

A Complaint Free World

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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A young monk entered an order in which the brothers lived in total silence. Only the abbot could grant permission for a monk to speak. It was five years before the abbot approached the novice and offered him the opportunity to speak just two words.

Choosing his words carefully, the young monk said, “Hard bed.” With genuine concern, the abbot apologized for the uncomfortable bed and promised to try and find him a better one.

Another five years passed before the abbot came again to the monk and said, “You may speak two more words.”

Again, the monk gave it great thought and said softly, “cold food.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” replied the abbot.

On the fifteenth anniversary of the monk’s entering the order, the abbot granted him two more words.

“I quit,” said the monk.

“It’s probably for the best,” replied the abbot. “You’ve done nothing but gripe since you got here.”

And how is it with your spirit? I have always considered myself a pretty positive person. I generally look on the bright side of things. Or so I thought. About four years ago, a colleague gave me this purple plastic bracelet from the Complaint Free World organization. The bracelet is a tool to help you stop complaining by becoming more aware of what you say and how you say it. The more I began to pay attention to the words I spoke and the thoughts behind them the more I realized how much I complain, how much of what I put into the world is negative. That is not the person I thought I was, nor the person I want to be.

But with one thing and another, the bracelet ended up in a drawer. Until last month. At that time, I found myself in a series of interactions with someone (not a member of this church, I hasten to add lest you all start looking at each other, or at your feet), I found myself interacting with a person so negative that they could barely communicate information for all the complaints clogging their speech. It was like a cloud of toxic gas coming at me and I actually started to physically back away from this person. Now, any of us can have a bad day, but this occurred over a period of time and multiple interactions. So out came the bracelet. I’ll never change the other person, but I sure don’t want people backing away from me because I have verbal bad breath so I decided to change myself. Become the change you want to see in the world, as Gandhi counseled.

I decided to make this change because I like being connected to people, and I don't want to alienate them with my negativity, but there are other reasons why complaining is not that great a strategy. One is the effect it can have on your health. Stress has been shown to play a large role in the disease process and complaining is part of the stress cycle, keeping you focused on your discontent. Doctors estimate that 67% of illnesses are a result of "thinking sick."¹ In a holistic mind-body-spirit view, a negative attitude expressed through complaints is not merely a function of thought and speech, but resides in your body and spirit. If we are what we eat, we are equally what we think and say.

Our relationships, like our health, are influenced by how we think and how we communicate. If that doesn't seem self evident enough, a study by Dr. J. K. Alperets entitled "A Descriptive Taxonomy of Couples' Complaint Interactions" says that "diverse research indicates that negativity and negative communication are positively correlated with relational dissatisfaction." In other words, unhappy relationships are wedded to complaining.

Our relationships with spouses, partners, co-workers and peers are one thing, but think for a moment about our relationships with children. We know children learn behaviors from what they see, and learn speech from what they hear. Children become, over time, just like the adults they see. Do we, whether parents or uncles or grandmothers or dad's best friend from college, want to raise a new generation of complainers who see the world through a haze of our dissatisfaction?

The ultimate end point of negativity, of course, is violence. Not only physical violence, though that too of course, but the violence of speech we can inflict on each other. A couple years ago we held a very successful workshop on non-violent communication and part of that was considering how the violence of our speech escalates the violence in the world. Complaints are not a form of non-violent communication. As Thich Nhat Hanh counseled in our reading this morning we can choose whether to nurture the seeds of peace within us, or the seeds of violence. Complaints are the seeds of violence.

You might be thinking that complaining plays a valid and important role in establishing boundaries, that if you remove complaining from your repertoire people will be free to run all over you because you won't be able to express when their actions are harming you. Becoming complaint free, like using other non-violent forms of communication, does not allow other people free rein at your expense, it merely changes the way you express your boundaries. Instead of berating or belittling someone for what they did, you request a different behavior. You have never complained anyone, including yourself, into making a positive change so you might as well try a different technique.

But you are also right, that there is indeed a time for complaining. All progress begins with dissatisfaction. Great Britain would still rule India if Gandhi and millions of others hadn't voiced dissatisfaction. Great Britain would probably still rule us if no one had complained! We wouldn't have civil rights, women wouldn't vote and equal marriage wouldn't even be up for debate if no one had complained. But the key is to move out of dissatisfaction with what *is* by presenting a vision of what *can be*. Complaining keeps us stuck in what is wrong when what we really want is to move forward to what is right.

¹ Bowen, Will, *A Complaint Free World*, p. 53

Webster's defines complaining as the expression of grief, pain or discontent. There are times when we should and must express all of those, but to remain stuck in any of them is to live disconnected from life. The average person complains 15 to 30 times a day. I am going to guess that the average person does not have 15-30 true experiences of grief, pain or discontent on the average day. I know I don't, so why am I communicating that as my reality by complaining?

There must be *something* we get out of it to keep us doing it. Oh, indeed there is. Dr. Robin Kowalski of Clemson University identified five reasons, five payoffs we get from complaining. They can be organized by the handy mnemonic device GRIPE.

G –get attention: We complain to get others to pay attention to us and, if possible, give us a positive response, “My arm is killing me!” “Nobody likes me; I’m such a failure.”

R –remove responsibility. We complain to shift responsibility to someone or something else, “You can’t fight city hall.” “The dog ate my homework”

I – inspire envy by making others look bad so you will look good, “My boss is so stupid” really means “I’m so much smarter; I could do a much better job.

P – power, This can be establishing power over someone, “Look what you did! You completely ruined it!” Power can also be about building coalitions to gang up on others, as in political campaigns, “My opponent is a liar and a cheat.”

And finally

E – excuse poor performance, “The sun was in my eyes.” “I would have been on time but the traffic was bumper to bumper.”

All of these reasons may work, we may get a modicum of attention, power, envy; we may be able to avoid taking responsibility, but at what cost? I ask myself whether these are ways of presenting myself with integrity and if the payoff is worth my happiness. Constant complaining not only irritates those around you, it lowers your own happiness as your world becomes one big dissatisfaction. Complaining, after all, is a competitive sport, and if you complain someone is going to have to out complain you. If you don't believe that try telling a story of missing a plane or of a fender bender you had. Everyone present has a story to top yours. And pretty soon you have the world's biggest ball of complaint.

In the reading Janine shared earlier Mike Carmichael created a ball of paint that weighs 3,500 pounds. That's as much as my car weighs. Each layer of paint is an average .001037 inches thick. That's about 26 microns. Nothing! How could that possibly make any difference in the world? Each little complaint is so negligible. How could it make any difference in your life? How could it make any difference in your level of happiness? So the weather's lousy and traffic is a nightmare and service in the restaurant stinks. What do a few little complaints hurt?

Emerson said that “mental health is the disposition to find good everywhere.” If that's true, some of us are in real trouble. Last Tuesday I went to the orthopedist for the halfway check on my arm. When I arrived a very harassed looking receptionist sort of shied back as she said, “I gotta tell you the doctor is running an hour late. You can stay, or leave and come back, or reschedule. It's up to you.” I had to finish reading the *Complaint Free World* book for this morning so I stayed and read. But in the hour I waited I saw a lot of really unhappy people snarl at that poor receptionist for something I doubt very much was her fault. If those people were hoping to shorten the wait or improve her job performance they did not get their wish.

So in I go to my appointment, a quick x-ray and then back to the exam room to wait for the doctor. Before he entered I could hear him whispering in concerned tones outside the door. When he came in he was terribly apologetic that the technicians had taken the wrong x-rays and he would have to cut the cast off to exam my arm and recast it. He says this backing away from me the whole time. And then, all but wincing in anticipated pain from the blow, he says, "Or you could go back to x-ray." "Well, let's do that then!" I said and I swear I could have knocked him over with a feather. After more apologizing took place, he left and I could hear him say to the practice manager just outside the door in a tone of surprise, "She seems OK with it!" Clearly he did not know that I had been occupying my time read *A Complaint Free World* and was anticipating the wrath of the cranky patient to rain down upon him. There was lots more apologizing before I left and I do appreciate that they weren't taking my time for granted, but how sad that everyone in the office was so tense anticipating a day full of complaints. It made me preternaturally sunny to them all as if to try and compensate for what in the past might well have been my reaction of complaints.

So, if we want to change this pattern, if we want to decrease our complaining and increase our happiness, what do we do? Simply, we are mindful of what we say, for what we say shapes our lives and tells others what we expect from them. And as we are mindful of what we say we become mindful of what we think and change comes. Perhaps slowly, but it comes.

If being mindful is difficult for you as it is for me the Complaint Free World bracelets can help. Experts say that if you do something for 21 days it becomes a habit, so the goal is to go 21 consecutive days without complaining. You simply start on day 1 with the bracelet on either wrist and when you catch yourself complaining, move it to the other wrist and reset your counter back to day 1 and begin again. I should mention that it is not as simple as progressing from day 1 to day 2 to day 3 and you are done in 21 days. Every time you complain the counter is reset to day 1 so the pattern is more like day 1, day 1, day 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 1, 1, 2, 3, 1 and so on. It takes on average 10 months for people to go complaint free.

Want to try? I have bracelets available here if you want to join me in the quest of greater happiness. If you are not sure now, you can start at any time and use a rubber band or keep a coin in your pocket. Whatever helps. You can schedule gratitude breaks in your day to spend just 30 seconds thinking about what you are thankful for or you can keep a gratitude journal because we can't complain and be grateful at the same time. Or you can adopt the words of Maya Angelou as your personal motto: "If you don't like something change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain."

So if you want to join me on the quest to become complaint free, come on up and get a bracelet. If we run out, I'll get more. In the fall I'll do another service about right speech and we can all check in on how we are doing. For now, come on up and get happy. May you all have a complaint free day.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.