

Rev. Linda Simmons
The Blessings of a Skinned Knee
April 2, 2017

Wendy Mogul writes in her book, The Blessings of a Skinned Knee about how to parent non-anxiously. She is Jewish and offers Judaism as a core value of non-anxious presence, as a settled, honed, honored, ancestral container into which we can rest to receive the guidance needed to respond from compassion, strength, and faith in the face of our fears.

One Jewish story among many she tells is that a rabbi told his congregation that he was planning a trip to Switzerland. "Why Switzerland?" They asked him.

"There is hardly any Jewish community there. What reason could you have for traveling so far?" The rabbi replied, "I don't want to meet my maker and have Him Say to me, "What?" You never saw my Alps?"¹

Mogul lifts up gratitude and celebration as ways to reside in the moment, where anxiety has no place.

Mogel highlights three concepts that she calls particular to the daily life of Judaism and the core of what are needed to live a life of non-anxious presence: moderation, celebration and sanctification.

In talking about moderation, she uses the example of food and children. She tell us that when we make a huge fuss about food with our children, worried about every teaspoon of sugar and every moment of over indulgence, then food becomes a source of anxiety and the simple blessing of food, of shared meals, of this time together is sullied, made into something that is less than a blessing.

How much of life involves this kind of balancing, this kind of allowing ourselves and others the freedom to live within our principles and to live with ease at the same time? We work so hard to be good, to be environmentally awake, to be informed and thoughtful and considerate of the planet and our bodies and others around us and sometimes, we forget that in allowing room for the bits that don't fit the picture perfectly, the rainbow sprinkles on the organic ice cream, we open room for balance, and in doing so, for blessing too.

Sometimes following the dictates of our principles to the letter keeps us from experiencing the blessing of the moment because we are so caught up in managing the moment. When we practice moderation, there is space for gratitude and celebration in which the present moment can arrive with all of its blessings.

Of course, moderation is not always viable. It is not good to moderate alcohol for instance if an addiction to alcohol is present, and some social and political situations should be

¹ Wendy Mogul, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 10.

responded to with insistence and persistence.² But most situations have room for moderation of not only what we take in but of how we take it in and with what level of self doubt or regret we review it all afterwards.

Striving for purity or perfection removes us from ourselves, each other and life. Sometimes a little so called *sinning* can be good for the soul when to sin can be to re-enter our own humanity and be called back to our humility and compassion for ourselves and others. Again, I am not advocating abuse of oneself or others here. Just allowing ourselves and others a little more room to live into ourselves.

This reminds me of an ad for a chocolate bar by R. Crumb called “Devil Girl Choco-Bar: It’s Bad for you, Seven Evils in One.” It lists the evils on the wrapper which include: delicious taste, quick cheap buzz, bad for your health, leads to hard drugs...”³

We have gotten so good at marketing pleasure, ease, rest, and even celebration as bad for us while at the same time naming them as the only way to achieve the American dream. No wonder we’re anxious!

That is the other lesson I learned reading Mogul. That self doubt can also be an over indulgence that erases blessings too. And to erase a blessing given, to deny the beauty and possibility and hope of a moment because we are too filled with guilt or regret or self doubt, is to live away from life, to deny our worth and dignity and the worth and dignity of others too.

If we were all to receive our blessings and give a blessing in return, our world would be a much different place.

Mogel writes, “In Judaism, the purpose of eating is partly to fuel ourselves to serve God and partly to force ourselves to enjoy what God has provided.”⁴

I love that imagery, in my translation, that we engage in these acts of living because they give us something essential, something that we need to survive: food, love, exercise, community, engagement with nature...and because they remind us to give thanks for the richness of life, for what we have.

I had a lesson about all of this recently when facilitating the immigration task force meeting last week. It was a good and fruitful meeting. Many recent immigrants attended and we Anglos asked what we could do together to build community and hope and safety. One leader from the immigrant community told us that what would be most useful is if we could create an Immigrant Informational Center and house it in our churches, maybe a different church every month or the same church and staff it with leaders from the immigration

² I am grateful for this insight from the sermon by Rev. Anna Levy-Lyons, “Moderation, Celebration, Sanctification” November 25, 2012 http://www.fuub.org/home/clergy/sermons/?sermon_id=87

³ Mogul, 166.

⁴ Mogul, 166.

community and others. I will be bringing this to the Interfaith Council next month to ask for their ideas and support and bringing here to our board too to see if we could become one of those churches.

There were other ideas about potlucks and social events. Much energy was generated. We heard a lot about the sorrow being carried by immigrant children and youth on island, how they don't feel home here, or safe, how they feel afraid and anxious.

Near the end of the meeting, I took the clipboard we had been passing around and handed it to the recent immigrants present and asked for their names and emails. I did not say I do this so that I can be in touch about the next meeting. I just gave the clip board that had at the top: Name and Email. I noticed that few people put anything down on the sheet.

After the meeting, someone from the recent immigrant community told me that he invited many people to come to the meeting but so many said they did not trust the gathering and that they heard they had to write down their names too.

As I fell asleep that night, I felt so much regret. To imagine that the norm for us, in this context, the ease in offering our names and emails, is the norm for all others, is a condition of white privilege. How many classes and lectures had I taken and even facilitated on white privilege? How could I miss this?

And of course, not being trusted as an Anglo community is so painful too; to hold that, to be with that, to own it is hard work of reckoning.

There were lessons to learn in the discomfort I experienced about my actions. I need to be more aware, I need to spend more time at dinner tables and worship services with folks from the recent immigrant community. I need to become a better friend, colleague and ally. That is when self doubt and regret is instructive, when it teaches.

But then I pushed it too far, I let go of the value of moderation and let the self doubt tempt me to destroy the blessing and my experience of it. How sad that would have been, to take this gift of being human together, this tenderness of our meeting here, where we gathered as Latinos, Brazilians and Anglos and shared ideas and listened and heard each other and make it into less than it was.

When I was able to recognize that, I was able to tell a story of being a learner, a partner, a fellow traveler who is growing on the journey, and I was able to celebrate the blessing, and sleep. And then to wake the next day to continue the work. That's part of it too right? Immersing ourselves enough in the blessings around us so we can continue to do the work of justice.

Our faith tradition as Unitarian Universalists leads us on this path too. To deny ourselves pleasure, communion with others and the consequent growth and mistakes and learning that engagement with the world has to bring- is to truncate the blessings of being human

that we affirm, that we celebrate, that we lift up as full of worth and dignity, that so many before us have given or devoted their lives to affirming.

The last principle that Mogul offers us that leads to a non-anxious, blessed life is sanctification. In Judaism, the simple becomes holy, or sanctified, when we apply our humanity to it fully.⁵ In other words, when we show up at our meals or coffee hour, or our meetings, or our times with our children, our partners, or friends and we give ourselves to them with our intentional presence, noticing them for what they are: gifts to us without which our lives would be so much less, then the things or the people are elevated, are sanctified, as we are.

According to a website called Bible Study Tools, a site I do not frequent often but that I metaphorically useful in this context: "The generic meaning of sanctification is "the state of proper functioning." To sanctify someone or something is to set that person or thing apart for the use intended by its designer. A pen is "sanctified" when used to write. Eyeglasses are "sanctified" when used to improve sight. In the theological sense, things are sanctified when they are used (for the purpose for which God intended them)".⁶

What is the purpose for which we are intended? I would say we are intended for the purpose of being fully awake to the love and blessing around and within us.

When we can live with presence with each other, moderating not only the things that keep us from ourselves and each other but also the ways we punish ourselves when we fail to live into our highest goals, then we can find the heart to celebrate the moment, calling it the blessing it is and therefore making it and each other holy, sanctified, enough.

There is a little book called the Tao of Pooh. I will be using it from time to time this month for inspiration.

I will close with a quote from it:

"What would we call that moment before we begin to eat honey? Some would call it anticipation, but we think it's more than that. We would call it awareness. It's when you become happy and realize it, if only for an instant. By Enjoying the Process, we can stretch that awareness out so that it's no longer only a moment, but covers the whole thing.

"As the poet Lu Yu wrote:

The clouds above us join and separate
The breeze in the courtyard leaves and returns.
Life is like that, so why not relax?

⁵ Mogul, 170.

⁶ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/sanctification/>

Who can stop us from celebrating?"⁷

Moderation, celebration, sanctification: may we be blessed with this rhythm and spread the joy and courage born of awareness thick on this beautiful and broken world so in need of our love and presence.

Amen.

⁷ Benjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh (New York: Penguin Group, 1982) 112, 113.