

**THE THREE POISONS OF LIFE AND THEIR CURE**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**October 9, 2011**

Good morning again, everyone. Thanks to Monica for her music, to Kimberly for the testimonial and to everyone here.

The Jewish Holy Day of Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – ended last night at sunset.

Atonement has rituals in many religious faiths. Unitarian Universalism doesn't and I think somewhat to its loss.

Many of you know that I have spent years in training at Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon. One of the many chants in daily services we did at the monastery was the Gatha (or verse) of Atonement. It goes:

**“All evil karma ever committed by me  
On account of my beginningless greed, anger and ignorance,  
Born of my body, mouth and thought,  
Now I atone for it all.”**

I've always loved that verse because it speaks to the heart of the human condition of pain and dissatisfaction in life.

This morning I would like to speak about those three universal characteristics of human life. In Buddhist teachings, they are called the Three Poisons. They are known as greed, anger and ignorance. They are also translated as greed, aversion, and delusion.

The Buddha taught 2600 years ago that these three were primary factors for human suffering and discontent in life. He also said there was a cure for them.

We see examples of them all around us. Their possible cures are all around us as well if we look closely. I will explore some of those examples.

Finally, I will invite us to do a guided meditation on a way to help cure these afflictions. There will be no conversation time after the sermon as I'd like us to focus on mindfulness practice rather than words spoken aloud.

Greed seems easy to understand. It can refer to selfishness, misplaced desire or grasping after things that we think will make us happy. Some of you know that I have an attachment to electronic equipment. Few things in life please me more than the latest tablet, iPhone or equivalent, or anything to do with modern communications. That's all good but when does desire take over from 'just enough'. I have here an iPhone thanks to the late Steve Jobs and Apple. It is really most things one could want in communications – internet, Facebook, GPS, Portland, Oregon traffic, and oh yes a phone. Why also have a tablet, a laptop and two desktop computers?

This is subtle greed and then there's institutional greed. You probably have noticed a general hue and cry in America these days about the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The justifiable argument is that those who make more money ought to pay more in taxes for the common good. The inequality in income is rapidly transforming America into a new Gilded Age of the late 19th century. Then, as now, rapid technological advances meant fortunes to be made by entrepreneurs who were determined, ruthless and quick to take advantage of human desires.

What are we to do about greediness? One approach is public demonstration of frustration. We see such expression with the Occupy Wall Street protest that is now spreading by internet and social networking to other cities. We can respond to greed by voting out one set of greedy politicians for another set of politicians who insist they aren't greedy.

However, if Buddhist teachings are correct, we can best start to cure greed and craving within ourselves.

Such teachings focus on the inner development of the individual.

So let's imagine we know someone who craves something that they believe will make them happy if they possess it. It might be a new relationship, job or a physical possession. What might be a cure to this affliction from Buddhist teaching?

One obvious answer is to ask how they know the new relationship, job or possession will make them happy? Will that possession be enough or will it lead to still more unhappiness? When do we know enough will be enough to make us truly content?

A second approach is generosity. All the world's religions codify generous giving as part of their mission. Islam, for example, has as its Third Pillar an annual alms donation for the needy. Judaism traditionally calls for a 10% donation to charity. Christian communities have varying amounts but all support generosity as part of the message of Jesus.

Unitarian Universalist congregations do not demand a specific amount of tithing or other mandated funding. Every congregation I've ever served has been generous with time, talents and funds for the larger community.

Next Sunday you will have the Executive Director of the UU Ministers Association speak on Excellence in Ministry. I invited him last spring to speak in hopes you'd hear more about that vital topic. He'll also speak about Association Sunday and I hope you'll find your own generosity in support of our larger Association that gives us much support and help.

Anger or aversion is also familiar to us. We all get angry. It's an important part of being human. Anger can propel us into changing a bad

situation. It can also be reactive and cause us to make bad decisions we later regret.

How are we to examine anger or its darker cousin hatred?

You probably noted this week the story in Italy when the murder conviction of Amanda Knox was overturned in higher court. She returned home to Seattle shortly thereafter.

The whole story of what happened that tragic night will never be known. Many lives were shattered because of whatever happened between people who lost control of their emotions. At some point, anger must have fed the emotional states of all involved leading to death.

This is anger run amok. We see lesser forms of it with road rage or on talk shows. It is everywhere and it waits inside each of us.

Compare the Amanda Knox story to this news story on Yahoo this week. Trisha Waldron was 28 years old when she realized that her life was a dead end. She had gone from being a daughter to a wife to having her first baby at 22. Now she was single and barely surviving on food stamps in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

She started a small jewelry business and it expanded over the years thanks to one important change she made. Her business relationships became essential. She said **“At first, I had a super aggressive, take-no-prisoners approach. I might have gained something for myself but I wasn’t very nice to those around me. Eventually, I learned that you draw power as a woman in business by being compassionate and inclusive. This way, you can make long and loyal relationships.”**

Here was someone who turned anger as aggression into compassion and partnership.

Here is one more example of transforming anger into compassionate action. I mentioned the Occupy Wall Street protests earlier. The protests that now are spreading to other cities in the United States have followed classic patterns of non-violence with authorities. There have been some isolated incidents as there tend to be but they have turned potential violence arising from hatred and unreasoning anger into peaceful bearing witness. They follow the pioneering steps of Gandhi, King and so many in Eastern Europe and the Arab world now.

Finally there’s ignorance or delusion. Delusion in Buddhist philosophy is having poorly understood view of reality. We are unable to experience things exactly as they are because we put filters of desire or dislike on them. We do not understand the true interdependence of all things (our Seventh Principle) and so we grab or cling to things we think will make us happy. Ownership of property is one example. I have items at home I

enjoy greatly but they exist without me ‘owning’ them. They were created, they are now antiques and someday they will break and lose their value. They are not mine to own but are borrowed.

Delusion ties into the other two poisons of life. We think that the next relationship, job or perfect home will make us happy. We become angry if we don’t get what we think will create happiness. And then we try all the harder or become aggressive as Trisha Waldron did at first in her business.

The Buddha and the lineage of men and women who were teachers down to today all said that the source of the Three Poisons was fear.

Imagine how fear could create a horrible tragedy for Amanda Knox and all those affected by the events that night?

Imagine how fear could make Trisha Waldron so aggressive in her business pursuits that customers and potential partners wanted nothing to do with her.

Imagine how fear can permeate our lives today as the economy of the world verges on ruin and political paralysis continues at all levels of government.

Imagine wondering if you’ll get a job or be comfortable in retirement?

Fear could paralyze you into inaction or reactive responses.

One last story from this week’s news. As you all know, Steve Jobs died on Wednesday. His commencement speech to Stanford University has been widely quoted in social and other media. These words particularly struck me:

**Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice...And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”**

Those words about courage to follow the heart and intuition are the antidote to fear, I think. Such a willingness to step back and truly hear what our intuitive voice calls us to do is the core of meditation and the deepening of wisdom.

I’d said at the beginning I’d offer up a closing meditation practice.

My Zen teachers at the monastery have taught a practice for some years called Voice Dialogue. The premise is that we all have sub personalities in our minds that speak all the time. Such a voice in your head might be musing over the sermon or thinking seriously about lunch.

One of the strongest personality voices in the Western world is called “The Internal Critic”. Any of you heard that voice? Many women have for generations heard it say ‘you’re not worthy or you should be submissive.’”

Men hear it as the voice saying “you failed, you don’t do work very well...you’re a bad example.”

I am told that the Internal Critic is an old voice that is trying to push us into living life differently but it tends to speak from a place of fearfulness. That fear then translates into a grasping after money, possessions or narcissistic demands. It can cause anger or convince us its critical voice is more powerful than any other.

It isn’t. Voice Dialogue training says that there’s always an opposite voice for each sub-personality voice. The opposite of the Inner Critic is usually called “The Wise Teacher” or sometimes the Aware Ego. It is the adult and compassionate part of every one of us.

So I’d invite you to sit comfortably for a few minutes and close your eyes. Can you bring forth the Inner Critic? It helps to give it a name. I call mine the name of my late foster mother or her husband.

Imagine that Inner Critic voice having a body or shape. It is speaking loudly to you. Invite it to sit down with you and share its fears.

But then say that for now it only has two minutes to speak and then it needs to rest.

When I ring the bell, thank your Internal Critic for its worries and concerns and tell it that it is time to rest for awhile.

See how you feel when I ring the bell before we sing the last hymn.