

So You Think You're Inadequate
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Here... in the peace... and the quiet... of this ancient house...

May we feel held...

Held by the spirits of all who have worshipped here across the centuries.

Held by this community, by one another here and now...

Here... in the peace... and the quiet... of this ancient house...

May we feel held...

In the curve of life... held by love eternal... held by the great mystery many call God...
others Allah... Brahman... Tao... Spirit of Life...

May we feel held...

.... may we find renewal and healing and peace

during our time of silence... that we might then turn to bless the world
with our lives and our love...

Reading – selections from the *Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others....

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time...

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

Sermon

In the Jewish tradition, to say “I am but dust and ashes” represents the virtue of modesty, of humility.

Yet as with many virtues, easier said than done.

A story is told of a rabbi, who in the midst of Yom Kippur services was overtaken by emotion, threw himself in front of the Ark of the Covenant and loudly declared “Oh God, I am but dust and ashes!”

The cantor of the synagogue, inspired by this dramatic act, also cast himself before the Ark and also declared “Oh God, I am but dust and ashes.”

Then the shammash, an synagogue official of much lower stature, moved by these displays, came forward, prostrated himself next to the rabbi and cantor in front of the Ark, and likewise emotionally affirmed, “God, I am but dust and ashes.”

At which moment, the rabbi quietly nudged the cantor, saying, “Look whose saying he’s dust and ashes...”

(found in many sources, including Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann:

<http://www.torah.org/learning/olas-shabbos/5759/vayeira.html>.)

Well, as Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann points out, in re-telling this old story, humility is to be sure a virtue, “But we must never fall into the trap of regaling in our own humility.”

This said, today I am moved to look at the other side of the coin, if you will. Many of us – perhaps all of us at one time or another (it might be part of the human condition) – experience feelings of inadequacy that go well beyond a measured humility. To put it another way, far from regaling in our humility, we may feel that our humility is all too well-founded indeed – because the truth is that we really are inadequate human beings... if the world only knew.

Inadequate in what way?

You name it. We might feel inadequate as a parent or spouse or friend; as a woman or as a man; inadequate in our work, our career; or inadequate in relation to the suffering in the world we would like to alleviate or the problems in the world we would like to help solve. I can tick off a few of those myself.

There is no shortage of things about which to feel inadequate.

And as if this weren’t enough, we might also feel inadequate in *comparison* to... our father or mother, a brother or sister, a colleague or coworker, or simply our own idea of what we *should* be able to do or how we *should* be able to live or the kind of person we *ought* to be.

Whew.

How did this happen? Messages, whether intended or unintended, from teachers, parents... from the culture at large? Or is it just part of the human condition?

Well, however it came to be, if misery loves company, perhaps when we’re feeling inadequate it could be helpful to begin with to know that we have lots of company, and pretty good company at that.

I can begin simply with where I left off last week.

Peter Hobart, our first minister and one of the founders of the town of Hingham 375 years ago next September, near the end of his life bemoaned what he called “the barrenness of my ministry.”

And yet we celebrate his life and ministry these centuries later. Why? Because we see the bigger picture. We can imagine Hobart’s courage in crossing the sea with a small band of fellow settlers begin a new life in a land quite different from their Hingham, England, facing hardships they had not known before. We know of Hobart’s boldness in challenging the colonial

authorities on more than one occasion. And we know, these centuries later, that in spite of dwindling church attendance near the end of Hobart's life, the church and town were destined to survive and thrive through these centuries.

Finally, we know that Peter Hobart was among the leaders who planted the seeds for these centuries, centuries during which thousands in this community have been spiritually nourished and inspired. We see the bigger picture of Hobart's life.

A contemporary example: we learn that Ted Kennedy, a man of huge accomplishment whether you agreed with his politics or not, felt inadequate well into adulthood – perhaps throughout his life, living as he did in the shadow of his older brothers Jack and Bobby, and perhaps contemplating his own flawed humanity and tragic mistakes along the way.

Yes, the company of the self-described “inadequate” is a large one – and is also much closer to home as well, maybe in a nearby pew.

I well recall visiting many years ago with one of our elders who was at the time in a nursing home, and as it turned out near death. This lovely and competent woman who had with her husband raised a fine family, who had been one of the volunteer stalwarts in the church and in the community, told me she felt like a failure. Nothing I could say could dissuade her of this clearly deeply embedded sense of inadequacy.

I knew better, anyone who knew her knew better – knew that by any outward measure this woman had succeeded in life, had been far more than “adequate.” Because *we* could see the bigger picture, which she in her time of distress – like Peter Hobart – could not.

Then this morning we read in the Boston Globe of a mother, Shondell Davis, who clearly did everything humanly possible to help save her son from the worst that the city streets have to offer... but in the end her son Johnny was killed on those streets. She did so much, through her own example and by making use of all the social services available; she did so much, yet she continues (and of course we understand) to question whether she had done enough.

Yes, the list is long, and reaches from our more or less ordinary lives, whether urban or suburban, to historic figures as well as to heroic figures of mythic dimensions.

Moses: When commissioned by God to free the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, we are told that his first response was that he couldn't do it, he wasn't at all up to the task.

Jesus: We are told that on the cross he felt forsaken by God; we sense that in his despair he believed his mission and ministry to have utterly failed.

(Look who feels inadequate now!)

Well, for all these lives and so many others, *we* often do know the bigger picture, but here's the paradox: We see and know the bigger picture for all these others... but so often we don't see it for our own lives.

What are we to do?

Well, we could simply affirm that this feeling of inadequacy, so difficult to assuage, is appropriate. For in some ways you could say it is: an appropriate modesty, since none of us are perfect and all of us know many ways we could be better human beings. In the same spirit, we could affirm that a feeling of inadequacy reflects an appropriate humility in the face of all that clearly *could* be done, that *must* to be done in this world of challenge and suffering, and that *we* are not doing. A sensitive soul cannot but feel inadequate in the face of it all.

Yes, all true enough. But there is a difference between a healthy and sane modesty and humility on the one hand, and on the other a feeling of inadequacy that can drag us down and bog us down – paradoxically making it all the more difficult to achieve the greater effectiveness as human beings we may feel we lack.

So how might we outgrow or transcend such potentially immobilizing feelings of inadequacy? Knowing we're not alone in our feelings, as I've said, might help. But beyond this, can we find a way of living life in the middle ground, contented with who we are and what we are able to do, with an *appropriate* humility, but not with a dogged sense of failure and inadequacy?

To begin with, a sports' analogy may be useful. You miss a shot on the tennis court. You can let disappointment spiral into a general self-accusation that you are a terrible tennis player. Or you can simply notice that you missed the shot, make a correction, and go from there. Perhaps reminding yourself that even Roger Federer misses shots and even loses matches. (Look who thinks he's inadequate now!)

The life lesson is of course that we make mistakes... and then... we can simply try to do better. Maybe we succeed, maybe we don't. We try again. But all along the way we are still acceptable as human beings. A mistake or the inability to reach some imagined height of accomplishment does not mean we are existentially inadequate human beings.

This was, after all, the great message of the early Universalists. They agreed with the Calvinists that human beings are a sinful lot, that we fall short in all kinds of ways, that in fact we have no hope of keeping the ten commandments! But those early Universalists also affirmed that God loves us even so.

We affirm this too, in our own contemporary UU way, through our first Unitarian Universalist Principle, which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Yes, we know, just as the early Universalists knew, that that every person makes mistakes, stumbles, and sometimes falls or fails. Yet we affirm that we are still of worth – not inadequate as human beings. It is our way of saying that God loves us still, even so, regardless...

As the Desiderata put it: We do have a right to be here, as much as anyone else! So “be gentle with yourself.”

The Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki affirmed all this in another, quite succinct way: “All of you are perfect just as you are and you could use a little improvement.”

Yes, we can work on ourselves, improve our skills at this or that, even become kinder and more loving!

But there is no need to be dogged along the way – if dogged we are – by that sense of inadequacy.

How about this: Can we realize that the sentence “I am inadequate” is not much more than a thought, and like all thoughts it will come... *and* it will go. We could practice just watching this thought, even learn to be amused by it (look who thinks he – or she – is inadequate now!), and then let the thought go away and proceed about our business.

After all, as Jesus admonished, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” And isn't allowing ourselves to be plagued by a feeling of inadequacy, naming for ourselves over and over again the ways we feel we have fallen short, weighing ourselves down with all of this... isn't it all just a form of worry? Instead, can't we simply notice how things are, what we might like to change, what we might like to do... and then get on with our lives? The worrying helps no one, least of all ourselves.

In short, recognizing how we might improve ourselves or some skill is one thing and can spur us to action. But our *feelings* of inadequacy are another matter and actually don't get us much of anywhere but down.

I'll close with another story from the Jewish tradition – perhaps you've heard it; I've probably shared it before. It is the story of Zusia, told in many variations. Here's the heart of it.

The renowned and respected Rabbi Zusia is on his deathbed, crying. His disciples ask him about his tears. He responds that as he nears death he has learned from the angels that when

he faces God, God will not ask him “Why were you not Abraham?” Or “Why were you not Moses... or Joshua?” Zusia says these questions he could answer, for he knows he possesses not the faith or the courage of these great men. But Zusia says he has learned that God will instead ask him, “Why were you not Zusia?” and this question he fears he won’t know how to answer.

I’ve known this story for years, but as I’ve mused on my theme for today I hear it with fresh ears. I hear the story telling us to relax into our lives – to stop trying to be something or someone we are not; stop trying to do things that do not suit our gifts – much of this misplaced effort perhaps growing from a sense of inadequacy and feeding into that same troubling feeling.

Rather, let us simply do what we can where we are with the gifts and talents that our ours. You’re okay! The world needs *you*, not you trying to be someone else, but you being you – of course improvable, but at the same time perfect already.

The world needs *you*.

That’s all. That’s enough.

One more thought: We can help each other along the way. A few more pats on the back, a few more words of praise for one another for work well done... just might help your spouse, friend, co-worker, feel a little more adequate... even okay... even a success. We are in this together.

So may it always be.

Benediction

May we go forth with
peaceful hearts,
loving souls,
hopeful spirits

May we share the peace, share the love, share the hope.

So may it be.