

Unintended consequences: you never know what's going to happen in life. That's one of the interesting things about it. I've been asking around lately about people's favorite stories on this theme.

Reverend Bob told me a story from the time when he was an ice cream truck driver. He says, "Back when I was driving ice cream trucks on Cape Cod and helping to run the business, my family came to visit, including my younger sister Toots."

Everyone, please tease Reverend Bob about being an ice cream truck driver with a sister named Toots. Extra points if you come up with a pun about his apparent calling to work on sundaes.

He continues, "[Toots] was spending a college summer at home in Buffalo working for AAA. We had just fired our Hyannis driver, so seeing an opportunity, we offered the gig to Toots while she was visiting. She took the job and slept on my couch for the rest of the summer. She loved Cape Cod, came back the following summer, and ended up marrying a pilot for Cape Airlines. They have three kids and live in Hyannis. All because we fired our Hyannis driver."

So one event set another in motion. Unintended, but good.

One of my favorite personal stories comes from a time when my kids were really little, all the way back in 1999. Anybody remember 1999? There was a really big fear of unintended consequences that year: Y2K. Would computers crash—and take the economy with it—at midnight on New Year's Eve? That turned out not to be such a big deal for the average person.

My story happened a few months before that. I was a stay at home mom back then. My three-year-old daughter and I were playing with her baby brother. He was probably four or five months old. So he was at that cute little age where they smile and giggle and try to copy the faces and sounds you make. So we were teaching him all kinds of faces and sounds. And one of us got the idea of teaching him to growl. "Rawr!" we said. "Rawr!" the baby replied.

Oh my gosh it was so cute. After that we spent the day doing little kid things. You know, asking questions. Pointing at bugs with sticks. Eating snacks with dip. Toddlers love dip. It's all so sweet... and also a little exhausting. Especially all the questions. So it was a relief when my spouse at the time got home from work, ready to enjoy some time with the kids, and took over for a bit.

I was in my own world and had forgotten about the morning when suddenly I heard him yell with fright from the back of the house.

I rushed to see what had happened. I found him leaning over our son, midway through a diaper change. With a startled look on his face, my spouse said, "Did you teach the baby to growl?"

The way he described it, he had been talking to the baby, who was cooing and babbling back when out of nowhere he went RAWR. Like he was possessed.

Scared the absolute bejeesus out of his dad. (And that's the only time I'll mention Jesus in this sermon).

Sometimes unintended consequences are good. Sometimes they are bad. (And sometimes the bad ones are hilarious). There's a story from the Taoist tradition about unintended consequences, and our tendency to call them bad or good. Our Minister Emerita Christine Robinson used to tell it from time to time. I asked her for it so I could share it with you again today. Many of you will remember it. Because life is so unexpected, and we live in such unexpected times, it's definitely a story that bears repeating. So... get comfy....

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Once Upon a Time, there was a Chinese farmer, who had a horse, and a little land, and a family to feed. He was poor...but he had enough. He had his oldest son to help out with the work and...he had a horse. So, he managed...barely, as long as most things went fairly well.

Now this story will be much more fun if you help me. I'll tell you what to do when we get to it.

One day, someone left the barn door open, and the horse...the horse which was their only means of running the pump, plowing the field, or riding to town... ran away. When news of this event got out, the neighbors came over to commiserate. "Oh, how awful that your only horse ran away," they said. "How will you manage, what will you do?" But the farmer was a philosophical sort. He answered his neighbors, "Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad...we'll see."

This line is important, so say it with me: Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad....we'll see. Really ham it up, come on! "Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad, we'll see!"

Well, lo and behold, the next day, the horse came back from the forest with several wild mares in tow. This made for quite a bounty, and when news of this miracle came about, the neighbors all came around to see the new horses and to congratulate the farmer. But the farmer was a philosophical sort, and you know what he said? He said, (all together now): "Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad, we'll see."

The next day, the farmer's only son went out to the corral to try to break in the new horses, train them to bit and bridle, and one of the horses kicked the boy and broke his leg. The neighbors all come around with offerings food and commiseration, but all the farmer would say was,"Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad....we'll see." And the neighbors went away, shaking their heads.

Well, a week later, war broke out in the empire, and the emperor's soldiers come looking for conscripts, and of course, they passed up the farmer's son with the broken leg but all the other young men in the village were forced to go...and maybe never return. After the soldiers had left

town, the neighbors crept over to the farmer's house to congratulate him on his luck, but the farmer, once more, said....

Well, this story could go on forever, of course, but I think you get the idea.

This story comes from the Taoist tradition, but its wisdom is the wisdom of all the world's traditions, and that is that we should accept what we can't change, let it go, and move on to whatever will come next... remembering that it's hard to know what good things will come out of hard changes, and what unintended consequences will attend even the most wonderful ones.

In reality, it would be weird to be completely neutral about the things that impact us, right? It's okay to not like losing your horse. It's natural to experience positive and negative feelings. But keeping in mind especially the possibility that what seems negative can bring about good—that's a perspective that helps us stay centered and opens up possibilities in life.

One area where this is especially useful is when it comes to interpersonal relationships, and those inevitable moments when we are informed that our impact on another person was not what we intended. You know what I mean? When someone we interact with lets us know we've hurt or offended them. And you get that no-no-no-no-no feeling. And you want to explain that you didn't *intend* any harm. But the more you explain yourself, the worse the conversation gets. One of the ways this often comes up is when it has to do with racism and other oppressions, which we can perpetuate at each other without meaning to.

The antiracism trainer Robin DiAngelo says she sees it happen all the time in the training she leads. We'll recognize it from our lives, too.¹ Organizations hire her to come in and do anti-racism trainings for their staffs. Often the companies are looking to diversify, and hope the trainings will help. In group discussions at the trainings, things get tricky. The pattern goes something like this: A white person in the group makes a comment that is racially insensitive. They may not mean to do it and they may not know what is wrong with the comment. Sometimes the problem with their words has to do with the larger context or history of racism, of which they may be unaware.

When DiAngelo gives them feedback about what was problematic, they become upset. They say she has misunderstood them. They say they feel attacked. Often, they will present "evidence" that they cannot possibly be racist, such as

- having joined in protest marches
- or having worked or lived in a diverse context,
- or being poor,
- or already having studied racism at some point,
- or having friends who are people of color,
- or having experienced a different kind of oppression in their own lives, such as gender oppression

DiAngelo says when confronted about their racism, the people often become angry, anxious, or withdraw. They may cry, or accuse her of being the racist one, or of making them feel guilty.

They'll say things like "I guess I can't say anything right then! I'm just going to stop talking!"

You know that saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions?" These conversations can really be hell. Whichever side of them you find yourself on. You know what I mean.

It applies beyond racism to other issues of welcome, equity, and inclusion. Whoever you are, being informed that your impact was offensive or hurtful for a person who is different than you, perhaps someone who is transgender, or who has a disability, or who is very young or very old, or who makes a lot less money than you-- that can cause a terrible feeling when that's not what you intended.

While we don't want to be hurtful, when we receive that feedback and it feels uncomfortable—consider maybe it's good. That feeling is reminding us of what's important to us. Connection. Community. What feels bad is being out of sync with that.

A couple of weeks ago, I preached about intention, and how, if we are clear about the difference between intentions and outcomes, we'll be more adaptable and resilient, and live better. The same is true in these conversations. If the outcome—harm or offense—isn't what you were aiming for, rather than defending it, a better approach is to accept it—in this case, perhaps with an apology—and go back to the deeper intention of connection and community. That takes some humility.

In his sermon last week, former ice cream truck driver Rev. Bob talked about the deep dive we are going to be doing this year into diversity and welcoming, into anti-oppression and anti-racism here at First Unitarian. The goal is really nothing short of radical transformation. Cultural. Institutional. Spiritual. His sermon contained a lot of insight and wisdom. If you missed it, you can find it on the church website. I encourage you to do so.

There will probably be some unintended outcomes along the way—good, bad, and who knows. How we respond to each step—whether with adaptation, deeper intention...or growling!— will help shape the next. As Bob put it, "How we do this work is as important as what we do. Maybe more important. It's relational." And he encouraged us to be open to being surprised.

May it be so.

ⁱ Stories and info about DiAngelo are drawn from her book [White Fragility](#). Beacon Press: Boston, 2018.