

I Can't Hear What You are Not Saying
 Unitarian Universalist society of Sacramento
 February 15, 2015



Readings

From the advice column Tell Me About It

By Carolyn Hax

June 10, 2014

Dear Carolyn:

My husband and I are good friends with a couple whose dietary needs have slowly changed over the eight years we've known them. When we first met, we would often hang out and have some beer or wine and food, which often included a shared love of bread, cheese, meats, ice cream, etc. After a couple of years of knowing them, the wife began to struggle with intestinal issues, and finally after a year or so of discomfort, decided to go gluten-free. Within six months she also eliminated dairy. Now they have started the paleo diet. I can tell she is feeling better physically, and I am truly happy for her.

However, we don't hang out with them as a couple anymore. It seems as if the husbands can get together to grab a beer (which he still drinks), or she and I might get together at a coffee shop where she can have tea. But the days of getting together for a meal seem to be over.

I also can't seem to get together with her without the discussion turning to how awesome this diet is or how dangerous gluten is, with the distinct implication that my husband and I should start following it as well. I am really tired of being preached the "gospel" of dietary restrictions. I find myself avoiding her, and also just wanting to shake her and say, "WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!! And I want to die with a piece of baguette slathered in triple-creme brie in my hand!!"

This does not seem like a sound approach. Suggestions for a better one?

I Want My Cake and My Friendship Too

Dear Cake:

I think that's the perfect approach.

Seriously. You are friends! And you see how much better she feels on her new diet! And you are happy for her! You simply don't want to make the same lifestyle change she did!

So why not just say that, in the you-know-I-love-you way that only true friends can pull off?

Maybe your friendship has never had that tone, fair enough. But even then, as I sift through questions submitted to this column, I spend a shocking (to me) amount of time reading different versions of virtually the same story: of people who are so dismayed by changes in a friendship that they're avoiding the friend. Inevitably, they say they're close to pulling the plug on the friendship — right after they mention that telling their friend the unvarnished truth is of course not an option.

So for you and all of you, I advise this: Since you're already ending the friendship, passively or otherwise, what do you have to lose by stating how you feel, what you loved, why you've drifted? Make it a deal,

even: “I so miss our dinners together, all four of us. What say I serve nothing but paleo, and in return we talk about anything but paleo?”

Truths feel mean, I get it, but surely you’ve been on the receiving end of a once-good friend’s dwindling attention — and doesn’t that feel pretty mean, too? And gutless? I can’t speak for anyone else, but I’d rather have an exasperated friend say, “For the love of crusty baguettes, would you please stop dissecting my diet?!” than just demote me to thrice-a-year tea.

Gospel of Mark chapter 10 verses 46-52

⁴⁶ Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁸ Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”⁵⁰ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

⁵¹ “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

⁵² “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Sermon

People often ask me where I get the ideas for sermon topics. In this case the idea came from the advice column that we read earlier in the service. You will remember that the women who wrote in to Carolyn Hax about her dissatisfaction with her friend who only wanted to talk about the Paleo diet.

This column raised the question for me of why it is so hard to express our feelings to people we care about.

One of the other sources of inspiration for me is the list I keep on my refrigerator of the top 5 regrets that people say on their death bed

#3 I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings.

Whats going on here? Why would we choose to end a friendship rather than to express our feelings of discontent? Why do we leave this life with important things left un expressed?

Like Carolyn Hax I get it – its hard. There are very good reasons why we choose not to tell those in our lives how we feel. Clearly we are afraid. It can be a big risk, disruptive and possibly causing hurt to others. We want to avoid all these things.

A common way to handle these un expressed feelings is to triangulate – tell a third party how you feel. That’s what the women did who wrote into the advice column. Nothing wrong with seeking advice, or expressing your feelings to a third party before you approach the person who you need to talk with. What is wrong is when we ask a third party to intervene for us. That’s true triangulation. Ministers know a lot about triangulation. Roger and I often experience this in a variety of ways . Someone has a problem with one of us, or doesn’t like something that we did – and we hear this from a third party - An indirect complaint or concern. If we are doing our jobs as ministers we will instruct the third party that we would be happy to speak with the person who has the problem, but that we don’t accept anonymous criticism or concerns. Another form of triangulation is when a person comes to us regarding a challenge with another person, and wants us to deal with the other person on their behalf. In this case if we are doing our jobs, Roger or I will support the person in working through their feelings, and offer to be present when they talk with the person whom they have a challenge with. Triangulation doesn’t solve anything other than to deflect your feelings and avoid confrontation with the person that is the source of your difficulty. Of course if you are in an abusive relationship it is necessary and important to triangulate – tell a trusted person so that they can help you to free yourself. But for most of us it is a form of avoidance.

An alternative to triangulation is to simply repress your feelings. Often in communicating with another person, a friend or a spouse, we try to keep our feelings managed or out of the picture.

Of course our feelings – are not just the noisy by-product of the problem – but are an integral part of what is going on. If we avoid our feelings they will just come out in other ways, making it hard to listen to what the other person is really saying, and getting in the way of resolving what is going on. Have you ever had a conversation with someone about a difficult subject, everything was kept clean and uncluttered with feelings. But afterwards you felt unresolved and dissatisfied with the conversation. When someone keeps bringing something up after you think its been resolved, its likely that their feelings have not be expressed or addressed. The resolution is not done without dealing with the feelings present in the conflict.

Often we define maturity as being able to control our feelings so that we can have a rational discussion. But I think the mature approach is to understand our feelings and express them – not as a vent or a rant, but honestly and completely and then give the other person a chance to process what they have heard.

One of the problems with speaking up is that often we can't decide if our feelings are worthy of consideration. Its really no big deal we think, why I am feeling so strongly about it? Some of us learn in our families of origin that we should suppress our feelings for the benefit of others – women especially internalize this message but it not only women. Or we wait until we simply can't bear it any longer and the feelings come out in an explosion, or are internalized into depression and anxiety that take their toll on our lives and relationships.

When I was younger I longed for a book to look up whether my feelings justified bringing up an issue in a relationship.

What we should strive for is equanimity – giving our own feelings the same weight as those of the other person.

If we go about our relationship keeping our feelings to ourselves or create narrative where we feel un supported building resentment and thereby disconnect from those your love. We are not giving the other person a chance to participate in the solution.

The philosopher Dave Matthews says in one of his songs – “we look at each other, wondering what the other is thinking, but we never say a thing, and these crimes between us grow deeper.”

In the movie Hope Springs we watch the story of a middle aged couple who have grown physically and emotionally distant. At the insistence of the wife, the couple embarks on a weeklong intensive couple's therapy program. The movie is advertised as lighthearted and amusing – but it is not. It is painful to watch, excruciating actually. But ultimately their courage in sharing their feelings with each other is inspiring.

So the difficulty in expressing our feelings is a critical component of why it is so hard to deal with conflict. But there is something else at work as well. The women with the Paleo diet friend was not willing to talk with her even though she intended to end the friendship. At that point what did she have to lose?

Actually quite a lot – She could lose part of her identity – in particular her identity as a nice person. Some of us cannot bear the idea of being perceived as selfish or unkind, or even

worse hurting someone. It seems petty to raise a concern about how much your friend talks about her diet. But it is significant enough so that you would consider ending the relationship.

People will stay in relationships far longer than is healthy for anyone because they don't want to hurt the other person. They are so attached to their identity as a kind person that they sacrifice their happiness.

Our identity is also at stake is when we realize, consciously or unconsciously that we have contributed to the problem. If we get to the heart of our feelings sometimes we have to own our part of the problem. And often recognizing this us to do some soul searching that may be beyond what we want to deal with. So we avoid.

Another of my favorite advice columns was a letter to Dear Abby from a women who had asked her husband to quit smoking because it was affecting her breathing. He ignored her requests. Then he read that second hand smoke was bad for dogs – so he quit.

His action likely shook her to the core. It challenged her sense of self and likely triggered some her sense of self- worth. It challenged her identity – what kind of women would marry a man who would treat her like that – what kind of women would choose to stay with a man who treats her so poorly.

The deeper the feelings the higher the stakes. Expressing your feelings to a loved one – whether positive or negative - you run the risk that they will not respond in a way that affirms you or the relationship. Of course when you express negative feelings it is reasonable to give them room for their own feelings to emerge. It's the bottom line that I think engenders the most fear and anxiety – the bottom line that they won't respect you, or the relationship, that they will discount, or at worse discard your feelings. This reaches into our inner most fear that we are unworthy of love.

It is this fear that we are unworthy that holds many people back from expressing themselves in the world – fear that if they express their needs or feelings that they will be calling the larger question of whether they are worthy of getting their needs met. In UUism the first principle we covenant to uphold is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Easier said than done, easier applied to others sometimes than to ourselves. In our childhoods, many of us did not get enough of a message of our own worth.

I am sure that some of you were shaking your heads at the reading from the gospel of Mark. You are probably wondering how a story about Jesus healing a blind man has any relevance to my topic today.

Let's explore this passage. What do we know of this Bartimaeus? For one thing it is likely that he was fairly well known in the community where the story is set. Why, because he has a name. There are many stories in the gospel that mention people by their characteristics or location, but Bartimaeus has a name. According to the scripture he was sitting at the roadside begging. It is likely that we know his name because he had been sitting by that roadside for quite a long time – he was known to the community as the blind beggar. At the time of the gospels people with disabilities were often shunned and outcast because it was believed that their problems were caused by evil spirits. Try to imagine how it would feel to be shunned in this way. On this particular day in the life of this blind beggar, Jesus of Nazareth and his entourage came by. During this era there were quite a few people traveling the land proclaiming to be the Messiah, and claiming to perform miracles. But Bartimaeus – clearly knew something about Jesus because when he heard who it was he cried out “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” As an outcast, Bartimaeus was used to not being seen or heard. He was just the blind beggar at the side of the road. And yet on that day he spoke up, and spoke up again when he was told to be quiet, the crowd shushed him, told that he was not important enough for Jesus to consider. Why this day? Did he know something of Jesus reputation?

When I imagine this scene I think of the crowd all clamoring for Jesus attention, of the people trying to shush Bartimaeus, how this whole scene could be quite overwhelming for a blind man.

I consider what it must have be like for Jesus, the crowds all calling out for his attention, wanting this and that from him. And yet on this day he heard the cries of the blind man. “Call him,” Jesus said to the people around him.

Then comes my favorite part of the story. Bartimaeus threw off his cloak and jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. He threw off his cloak- jumped to his feet. When Jesus recognized him the crowd told Bartimaeus to cheer up - this tells me that he had been sitting in a hopeless way, perhaps filled with despair. What propelled him on that day. Was it the hope that his life could be different? Jesus called him and he sprung up. Someone of significance has acknowledged him, had heard him call.

It is likely that Jesus knew what Bartimaeus wanted – Jesus was known for his healing miracles. But he makes Bartimaeus ask for what he wants, “What do you want me to do for you,” Jesus says. Bartimaeus replies, “Teacher, I want to see”. But again Jesus turns it right back on him – “go, your faith has made you well.” What did Jesus do? The scripture then tells us that Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus.

The scripture tells us that Bartimaeus received his sight - What the scripture doesn't say is that Jesus restored it. In my appreciation of this story there does not need to be a miracle for the story to have power. There does not need to be a miracle for Bartimaeus to be transformed. I hear this as Jesus saying that Bartimaeus had the power to heal himself by finding and

expressing his voice – his right to be seen and heard. Jesus is offering his authority to endorse this basic right for Bartimaeus, the right to have fully acceptance as a member of society.

Many emotions came up for me as I read the story. I was impressed that Bartimaeus spoke up and would not be silenced. I was angry that people tried to shut him up, and afraid that Jesus would not notice him. It felt like a big risk to me that he insisted on getting Jesus' attention. I have some pride in Bartimaeus for having the courage to ask for help, to say I am here – I am worthy. I have joy in the fact that his courage to speak-up made all the difference.

Blessed Be

References:

Difficult Conversations. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen
Viking book, 1999