

**L'Eggo My Ego**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**  
**August 9, 2015**

Each year, Unitarian Universalists gather in the thousands for what we call the General Assembly.

This year, it was in Portland, Oregon.

Next year, by the way, is Columbus, Ohio,  
so mark your calendar for the third week of June and plan to go.

Two years ago, we were in Louisville and I arrived . . . distressed.

It was clear to me that the changes in the life of the church  
were not a short post-recession blip, but something bigger.

And at that meeting, guess what?

Everyone was talking about the same thing!

I was so reassured.

It wasn't just me.

We were smart, good people, all asking the same questions.

I felt so much better.

Last year, when we gathered in Providence Rhode Island,  
folks shared what they were doing.

Experiments. Ideas. New innovations.

I left feeling like, wow, we have such good leaders trying their best to figure  
this out.

I felt so much better.

This year, folks talked about... failure.

What?

Failure, vulnerability, pain, and loss.

Turns out that some experiments don't work.

And you know what, it hurts.

One of my friends, Ian, started a beautiful new church community in Brooklyn.

He was doing amazing ministry, gathering young people,  
touching lives, reaching out.

But the money didn't work out, and he burned out,  
and is taking a break.

He spoke to us about how much it hurts.

One preacher spoke of how the deep and horrible tragedy of his life  
shaped him for justice,

and how being vulnerable — not knowing what to do —

was essential, as a white man, for his groundbreaking work for racial justice.

Another preacher spoke of how she hid, for years, the arm affected by  
childhood cancer,

thinking her brokenness made her weak, unworthy.

Only when she came to see that arm as her healing arm,

fully part of her,

could she move toward spiritual aliveness.

And she too drew the line to the work of justice:

we cannot do the work as if we were "whole" and those we wish to help are broken.

We are all broken and whole at once,  
we all fail.

And my friend, the minister in McHenry, Sean Dennison,  
spoke of how failure is not an option.

As in, we have to fail, and admit our failures.  
Not just to learn from,  
but to be real.

The world is so fake, and authenticity - admitting that we are broken, hurting,  
wounded, imperfect -  
this is the only path to spiritual healing.

It was interesting to me how the conversation goes.  
From "What shall we do?" to "Let's try this" to "Let's be real about how it hurts  
when it doesn't work."

And that got me thinking about ego.  
Vulnerability, honesty, failure, these are hard things for the ego.

Ego is a strange thing.

Some parts of American culture, in particular, love a great big ego.  
The bigger the better.  
The Larger than Life character dominates some parts of our imagination.  
Paul Bunyan. Jay Gatsby. Dirty Harry. Donald Trump.

Some folks love a big ego.  
Someone whose over-confidence spills out and makes us feel confident too.  
Or at least, some of us.

But there's enough of the ancient Greek in us to know how it ends.  
Icarus flies too close to the sun, his wings melt, and he falls to his death.  
Admit it, some of you turned on the debate Thursday night  
because part of you wanted that Icarus moment.  
*Schadenfreude*, the Germans call it - pleasure in the misfortune of others.  
They'll get their comeuppance, we think.  
Hugo and his huge head -  
he'll learn the hard way to not have such an ego.  
And, in that story, it works out in just the right mythological way:  
the now humble servant is changed forever and becomes lovable and kind.  
Happily ever after.

If only it always worked that way, right?

More often than not, I think, we jump between too much ego and too little.  
I so resonate with the words of Rinpoche:

"One minute we're feeling pretty smart and sure of ourselves, and the next minute we're feeling totally inadequate or guilty about something."

Brother, preach it.

That is my experience.

One minute I feel pretty smart.

One of you says something nice about the sermon, something goes right, and I think,

that's so great.

I'm pretty great.

Then someone complains, rightly so, and I feel terrible.

It's not just church.

In the morning, I run and feel so healthy.

Then I have 3 or 4 or 10 thin mints and feel like a slob.

My kids are happy and well, and I feel like a pretty good dad, overall, and I go to change the laundry and come back to find them yelling at each other,

one of them on the floor kicking their feet,

and think, god, I'm horrible at this.

And don't even get me starting on what dating does to the ego.

Lord have mercy.

My great temptation - and I don't think I'm alone in this -

my great temptation is to bow down before the altar of competence.

How did Stuart Smalley put it:

"I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me."

This is the ego:

If I do good enough work, people will like me. And I'll matter.

But the flip side is ego too:

I'm not good enough. I don't count.

Shame, guilt — it is a kind of ego, too.

To think, "Why is the universe conspiring against me?"

Really, the whole universe?

Maybe it's just bad luck?

When we ride the roller coaster of ego,

we'll always be going up or going down.

Sometimes we'll lose our lunch.

It might be exciting, but I'm not sure it is very healthy.

I take that back.

I know it isn't.

I know it isn't because I've spent a lot of my life doing it.

And since I'm not a character in a children's picture book,

I suspect I'll never be cured.

I'll always have to work at it -

to let the ego slide away,

to just be in the world,

take it as it comes, feel the rhythm,

remember that my ability to speak before thousands does not make me worthy,  
nor does my inability to sing like angels make me worthless -  
it is to be guided, as much as possible, by love,  
that is worthy of my life.

Now, I've shared all this about myself -  
more than I usually do with you -  
because I know that I am not alone in this.  
I know you people.  
So many of us have adopted this attitude.  
We strive to be good enough, to be competent.  
Useful, and respected.  
We'll be vulnerable, but only the right amount.  
Geez.

Any of you ever feel this way?  
Riding the roller coast of ego?  
Thinking if you are good enough you'll be loved?  
Thinking you're no good because you had a setback or two or ten?  
Any of you ever feel this way?

Any of you ever think to yourself,  
something like,  
L'eggo my ego!

Like you just can't take the ups and downs?

Feeling so large one moment - a god, the force that moves the moon,  
and feeling so small the next - just a mirco-dot on the surface of a rotating  
rock.

I don't know about you, but this is one major reason why I need church.  
Why I need religion.  
Why I need spirituality, and tradition, and the teachings of faith.

Most of the religions of the world have ways to help us step off the roller  
coaster of ego.  
To let go of our clinging, unhealthy attachment to how we are perceived by  
others,  
or how we are perceived by ourselves.

Religion, usually, reminds us that we are not as important as we think we are,  
but neither are we as useless as we think we are.  
In the language of the Christian church, that we are not God, but we are made  
in the image of God.  
That you must lay aside your ego, your possessions and your desires,  
to take up a cross and follow.

In earth-centered traditions - including in religious naturalism - we put it in  
other terms:  
that the universe is so big, to gaze at the stars and stand on the sea -

oh, the majesty can overwhelm us,  
and yet, miracle, we are made of that star dust,  
and all the energy and matter of the universe is one pulsing living thing,  
including us.

But of course, the religion that has spent the most time thinking about the  
myth of ego,  
and how to let go of it, is Buddhism.  
The Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was a prince.  
He lived sky-high in a castle.  
Like Hugo, he thought he was pretty important.  
But he had no idea about the world.  
He had all the treasures, beautiful women, rich food, everything.  
And one day, he went out of the palace and into the city  
and saw something he had never seen before:  
suffering.  
Poverty, illness, death.

His ego was shattered.  
How can this be?

He left the palace.  
But he did not become the Buddha yet.  
No, first, he joined a religious movement that taught deprivation.  
They said, everyone is unworthy.  
They ate almost nothing, had no joy, no pleasure.  
He almost wasted away.  
He sublimated himself into almost nothingness.  
But suffering did not go away.

Then, sitting under a Bodhi tree,  
he realized something:  
he was clinging to his ego in the palace, thinking he was wonderful.  
And he was clinging to his ego as a beggar, thinking he was horrible.  
The cause of suffering wasn't the ego,  
it was clinging to the ego.  
Being attached to what we, or others, think of us.  
Instead, become un-attached.  
Observe, notice.  
Be filled with loving kindness.  
Not because folks will respect you more or even because you'll respect yourself  
more,  
but just because.  
For yourself, for others, for everyone.  
Be filled with loving kindness.  
Without attachment.

The key neurological insight here, by the way, is right -  
thousands of years before we had MRI's, the Buddha understood the human  
mind pretty well.  
Each moment of existence is separate,

and it is the power of our memory that tells us that we are an "I", a "me, and "mine."

But mind, actually, exists in the interplay between our own brain, the nerves of the body, and the world around us. This doesn't mean we don't have individuality, or bodily integrity;

but it does mean that there is no "I" apart from "we", no existence outside of the interdependent world.

And so many of the things that we feel good about or bad about really aren't in our control, anyway.

Things just happen, sometimes.

If we can accept it, without internalizing everything as a referendum on our worth,

we'll be so much more at ease.

This is not easy!

As any Buddhist will be the first to tell you.

A Buddhist teacher is reputed to say,

"I meditate one hour every morning, to let go of attachment and ego and be at peace."

And what do you do, she was asked, when you have a lot to do that day?

"Oh, then I meditate for two hours."

It's hard work!

Letting go of attachment to ego takes daily reminders, spiritual practice.

You can't just think it and have it happen.

I find the insights of Buddhism to be very helpful.

I try to let go of my clinging to the ego.

I even read a book last year, "If the Buddha Dated" which was very helpful.

Enjoy the moment, don't cling to what doesn't work - good stuff.

Not easy, but useful.

But I'm not, in the end, a Buddhist.

It's helpful, but where I, personally, find my ability to let go of ego, to get off the roller coaster, is in love.

The love, not of a single person per se,

as good as that can sometimes be,

but in the love of the holy.

The sacred.

Which is enacted, most of all, in the love of my closest and truest friends.

In her testimony, Susan spoke how her friends and family got her through the lows of ego,

and we've been there, right?

So many of us?

Some lows lower than others, but we've all be there.

And the love of friends –

the real ones, the ones who are with you when you are down and when you are up -

goodness, that's everything.

Love no matter what.

That's how I think of the holy,

love no matter what.

We're gonna sit at the welcome table,

all kinds of people.

We're gonna sit at the welcome table.

I used to love that song because I thought I was the host -

I was the one who loved everyone and set the table,

but then someone said, no, no, you are the guest.

God is the host.

Or, the earth, life itself, but you are the guest.

I am the guest.

We are the guests.

And we need not have a fancy style to sit down and be fed.

I am enough.

You are enough.

We are enough.

Life comes and goes.

There are times of joy, and times to cry.

We learn to bend, like the willow in the wind.

Learn to take it as it passes by.

And dance in the presence of mystery, dance to the rhythm of a deeper love,

let go of needing to be good and let go of feeling bad,

and just be, and just dance, and just sing.