Habits¹

Rev. Myke Johnson January 3, 2016 Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Our Readings Today: For a New Beginning by John O' Donohue²

Excerpt: ...This beginning has been quietly forming

Waiting until you were ready to emerge...

Piglet's Song by Benjamin Hoff^s *Excerpt:*

Let's find a Way today, that can take us to tomorrow...

Sermon

Some of you may remember almost five years ago, I attempted to teach our two kittens how to use the people toilet. (Hey, I found a kit on the internet.) So I used the kit, and each time one of the kittens finished with the toilet, I would say "Give me five!" and they learned to hold up their paw to my palm, and then I'd give them a treat.

However, after a few months of steady progress, the whole attempt failed. Billie, our little black cat, decided to rebel, and she started using the bathtub instead of the toilet. Her tabby-colored sister, Sassy, followed suit. After a battle of wills for several weeks, I gave in, and abandoned the project. They loved their new kitty litter boxes. Life went on. One lingering result of those efforts is that often when I use the bathroom, the cats come in to hang out with me, and sometimes Billie will scratch around in the bathtub—though they never used it as a litter box again.

Sassy still enjoyed "Giving me five" and getting a treat, and in fact expected us to play that game each time we were in the bathroom. But while Billie would join us in the room, she absolutely refused to participate, and turned up her nose at any treats. In fact, if I put one in front of her, she would often batt it over to Sassy. And that was how it was for the next few years.

But then, earlier in December, everything changed. Billie started eating treats again. I didn't ask her to "Give me five!" But one day, she was scratching in the tub, and I came over and started petting her. And when I gave Sassy her treat for giving me five, I put one in the tub for Billie. And she ate it. And then, the next day, she ate another one. Suddenly, she loved treats again, and she would eat them whenever I gave her one, and even jump up on the counter to get one.

I was thinking about this change when I considered our topic for today. How is it that for four years, Billie had one habit, and then suddenly, she changed, and started a new behavior? And how is it for us, when we want to change a habit or start a new behavior?

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² From To Bless the Space Between Us

³ From The Te of Piglet

Self-improvement is a part of American culture. It is such a self-evident part of our culture that we might not realize that the self-help movement began only in the 19th century. In fact, Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson is a part of that history. In 1841, he published an essay entitled Compensation, suggesting "every [one] in [their] lifetime needs to thank [their] faults" and "acquire habits of *self-help*," because "our strength grows out of our weakness."

At this time of year, self-improvement is on the minds of many. Almost 50 % of Americans make a New Year's resolution to change some aspect of our lives.⁵ We hope to let go of old habits that aren't serving our health and wellbeing, and start new habits that will. But only 8% are successful in achieving their resolutions. What makes it so hard to change?

That difficulty is why I am curious about how Billie changed her habit. Since Billie can't talk, I can't know for sure, but it seemed to me that some sort of healing happened for her that enabled her to let go and make a new choice. Billie has always been very concerned about her dignity and she doesn't like someone telling her what to do. When I offered treats for a high-five gesture, perhaps that represented an interaction beneath her dignity. Just the opposite for Sassy, who loves to play the games and please us. They have different personalities. Perhaps after all of the struggle for the toilet training, jumping into the tub and refusing treats was a way to reassert her autonomy—I am in charge of me and don't forget it.

But then, the day things changed, I gave her more attention than usual, as I petted her in the tub for a long time. Perhaps she felt seen and respected, in her corner of the room, in her territory. Maybe in some kind of cat language, she heard me saying "it's okay, I get it, I won't ask you to play that game any more." And then she felt she could let go of the battle of wills she had been waging.

It's all a guess. But the reality is that she changed her habits. And I want to think about this story because of what it might have to teach us about our own attempts to change our habits.

So often, we attribute our success or failure to our willpower, or lack of willpower. But perhaps it is something less controllable, and more unconscious. Like a little black cat lurking within our minds ready to outlast us in any battle of wills we might initiate. So maybe, when we make a resolution to change a habit in our lives, one of the steps should be to understand the source of that habit, and what keeps it alive in us. We need to meet that habit in its own territory, and learn what it represents and what it needs from us.

The most frequent New Years' resolution by far is about dieting or losing weight. I lost some weight a couple years ago, by changing what I ate to eliminate sugars and lower my carbohydrate intake. It was a drastic change in my diet, and I had the motivation of health and wellbeing to get me started. And then, I did feel better, and that helped too. I have mostly stayed on that healthy eating plan, and stayed at my new weight.

But what is interesting to me is how easy it is to lose track of those good habits. The old habits persist in my psyche. I often feel cravings for sweets and fall back into unhealthy eating. So if I treated those impulses like a small black cat, what might I learn?

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation" (1841) in Essays, p. 22.

⁵ http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/

First, I could ask, "What do sweets represent for me?" And "What is going on when those cravings hit me?" Ironically, one of the times I most crave sweets is when I am writing a sermon. So as I was writing this, I noticed that right then, sweets represented for me an extra burst of energy and concentration. When I used to eat sweets regularly, I would often munch on chocolate almonds while I wrote. Sugar in meant words out. So I was sitting at my desk writing, feeling tired, and wishing I could eat some chocolate to do this work.

And then I could go even deeper—I recognized that writing a sermon is really hard work for me. A sweet can also be a small reward or a small comfort, like a pat on the back saying "Good girl, Myke, Give me five!" If I followed that logic, then perhaps I needed to find other ways of giving myself little encouragements while I write. Energy, rewards, encouragement. Those are the human needs of my inner black cat who doesn't totally buy into my new habits of eating.

If you let yourself go deeper with your own less welcome habits, you may find your own version of the small black cat who isn't ready to change. Perhaps you want to start walking every day before work, but have trouble getting out of bed in the morning. Perhaps you want to find a new job that will better match your own talents and skills, but you are attached to the security you have in your current employment. Perhaps you want to spend more time with your children, but when you try, you can't stop thinking of all the other work you have to do. Perhaps you are ready to quit drinking, but all your friends like to gather at the bar.

Think about the habits *you* would like to change. Are there good things that are somehow attached to those habits that you don't want to give up? What human needs are buried within them?

Sometimes it is enough to recognize those human needs, to acknowledge them, to meet them where they are, to appreciate how important they are. Just that step can help them to let go. When we recognize a need lurking beneath an old habit, we are better able to find new ways to meet that need.

But sometimes our habits take us deeper into our human wounds and we need to give them even more attention and love. Sometimes our old habits aren't ready to let go.

And then we must ask, Can we accept ourselves as we are, right now? Even if we eat that piece of chocolate that isn't on our new diet? Even if we aren't taking any walks before work? Even if we stay in our old secure job? Even if we do the dishes instead of playing with the children? Even if we keep drinking? One of the things I learned as a psychotherapist was that change is paradoxical. It is easier to change when we love and accept ourselves as we are right now.

When we beat ourselves up for our imperfections, we actually make it harder to change. Martha Beck, a life coach and columnist for Oprah's *O Magazine*, writes: "I, too, followed a pattern of resolution, recidivism, and recrimination, until years of coaching showed me how useless it was. Self-criticism never helped my clients keep resolutions. It just made them wretched and annoying." 6

She goes on to say:

There are very good reasons not to get bent out of shape over a lack of resolve. First, as you've probably heard, our brains are malleable. Repeated self-criticism can literally

^{6 &}lt;a href="http://www.oprah.com/spirit/What-to-Do-When-You-Mess-Up-Break-Your-Resolutions#ixzz3vwRfBlg5">http://www.oprah.com/spirit/What-to-Do-When-You-Mess-Up-Break-Your-Resolutions#ixzz3vwRfBlg5

shape them into patterns that sustain negativity, while persistent self-acceptance can reinforce more felicitous neurological pathways. Second, whenever we go to war with any issue in our lives, the thing we're fighting has a way of fighting back... Paradoxically, positive change comes about when we're cheerfully nonresistant to things as they are—even things that seem highly problematic.

I found a beautiful poem by the Sufi mystic Hafiz, which expresses this radical self-acceptance.⁷ He writes:

Now is the time to know That all that you do is sacred.

Now, why not consider A lasting truce with yourself and God.

Now is the time to understand
That all your ideas of right and wrong
Were just a child's training wheels
To be laid aside
When you finally live
With veracity
And love. ...

My dear, please tell me, Why do you still Throw sticks at your heart And God?

What is it in that sweet voice inside That incites you to fear?

Now is the time for the world to know That every thought and action is sacred.

This is the time
For you to compute the impossibility
That there is anything
But Grace.

Now is the season to know That everything you do Is sacred.

Everything you do is sacred. What a heretical idea! Because of course we know that some things are good and some things are bad. But what if that isn't exactly true? What if everything we do really is sacred?

⁷ Hafiz, "Now is the Time" in *The Gift* - versions of Hafiz by Daniel Ladinsky

Recently, I signed up for a DNA test at one of the online companies that offer them. It was fun to see what they reported about my genealogy—mostly it confirmed what I already knew about my ancestry. But I also looked at health-related genetic characteristics. It turns out that I had a variation in one segment that creates a tendency to worry. Well, that wasn't something unexpected either, because I know I have a tendency to worry. Worrying is one of the habits I would love to change. But here was this DNA snippet telling me that I was genetically programmed to worry more than some other people.

Should I feel bad about myself because I worry too much? This test put a whole new perspective on it. Worrying is just a part of my natural biology. Not anyone's fault except the natural process of evolution. It must have served some sort of evolutionary purpose if it became encoded into the genes of some of us. The more we learn about genetics, the more we discover other aspects of our lives that are built into our natural programming.

Can I accept that my tendency to worry might be part of the sacredness Hafiz is talking about? Not good or bad. If I accept that my worry may be sacred, if offers me a new path in my relationship to it. If I accept it, if I honor it, then I can be more gentle with myself as I seek to create less worry in my days, and more trust. It is like petting a little black cat who is scratching in the bathtub trying to get my attention. Don't push me, it says, just accept me as I am. And paradoxically, when I accept my worry, it eases up, it relaxes, and lets go.

How many of our habits might have this genetic predisposition? By setting goals, or by making resolutions to change our habits, we are more likely to achieve the results we desire. But it is also true that when we accept ourselves, and accept our habits, we can more gently ease our way into wholeness, into new choices, into change. Both goal setting and self-acceptance are important parts of the process.

Have you ever watched a baby learning to walk? A baby falls down thousands of times. It doesn't matter. It is not wrong for the baby to fall. It is all a part of the human experience. It is all a part of learning to walk. The baby has a desperate resolution to walk. We don't chide the baby for its falls, rather we encourage it, and laugh with it, and accept it as part of the process. And that is how all of us learn to be human. With resolution, with encouragement, and with acceptance. With love, not pushing.

Take some time during our quiet meditation to ponder a habit in your life that has been troubling to you.

Take some time to pay attention to what might be hidden within that habit.

Can you see the sacredness that resides within that habit?

What human needs of yours are met through that habit?

Might there be other ways to meet those needs?

Is the habit ready to change? If so, what is the first step?

If not, what is the first step?

Meditation

Closing Words

As piglet says⁸: "Let's leave behind, the things that do not matter.

And we'll turn our lives, to a more important chapter."

⁸ Benjamin Hoff, "Piglet's Song" from The Te of Piglet