

First Unitarian Church

April 3, 2022

I'm going to start with a story. I heard it on the Buddhist teacher Tara Brach's podcast, but it has been told in other places.ⁱ The author is unknown. The story does not say whether it is a true story or just a good story. I'll let you decide for yourself. It comes to us in the form of a letter written to an insurance company.

To Whom it May Concern: I am writing in response to your request for additional information in block three of the accident reporting form. I put "poor planning" as the cause of my accident. You asked for a fuller explanation. I'm a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six story building. When I had completed my work, I found that I had some bricks left over, which, when weighed later, were found to be three-hundred-and-forty pounds. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley which was attached to the side of the building at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went back up on the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went down and untied the rope, holding it tightly to assure a slow descent of the 340 pounds of bricks. You will note in block 11 of the accident reporting form that my weight is 135 pounds.

Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I 'lost my presence of mind' and didn't let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming down. This explains the fractured skull and broken collarbone. Slowed only slightly, I continued the rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley. This explains the lacerations of my hand. Fortunately, by this time I had regained my presence of mind and held tightly to the rope in spite of the excruciating pain I was beginning to experience.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground, and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighed about 50 pounds. I refer you again to my weight of 135 pounds, in block 11. As you can imagine,

I began a rapid descent down the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles, broken tooth, and lacerations to my legs. The encounter with the barrel slowed me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks, and fortunately only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, that as I lay there in the bricks, in pain, unable to move, and watching the barrel six stories above me, I again 'lost presence of mind'... I let go of the rope.

The title of this story is “knowing when to let go.”

Is it a true story? Fiction? I’ll tell you what. Sometimes a story is true without being factual. You know? It can impart truth, without having actually happened. Many of the world’s sacred texts are just like that. Like the parables told by Jesus and the ones told about him. We’re going to examine one of those on Easter Sunday.

What caught my attention in the bricklayer’s story for today is the phrase, “I lost presence of mind.” It’s an interesting phrase. To be present is to be aware and intentional in our thoughts. Our brains are always working, but when we are operating without being aware of our thoughts, we do not have presence of mind. We are thinking *mindlessly*. The mind is defined as the element of a person that enables them to be aware of the world and their experiences, to think, and to feel; the faculty of consciousness *and* thought. (Italics mine).

A related concept is something called metacognition. The prefix meta means beyond, above, or at a higher level. Cognition is thinking. So metacognition is *beyond* merely *thinking*. Metacognition is awareness and understanding of one’s own thought processes, and having a role in directing those processes. It is one of the defining features of human beings, metacognition. We may not be the only animals that can do it, but it’s a very strong characteristic in humans.

In fact, metacognition is the reason church is a thing. We humans are self-aware, and that prompts us to wonder why we exist and what it all means. At church we contemplate those things. Which brings me to this month’s theological theme: “awakening.” Spiritually speaking, the opposite of being awake isn’t being asleep. It’s more like being in a trance. The difference between being awake or not is whether you are aware. Whether you have presence of mind. And not just whether you have it or not, but the degree to which you have it. We can be more or less aware, more or less awake. It’s more like a dimmer switch than an on/off switch.

When we go through life not very awake, we miss out on some of the best things in life. And yet it’s very easy for us to slip into a kind of trance. If we don’t intentionally work at being awake, having awareness of our own thoughts, a state of mindlessness sneaks in. One common trance we humans find ourselves in is what I’ll call the Trance of No Wonder. In that trance, our minds experience life without noticing how awe-inspiring it is. When humans are children, we are absolutely wired for wonder. Remember how amazing things were when you were little? A flower in the sidewalk crack! A wriggly worm! All the things you can draw with of a box of crayons! Ice cream that comes out of a machine!

As we grow older though, our attention shifts to the tasks of living—to work and other responsibilities. And now there is a whole attention economy—there is profit to be made from our attention. So advertisements and social media and all that kind of thing clamor for it. Especially when we are tired from the tasks (and stress) of living, it’s tempting to give in and give our minds over, engaging mindlessly. I know I’m not the only one who has ever thought, “I should get off Instagram,” and then kept scrolling and scrolling without getting anything meaningful out of it... It’s not that it’s inherently bad, it’s just hard to keep your metacognition turned on. Hard to maintain awareness of our own thoughts when we are doing that. We are

deep in the Trance of No Wonder. When we awaken, we might choose to do less of that, and more of the things that are enlivening, or even wonderful.

Another thing that happens when we go through life without being very awake, is that we may find ourselves operating from beliefs and thoughts that don't serve us very well.

In the Trance of Unworthiness, we live as though we are not enough. We suspect we are deeply flawed, and therefore unworthy of belonging, of healthy love, of pleasure, rest, and play. Maybe we come to believe this untrue thing because the people who raised us communicated to us that we were unacceptable to them. Or maybe we have a personality, body, or brain that is not well understood or are not valued by the cultures in which we live. It takes a lot of mindfulness, a lot of consciously thinking, to avoid or awaken from that trance.

There are trances of powerlessness, of fear, of scarcity, of independence (in which we do not acknowledge how interdependent we are), and of dependence (in which we hold others responsible for our happiness, and blame others for our unhappiness). There are lots of trances we can find ourselves in.

In the mental health field, therapists help people become aware of something called cognitive distortions. I think these are also a result of not being aware enough of our own thinking. I'll share some examples with you. See if you recognize any in yourself. They are very common.

Black and White Thinking: this is when a person sees things in terms of either/or. A thing or a person is good or bad. Right or wrong. If you hear yourself using words like: always, never, perfect, or impossible, ask yourself whether you're missing some nuance or opportunities. Those words are favorites in black and white thinking.

Personalization is another cognitive distortion. That's when we automatically take things personally. For example, if I go to shake Bob's or Matt's hand in the receiving line, and as I talk to them I notice them looking at the rest of the line, and I assume it's because they don't want to talk to me, that would be personalization. Maybe they don't want to talk to me, or they might just be trying to keep an eye on the room because they are in charge and that's part of their job.

Catastrophizing. Anybody do that? When you dwell on the worst outcome, and maybe even assume it will happen? Oh Mylanta. My car is making a funny noise. It's probably going to need a new engine. That's going to cost thousands of dollars. I'll have to get a second job. That means I can't go on the camping trip with friends. I'll probably lose all my friends, working so many hours!

Woo... slow your roll! Right? It's probably just your spark plug. Check to see if it came loose from the distributor. Or, it's probably just a coil pack. Try resetting the ignition system through your diagnostics port.

I'm just kidding. I don't know anything about that stuff. It could have been a bird strike for all I know. But for heaven's sake, stop catastrophizing.

Mindreading: that's when we think we know what someone else thinks or feels. Sometimes even when the person explains otherwise, a mindreader will still insist on what they say the person is thinking or feeling.

Labeling- that's when we label someone or something based on a very limited experience. For example, if someone I've just met seems grumpy, and I assume they are a mean person. That's really jumping to conclusions. People can seem grumpy when they are in pain. You don't know their story. Stereotyping also falls into this category.

I'll share two more. Emotional reasoning is a big one. Emotional reasoning is mistaking one's feelings for reality. "I feel bad, therefore you did something bad." Or I feel scared, therefore there must be real danger. This one makes me think of all the horrible anti-transgender legislation that is being passed in a bunch of states right now. Some people feel threatened, therefore they assume trans people are a threat, when the opposite is obviously true. Transphobia is what causes harm.

Transgender and nonbinary people's lives are sacred. Transgender and non-binary people are beloved people with inherent worth and dignity and unique contributions to make.

Finally, there's the Fallacy of Change—assuming that other people must change in order for you to be happy. It's a frustrating way to live, since we can't change anyone but ourselves.

Are any of these trances familiar to you?

What do we do? How do we snap out of them? Well, wanting to is the first step. Then you practice mindfulness. You observe your own thoughts as you are thinking them. Meditation is one way to do that. Another one is to set up some little reminders to take a pause and check in with yourself. A sticky note on your mirror or something. I got a new washer and dryer last year that play a little song when their cycle completes. At first I found it annoying and was going to turn it off. But then I decided that instead, whenever I hear it, I'll take a breath and observe my thoughts. Last Sunday I told you about the We Croak app I have on my phone, which sends me several messages each day that say, "Don't forget, you're going to die!" And how, I find that seemingly stark message calming because it reminds me to keep things in perspective. Maybe whatever is causing me anxiety is not really that important? That's a mindfulness practice, too. Counseling is another good resource. So is coming to church, where we talk about and practice this kind of thing quite a lot.

It's never too late to awaken. We've all been whacked by the wheelbarrow a few times. It's always a good time to start, or return to the practices, or get better at them. It's always a good time to know when to let go of what does not serve us well, and lean into the sacred gift of our lives.

ⁱ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/tara-brach/id265264862?i=1000552159109>