

First Unitarian Church

October 25, 2020

We are in the final week of October, which makes this the last Sunday for our theological theme of Deep Listening. So far this month, I have preached about transformative listening; Bob gave a sermon about listening in Beloved Conversations; and last week, Christine encouraged us to listen to ourselves, to the wisdom within.

Today, I want to talk about something that is a natural part of every one of us, but which can prevent us from all of these kinds of deep listening if we are not aware of it. I am talking about our egos.

There are many different definitions out there of what an ego is, some more complicated than others. At its most basic, the word ego is simply Latin for "I." As in me. I. It is the part of us that has a sense of being a self that is separate or different from everything else. In that sense, what we call the ego is not a thing, but a way of perceiving. In reality, we aren't as separate from everything else as our egos would suggest, right? Our bodies are made up of the same water, carbon, etc as everything else, and they are part of the same cycles as other living beings. Yet we have this mysterious, built-in sense of self. We say, "I." The philosopher Martin Buber observed that we relate to everything as either I-Thou or I-it. I-Thou, meaning I-*you*, is how we relate to other beings. I-It is how we relate to objects. Either way, whether we are relating to a being or to an object, we humans are relational through and through. That's because of the ego.

And if that's all an ego was, we could leave it with the philosophers, right?

"I" would just be a mode in which we relate to other beings and to the world. Instead, though, that "I" becomes elaborate. We develop an identity around it and a complex sense of who that self is. When a person's sense of their self becomes their primary focus, and they direct attention back to it all the time, and they start to want their self not only to be the focus but also to be better than other people's selves, then we say they have a *big* ego. I'll bet you can think of someone right now who has a big ego. Ugh.

The secret behind a big ego, though, is that it's built around a need to not be ordinary. It rests on a belief that one must be better/stronger/more successful/whatever than others, that anything less is not acceptable. In this way, it is built around a terrible fear of inadequacy, insecurity, and often, around self-loathing. An overinflated ego has disdain for the ordinary, vulnerable person within.

That's why the biggest egos are often also the most fragile and the most ferocious. Challenge the ego that is very fragile, the one with fear right below the surface, and that person will be very reactive. That ego turns into a monster. Anything to avoid looking ordinary.

The ego hides vulnerability. That's true with the big, obvious ego-maniacs, and they are easy to spot. But it's also true (often in sneakier ways) for the rest of us.

In *Rising Strong*, Brene Brown writes:

Our ego is the part of us that cares about our status and what people think, about always being better than and always being right. I think of my ego as my inner hustler. It's always telling me to compare, prove, please, perfect, outperform, and compete. Our inner hustlers have very little tolerance for discomfort or self-reflection. ...The ego has a shame-based fear of being ordinary...

There's that fear of being ordinary—it's true for lots of people, not just people with obviously big egos. It doesn't help that we are constantly bombarded with advertising and cultural messaging that says we are not enough. Brene Brown continues:

Avoiding truth and vulnerability are critical parts of the hustle. Like all good hustlers, our egos employ crews of ruffians in case we don't comply with their demands. Anger, blame, and avoidance are the ego's bouncers. When we get too close to recognizing an experience as an emotional one, these three spring into action. It's much easier to say, "I don't give a damn," than it is to say, "I'm hurt." The ego likes blaming, finding fault, making excuses, inflicting payback, and lashing out, all of which are ultimate forms of self-protection. The ego is also a fan of avoidance—assuring the offender that we're fine, pretending that it doesn't matter, that we're impervious.

Now, it's not wrong to have an ego. Remember, in its basic form the ego is just your perception of having a self. "I." It's part of being a human. It's why our lives are precious to us, and because it makes us relational, it makes us precious to each other. In fact, in one story from the Buddhist canon, the ego is portrayed as the basis for compassion toward others. Here's how it was recounted in an article in the Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle*:

King Pasenadi, in a tender moment with... Queen Mallika, asks her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" He's anticipating, of course, that she'll answer, "Yes, your majesty. You." ... But this is the Pali canon, and Queen Mallika is no ordinary queen. She answers, "No, your majesty, there isn't. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" The king, forced into an honest answer, has to admit, "No, there's not." Later he reports this conversation to the Buddha, who responds in an interesting way:

Searching all directions  
with one's awareness,  
one finds no one dearer  
than oneself.  
In the same way, others  
are fiercely dear to themselves.  
So one should not hurt others  
if one loves oneself.<sup>i</sup>

The Buddhist canon consists of thousands of stories, and through them Buddhism arrives at the golden rule from many angles. I think this really is an interesting one.

We all have egos and that's not bad. The ego is only a problem when it becomes a barrier to connection, growth, authenticity, self-acceptance, and love.

What we need is a strong, right-sized ego, rather than a big, fragile one. What does that mean?

The Buddhist teacher Robert Thurman says: "The key... in the Buddhist sense, is not dissolving but developing the ego into a more flexible and permeable ego. This is considered a strong ego, capable of both surrender and function. The weak ego is the rigid, defensive one."<sup>ii</sup>

A strong ego is capable both of surrender and function. It is flexible, and permeable. If the ego is our sense of self, then to have a strong ego is to have a sense of self that's flexible. Not in an extreme way. I don't mean your sense of self has to change with the wind. But flexible in terms of being open and accepting. Accepting of our growing edges, as well our maturity. Of our ordinariness, as well as what makes us unique. Of our vulnerability, as well as our resilience and strength.

It's usually easy to see when someone else's ego flares up. How do we know when our own egos are getting in the way?

Well, we can keep an eye out for the "ruffians" Brene Brown described. Anger, blame, avoidance, finding fault, making excuses, inflicting payback, and lashing out.

In addition, one of my favorite ways to catch my ego in action is to ask myself, what are you afraid of right now?

For example, I ask myself this whenever I feel nervous about public speaking. I used to drive the whole eight minutes from my house to church on Sunday mornings with such a stomach ache. Now that I have a shorter commute it's a lot less painful, but whenever I feel nervous on a Sunday before church, I still ask myself, "What are you afraid of right now?"

What makes us all afraid of public speaking—or other ways of putting ourselves out there? It's that others will see that we aren't that great, right? If I preach this sermon, deliver this presentation, or try to start this new business, or let my artwork be seen publicly, or \_\_\_\_\_. Others may see that it, that *I*, am not very good. Or not good every time. Or am still learning. If we are more attached to our egos than to our other goals, it blocks us from sharing our gifts, and from learning through failure, which is surely the only way to become wiser, kinder, and spiritually larger.

Sometimes the things that challenge our egos are small in the grand scheme of things. Sometimes they even make good stories later, but they are still rich learning moments.

In our reading this morning, Vanessa Rush Southern discovers the alarm that has been going off for the last hour was in her own pocket.

I sat down to brainstorm some of the moments in my own life that have been blows to my ego, or at least taken it down a notch.

A bunch of it was like a litany of comedy.

There was the night in Oregon, when I called 911 because I thought someone was hanging off the side of a building. When the firetruck arrived and shined a light on the scene, it turned out to be a mural of a rock climber. Question your perceptions!

Also on the list, the day I ran a charity 5k race. I came in last. So last, that when I got to the end they were literally rolling up the finish line and I yelled, "Wait!" There had been someone behind me for a while, but they gave up. That quitter was a big chicken! I told myself, obviously to shore up my ego. I have been a runner my whole adult life, you guys.

Another time I was running around the UNM golf course when a little bird did some loop-de-loops right in front of me and as I smiled at the sweetness of it, I tripped and did a full faceplant in the dirt. "Are you okay?" An oncoming runner called. "Everything but my ego," I replied.

I've also done face plants on the La Luz trail and a trail on Mt. Hood. I know, most of you are used to seeing me walk confidently across the sanctuary platform wearing high heels. I have been waiting for ten years to fall on that platform.

But other things on my list get more at the core of who I am and how I want to be in the world. Like realizing, when my kids were in high school, that the time for midcourse corrections in parenting was over. And that while I hoped I would continue to grow throughout my life, the parenting they'd remember from their childhood was already done.

How many memorial services have I led, where the children of the deceased had a completely different experience than everyone who met that person in later years? In some cases, they may even have had children at two different times in their lives, and it was as though the two sets of siblings had two different parents in the same person. Sometimes our growth makes our past shortcomings painfully obvious.

But the best relationships happen when we are open, permeable, accepting; when we can acknowledge our face plants as well as our more gradual failures.

On Friday, I had a conversation with a member of our congregation who is near the end of her life. We had hoped she would have many more years left, but it is not to be. And as I often do at end of life visits, I shared with her four things people may want to say to each other as part of their goodbyes. The four things are:

I love you

Thank you for loving me

I forgive you

And, please forgive me.

These are things that cut right past the problem parts of our egos and go straight to our love for each another.

There are only a couple of minutes left in this sermon. As I was writing it, I went oh god, Angela, how are you going to end the sermon now? It's the week before the election! You can't end a sermon with death!

And yet, what could be more healing now than this most humble, compassionate way of relating to ourselves and to each other? And we don't have to wait for the end of our lives for that.

What I know is true, is that regardless of what happens in the days and weeks to come, the world we dream of is going to be built through that kind of care between ordinary people. Through care and through a lot of other things, but what I'm saying is the world we dream of cannot be built without humility and compassion and mindfulness about our egos.

That's where my hope is. You are precious to me. And it's good to be together.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://tricycle.org/magazine/healthy-ego/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://tricycle.org/magazine/re-when-you-speak-letting-go-ego-what-ego-you-are-talking-about-letting-go/>