

WHY DO YOU ASSUME THAT YOU ARE CORRECT?

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OPENING WORDS

We only see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. We don't perceive things the way they are. We have the habit of dreaming with no basis in reality. We literally dream things up in our imaginations.

The Four Agreements, p. 65, Don Miguel Ruiz

MEDITATIONAL READING

The way to keep yourself from making assumptions is to ask questions...If you don't understand, ask.... and even then do not assume you know all there is to know about a given situation.

Also, find your voice to ask for what you want. Everybody has the right to tell you no or yes, but you always have the right to ask. Likewise, everybody has the right to ask you, and you have the right to say yes or no.

...The day you stop making assumptions you will communicate cleanly and clearly, free of emotional poison. Without making assumptions your word becomes impeccable.

...If all humans could communicate in this way, with impeccability of the word, there would be no wars, no violence, no misunderstandings. All human problems would be resolved if we could just have good, clear communication.

Ruiz, pp. 72-73

SERMON: “Why Do You Assume That You Are Correct?”

This morning we continue discussing thoughts from The Four Agreements and The Fifth Agreement by Don Miguel Ruiz, a trained surgeon who stems from the ancient Mexican culture known as the Toltec. He stands in direct lineage to the shamans and faith healers of his heritage, a people who were able to combine spiritual and scientific pursuits, thereby creating guidelines to help us achieve a more fulfilling life – a different "dream" from the one we have been imagining.

Today we will explore the Agreement: "Don't Make Assumptions."

But before we don't make assumptions, let us make some!

Let us assume, in the first place that we do assume many things throughout our day and night – even in our dreams.

We are consumed by "self" – believing that others are as consumed by our "self" rather than being consumed by their "self."

That is a false assumption. A true assumption (or one a bit closer to reality) is that all "selves" are more consumed by themselves, than they are by other "selves."

So, let us agree to assume that we do assume - and that sometimes (if not often) we assume things incorrectly; or that we are so involved with assuming that others are assuming things about us, that we could care less about assuming things about them.

I shall now assume that you understood what I just said.

But when we do assume things about others, we often assume that we are being understood, whereas that might not be so.

How complex it all is! Indeed, let us at least, assume that!

Some Common Assumptions

Now there are some things we **generally assume** about life and there are reasons why we do so. Here are a few I have thought about:

We assume that we humans were created by the merging of our parents' DNA's. But we can no longer assume, that each of us was created in the conventional way (there are in-vitro fertilizations, surrogate mothers, and the

pursuit of cloning). There is no human cloning yet, but more than 20 types of animals have been.

We assume as babies that we will be taken care of. Some of us never leave that infantile state. And sadly, here and around the world, whatever expectations a baby can be thought of as having in regard to being nurtured, do not always come to pass. Some people are more fortunate than others, however – they are cared for.

We assume that some people and things are good for us – physically and emotionally. We find out, however, that some of those things we thought were beneficial, turn out not to be. Anyone here have an "ex" spouse? And are all your medications necessary? And does your belief system benefit your well-being?

We assume that everyone – or at least most people – will like us. Or we assume that everyone – or at least most people – will not like us. Have you ever been evaluated – by your employer? By a court of law? By your peers? By an on-line dating service? If you are totally liked, are you merely trying to please others?

We assume that there are natural laws. We can, however, fall into the trap of thinking of "science" as a closed-system – when the result of an experiment repeatedly occurs. Still, particle physics, anti-matter, dark holes, and atom smashing point to those things we can't assume because we don't quite know about them.

We assume that some people are better at some things than others are. Such statements to us (especially in our early years) can be limiting of self. We become conditioned to believing the dream others have given us. Therefore we might limit our potential by assuming that we are destined for some things, not for others.

We assume that it can't happen here! It can't happen to me! It can't happen to my loved ones! We forget sometimes, don't we, that human beings have named such entities as gods and goddesses, fate and fortune, the turn of the wheel – but that nature (or "whatever" we call it) has the final say as to what any of this might mean.

Why We Make These Common Assumptions

So why do we make these assumptions? I believe we do so for the following reasons:

For security – of "self" and others. We need guidelines, rules, regulations, boundaries, ethics, laws that will protect us from the chaos of unknowing. We need them in varying amounts, depending upon how independent-minded or anti-authoritarian we assume that we are. We are self-protective; we are afraid.

For identity. We each have what western psychiatry calls an "ego." On the other hand, eastern spirituality posits the thought that there is no separate self, that all sensate existence is interconnected, and as such, is part of a higher self. Both western and eastern thinking, however, create an identity of "self."

For purpose. We create our own thoughts about someone or something – for good or ill – to give us a purpose in life. Someone else's purpose might seem purposeless to us – especially if it seems self-negating or community-negating. Still it is a purpose – an "ultimate concern" (Paul Tillich's term.)

The Fognano Syndrome

Let me tell you a personal story about making assumptions.

I was a perfect kid. A perfect student.

So one day, near the end of ninth grade, I was shocked and terrified when the principal of my junior high school sent a note to my teacher that requested my presence in his office.

The principal, Mr. Fognano, was not considered a friendly man by any means. And I knew that kids wound up in his office only because they had gotten into trouble.

So when I was summoned to his office, I assumed the worst.

But how perplexed I was when, upon entering Mr. F's office, I was greeted with a big smile. "Congratulations," he told me. "You have been voted the outstanding boy in Suitland Junior High School.

At any rate, sometimes assumptions can be totally wrong – and in being so, they can be totally debilitating – limiting our potential, creating a poor sense of "self."

"The Fognano Syndrome" is what I call it: assume the worst.

Sadly, Mr. Fognano died of a massive heart attack, in his middle years.

Exploring the Dilemma Further

I imagine that we all have had our "Fognano" moments – some of us more frequently than others.

But truly, we all have moments – many of them – when we assume things (good or bad) about people and events.

Think about a new relationship in your life – a romantic one, a professional one, a familial one, a friendly one, a ministerial one.

Forgetting to practice Agreement Two ("Don't Take Anything Personally"), you are aware that you are on your best behavior – weaving and dodging away from your desires to let yourself relax and "be yourself" by telling this new person what you really believe or wish.

We all do it. It's called "trying to make a good first impression." The only problem is this: that the person who is sitting directly across from you at Starbuck's sipping her Caramel Macchiato - while you indulge yourself with your Cinnamon Dolce Latte - is also on her good behavior. Both of you are assuming that the other is assuming such and such – horrible things, sweet things. Neither of you is real – "real" doesn't happen until down the road.

We aren't even "real" to ourselves (meaning beyond assumptions about our "self" and seeing our "self" for what we more approximate), until we are a bit more mature - thanks to experience and clear introspection.

As Ruiz puts it:

...we have a fear of being ourselves around others. Because we think everyone else will judge us, victimize us, abuse us and blame us as we do ourselves. So even before others have a chance to reject us, we have already rejected ourselves. That is the way the human mind works. (p. 69)

Extricating Our "Self" from the Self Trap of Assumptions

So how might we free ourselves of our assumptions? Don Miguel Ruiz tells us to ask questions – of our "self" and of others; and to be willing to have others ask us questions.

Even if the process can cause us stress because we are afraid of what we might learn - ask questions. If we want to get out of the dream we create – one of our illusions – and to gain clarity and freedom in life, we need to speak our truth and seek the truth.

This reminds me of what one of the cherished principles of our Unitarian Universalist way of viewing the world and our place in it tells us: "Speak the truth in love."

But how might we do this? Let me tell you a story about a group of people and how, over time the assumptions they had about each other, proved to be less than accurate.

I am in a novel-writing course on the first day of class. The professor is unkempt and smells of booze. He does not look like a success, but he introduces himself by saying that he received an Academy Award for screenwriting – 50 years ago.

Then the others introduce themselves.

* An 80-some-year-old-man who is writing a novel about his experience as a soldier in World War II. He has been writing the book for two decades.

* A man in his thirties who is writing a science fiction novel and has written 8 pages so far

* An Asian woman in her fifties who says that her books are about her experience as an Asian woman adapting to life in the United States.

* A woman who is a retired librarian and an art aficionado who is writing an art-theft-murder mystery that takes place in Florence.

* A male hairdresser who announces that he is gay and wants to write about a gay cop who solves murder mysteries.

* A fifty-year-old female therapist who is writing a complex psychological novel that would involve a woman who is caught between two lovers, one male and one female.

* A twenty-something male who has had a script "optioned" by a television sitcom and knows that he is on the brink of literary greatness with his book about his life.

* Yours truly, a liberal preacher who desires to learn some writing techniques to improve his sermons, although he secretly desires to write a best-selling novel.

So we spent a couple months together reading excerpts from each others' books, sharing our comments, asking questions, speaking our truth. We went beyond being merely classmates and teacher, we became intimates.

You see, we went beyond any initial assumptions we had had that first evening when we met. We read "between the lines" – that is to say, we went deeper into the character of each other. What each of us wrote showed another side to ourselves.

I cried in reading what the old soldier wrote about his dying comrades; I was shocked by the gory details of murder the gentle hairdresser wrote; I learned of the pain of cross-cultural adaptation from the Asian woman; I realized that the kind of science fiction the one guy wrote was brilliant and far beyond my understanding; I was fascinated by the detail the librarian came up with – and with her ability to write great sex scenes; I was totally confused by the script-writer's desire to create his own punctuation system; and the therapist's characters bored me to death, despite an intriguing premise. And I? A mild-mannered, suburban preacher? I learned from others that I was not the serious writer of murder and mayhem I had hoped, but a preacher who wrote like a preacher.

The assumptions we had made about others and about ourselves were seen as so superficial.

Oh, how we all make assumptions about others and our self – and not just about strangers, but about the people who are closest to us. And how we do it all the time!

In effect, we can re-do the dream we live, by applying that Don't Make Assumptions Principle that tells us to ask questions instead, and to be asked questions in determining what is real, what is possible, what is true.

It takes lots of practice to make this and all the Five Agreements a life-long pattern. But at least we can start.

So, what are the assumptions you make about others? About me? About others in this congregation?

CLOSING WORDS: "We make all sorts of assumptions because..."

We make all sorts of assumptions because we don't have the courage to ask questions...We make the assumption that everyone sees life the way we do. We assume that others think the way we think, feel the way we feel, judge the way we judge...This is the biggest assumption that humans make.

Ruiz, pp. 68-69