

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU
 San Miguel de Allende UU Fellowship
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OPENING WORDS: "When you make it a strong habit..."

When you make it a strong habit not to take anything personally, you avoid many upsets in your life. Your anger, jealousy, and envy will disappear and even your sadness will disappear if you don't take anything personally.

The Four Agreements, p.58-59, Don Miguel Ruiz

MEDITATION: "Whatever happens around you, don't take it personally..."

Whatever happens around you, don't take it personally...if I see you on the street and say "Hey, you are so stupid," without knowing you, it's not about you, it's about me. If you take it personally, perhaps you believe you are stupid. Maybe you think to yourself: "How does he know? Is he clairvoyant, or can everybody see how stupid I am?"

You take it personally, because you agree with whatever was said. As soon as you agree, the poison goes through you, and you are trapped in the dream of hell. What causes you to be trapped is what we call "personal importance." Personal importance, or taking things personally, is the maximum expression of selfishness because we make the assumption that everything is about "me." During the period of our education or domestication, we learn to take everything personally. We think we are responsible for everything. Me, me, me, always me!

Nothing that people do is because of you. It is because of themselves. All people live in their own dream, in their own mind; they are in a completely different world from the one we live in. When we take something personally, we make the assumption that they know what is in our world, and we try to impose our world on their world...

Whatever you feel and do is just a projection of your own personal dream...

Ruiz, pp. 47, 48, 50

SERMON:

The author of *The Four Agreements* and the book *The Fifth Agreement*, Don Miguel Ruiz, was born in rural Mexico, the youngest of 13 children. He is descended from the Toltecs, a people who lived thousands of years ago in the central valley of Mexico in the cities of Teotihuacan and Tula.

The Toltecs were advanced in scientific pursuit and spiritual practice. Their teachings were not a religion, but a philosophy that sought to create a way toward understanding and meaning. They believed that we humans are forever in a dream state. It is how we dream that determines the quality of our lives. Most of us limit ourselves, failing to transcend to a higher awareness, living with the belief that life must be composed of suffering. But we can change how we dream and achieve happiness. Discovering love and respect for one's self is the beginning of that process.

Don Miguel's family was composed of healers and shamans. He became a surgeon, coming back to his ancestral teachings only after a near-fatal car accident. He wrote his best-selling book - using the basic teachings of the Toltec tradition - to write a kind of spiritual manual.

Whether or not you choose to think of his guidebook as composed of spiritual teachings, nevertheless it does comprise some very sound psychological truth that I would like to share with you in this series of sermons.

Essential to creating a better dream life is to practice these Five Agreements, which include:

- * Be impeccable with your word.
- * Don't take anything personally.
- * Don't make assumptions.
- * Always do your best.
- * Be skeptical but learn to listen.

But rather than start with the First Agreement this morning (we shall discuss that one next Sunday), we shall explore the Second Agreement: **Don't take anything personally.**

This particular agreement might very well be the Achilles heel for many of us in this room - those of us who throughout our lives have been deemed "overly sensitive," "thin-skinned," "someone who is easily hurt."

Anyone in this room self-identify with these remarks?

As I went through this week thinking about these things, I noted how many times I violated this Second Agreement. And I noted how many times others took things personally: what I said to them; what others said to them.

And noting the numerous times these situations arose, I also noted how I or others reacted to these situations.

I could only observe the tone of voice of the others, or their bodily actions, or their emails. Observing myself, I could

determine such bodily changes as heart palpitations, an upset stomach, a flushed face, shaky hands, sleeplessness, low blood sugar, a migraine headache and general agitation – and I hadn't even gotten out of bed yet!

Origin of the Difficulty

But why do we have such a dilemma? Why do we take things personally?

Ruiz suggests:

Personal importance, or taking things personally, is the maximum expression of selfishness because we make the assumption that everything is about "me."

So we must ask: Why are we "selfish"?

Exploring "Selfishness" – The Religious Lens

For one thing, if we look at the concept through the myriad of lenses of prescribed religious doctrine, we see that one's sense of "self" is deemed inherently evil - or inherently good.

We, who are heirs to the liberal side of Protestant thought, believe in the latter. We Unitarian Universalists even proclaim as much in our very first "Principle" when we "affirm and promote"

the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

That is a far cry from the crystallized doctrine that proclaims "the fall of man" – the "original sin."

Still most of us who attempt to connect with other human beings, realize that too much love of self can be a bit too much love of self.

But then, so is denigration of self – where neither you nor anyone is thought good enough.

It does seem that to be human is to be buffeted around by the opinions of others – taking them or leaving them – but for many of us, feeling some disruption of inner peace in the process.

Why? Because we are consumed by self, believing that it really is - as Ruiz puts it - all about:

Me, me, me, always me!

As a cure, St. Augustine suggests

Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.

Then there is Frank Lloyd Wright, a Unitarian Universalist – who is a contrarian to St. Augustine and suggests a different cure:

Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose the former and have seen no reason to change.

At least Wright wasn't a hypocrite.

At any rate, some of us express a sense of self-centeredness that would benefit from eschewing comments others make, that we then use as determiners of who we are, how we feel, what we think, and what we do.

Hear what Ruiz is telling us in this regard: it is not just the negative, self-defeating comments he is telling us to deflect, but the positive, self-affirming ones as well!

As he puts it:

It is not important to me what you think about me, and I don't take what you think personally. I don't take it personally when people

say, "Miguel, you are the best," and I also don't take it personally when they say, "Miguel, you are the worst." I know that when you are happy you will tell me, "Miguel, you are such an angel!" But when you are mad at me you will say, "Oh, Miguel, you are such a devil! You are so disgusting! How can you say those things?" Either way, it does not affect me because I know what I am. I don't have the need to be accepted...

It is nothing personal, because you are dealing with yourself, not with me. (Ruiz, p. 51).

Exploring "Selfishness" – The Psychological Lens

The idea of being consumed by self – a narcissistic reality that each of us participates in to varying degrees – has a wealth of possible psychological reasons for its existence.

I particularly resonate with Carl Jung's concept about the "shadow side." This shows up when you practice "projection" – that is to say, when you take what you do not like about yourself and attach it to the other individual's personality.

In doing this, you sincerely believe that it IS the other person who is reacting in a way as if s/he is hell-bent on hurting you.

So when you perceive that person as being negative toward you, you start to take things personally – in a way this makes sense, since what you do not like about that individual are those very qualities you do not like about yourself – or at least feel uncomfortable about.

It's odd, isn't it, that there are sometimes two major learning lessons when you are dealing with those who you perceive as the most "difficult" people:

* You can learn a lot about yourself when you explore that difficult relationship with that other person.

* You sometimes can forge a strong bond with that person exactly because s/he has a lot to teach you about yourself. In a way it is a very thin line between "the other" as "enemy" and as "friend."

That is not to say that this process is at all easy – it is desperately hard!

Most of us, however, do not go into that rarefied atmosphere of human interaction with someone we feel is "out to get us."

We hide our feelings – of hurt and disappointment; that sense that we have been negated and discounted.

We might be afraid if we attempt connection that we will be hurt even more than we perceive we have already.

Or, we hide our feelings of disappointment through humor.

That inimitable movie director, Mel Brooks, illustrates this when he was asked what he thought of critics and replied:

They're very noisy at night. You can't sleep in the country because of them. His interviewer corrected him by saying that he had asked him what he thought of critics and Brooks responded: *Oh, critics! What good are they? They can't make music with THEIR hind legs.*

Of similar intent are the justly famous words of that flamboyant pianist Liberace who said to the critics: *What you said hurt me very much. I cried all the way to the bank.*

Most of us, however, would probably be closer in attitude to Orson Welles:

Every actor in his heart believes everything bad that's printed about him.

Truly, sometimes the people who are living in their particular hells – taking things so personally – rising with the positive comment, falling with the negative one – are the most sensitive – and therefore the most creative individuals.

Repercussions

Well, the assumption that any of us will ever truly communicate to each other the exact things we are thinking and feeling is faulty thinking. How can we, when we ourselves do not know what we are thinking and feeling, but are only assuming that we do? And in our assumption comes approximation.

The ongoing advancements in Neuroscience or so-called “Brain Science” do, indeed, tell us as much – but then, this is a subject for another discussion.

Well, as a public speaker, I assume that what I say is not what others hear – and that what others hear is grandly diverse.

Consider the following scenario based upon actual comments from my own experience. But let us add a twist: YOU are now the minister. You have been ministering for four decades.

And one day, while standing at the exit after the service is over, you suddenly are transported to a different time frame, a portal has opened and you have been swirled into it. And all four decades of parishioners are filing or fleeing past you in an attempt to get to the coffee hour. And you hear all their comments about all the sermons you have ever preached. And most of them you *do* take personally. You hear such things as:

* *That was very **interesting**.*

* *You really reached for the stars on **that** one.*

** Do you have a copy of that?*

** I would hear you better if you didn't lower your voice at the end of every sentence.*

** Didn't you preach that one before?*

** That was a bit long.*

** Oh, we're getting out of here early today!*

** That was your best sermon ever...I mean the others were alright, but...*

** That 14th word in your sermon's 29th paragraph is not pronounced "shimmera"!*

** I sure like your piano playing...your sermon was okay, too.*

And, as people from your forty years of preaching continue to pass you, they become very real:

** One young mother, upon saying that she completely disagrees with what you have preached against child abuse, slaps you across your face - hard.*

** A former Ivy League professor tells you that he wishes you were dead and that you better watch out during the upcoming Easter Sunday service.*

** A man who disagrees with what you said in a newspaper article against the death penalty, threatens your wife and children by asking how you would feel if he shot them to death.*

** Some women in the church, believing you said from the pulpit that your wife was pregnant again (which you never said), are wondering 8 months later, why she isn't "showing."*

** Your ministerial predecessor who is now retired and is attending the church you are now serving, the same one he served*

for 24 years, suggests some pointers to improve your preaching (so that you will preach more like he used to).

** A man whose wife has recently died after over 60 years of marriage merely grasps your hand and you see tears in his eyes.*

** After you have preached in favor of same-sex marriage, a straight couple greets you with: "You seem to know a lot about relationships, would you marry us?"*

** A long-time member of the congregation comments about your sermon – the only one you have ever written with strict rhythm and rhyme and spent a quadruple amount of time researching and writing compared to your standard sermons – "well, that was your worst one ever – boring!"*

** You note a first time visitor with her eyes cast down, moving as fast as she can toward the other exit so she will not have to greet you or anyone else.*

** After a number of people have passed by you, you automatically extend your hand in greeting and note with a start, a familiar face: your spouse's. You change then from being the preacher de jour to the preacher exposed, feeling a bit disoriented.*

Conclusion

This little scenario is symbolic of your life and mine, for each of us has had people who pass through our lives, each with their own messages to tell us, and we reciprocate with our own messages to them.

Sometimes we get it more-or-less right – we express what we want to say; we hear what others have to tell us.

But most of the time – especially for those of us who take things personally – we wind up overly puffed up with praise or overly deflated with negative criticism.

It is only in a state of intentionality to change how we perceive the words and actions of others that can bring us a more fulfilling existence.

Don't take things personally.

I wish you luck – and I wish myself luck.

CLOSING WORDS: "As you make a habit of not taking anything personally..."

As you make a habit of not taking anything personally, you won't need to place your trust in what others do or say. You will only need to trust yourself to make responsible choices. You are never responsible for the actions of others; you are only responsible for you.