

Sandpaper People
A Sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg
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Reading *Everybody Has a Heartache (a blues)* by Joy Harjo, excerpt
In the United terminal in Chicago at five on a Friday afternoon
The sky is breaking with rain and wind and all the flights
Are delayed forever. We will never get to where we are going
And there's no way back to where we've been.
The sun and the moon have disappeared to an island far from anywhere.

Everybody has a heartache —

The man with his head bobbing to music no one else can hear has that satisfied
Feel — a full belly of sweet and a wife who sings heartache to sleep.
In his luggage (that will be lost and never found) is a musty dream of flying
Solo to Africa, with a stop on the return to let go the stories too difficult to
Carry home. He'll take off his shoes to walk in a warm, tropical sea.
He'll sing to the ancestors:
Take me home to mama. No one cooks like her.
But all the mamas worked to the bone gone too young.
Broken by The Man.

Everybody has a heartache —

Everyone's mouthing fried, sweet, soft and fat,
While we wait for word in the heart of the scrambled beast.
The sparkle of soda wets the dream core.
That woman over there the color of broth did what she was told.
It's worked out well as can be expected in a world
Where she was no beauty queen and was never seen,
Always in the back of someplace in the back —
She holds the newest baby. He has croup.
Shush, shush. Go to sleep, my little baby sheepie.
He sits up front of her with his new crop of teeth.

Everybody has a heartache —

This man speaks to no one, but his body does.
Half his liver is swollen with anger; the other half is trying
To apologize —

What a mess I've made of history, he thinks without thinking.
Mother coming through the screen door, her clothes torn,
Whimpering: *It's okay baby, please don't cry.*
Don't cry. Baby don't cry.
And he never cries again.

Everybody has a heartache —

Baby girl dressed to impress, toddles about with lace on this and ruffle on that —
Her mother's relatives are a few hundred miles away poised to welcome.
They might as well live on a planet of ice cream.
She's a brand new wing, grown up from a family's broken hope.
Dance girl, you carry our joy.
Just don't look down.

Everybody has a heartache —

In the terminal of stopped time I went unsteady to the beat,
Driven by a hungry spirit who is drunk with words and songs.
What can I do?
I have to take care of it.
The famished spirit eats fire, poetry, and rain; it only wants love.x

Sermon

The usefulness of sandpaper is precisely that it is abrasive. It is made to rub something slowly, methodically, constantly until that something is raw. In the same way, a sandpaper person is the individual we can't avoid (a relative, co-worker, neighbor) whose presence annoys us, rubs us raw—little by little, day after day. I suspect each of us could name at least one person who for whatever reason bothers us.

It's only fair to also acknowledge that we ourselves are bound to irritate someone. As much as I try to be nonabrasive, I have no doubt that I myself am some peoples' sandpaper person, probably someone even in this very room. Coming to terms with that reminds me to be kind even as I might occasionally find someone annoying.

When I was a medical assistant at a feminist family planning clinic, I had a coworker with very low boundaries. She was always sticking her nose in other people's business, inciting the kind of gossip that spirals into drama. Once, this is while she was on the clock, mind you, she used a clinic phone line to call the number on her hair dye box and ask whoever was unfortunate enough to answer whether the color she had selected would help her attract a man.

That's annoying, right? Here's the thing, though. When we got behind and I needed to leave for a college class or a coworker had kids to pick up at daycare, this same coworker never minded staying late. She wasn't bad. She just grated on my nerves, like sandpaper.

This kind of person is part of life and so what should we do when we encounter one? It's tempting to write them off as some kind of mysterious cosmic punishment we must endure. After all, we can't very well run screaming every time a particular coworker pulls into the parking lot or that certain relative sends a text. So we should probably figure out how to learn to live with them. The townsfolk in *Abiyoyo*, our all ages story, might teach us a thing or two. They may have been fed up with the boy and his father at first but those annoying habits of playing the ukulele and performing magic tricks turned out to have a pretty important upside, after all.

What I'd like to explore today is whether or not our sandpaper people might actually be opportunities for spiritual growth. Annoying as certain individuals may be, as much as they rile and rough us up, maybe they smooth us out as well. Can we learn something from them, even if we never grow to love or even like them?

My sandpaper coworker did teach me something. She cornered me one day in the awkward block of counterpace where I worked and showed me that if I wrapped and then arranged the medical instruments in a particular way I could fit more of them in the autoclave. If I could sterilize more equipment at once then I could run the machine less often, thus saving substantial minutes a handful of times each day. Is a tip this practical a spiritual lesson? I would argue yes.

Yet the undoubtedly spiritual lesson I learned from her is simply that I can learn from people I don't like. In this case, the situation was pretty clear-cut. She appeared in my realm bearing helpful information. Fewer autoclave batches equaled a less stressful job.

Unfortunately, the way this works isn't always obvious. How do we move from being irritated to gaining spiritual insight? This is one of those questions to which there are no wrong or right answers, and many worthy paths. If you've found any particularly good ones then I'm sure I'm not the only one who would love to learn about them during Congregational Response.

One resource I find incredibly helpful is the work of Pema Chödrön, today's most popular American-born teacher of Buddhism. She's authored many clear, simple books that might interest you if you find yourself wanting to go deeper with this stuff than the few morsels I can offer here. From Chödrön I learned about the Tibetan concept of *shenpa*¹, which she describes as "the hook that triggers our habitual tendency to close down" and feel spiteful, annoyed, etc. She says that getting unhooked begins "by recognizing that moment of unease [so we can] learn to relax in that moment."

"*Shenpa* is usually involuntary and it gets right to the root of why we suffer. Someone looks at us in a certain way, or we hear a certain song, we smell a certain smell, we walk into a certain room and *boom*." We're hooked. We're crawling out of our skin with disgust or

¹ <http://www.lionsroar.com/how-we-get-hooked-shenpa-and-how-we-get-unhooked/>

irritation or that feeling of superiority. I have to admit; I recognize this. This describes me sometimes.

Chödrön has also experienced what happens when people practice recognizing *shenpa*. In fact, this is a formal exercise at Gampo Abbey, the Buddhist monastery in Nova Scotia where she is the principle teacher. She reports: “We discovered that some of us could feel it [could feel *shenpa*] even when a particular person simply sat down next to us at the dining table.”

Here’s her take on what’s happening: “*Shenpa* thrives on the underlying insecurity of living in a world that is always changing...We could also call *shenpa* “the urge”—the urge to smoke that cigarette...to have another drink, to indulge our addiction whatever it is. Those...with strong addictions know that working with habitual patterns begins with the willingness to fully acknowledge our urge, and then the willingness not to act on it.”

She writes, “If we can see *shenpa* just as we’re starting to close down, when we feel the tightening, there’s the possibility of catching the urge to do the habitual thing, and not doing it.” Well, that’s hopeful! And there’s more; to support and contain this process, Chödrön strongly recommends a meditation practice. There are other steps she suggests as well:

Does someone bother you? “Stay with the uneasiness, the tightening, the itch of *shenpa*. Train in sitting still with [the] desire to scratch. This is how we learn to stop the chain reaction of habitual patterns that otherwise will rule our lives.”

If we’re willing to practice this over time, *prajna* begins to kick in. *Prajna* means clear seeing. It’s our innate intelligence, our wisdom. By focusing on *prajna*, we begin to see the whole chain reaction clearly. As we practice, this wisdom becomes a stronger force than *shenpa*. That, in and of itself, has the power to stop the chain reaction of being driven to distraction by our sandpaper people. We might not like them but they will no longer provoke in us such vehemence.

“The earlier we catch it,” teaches Chödrön, “the easier *shenpa* is to work with, but even catching it when we’re already all worked up is good. Sometimes we have to go through the whole cycle even though we see what we’re doing. The urge is so strong, the hook so sharp, the habitual pattern so sticky, that there are times when we can’t do anything about it.”

“But there is still always something we can do after the fact,” she reassures us. “We can re-run the story. Maybe we start with remembering the all-worked-up feeling and get in touch with that. We look clearly at the *shenpa* in retrospect; this is very helpful. It’s also helpful to see *shenpa* arising in little ways, where the hook is not so sharp.”

For example, maybe the person who hooks you is a close relative and it’s an old, deep, powerful cycle in which you’re caught. That’s a lot to tackle so maybe a realistic goal is to simply notice the times when you realize in retrospect that you got stuck in that loop. The development of that *prajna* (remember, that’s clear seeing) might prepare you to one day

reflect that the reason your neighbor annoys you might actually be because of their resemblance in habit or characteristic to the relative with whom you struggle. Start there. See what else you can learn. Build up to tackling the more ingrained relationship.

I find that the simple act of noticing my thoughts can be tremendously liberating when someone is getting on my last nerve. Staying with whatever hard feeling is present is difficult—I didn't grow up knowing how to do this—but learning it is the key to freedom from suddenly finding myself seething with silent irritation and not sure how I got there or how to return from that brink.

Another way to put this is that I've learned from Chödrön that just acknowledging what I'm feeling without judgment can (on my really good days, at least!) help me be open and even curious toward my sandpaper people. After all, everybody has a heartache, an important reminder we received from our reading today by Joy Harjo, renowned Mvskoke/Muscogee or Creek Nation poet. Everybody has a heartache. Everybody has a story to tell.

My friend Cassie had a powerful experience of just what I'm talking about and she gave me permission to share it here. Growing up, her family befriended a difficult woman who was incorporated into most holiday celebrations and other family events but was not particularly easy to have around. At Thanksgiving it often seemed like she would come just to criticize and suck the energy out of the room.

Years have passed and Cassie lives states away. When she was seven months pregnant, this is a couple months ago, this family friend announced her intention to visit. It wasn't exactly welcome news but Cassie felt she couldn't refuse and so, five days after Cassie gave birth, this friend arrived.

"Are you kidding?" I said over the phone when she told me this story. "How'd it go?!"

Cassie sighed, "It was ok," she said. Pause. "It wasn't great."

When this friend didn't get what she wanted, her bad mood would drift everywhere. Cassie described it as a bad mist. This friend expected a lot of one-on-one time with her and was insulted that her host was preoccupied with nursing and sleep and the big transition of having a human come out of her body and into her life.

Yet as the days of the visit wore by, Cassie saw that this person was suffering spiritually. She was lonely. Life had not gone as she wanted. She didn't have healthy ways to fix her loneliness; all the stories she shared about her life betrayed that manipulation was her only mode of being in relationship with those she desperately sought comfort from and connection to. Cassie began to see that everybody has a heartache.

She actually ended up being grateful that she had more than a single holiday meal mediated by many other people to spend with this family friend. It forced her to be more present with the discomfort of this person's company and that ultimately proved the key to her noticing what was happening on a deeper level.

Instead of judging her friend, finding her lacking and discarding her as a simple annoyance, she started to see the complexity of this person—in all her shortcomings, yes. Yet she also glimpsed the tremendous disappointments that life had contained for this person and in seeing that she found a place of compassion.

Cassie was surprised to realize that her spiritual lesson was humility. She herself is a happy newlywed. She and her husband have a healthy, beautiful baby, meaningful work and a community of connection. In a flash she realized that while she had done many things right, for which she was rightly proud, she is also profoundly lucky to not wake up with the emptiness she saw in her friend's life. "That could very easily be me," she said on the phone.

In his reflection, worship leader Dan Van Sickle talks about locating the point of friction because it's where learning can happen. He observed something else to me about friction, during a meeting to prepare this service. In order to create the friction generated by applying sandpaper to something, two surfaces are required. One, alone, would have no use. There would literally be no friction. No resistance. And metaphorically, there would be no learning. The friction is where Cassie learned. It's where we encounter *shenpa* (our hooks, or urges) and also, hopefully, eventually, the clear sight of *prajna*. The friction is where I learned from a difficult coworker.

The sandpaper people in our lives may rub us raw, yes, but if we can greet the friction as a teacher then they might also help rub us smooth. May it always be so! Amen.

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