

## Complaint Free World Redux

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL

September 15, 2013

OK, it's check in time to see how we are doing nurturing our relationships, increasing our happiness and strengthening our health! Back in the spring we distributed 70 of these purple plastic bracelets as aids to help us complain less on the knowledge that chronic complaining damages all three – relationships, happiness and health. The idea was that every time we caught ourselves complaining we were to switch the bracelet to the other arm as an exercise in mindfulness. Our goal: to reach 30 consecutive days without complaints, sarcasm or gossip. So how did we all do?

When we began, I had not a purple bracelet, but a purple cast on my arm so I used a rubber band that would fit over the cast. This turned out to be both cheating and helpful as I realized that having a rubber band around your wrist all day was uncomfortable. A rubber band on your cast, however, is no great inconvenience, though I did remove it to perform Bre and Ana's wedding based on the tacky factor. But otherwise, I went to extraordinary lengths not to move it off the cast. Made it to 12 consecutive days without complaint before the cast came off, and with the cast went the rubber band and with the rubber band went the mindfulness. Did not even think about it again until August when I began to put the worship calendar together and had to start all over again. So I'm on day 1. That's how *I* did.

Even though I didn't reach 30 consecutive days in the 105 days since the first sermon, I did learn a lot about my patterns of complaining. First, I resort to sarcasm more often than I outright complain so that is one of my personal challenges, the drive to be witty at another's expense. Secondly, I noticed that I complain to and with the same people. The good news is that I don't complain much to strangers but rather in relationships where I feel more comfortable and more closely connected. The bad news is that I complain to the people with whom I feel most comfortable and most connected. It reminds me of an old Mills Brothers song, "You Always Hurt the One You Love." My father played that album frequently and it took me years to understand that lyric when I was a kid. I get it now alright.

But enough about me. How did y'all do? Lisa Flanagan shared her experience in these words:

After weeks of switching from my right to left wrist, and back again, nearly every day, sometimes several (like 12) times a day, I have resigned myself to keeping it (mostly) on my right wrist. Now, it sits as an awareness tool, so that when I do complain (often), I glance down at my purple bracelet and say to myself, "There I go again!" I like my purple bracelet. I wear it with an aqua-colored one that supports breast cancer survivors. I like wearing both together because they look cute and colorful. Sometimes people ask me what they're for, and I tell them. If they're not a UU, they cock their heads slightly, smile, and exit the conversation; or at least *that* part of the conversation. "Just another California weirdo," they may be thinking. And, that is true. I am a California weirdo who wears stretchy bracelets that remind me that breast cancer survivors are some of the strongest people in the world, and

that complaining is bad, wrong, abhorrent, and very socially acceptable.

Also, my dog, Simon, likes to try to chew on my bracelets. They seem to be virtually indestructible, which confirms my belief in them. I vow NOT to complain about things unless I am also coming up with a solution to the problems, but, alas, I usually end up just plain complaining. I'm pretty good at it. Actually, it's a finely honed tool in my toolbox. I'm not being proud, just honest.

And that is my story on my purple, Complaint Free World bracelet.

Not everyone was a fan of the purple plastic jewelry. This is what your Church President Kathy Packard had to say:

Here are the results of my attempt to live complaint-free: I didn't get very far—a few days and then I would regress again. Therefore, I am not consciously trying to continue this program—it's too discouraging. But I continue to wear the bracelet as a reminder, and it has kept my mouth shut a few times when I was tempted to say the wrong thing. I never used the purple bracelet but one of my own. Just this week I changed to a different bracelet because the clasp was difficult to release at the end of the day. But I still think the reminder to speak fewer complaints is worth the effort and will make me a better person and the world a better place.

So let's hear from a few others. The Oblinger-Hammond family tried to cut back on complaints as a family. Ripley will share how that experience went.

-----RIPLEY-----

Barbara Heyl will now share her experience.

-----BARBARA-----

So I hope you heard some common threads in there. Not everybody did it the same way, not everyone had the same feelings about the experience, but everyone struggled with it. And I think that's good. It means there was some commitment there, otherwise at the first sign this might take some effort you would pitch it in the garbage. Did we all succeed? Well, yeah, in a way I think we did because it brought awareness to what we say, how we say it and the effect it has on others. Did we all prove anything? Yes, I think we pretty well demonstrated that change is hard. Change can be, oh, so slow and change is hard. But change is also easier and more fun in community.

In community you have someone to share the journey with, to encourage and support you, to call you gently back to covenant, and best of all, in a group, our slips and stumbles become comedy rather than tragedy. In a group you can more easily gain perspective that alone we might lose. Wearing plastic bracelets because you like the color combo, noticing that they are impervious to dog bites, the resigned sigh when triumph eludes us—it's all just funnier in a group, whether in your church or your family.

So, there you have one of the primary reasons we took on this experience because being part of a group, any group, requires the ability to be in right relationship with others and a huge part of that is right speech.

In Buddhism, right speech is the third of eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. But what makes our words “right,” their truth? Only partially. Buddhism defines right speech as that which is true, but also that which abstains from being divisive, abusive and idle.<sup>1</sup> Followers of the path are urged to speak words that are “soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing,” words that are “worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.”

To determine if what you are about to say is right speech or not, there are four gates the words must pass. Having been an engineer for 20 years I can’t help thinking of them as a flow chart where the first decision gate is truth, where we ask ourselves, “Is what I have to say true?” If no, remain silent. If yes, continue to gate number two: necessity. “Is what I have to say necessary?” The third gate is kindness. “Is what I am about to say kind, or I am about to bludgeon someone with my own truth?” The final gate is about timing. “Is this the proper time to say this?”

Four gates makes it sound so very systematized and easy—just follow the flow chart. Swami Kripalvanandji, speaking from the Hindu tradition, simplifies our task even further saying, “Before speaking, consider whether it is an improvement on silence.”

But it is, as we have seen, not easy at all in practice to always speak only that which we know to be true, necessary, kind and timely. Our culture has trained us strongly in the opposite direction. Improving our speech only in this one way, by removing complaints, has proved a challenge. May we stay in the struggle. Together may we seek a gentler path, and share a laugh along the way.

Namaste.  
Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2013 Jacqueline R. Clement, All rights reserved

---

<sup>1</sup> AN 5.198