

Today's reading: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session12/anger>

Last week I preached about transitions. I talked about how we are all going through a big one: adapting to this time in the pandemic. And within that, we're all going through one together as a church community: reopening our sanctuary for Sunday services beginning on September 12, learning how to do church differently as a part in person, part virtual congregation. Many of us are also going through other transitions in our personal or work lives as well.

Last week I also talked about the three phases of a transition: Every transition has a beginning, when we say goodbye to what was. Every transition has an ending, when you live into the new thing. A new beginning means the transition is over. And every transition has a middle, or neutral, zone. When you're not in the old reality, and you're not in the new one yet either, that's the neutral zone. It can be anxiety provoking. It can be confusing. You can find yourself wanting answers *right now*. Emotions can run high, or pop up out of nowhere.

Have you been on the receiving end of any outsized emotions lately? Have *you* had outsized feelings? Maybe someone even called it overreacting. If so, it really may be connected to all the transition underway.

So that was last week. For today, building on what we now know about transitions, I want to lift up three observations:

1. That humans are profoundly social creatures. Both the worst pain and the greatest joy we can experience happen in our relationships with one another. Humans also almost always report that their life's greatest meaning involves their relationships with others. That's what church is fundamentally about: it's about meaning, about celebrating and nurturing joy, and about comforting one another in times of pain.
2. That when we feel anxious or unsettled, we sometimes also experience conflict and disconnection with the people around us.
3. That another possibility is that we can notice what's happening, share that experience with each other, let it bring us closer, and that our communication skills will help us.

That's what today's sermon is all about. Consider it a life hack for the neutral zone. And it has a cool elephant story in it.

Today's reading was a Buddhist parable I shared with some of our congregation's children and youth this week at UU Kids Camp. Usually the camp takes place a few hours away from here at a sleepaway camp. But this year, because of COVID, it's a day camp on the church campus. So, I got to drop in. One of this year's many small silver linings.

Now, I know that at first glance, you could say this parable sounds like one of failed communication. An angry man yells something, and the Buddha is just like *nope*. I'm going to come back to that in a second. First, here's another, more modern parable (not the elephant story yet!):

Dead ahead, through the pitch-black night, the captain sees a light on a collision course with his ship.

He sends a signal: "Change your course ten degrees east to avoid collision."

Promptly, a reply comes in: "Recommend *you* change your course ten degrees west."

The captain responds, "This is the captain of a British navy ship, I say again, change your course, sir!"

The response: "I repeat, you will have to change *your* course."

The captain, furious by now, responds: "I'm not changing course! Change *your* course immediately, or countermeasures will be taken to ensure the safety of this ship. I mean a battleship and I mean business!"

The reply came without delay: "I'm a lighthouse. Your call."

This is one of those stories that has been around a long time. No one can remember who started it, but it'll preach, as they say. In both of these stories one party communicates something and the other refuses to receive the communication as intended. But there is a difference. In the Buddhist one, the Buddha is responsive but not reactive. He responds to the angry man's comment by incorporating it into his teaching for the crowd. But he does not *react* to it by getting defensive or angry. He sees that moment in context and responds to the context. In the lighthouse story it's the opposite. The captain is very reactive. He does not give the context much thought. If he had, he might have been less eager to fire off like that, and more responsive, more curious. Together, they offer two helpful reminders about communication: that we can choose not to take on other people's negative emotions, and it is wise to be curious instead of reactive when a conversation partner responds negatively to something we've said.

That's challenging in the moment though. Someone says something that rubs us the wrong way, or strikes us as insensitive or unfair, and maybe we are already at our wits end because of other stress, and—you know that feeling you get: that *fighting* feeling. At Kids Camp, I asked the group, "When you feel mad, where do you feel that in your body?" You know sometimes our bodies actually know we are mad before our conscious mind knows it. Our bodies can clue us in before we say something regrettable. One of the kids said they feel it in their jaw.

I know exactly what they meant. Do you?

My husband says he *knows* I'm mad when he sees me stick my jaw out, a very subtle movement. When I do that it's like "watch out." Now he'll tell me. He'll say, "I see that you just

did that thing with your jaw. Can we keep each other close?” I think this is very Buddha-like of him because while I may not bow, it interrupts what might have been a chain reaction.

In a chain reaction, our hearts harden toward the other person, we speak from that place, and elicit the same reaction in them. The more this energy feeds off of itself and grows, the more certain we become of the righteousness of our position and the wrongness of the other person’s. That’s what today’s Buddhist parable is about: not mindlessly getting caught up in a chain reaction.

So one of the things we can do to become more skillful at communication, is to notice when we might take on another person’s negative emotions, and we can gently decline that gift. And another thing we can do is be aware of our own emotions, noticing when they arise, and when we might be inclined to try to “give that gift” ourselves. With those two skills we are able to avoid getting all tangled up—in feelings and in chain reactions to feelings—so we can be more present. And when we are present, then we can do what is actually the number one most important thing in communication. Do you know what it is?

We think of communication as, say, a process of active, reciprocal self-expression. One person says something and then another does. But actually, that’s not the most important part at all. The most important part of communication is not talking but *listening*. No amount of talking will bring people together if no one is listening. And I don’t just mean listening with ears. That’s hearing. Listening has to do with the quality of our attention. You can be a great listener without hearing a thing.

I’ve got a story about that. This one is not a parable. It’s the elephant story. It’s a story about Katy Payne, who is an acoustic biologist.¹ That means she studies animal sounds. Payne is the researcher who first noticed that whales not only sing, but change their songs over time as a group. She discovered that.

Once when Katy Payne was visiting the Pacific Northwest for a conference, she learned that a baby elephant had been born at the Portland Zoo. It was being kept together with its mother, and with two other elephant mothers and their babies, as though they were all one family, even though the three adult elephants were from three different continents. Payne thought it would be really interesting to go to the zoo and just hang out with these elephants and see what they were like. This wasn’t meant to be a scientific study. Payne describes it as an “innocent, playful, childish thing” that she just really wanted to do! So she got permission from the zookeepers to spend a week with them. I’m sure her credentials as a biologist were helpful.

While she was there, she says she kept having this feeling of the pressure changing in her ears. She says it was like the air was “throbbing” or “thrilling” or “shuddering.” Those are her words. And it was only happening near the elephants. Not in the rest of the zoo. Well, she knew from her work with whales that there are some sounds that are too low for the human ear to hear. So she investigated further—she must have brought in some special equipment—and discovered that she was right. The elephants were communicating. She had somehow sensed what she could not hear.

What sense was she using? We speak of the five senses—taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch. She couldn't hear it. She says she felt it. But she didn't feel it by touching it. Her body registered it, the air throbbing, or *something*, and she was paying attention and noticed. We have many ways of knowing, we humans.

When we are communicating with each other, person to person, it's such a routine part of life that it happens a lot of the time, for a lot of us, on automatic pilot. Unless something is happening to slow us down. In our interactions with each other though, we can also develop a skill of paying attention so that we notice what is not obvious.

It's really not that hard to do. Katy Payne says if you go hang out near some elephants and pay attention, you too can feel that thing happening in the air when they communicate. The hardest part is remembering to pay attention.

Likewise, when humans communicate, the hardest part is probably just remembering to pay attention so that you can listen to what the person is saying, to what they may not be saying, to their body language, to the context, to what your body is telling you about your reactions, to the impact of your response.

And... it is important to listen to how you yourself sound in what you say. I had an unforgettable lesson about that one time. It was the early 2000's. I think my daughter was probably about seven, and my son about four. And she had started getting really snarly with him. They'd be playing together, for instance, she'd suddenly shout, "Stop singing that, you're being annoying!" We'd been trying to get her to lighten up. Then, one day in the car, my husband asked me something. I don't remember what it was but for some reason I must not have liked it because I heard myself snap at him in exactly the same out-of-the-blue way (same tone and everything). My daughter had been *imitating me*. Like a little mocking bird.

A couple of weeks ago I encouraged you to "find your edge and soften." Remember that? One of the obstacles to communication is when we contract, harden. Soften your edge, soften your heart. As you speak and as you listen, to yourself and others.

Not taking on other's negative feelings, being curious when we encounter resistance, listening, and softening. These are practices that will help us social creatures stay connected and in right relationship. In that way they are among the *spiritual* practices that carry us through this time, right there along with praying each week for each other, for our congregation, and for our world.

May it be so, and in this time as always, may you be at peace in your heart, and may we all make our lives a blessing upon others, through our manner of being in the world.

ⁱ The following story is told in Payne's interview with Krista Tippett: <https://onbeing.org/programs/katy-payne-in-the-presence-of-elephants-and-whales/>