the choice we wanted them to make. There are too many variables to run a scientifically valid experiment with human lives. Even if we faced what seems like the same situation before, even if another friend or family member navigated the same situation, even if we know what the best practice consensus is in the academic literature, that is no guarantee that the results would have been what we wished them to be. It is too complicated to know for sure.

And because every situation is different, there are times when the stakes are so high, when the risks are so great, that we feel compelled to say something to the person we care about, even when it holds the risk for damaging our relationship. Each of us has different thresholds for this. It usually takes me some meditation and prayer to get to this place where I can speak rooted in love and set judgement and my desire for control aside. I then speak the truth as I experience it, offering to help. I am careful to speak my concern and my love, not necessarily my ten point plan for addressing the problem. "I'm really worried about how much you are drinking." "You deserve to be treated well." "I am really worried about you." "I am here if you ever want to talk about this or want help." And, very rarely, "I've been thinking a lot about your situation and might have an idea that you'd like to hear. Would you be interested?" We listen for what the people we love ask for and do our best to provide it.

Thus far, I've spoken about us as the ones who are feeling the struggle of carrying other people's autonomy, of their ability to make choices that we don't agree with. Sometimes we are the ones on the receiving end of others well-intentioned but un-requested advice and judgement. This often happens after a hard diagnosis or another struggle becomes publicly known. People seem to come out of the woodwork with their advice, whether it is welcome or not. When those times come for us, it is important to set boundaries – make it known that you are not taking advice. Once, in a hard season in my life, I sent a note to the people in my life that I cared most about telling them about what I was facing and saying that I was working it through with professionals and don't want to talk about with them when we saw each other. Most people were able to follow those directions.

Another thing we can do when people we are about are trying to manage our choices in ways we have not asked them to is to listen for the seed of love that is at the heart of this behavior that rarely feels like love. Sure, their attempts at control and their assumptions that we are not the ones best equipped to make our decisions might feel like are love gone toxic or kindness become cruelty, but there is that seed of love and kindness in their somewhere. They wouldn't bother if they didn't care about us. I think to myself, "oh, they are trying to show love." "Oh, this is them trying to make sense of a world that is beyond our control." True, it is fundamentally unfair, for the person in the middle of struggle to have to have practicing compassion for the people trying to give them advice added to their emotional and spiritual work, but when I'm that person, I am better able to live my values when I do.

In these situations, I also practice a mantra that I first read in the memoir by comedian Amy Poehler. It is, simply, "good for them, not for me." She writes about it in the context of the mommy wars, the conflicts about parenting choices that feel incredibly high stakes – how do you feed your child? What school do you send your children to? How do you discipline? And one and on and on and on. Poehler suggests not taking others' choices and advice personally, just acknowledging that it's working for them and might not be your best choice. I repeat it to myself, especially in those moments when no one is actually giving me unwanted advice, but I'm turning my judgements inward and criticizing myself for not excelling the way someone else seems to be.

This has all been rather abstract. I want to end with a more concrete example of what it can look like to practice love that honors of others in way that grants them the grace of their own autonomy and allows mutual discovery. Every year, the Unitarian Universalist Association publishes a book in their InSpirit series. It is usually a small book of short reflections by a minister. They are informally known as meditation manuals. This story about granting someone the grace of their autonomy is from the meditation manual by Vanessa Rush Southern. She writes.

'A cousin of mine tells the story of the only time, so far, he has ever acted heroically. But his is such an unusual tale of heroism. He lived in San Francisco at the time. One day at rush hour he was on the platform of the Bay Area Rapid Transit line he took to and from work every day. Also on the platform was a man who was blind—blind and also pretty inebriated, and so he was weaving and stumbling along between benches and other obstacles.

In the midst of all this weaving and stumbling and even swearing at fellow commuters, the man took a tumble right off the platform and onto the tracks. This was particularly bad timing since the station signs warned that a train was due in fewer than a couple of minutes. People started yelling at the man, telling him what to do and where to go, all the while ignoring *his* screams. "Where is my pole?" he was yelling. "I need my pole!" he cried out, as the crowd grew more and more frantic.

This was when my cousin became a hero. He jumped onto the tracks, grabbed the man's pole, handed it to him, and jumped back onto the platform. The man immediately calmed down, felt for the tracks, oriented himself, reached for the platform, and started to struggle up. With others

reaching under his arms to help him, he scrambled onto the platform and away from danger just as the train arrived at the station. Disaster averted.

Jumping down and simply handing this man his pole might seem strange when so much rested on the man getting off those tracks. But my cousin did what so few of us do when faced with near disaster. He shut off his own sense of what the man needed or should do, and instead listened to what the blind man, inebriated and in trouble, said he needed. In fact, the man, even though he was drunk and did not have the ability to see, knew himself and his inner resources better than anyone else in that station. With his pole in hand, he was able to start to dig himself out of danger, when a platform of screaming people would have yelled him to his death.³

So may we all be like that cousin, setting aside our sense of what another should do, listening and trusting that the other knows better than us.

May we respect one another's inherent worth and dignity and remember that we are not in control.

May we love. May that love honors of others in way that grants them the grace of their own autonomy and allows mutual discovery.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

³ Southern, Vanessa Rush. *Miles of Dream: Meditations*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2015. Pages 21-22