

## The Woman Who Was Changed by a Jump Rope

This morning, somehow, like me, you woke up, you got yourself and your kids out of their beds, you dragged your partner's nose out of reading the Sunday morning paper on their iPad, you said "no" to a whole bunch of other things, to be here.

Why?

No really, why?

Do you have a reason? Keep that in mind as I tell you the ancient parable of the woman who was changed by a jump rope.

In city far away, lived a woman in her early twenties. Her life was pretty much as you'd expect for a woman at this stage in her life. She had a job. She went to work. She had friends. She certainly didn't go to church, but I mean, that's not surprising. How many people in this room, right now, are in their twenties? Anyone?

(You're all looking at me like "Otto, aren't YOU in your twenties?" Yeah, my twenties are way behind me. I'll have you know I turned 30 on my last birthday.)

But back to our parable, do you know where this woman did go? The gym. I hear that's where people in their twenties hang out.

Anyhow, when this woman was at the gym, she did a variety of exercises, like you do at the gym, I'm told. She lifted weights, and worked out on the exercise machines, and did other things I think. And at the gym she sometimes used the jump ropes.

And so one day, she starting thinking about how she wanted her own jump rope to use at home. And so she came up with a plan. Instead of buying a jump rope, which she could've afforded for, like, \$3 at Target, she decided to steal one from her gym.

So on that day she went and did her workout like she always did, followed all her routines just like any other day and then she went to the locker room, changed out of her workout clothes and walked back into the gym, looked around to make sure no one was watching, picked up a jump rope, put it in her bag and booked it out there.

Now, of course, we couldn't all do this. I think it's important that I tell you that the woman in this story is white, of course, and nobody was expecting that she'd be stealing a jump rope so she just walked out and nobody bothered her. Not all people have this luxury. But at this gym, this young white woman in her twenties did.

It didn't take long for her to realize what she'd done. Almost immediately the guilt and shame sunk in. She knew she had done something wrong. But she didn't know what to do about it.

Now, have you ever felt the same way? Have you ever done something and immediately regretted it, knew that it was wrong? I know that I have. Sometimes it's something small, like I sent an email that was maybe a little mean, or I didn't help out a friend when they needed a hand, even though I could have easily done so, or I looked the other way when Family Promise (that's the shelter that comes to stay with us tonight) asked for volunteers. And sometimes it's something much bigger than that.

Can you think of something? If you are like me, you can think of many things.

Keep that in mind as I continue to tell this story.

So, this woman, who we'll call Jen because that's her name, did not use the jump rope when she got home. In fact, just looking at the jump rope gave her so much guilt that she boxed it up and put it on a shelf and tried to forget about it.

If it had been me, I would've used it.

But not Jen. On that shelf it stayed for five years, when she came across it as she was packing up her stuff to move to a new city. And as she opened the box with the jump rope in it the familiar feelings of guilt and shame returned.

If it had been me, I would have thrown it away right about then.

But not Jen, she packed it up and moved it with her. And from there it survived several more moves until it had been ten years that she had been carrying around this stupid jump rope. Can you imagine? Seriously, I don't get it.

And she said to me, because, yes, the "woman who was changed by a jump rope," is my personal friend, she said to me "Every time I looked at the jump rope my guilt just got worse."

And wow, do I ever know that feeling. That feeling like "There it is! The thing I did wrong. What am I going to do? I don't know what to do about that." For me, it lodges itself in my stomach and I can feel it right here, and I want to push it away and forget about it.

Or maybe I think "There's got to be something I can do about that, but *what?*"

Because what was there for Jen to do? She stole the jump rope ten years before, what can she do now? She can't go back in time and NOT steal it. Was she destined just to carry it around for the rest of her life.

Now, Jen's not a Unitarian Universalist – Yet (don't worry, friends, I'm working it). At this point in her life she wasn't going to church or any other religious community, until she found herself at a Buddhist retreat.

Now, I don't know exactly how Jen ended up there, but it was there when she first heard the five precepts, the practices of Theravaden Buddhist practice. Perhaps you are familiar with them. Let me read them to you:

Number one: I undertake the training rule to abstain from killing.

Number two: I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not given.

Right. So it's clear that Jen had taken something that was not given to her ten years ago when she walked out of that gym with the jump rope. A clear violation of the second training rule.

And ten years ago she *knew* that it was wrong.

But upon hearing this precept, this training rule, she decided that she needed to do something about it. Finally.

So she went home and she dug up the jump rope, and she put it in a manila envelope and mailed it back to the gym in the city she had moved from. And during those ten years she had told not a single soul about this.

A few years later she was on a first date and told the story to the man she was on a date with, kind of on a whim. He thought it was interesting and I have him to thank for the fact that this story eventually made its way to me. When upon hear it I exclaimed "Can I make a sermon out of that???" In retrospect, probably not the best response.

So why am I telling you this story?

There are a lot of things that this story brought up for me. The guilt and shame she carried around. The question of what lead her to steal in the first place. The silence around it. The fact that she didn't just use the jump rope or get rid of it.

And there's a way in which this physical manifestation of her misdeed is this very concrete metaphor for the guilt and shame we all carry about the things that we've done. And the way in which she mails it back and "let's go" is really compelling.

If only all of these acts that we've done, all the ways in which we've wronged others, had such simple and clear solutions.

So remember earlier when I asked you to think about something that you had done, or maybe didn't do but should have, that you felt bad about? Yeah, spoiler alert, I don't have a clear solution for you.

But that doesn't mean you can't think about it.

You see, the thing that really seemed to stick with me about this story was the way in which her religious community helped her to see something she already knew. Which reiterates an important question to me – what is the purpose of religious community?

You see, on her own, Jen *knew* what she did was wrong. She knew that she should not have taken the jump rope. But it was hearing this precept not to take what wasn't given for her to actually do something about it. She needed this outside prompting, this religious community to help her to figure out what to do. In ten years of having the stolen jump rope, that's what changed her.

Nathan, our senior minister, sometimes says that we come to church to practice being our best selves, to practice being the people we want to be. But what does that *mean*?

We all have an internal sense of what is right and wrong. And I think we can all relate to Jen when she took the jump rope, that immediate sense that we've done something we regretted. We all have that sense of what to do or not do.

And religious communities can be a place where we can test that out.

Religious communities can stretch and push us to do "the right thing" even when it's difficult or hard. Because the other people can hold us accountable.

Now, obviously, this doesn't mean we blindly follow whatever our religious communities tell us. That's why we need to find that place where our own internal beliefs line up with those of our church. These two things: our own moral conscience, and that of our communities, work together. It can be our religious communities that actually compel us to take action.

And, I get it, Jen's story is incredibly clear cut. She took something she shouldn't have. She knew she shouldn't do it. She found a religion with a rule that literally said "don't take things." And because she had the jump rope, she was able to do what, in her mind, seemed like the right thing to do.

But what if it's not so clear? What if you know that what you've done was wrong, or what if you know that you need to do something, to make something right, but you don't know what it is?

And maybe this is where you start to think that Unitarian Universalism isn't so helpful. Sure, you could look at our seven principles (located in the first few pages of our hymnals, by the way

– now is as good a time as any to brush up on them) as an equivalent to these precepts, but they lack a certain definitiveness that the precepts. Instead of “I undertake to the training rule to abstain from killing,” we have a covenant to affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” instead of “abstaining from taking what is not given,” we have “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.”

The principles are almost deliberately abstract, which can be both a blessing and curse. There is nothing that tells us we HAVE to do something. But by choosing to come to church here this morning, what are you hoping for?

Did you come here expecting to be challenged? Comforted?

Did you come here expecting to be changed?

Maybe we come here for each other, to help each other, to guide each other, to be prophets in each other’s lives. Maybe we come here to hold each other accountable to be our best selves.

We see examples of it here at this church every day. We see people showing up for Family Promise next week. We see the work that Racial Justice Transformation Team is doing to try and inspire a more open conversation about racism in our world and in this congregation (Just Mercy conversation after church today!). We see all of the people who volunteered to help at all the recent memorial services here. We see our offering plate go to causes we care about each month.

If you’ve been coming here for a while, you can probably think of other ways, big or small, that you’ve changed because of coming to this religious community.

Because my friend, the woman who was changed by a jump rope, wasn’t really changed by a jump rope. She was changed because she allowed herself to be open to a community and to let it hold her accountable to something she already knew. After years of holding on to this problem on her own, she discovered that she was not alone. She let herself be changed.

We can’t come to church and expect not to be changed by that experience. We can’t come to church and not let the resolve of our own minds mingle with that of the community. We can’t come to church and expect to keep living the same way we did before.

A few weeks ago when asked about why we come to church, here were some of the answers:

“Purpose, caring, hope, inspiration.”

“I’m okay, I can do better.”

“Challenge (In a good way!)”

“Opportunities to give and to love and to welcome.”

So this is what I’m telling you. You already know it. Let yourselves be compelled to do something you’ve been avoiding, something you know you need to do. Think about something right now that you could do to help become more of the person you want to be.

Return the jump rope. Even if you think it’s too late. Even if you think it doesn’t matter.

Because this is where we practice being our best selves.

Let us say together Amen. Amen.

May it be so.