

“KEEP TRYING: THE TROUBLE WITH BEING SMART”

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Growing up, I had an amazing best friend. Let's call her Caitlin. She was hilarious and brilliant. She still is, actually. We're still close friends. She's visited me in various states across the years and I officiated at her wedding. But I did something to her in elementary school for which I am ashamed. I was unkind about her behind her back and the reason I've assigned her a fake name today, instead of asking her permission to tell this small story here with her real name, is that to this day I have never breathed a word to her about this important incident in our friendship. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Caitlin had a habit of describing in detail her frequent and creative dreams. Maybe she was sometimes too specific, although I recall waxing poetically to her about all sorts of subjects that weren't particularly fascinating, like that my parents wouldn't let me pierce my ears and how much I disliked a teacher. So I'm not sure I was overly entitled to judge.

Anyway, I once found myself in the company of two other girls from school. You have to understand that these were not just any girls. They were one year ahead, making them fifth graders and at the top of the social hierarchy at Maplewood Elementary School. They were cool. They liked me fine but I knew that if I could just get in good with them then they would like me even more, maybe even as much as I liked them.

I have no idea how the subject arose but I made fun of Caitlin behind her back to them, even doing a little imitation of her going on and on about some random dream. They laughed and the conversation drifted into other areas. I hung out with them all recess. Sweet victory!

By the next day I felt terrible. I knew I had done something mean and bad but I didn't know what to do about it. See, I was a good Unitarian Universalist kid. I didn't have to worry about hellfire or any kind of big eternal misery for wrongdoing because my understanding of God never included divine wrathful punishment. At the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, I was taught that I was good inside, decent at the core, fundamentally worthy.

Yet when I was in fourth grade and this incident with Caitlin happened, Unitarian Universalism failed me. It had long assured me that I was wonderful and good no matter what and then, when I realized that my behavior had not been good or wonderful, it had nothing to say. I pondered this for years, but silently, so no one would know my shortcoming. I was always left with this question: If people are spiritually good, why didn't I behave better?

I don't mean to overstate the magnitude of what I did. I didn't physically hurt anyone, and now I even understand that it's part of a child's healthy development to experiment within reason about how it feels to treat people well or poorly. I bet a million bucks that my friend Caitlin would giggle uncontrollably at this story now. But if it had gotten back to her at the time? She would have been crushed. If our roles had been reversed I would have been unspeakably wounded.

This was also when I was learning in school and at home about the global and historical worst of human behavior; the Jewish holocaust, genocide of Native Americans, enslavement of Africans and African-Americans.

If all people contain good in them, doesn't that mean they are supposed to act like it? And what is to be done if they don't? What should I do if I don't? To be honest, Unitarian Universalism has always been a little vague on the details and protocol of how to recover from bad behavior. This shortcoming is even a reason that people I know who have grown up UU and then left it for other faith traditions have cited as to why they left.

Here's *why* I think this is a weakness: Ours is a religious tradition of "come inners," meaning that we are a community where more people have chosen us of their free will and fewer have grown up within our embrace. It's a blessing to be in a movement people wish to join! If this describes your journey, welcome. Thank you for being here! It's not always easy to depart from the familiar and try something new.

But let's look a little more closely at who's here. Of the people who have come to us by choice, we are finding that more and more were raised secular. In addition, a healthy minority is from a tradition other than Christianity.

The majority of Unitarian Universalists—in the past and today—come from some form or interpretation of Christianity. Unitarian Universalism itself has Christian DNA. A central Christian belief has long been the idea of original sin, which is that humanity as a whole has sinned simply by being human. Not all Christian communities believe this uncritically, of course, but it's an idea that has been a very real deal-breaker for many people who leave Christianity, some of whom make their way to Unitarian Universalism.

In rejecting original sin, many UU come-inners (including folks here, I know) have found great meaning and relief in the idea that we are not fundamentally wicked. Instead, each of us has inherent worth and dignity, as it says in our UU principles. Yet as a result, the UU focus on our goodness can sometimes overshadow the reality that our behavior can be less than good, even bad.

Ok, so I've called out my beloved faith tradition, criticized it. But I also have a suggestion about what could help strengthen this weakness: recent psychological research. Po Bronson, a journalist for New York Magazine, will give us a good introduction to these psychological findings. He has written about the idea that too much of a focus on who you are—like if you're good or smart or any other positive quality—can sometimes be less

helpful than concentrating on the importance of trying hard in life. He calls this the “inverse power of praise” and uses the story of a child called Thomas to make his case¹.

Since Thomas could walk, he heard constantly that he’s smart. His intelligence was statistically confirmed when an IQ test gained him admittance to a school reserved for the top one percent of all applicants. But the self-awareness that he’s smart didn’t necessarily translate into fearless confidence.

In fact, Thomas’s father noticed the exact opposite. “Thomas didn’t want to try things he wouldn’t be successful at,” reported his father. “Some things came very quickly to him, but when they didn’t, he gave up almost immediately, concluding, ‘I’m not good at this.’ ”

In third grade, Thomas was supposed to learn cursive penmanship. But he wouldn’t even try. Thomas’s father tried to reason with him. “Look, just because you’re smart doesn’t mean you don’t have to put out some effort.”

This phenomenon caught the attention of psychologist Carol Dweck, who spent the 1990s studying the effect of praise. She sent researchers to New York to take single children out of their fifth-grade classroom for nonverbal IQ tests consisting of a series of puzzles—puzzles easy enough that all the children would do fairly well.

Once the children finished, researchers told each student their score, and gave a single line of praise. Some were praised for their *intelligence*. “You must be smart at this.” Other students were praised for *effort*: “You must have worked really hard.”

The students got to pick their next test. One would be more difficult than the first, but the researchers told the kids that they’d learn a lot from attempting it. The other choice, Dweck’s team explained, was an easy test. Here’s what’s interesting: Of those praised for their effort, 90 percent chose the *harder* set of puzzles. Of those praised for their intelligence, a majority chose the *easy* test. The “smart” kids took the cop-out.

So, why? “When we praise children for their intelligence,” Dweck wrote in her study summary, “we tell them that this is the name of the game: Look smart, don’t risk making mistakes.”

And that’s what the fifth-graders had done: They’d chosen to look smart and avoid the risk of being embarrassed. In my own elementary school days, had I done something similar, by trying to avoid the embarrassment of being seen as bad?

In the next round of Dweck’s research, none of the fifth-graders had a choice. The test was difficult. Everyone failed. But again, the two groups responded differently. Those praised for their effort on the first test assumed they simply hadn’t focused hard enough. “They got very involved, willing to try every solution to the puzzles,” Dweck recalled. “Many of them

¹ <http://nymag.com/news/features/27840/>

remarked, unprovoked, “This is my favorite test.’ ” Not so for those praised for their smarts. They assumed their failure was evidence that they weren’t really smart at all. Dweck said, “Just watching them, you could see the strain. They were sweating and miserable.”

From the get-go, Dweck had suspected that praise could backfire, but even she was surprised by the magnitude of the effect. “Emphasizing effort gives a child a variable that they can control,” she explains. “They come to see themselves as in control of their success. Emphasizing natural intelligence takes it out of the child’s control, and it provides no good recipe for responding to a failure.”

In my own childhood, making fun of my friend behind her back was a failure. Unitarian Universalism didn’t provide me with a good recipe for responding to it.

None of this research tells me that our faith tradition is wrong. I still believe that each person has a spark of fundamental decency in them, even when I learn about the most terrible people who undoubtedly did hideous things.

Yet as a kid, I missed an important, subtle point. I don’t think our theology actually says that everyone is all good, in the sense that “we all behave well at all times.” As an adult I understand nuance better. Some Unitarian and Universalist theologians across the years have said that people can and should always be wonderful. But most have not been that out of touch. Most have rejected the idea that we’re perfect, believing instead that, sure, we’re flawed. We’re capable of wrong-doing because we’re human, but that at our core we also always contain intrinsic goodness.

Dweck’s psychological findings might help us clarify that what we mean when we tell our children (or our people of any age) that we are good is that we should keep trying to be good. And that it’s never a losing battle. And that we shouldn’t worry too much if it’s hard.

Intelligence, which is the subject of Dweck’s work, isn’t the same thing as goodness, which is the subject of my personal story about Caitlin. Goodness and intelligence are different, but they are both qualities that are often assumed to be innate when, in fact, both benefit immensely from effort. Being good or smart is great but what’s even greater is our capacity to keep trying.

Instead of taking as our role model Thomas with the high IQ, let’s remember Abbie, the heroine of our reading today and a real person. *Keep the Lights Burning, Abbie* was written by Fellowship members Peter and Connie Roop, and is based on Abbie Burgess’ own accounts of her life. She and her family lived on Matinicus Rock off the coast of Maine. When Captain Burgess went after desperately needed supplies in 1856, he left Abbie in charge. A tremendous storm came up that lasted four weeks. During all that time, Abbie took care of her sick mother, the chickens, the lights.

Obviously Abbie was a smart and capable person, intelligent and moral, but her main characteristic that shines through for me is that she was a hard worker. She was

unprepared in major ways for the tasks in front of her. She didn't always know what she was doing but she didn't give up. She kept trying.

I wouldn't have thought of it this way at the time, but when I was presented with a hard situation in fourth grade (that I hadn't behaved kindly and wasn't sure what to do to make it right) I guess I gave up. But I'm game to keep trying. With Abbie as my role model, I'm going to share this story with Caitlin. I'm not sure exactly what her reaction will be but I have a feeling that, like the fifth graders Dweck encouraged to keep trying, we might be able to experience the benefits of working on something hard: in my case, a long and lovely friendship. May we all be so lucky. Amen.

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