

Ouch! Living with Micro-aggressions

Rev. Roger Jones
UU Society of Sacramento
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Hymns: #361, Enter Rejoice and Come In; #6, Just as Long as I Have Breath (meditation hymn); #121, We'll Build a Land (suggested substitute words in the refrain: "...where **all kinds of people**, anointed by God, may then create peace." Solo by Keith Atwater: "If This Is Not a Place" (by Ken Medema)

At end of this document: "Coffee Hour Caution," a reflection by USS member Linda Roth

Sermon by Rev. Roger Jones:

In the summer after my second year of seminary, I was attending General Assembly, which is our yearly denominational conference. That year, the Reverend Mark Morrison Reed gave the sermon in the big worship service on the Sunday morning of GA. An African American, Mark grew up in the First Unitarian Church of Chicago. He has written books about UU history, especially as it relates to racial issues and civil rights. His sermon at GA was about some other topic, but it was provocative and stirring. Later that day I saw a group of seminary friends, including John Gilmore, who was ahead of me in seminary. John is a black man, but he really doesn't look like Mark. John reported that several white people had come up to him in the hallways of the convention center to praise him for the sermon which the other man had given.

John was good natured as he told this and I laughed at the stupid mistake of those strangers. How funny! I didn't realize that if such a thing happens to you over and over, it may not be so funny. I saw John at this year's General Assembly and reminded him of this story. I received his permission to tell it. John says he continues to be mistaken for one black man or another. This is called a micro-aggression. In the words of Professor Derald Wing Sue, micro-aggressions are the "continuing and everyday slights, insults, invalidations and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral and decent people."ⁱ

Micro-aggressions exist as a reflection of social bias against people because of race, gender, and sexual orientation, among other categories. They are the subtle social tools that tell some people from some groups: "Stay in your place." They're not overt, like a hate crime or bigoted slur, not usually harmful to one's employment. Compared to overt violence, micro-aggressions are like paper cuts. But constant and regular paper cuts do take a toll. They hurt, they wear down the spirit.

I've heard of parents going to pick up their kids after school, and being treated with suspicion because they were not the color of their kids, or because one parent was of the same gender of the parent who had brought the kid into class earlier in the day. I've heard more than one story of a Latino outside mowing his lawn, when a car pulls up and the driver asks how much he charges for gardening service. The invisible micro-aggression is the message: "You're out of place. People of your group don't belong here." It's not a burning cross in the yard by the KKK, but a paper cut, and these add up. Several years ago a member of this congregation asked me: "Who's Pablo, and when did we hire him?" That's not his real name, but he was a Latino. He was a new volunteer, part of our congregation back then. He came after work to water the trees on our campus. Pablo was not a new custodian. Ouch.

Women who became college professors in the 1960s and 70s have told stories of campus cocktail parties. They often received this opening question: "Which professor is your husband?" I've read stories of women attorneys new in law firms, getting the question: "Whose secretary are you?" While women are no longer kept out of academia or the legal profession, the message of the micro-aggressions was: "You don't really belong here, do you?"

In 1992, as the Board president of my church in Chicago, I arranged for our brand new UUA district executive to lead a planning retreat for the congregation. She wasn't the first woman to be a district executive, but our congregation hadn't met her yet. Wearing a long skirt, she came to our Friday night kickoff dinner at a Chicago banquet hall. As she made her way to the restroom through the tables of the banquet hall, she got two orders for

chardonnay. That never would have happened to a bishop.

Derald Wing Sue notes that these little aggressions come from fair minded people who would never intentionally wish to discriminate. We would like to treat everybody fairly and with respect. We strive to. Yet negative attitudes are held widely in society, and they do make their way out of our mouths. We can be the unwitting and unwilling enforcers of the structures of privilege, prejudice and oppression, structures which are built into every society in different ways.

“Are you married?” “Are you married?” “Why aren’t you married?” Back in the 1980s, before lesbian and gay people were as visible as we are now, I got that question a lot. “Are you married?” “Why aren’t you married? Haven’t you found the right girl yet?” Nobody intended to oppress me, but here’s how it did. Such questions assume a box that everyone fits into. They imply that if you don’t fit, there is something wrong with you.

In 1982, I was talking to my college advisor at the coffee hour at the local UU church. She asked: “Do you have a girlfriend?” Instead of dancing around the truth, I tried a straightforward answer. “Well, I guess I haven’t told you, but I’m gay, and single.” I had respect and affection for her, but I weighed the decision about how much to say. How truthful should I be when I didn’t know if she would accept me? What about my standing in the academic program? The risk of not being respected felt real. “Oh,” was her answer. “Well, that’s okay. But I don’t really like it when they flaunt being gay.” Ouch!

After I went home, I thought about how I could have responded: “Oh, are you saying you wish I hadn’t told you that? How much honesty would be considered *flaunting*? Should I never bring it up again?” There were so many ways she could have responded that showed caring and thoughtful curiosity. She could have said: “Oh, thank you for telling me.” She could have asked, “What has it been like for you as a gay student at our college?”

In that exchange, I felt the worries familiar to people whose identity is seen as being on the fringe of our society. That could include not only lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer

people, but women, people of color, or people with disabilities.

Micro-aggressions can happen to fat people: “My, *that’s* a lot of food!” we might blurt out. Or: “You’re going to have dessert?” And to *skinny people* too: “Are you okay? Are you eating enough?” or, “Here, have another helping. Put some meat on those bones.” Verbal paper cuts can happen to anyone. We all stumble and step on one another’s toes. Anybody can do it; anyone can feel it. However, as Professor Wing Sue notes, micro-aggressions are most harmful to persons from groups that historically have been disdained, disregarded, or kept on the margins of society.

A lot of us, when we are told how we have participated in a little aggression, will suddenly feel the heat of shame. We may withdraw. “I’m not a bad person!” I have felt shame rising up in me when I’ve realized my goof, and the hurt my words have caused.

Resignation and anger is another way to respond. “I guess we can’t ask *anything*! Can’t bring up anything, anymore!” This is an understandable feeling. We don’t want to step on a land mine, and we don’t want to feel the embarrassment of harming another person. Yet it is important to note that people on the receiving end of little aggressions have to ask themselves ALL THE TIME whether *they* will say anything. Will they confront a comment that misrepresents them? Or instead, after receiving an unintentional insult, will they smile, then change the subject? Will they choose quietly to nurse one more slight, until they are in safe space to tell someone they trust? Or will they say “Ouch!” Will they see if we are curious to know why they said *ouch*, when we haven’t intended any injury? To monitor yourself constantly, to balance staying quiet verses speaking up--it’s a burden.

“What are you?” A woman I knew in another UU congregation heard this question a lot, sometimes in church, but mostly at work and in public. She was a flight attendant, and a lovely woman of light brown skin.

What are you? “A mother of two,” she could say.

NO, what are you? She *would* say: “I’m an American.”

NO, what is your race? Her heritage was African, Irish, and Native American.

What are you? Does people who ask demeaning questions like that/ even deserve to know something as intimate as her family heritage?

When we say hurtful things, as well-meaning as you or I might be, it's not the responsibility of the person we hurt to educate us about the bias we reveal, or the paper cut we're causing. It's not their job. NO, it is our job as people of conscience to learn and reflect on how we might be intruding on another's tender places.

Perhaps we can hold back some of our eagerness and curiosity until another person shares what they choose to share. For example, we could say: "Tell me about yourself, if you don't mind. I'm curious.... Oh, say whatever you'd like to. I can tell you a bit about myself if you like."

Most of us will make assumptions we do not recognize or examine. All of us, whoever we are, can strive to be more mindful and thoughtful as we seek to respect one another for who we are, accept our differences and learn from them. We all need to move with more grace in the world.

When we're not putting our own foot in our mouth, we can be a good ally. There are a few ways we can try to be a good ally if we see another person on the receiving end of a little aggression. Taking our friend aside later, we can ask: "Did what that person say to you come across to you the way it would come across to *me*? Did it hurt?" I regret the times I *could* have done this, and failed. For those on the receiving end of those little bias-based aggressions, it's helpful to have someone listen, to have their experience taken seriously. Validation of their experience can mean a lot.

Another way to be an ally: after we hear a hurtful remark, we could wait for a break in the conversation, then take the offending party aside. "Do you realize how that came across?" Privately, we can explain how their well-intentioned question was harmful. We could suggest alternatives for the future.

Or an ally could interrupt, right away. "*Ouch!* I can't believe you said that!" This is pretty aggressive itself, but sometimes it's called for. Recently in rural Rhode Island, I visited a UU family I've known since I spent a year there as a

ministerial intern 20 years ago. The dad of the family is brown skinned, both African American and Native American.

In the past year, he's been pulled over twice by police. He is 72 years old. Not long ago he was driving a pickup truck he'd borrowed from a church friend. He was pulled over, and his license was checked. Why? The officer said there was no license plate on the front of the truck. When he finished his trip and arrived at the home of the white friend who'd lent him the truck, she broke into tears. They saw that there was, in fact, a license plate on the front. She called up her small town's police department. She told them what happened to her friend. She was outraged and she insisted on an apology for him. Soon, a knock at the door, and the officer was there to apologize to both of them.

All of us can find something that we feel hurt about, I think. Everybody can feel like an outsider with respect to some aspect of who you are. I've been serving congregations as a minister or lay leader for 30 years. It never fails that people come to me privately and say that they don't fit in. They feel like an outsider. These are genuine feelings, perhaps with bad experiences to back them up. But you know, if I introduced everybody who felt that way to everyone else who felt that way, we'd have a large crowd. As a matter of fact, we could start a congregation! But of course, we've already got one.

Our UU religious movement was founded by people who didn't fit in by one measure or another, yet they felt called together by the values of our common humanity, dignity, thoughtfulness and compassion. We always benefit from added learning and practice as we strive to live out these values. We affirm our shared humanity by accepting our uniqueness and by exploring our differences with respect.

There is no cure to the curse of the paper cuts, but we can reduce their frequency. We can learn to make more space for empathy and understanding. We can resist that urge to fill the air with intrusive questions or presumptuous opinions. Often, this is just as simple as not speaking. Holding our tongue. *Not forever*, but pausing long enough to be present to what we're thinking or feeling about a situation or another person.

What am I assuming? Pause...to question ourselves before questioning another.

Why do I have such an urge to ask this question in the first place? Am I putting somebody on the spot? It can be worth it to wait and consider our assumptions first, instead of rushing to fill the silence with words. This is the practice of being present.

In this congregation, we're always aiming to be more aware and kind with one another. We can use our experience here to practice living with surprises and learning from one another. We can practice mindful interactions. We are building a community to make space for everyone's uniqueness, and to create a safe space for one another.

We do this not for our own sake but in service to our mission to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. Because we affirm human dignity for everyone, we are here to listen and learn, to grow and encourage the growth of one another. It is an adventure of authentic interchange, real people together.

This is community, and it is a gift. With grace and good humor, courage and humility and forgiveness, let us be good stewards of this gift. So may it be.

Amen.

*Minute of Silent Reflection
and Witness to our Share Humanity*

a Reflection by UUSS member Linda Roth

The preparations for the service last Sunday caused me to focus on the 7 principles of Unitarian Universalism. And Reverend Lucy's beautiful and touching rendition of Kermit's song "It's Not Easy Being Green" truly spoke right to the "Acceptance of One Another" as well as "the dignity and worth of every person"

I know we all want to uphold and practice our principles and Roger will be discussing this in more depth in his sermon, but I wanted to highlight an effort I'm making to honor the principles that is demonstrated in this informative document
COFFEE HOUR CAUTION.

It's provided by the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries of the UUA. When the Sunday service concludes, most of us remain in the Welcome Hall or the patio, chatting, drinking coffee, and connecting with people we don't recognize who may be new. Until I read this, I was unaware of an approach I usually take when I engage with people in their late teens or twenties. In the past, you might have heard me say:
"How old are you?" or
Are you new here? or
When are you two planning to have kids?...
What year are you in school?...
So glad to see you – we need more young people!...
Have you met our other young adult?...

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The Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries recommends: AVOID SAYING: "How old are you?" Is age so important? If we're getting acquainted, how about: What did you think of the service today?

AVOID SAYING: Are you new here? A young adult may have been attending for years, and you just haven't met them. The implied message is that you think they don't belong here.
How about saying: I don't think we've met, my name is....

AVOID SAYING: When are you two planning to have kids?... Having or not having kids is a private matter and not one people may want to discuss if they are not close to you. This implies that you only value young adults for their future children, not as a peer adult, here and now. Instead, how about saying:
What brought you here today?

AVOID SAYING: What year are you in school?...

Assuming someone is a student implies you think they are of a certain age or life stage. Give them the chance to talk about whatever is meaningful, which might not be school. INSTEAD, why not ask an open-ended question:
So tell me about yourself...

AVOID SAYING: So glad to see you – we need more young people!...
Like everyone else, young adults want to be seen for who they are, not as a token for their age. Not as a category to be filled. SAY INSTEAD: Great to meet you! I look forward to getting to know you.

AVOID SAYING: Have you met our other young adult?... Young adults enjoy friends of all ages. Welcome them into faith and fellowship. SAY INSTEAD: Let me introduce you to my friend.

¹ Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Wiley, 2010. For a brief

If they ask about a Young Adult activity, you can find out for them.

IN GENERAL, this guidance works no matter whom you wish to welcome into your community.
introduce yourself

make friends

be interested reach out
respect boundaries

Building community doesn't just happen. It takes intentional effort. I appreciate all of the efforts that people at USSS have made over the years to make me feel part of this community. Thank you.

video presentation, see
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAIFGBIEsbQ>