

“HOW AWKWARD”

A Sermon Delivered for
The First Parish in Needham
Sunday, November 4, 2007
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O what a piece of work we are! The hymn this morning hit that nail squarely on the head. It's my hunch that all of us are prone to saying the most inappropriate things, doing the most uncomfortable actions, and making the most complete fools of ourselves at the most unexpected times. I can think of at least a few of these times in my own life. . . .

Seminarians are expected to work as chaplains at a hospital for one summer. It is an intensive experience where one explores his or her pastoral identity in the midst of a group of peers who are doing the same. Some call this “boot camp for ministers.” At the end of this sometimes painful, sometimes rewarding, and always challenging summer, participants are issued a final report about their ministerial and psychological progress. These reports are often very personal, including several very intimate details about one's life. Last week, I had to make several copies of this for my ministerial credentialing process at the Unitarian Universalist Association. One day later, I found out that I had left the original in the library's copy machine.

How awkward.

I had been working on my book report on Aldous Huxley for several months. This was my first homework assignment in the ninth grade: I had to take an author and do a presentation on his work and life. It was the only time that I had ever gotten relatively excited about doing homework. I loved *Brave New World*, with its terrifying vision of what humanity could become under totalitarian rule.

Minutes before my presentation was to begin, I started to feel sick. My heart was racing. My breath was shallow. When my name was called, I could barely get out of my chair. I had never been so scared. When I finally managed to reach the front of the room, it felt like I had swallowed a cup full of cement. I was frozen. I barely managed to get a few words out before I had to sit back down.

How very, very awkward.

Being human is about having expectations and having experiences. Being awkward is about having expectations and experiences that do not match up with one another. Whether you leave a private document in a very public place, or you find that you are too afraid to complete a task that so many others find easy--that's when things get awkward. It is not a pleasant experience. Awkwardness is an uncomfortable, even painful way of being human. It reminds us that we are out of step with others, that we are not quite right, that we might be rejected.

Not surprisingly, there are several websites dedicated to this particular facet

of human experience. My favorite is the “Awkwardness Survival Guide.” The very name of this online destination throws into relief our general feeling of what it means to be awkward--that it is something to be survived, minimized, and overcome. Awkwardness is certainly never desirable, as the advice on this website clarifies.

For instance, what should you do when you lean so far back in your chair that you fall over? According to the “Awkwardness Survival Guide,” fake a seizure. What do you do when you confuse a friend or colleague with your spouse by ending a telephone conversation with a habitual “I love you”? The “Awkwardness Survival Guide” counsels that, for the rest of your life, you should end every subsequent conversation with a casual “I love you.” That way, people will simply assume that it is “your thing.” My favorite is its suggestion about what you do when you accidentally call your teacher “mom.” Your best option, the website suggests, is to “literally crawl into a hole and die.”

There are plenty of people whom I think shouldn’t get themselves into awkward situations, who should be more masterful in their interactions. I am thinking specifically of the stories of great religious men and women. Often full of instructive and insightful comment, they also seem to be the same people who find themselves in such terribly awkward situations.

In the book of Exodus, Moses saw a bush that was on fire as he was tending sheep on the mountain of Horeb. Noticing that it was not being consumed by the flames that enveloped it, he walked over to investigate. I am going to ask Ed to help me out with my rendering of this interaction that Moses has with God in the burning bush. Ed, can you please come forward?

Lucas: You can be God, and I will be Moses. “Oh, look, a burning bush!”

Ed: “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

Lucas: Moses did so, and God continued:

Ed: “The cry of the Israelites has come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, Moses, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (3:10).

Lucas: “You want me to what? Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Don’t you know how awkward that conversation would be?” (3:11)

Ed: “But I will be with you” (3:12).

Lucas: “No, what I am trying to say is, what if they do not believe me or listen to me? What if they say ‘the Lord did not really appear to you’? Then what?” (4:1).

Ed: “I will give you signs and wonders, so that they may believe” (4:5).

Lucas: Pause, “This is so awkward, God, but I don’t think so. Leading the Israelites out of Egypt really doesn’t draw on my skill set. I am a shepherd. I have never been eloquent . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10).

Ed: "I am NOT asking. Who is it that gives speech to mortals? Is it not I, the Lord?" (4:11)

Lucas: "Yeah, you know, I really didn't want this conversation to go here, but can't you just send someone else?" (4:13).

Ed: "How irritating you are! Go forth! I will teach you what you shall do!" (4:15)

Lucas: Thanks, Ed.

Part of taking off one's shoes in sacred space is putting them back on, and walking out into the world to realize our ideals. This is the hard part, the part that Moses didn't want to have to do. And just as God set the bar awfully high for Moses, so does Unitarian Universalism set the bar high for us. Our understanding of the fragility and beauty of our world, our calling to ameliorate its suffering and injustice is a high and lofty ideal. As the story of the burning bush highlights, being called to the high and lofty is often awkward. Ideals necessarily undermine the expectations of the larger society, creating that tension where experiences and expectations do not match up. Who was Moses to challenge the Pharaoh? What is Unitarian Universalism to challenge injustice? Indeed, our liberal faith demands that we will settle for nothing less than being out of step with society, than our failure to meet the expectations of a society that often lacks justice and compassion. To live up to our convictions and commitments, we have to risk being awkward.

This past spring I went to Holyoke, Massachusetts, with the youth group of First Parish. We had the choice to do two kinds of work there. Either we could go to a farm, or we could help out with a local after-school program for underprivileged children. About fifteen of the youth went with another advisor to the farm. The three remaining youth went with me to the after-school program.

When we got to the dark, tiny room where over thirty children were playing, talking, eating, and doing homework, it became clear just how much we did not fit in. Many of the children could only speak Spanish. We were given no instructions or orientation. Thrown into this mix of activities, the four of us stood uncomfortably in the center of the room. It was awkward.

As one minute ticked to two, to ten, to fifteen, I looked around for some kind of way in--something, anything, in which we could take part. Outdoors, I noticed some young persons playing hopscotch. So I went outside and asked if I could try it. Despite being a twenty-five year old man doing something typically reserved for much younger children, I was pretty good. Suddenly things were not so awkward. The youth group and I started to have fun. We even made some friends.

In this situation, awkwardness appeared as the strange moment when two cultures rub up against each other. It wasn't quite as exciting as insisting that the Pharaoh let the people of Israel go, but it was uncomfortable nonetheless. And the youth were acutely aware of this. None of us found it effortless to transition into this different cultural space. But I wonder. What would it have meant if we did not

take the risk of appearing out of place? What would have happened if we had said no to our highest ideals--no, we are not going to risk being awkward to engage the work of service and justice?

Refusing to be awkward, refusing to dwell with an experience that is uncomfortable and challenging has its own penalty. Perhaps we are not going to make God angry at us, as Moses did. But we also wouldn't have been given the chance to contribute our time and energy to a town that has a dropout rate at least ten times as high as Needham's. We wouldn't have been able to learn from a community where 50% of its students live below the poverty line. We wouldn't have seen some of the same children from the after-school program in line, the very next day, at the local soup kitchen. We would have fallen short of our ideals, far below the bar that our faith sets for us. Just as Moses preferred the comfort of his pasture to the awkwardness of confronting the Pharaoh, so the youth could have stuck around Needham instead of awkwardly encountering the poverty of a community very different from its own.

The youth chose to awkwardly confront the poverty of a community very different from its own.

Diane Arbus is an American photographer whose pictures often capture the tragedy and violence of our country. Reflecting on her use of the camera, she writes: "I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself." When we dwell with the experience of unmet expectation, rejection, or being out of step, we invite the possibility of rearranging ourselves. We become open to seeing the world in a new way, or of learning to challenge injustice, or of discovering something about our lives. Risking awkwardness sometimes alters our perception of a world that is often filled with suffering. And in doing so, it occasionally contributes some change, however large or small.

But let's be honest. Learning, changing, and serving do not capture the entire experience of being awkward. There is another element to this painful way of being human, one that is explored in the "Awkwardness Survival Guide." I am really not sure if there is a lesson contained in the act of leaning so far back in one's chair that it falls over, or in accidentally telling a coworker "I love you," or in calling one's teacher "mom." Part of being awkward, part of having that all-too-human moment of expectations and experiences that do not match up is the lack of any clear outcome or lesson. I didn't learn anything from leaving my psychological evaluation in the library's copy machine, except, perhaps, not to do it again.

Even with the painfulness and discomfort, even with the lack of any clear lesson or outcome, I hope that, during my time as the intern minister here, we can open ourselves to being awkward together. I pray that we can stay with the possibility of being rearranged. I want to see us take our faith into a world that falls so short of our ideals, and change it. Awkwardly. Blessed be and amen.