



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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HOW TO ASK FOR HELP

There's a London Drugs branch next to my apartment building in Park Royal, and the first time I went there, I had a short list of medicine cabinet items I needed. It took the better part of ten minutes for me even to find the 'drugstore' part of London Drugs, but it started getting me acquainted with its range of products. The second time, along with some shampoo, I picked up a few groceries; the third time the list included toothpaste, aspirin, milk, salsa, a bathtub plug and a spraying head for my kitchen faucet. You see, each time I went there, I saw more things that I could get there the *next* time I went in. Then, awhile back when I mentioned here that I'd be shopping for a new computer, imagine my surprise when a venerable, long-time member told me to get one at London Drugs! A computer? At a drugstore? Sure enough, there they were!

But I'm digressing a bit because my point is that each time I go to London Drugs, the exact same store, I wander up and down the aisles looking for what I want; they never seem to be in the same place as the last time, or I mix up where the laundry soap was last time with where I think the mouthwash is so I'm like a lost lamb in there. Do I ask an employee where I can find what I want? No, I hold my head high and pretend that I'm not *lost*, I'm just gradually learning where *everything* is. Ah, so *here's* where they keep the 8-quart crock pots; I must remember that! Oh, a down-filled sleeping bag; if there's another big storm I can find one of those *right here* in Aisle 18. As I spend half an hour searching out Oil of Olay and Preparation H, I'm thinking, "I don't *need* help," but in fact I just don't want to ask for it.

Imagine then my dilemma when 6 weeks ago I was pretty sick. It was easy for me to ask people to help carry out the tasks that I knew I couldn't do because it was my *responsibility* to ensure they were done. When it came to figuring out if I needed personal *help*, I came up with every way I could *not* to need it so that I didn't have to ask. In fact, I received kind offers that I turned down, largely because I wasn't ready to be seen in such a vulnerable state. I hasten to add that I learned my lesson that time, and no one need worry that I won't ask for help when in the future I need it. That kind of pride – the pride that leaves us to fend for ourselves, usually poorly -- is the wrong kind of pride.

We Unitarian Universalists know that there are good forms of pride. Pride assists us to take hold of our freedom and trust our own thinking. Pride can help us own our talents and skills so that we can be as successful as we are naturally able to be, often beyond what we ever thought was possible. On the other hand, pride can start to build up an image of the self; an image that all too often is reflected back by others because it suits them to take us at face value. Such an image becomes deeply important to our sense of belonging in society.

Sometimes this image is less than who we truly are; it's an image that we need to break out of in order to become larger, stronger, smarter than we've been perceived to be. But, and this is what's crucial in my subject today, other times we fail or believe that we fail to live up to the image others have of us. This especially happens when we have been diminished in some way – a business reversal, a hidden family problem, a loss of health. At these times we become vulnerable, and often we're ashamed of that, sometimes not even knowing that we are. We can feel weak or incompetent. In this state, it's pride that isolates us. It may feel like shame is the barrier, but it's pride that creates the shame.

In recent years, the thinking about shame has become skewed; so many have had to free themselves from the bonds of the shame that was used as a social control of women and minorities in the past that it's easy to believe that shame itself is a bad thing. But think about it: if shame is bad does that mean 'shamelessness' is good? No, there is such a thing as healthy shame. It's the feeling that teaches us that we need to fit in somehow with other people; that we need to learn how to behave in order to maintain healthy relations with others. Shame prevents grandiosity and the kind of over-inflated self-regard that makes us arrogant and cruel.

Inappropriate shame can come from feeling that no one else would ever have the problem that we have, at least no one else that *we* know; no one who lives on *our* street; no one with *our* education or status. We think no one will understand; that our problem makes us a failure. This is the shadow problem of pride; instead of feeling somehow better than other people, we feel that we are far worse, uniquely worse, eternally and isolatingly worse. At all costs, the true face must be hidden; the false smile pasted on; the appearance maintained.

Sometimes, it's not even our own problem that we feel ashamed to let others see. Someone we know or love is troubled or behaving badly, and the reflex is to protect *them* from their own appropriate shame. This is the classic case of 'co-dependency', being in relationship with a person addicted in some way; it's easy to be drawn into trying to solve that person's problem, even when the problem is that they need to get honest and take responsibility for themselves.

To make sure that I haven't lost you, my main point is that excessive pride and excessive shame restrict our freedom to be authentic, to be who we are in this moment. If who we truly are right now includes being someone with a problem we can't solve ourselves, then it is entirely right to let others know this and to ask for help.

The funny thing is that almost always the things that trigger shame are the same problems that many people around us are facing, have already faced or will someday. They are the problems that come with living in our times.

A friend of mine told me a story about his favourite aunt, a woman in her late 70s. She was the relative with the keenest and most open mind, the cleverest wit and the biggest heart. He loved her dignity and self-regard without any sense of haughtiness.

One evening he was picking her up to go to a rather fancy family dinner; she asked him to wait briefly while she went into the bathroom. In a couple of minutes, she called to him through the door, asking him to come in and help her as she'd had an accident, a very messy one that soiled her clothes as well as the bathroom. What stayed with him was that her dignity and sense of self didn't change at all. She asked for and accepted his help as though the problem was simple and uncomplicated. She'd simply had an accident and knew that she couldn't fix it herself. This allowed him to help her without his own shame being triggered on her behalf, and without anxiety for her feelings.

People have accidents. People get sick. People get afraid, or depressed. Some of us are fired. Some of us drink or use drugs. Some of us commit a crime. Some of us have impulses that hurt others. Some of us keep letting ourselves be hurt over and over.

It's easy especially in our consumerist, thrill-seeking society to believe that life is really meant to be a series of peak experiences; we live for them and take pictures and tell stories. Life is supposed to be exciting!

Our society is also deeply conformist. Even we Unitarian Universalists, who strive to express our own uniqueness, tend to conform in many ways. We depend on the CBC, PBS and the Discovery Channel. We drive fuel-efficient cars and wear sensible shoes. But even if that's not always true of us, we're surrounded by conformity and predictability. Our church is in a neighbourhood where it's illegal to have a clothesline, for goodness' sake. *Everybody* has to have a dryer; no polka dot boxers waving in our backyards! When life isn't exciting, it's supposed to be normal!

What rarely occurs to us, myself included, is that life is supposed to be difficult. It's OK that school has to be difficult so we'll learn, or that physiotherapy has to be difficult so that we'll regain our strength. Perhaps life itself is supposed to be difficult so that we'll learn and gain strength.

Now, I don't think that we should accept other people making our lives harder in the mistaken expectation that it's supposed to happen and we'll grow stronger; rather, in cases like that, we strengthen by not accepting the burden of trouble or pain that really belongs elsewhere. It's not OK for someone to foist a problem onto your back. Shrug it off and give it right back to them. I'm also not denying that life doesn't flatten or even destroy innocent people.

What I'm emphasizing today is that none of us becomes who we are by surfing over the easy times; we are significantly formed by our problems. Furthermore, our relationships, our families and networks, are built as much through surviving and solving problems together as they are by sharing love and joy. Most of the time, we're not meant to face difficulties all alone. To return to my previous analogies: if our only feedback after writing a test is that the errors are marked with an 'X', it's useless; we need someone to help us learn the parts we don't know. If we attempt physiotherapy on our own, we're inevitably going to take it too easy or too hard; someone needs to show us what's just right, pushing us and pulling us back. Asking for help is natural; it builds bonds between people.

Now of course it's important to be thoughtful about whom to ask. We might have our own pattern of asking the *wrong* people for help, so we need to be aware of what we're doing. Not all of us are ready to be trusted so deeply. Some don't have the capacity at present to offer help, or at least not the kind of help that might be needed. Some are too burdened to have any energy left to help others. But surprisingly often, people are very ready and willing to do for us what they can.

I remember one Sunday during my internship when a boy about 8 years old walked up to me between the two services and said without a hint of hesitation or shyness, "Can you help me find Karen Lewis, please?" Karen Lewis is the Director of Religious Education in Dallas; she's their Lynn Sabourin. This boy needed to talk to her about something, and I happened to know just where she was, so I took him to her. I found out later that this boy recognized me and knew my role at church because he'd seen me participate in children's chapel a couple of times. But what struck me was the trust he showed in walking up to me to ask for help. Not only was I impressed with his social skills, I was so touched to know that he knew me and asked *me* to help him.

In contrast to our pride being damaged, or our self-image falling apart, or our shame overwhelming us, we can bring that child-like quality of simple trust into our relationships by asking for help. Such a request is actually a statement of several things other than, "I trust you."

It says, "I value you enough to believe that you can help me." It says, "I believe that you value me enough to want to help me." It says, "I think you're a human being who is

understanding and compassionate.” It says, “I love you enough to let you know what’s really going on.” It says, “You are an important part of my life.” It says, “*You* needn’t fear what I think about you because I’m letting go of my own fear about what *you* think of me.” To ask for help is to state the value, regard and confidence you feel for that person. To ask for help is to knit one more stitch in the beloved net of community that each of us helps to build and maintain for us all. To ask for help is really to offer a blessing.

Imagine saying all of these things directly to someone you know. To your partner: “I love you enough to let you know what’s really going on.” To your neighbour: “I value you enough to believe that you can help me.” To your boss: “I think you’re a human being who is understanding and compassionate.” To the person sitting beside or in front of you here this morning: “You’re an important part of my community. I’m not going to fear what you think of me.”

But you don’t *have to* say all or any of those things. All you have to do is ask for help.

It so happens that, in keeping with this theme, I’m able to tell you today that the Board has established a new way in which this community can offer help to and seek help from each other. A vital, compassionate and generous congregation is ready to help its own members. I’m proud to say that soon North Shore will be able to do this.

You’ll read in your newsletters, and I’ll continue to announce for the next few weeks that we are creating a Pastoral Discretionary Fund, a service common in many other churches. The Minister alone can access this money to offer financial aid to members and friends of the congregation who have good reason to ask for help, so the fund is set up in a way that is both accountable and entirely confidential. Each year, our collections around Christmas time will go towards our Discretionary Fund; this year it will be the money offered at our Children’s Pageant on Dec 23 and at our two Christmas Eve services. Please be prepared to be generous to fellow members at those times. My donation will be \$200.

I’ve said today that asking for help is a blessing to those we ask. To offer help is to complete the blessed circle.

May our community overflow with such blessedness.