

Jennifer Beth Johnson
March 17, 2019
“Love Is a Tough Business”
First Parish in Sherborn

Reading

Awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination. Culturally, all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the work place, domestic households, intimate relations—should and could have as their foundation a love ethic. The underlying values of a culture and its ethics shape and inform the way we speak and act. A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well. To bring a love ethic to every dimension of our lives, our society would need to embrace change. . . .

To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic . . . , we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone.

—bell hooks, from *All About Love*

Sermon

Revolution and grit. When I first read these words in response to my inquiry about your monthly worship theme for March, I stopped in my tracks. Uh oh, I thought. Maybe I’m not the right preacher for this theme.

The revolution part, yes! Absolutely! Count me in! But, grit? At the risk of too much honesty, I’ll admit that I’ve never thought of myself as a particularly gritty person.

When I think of grit, I almost always have the same visceral reaction. Quite vividly, the feeling of falling off my bike when I was a little kid comes to me. I remember the sense of helpless disequilibrium, as I let loose what my mother called my trademark blood-curdling shriek. After hitting the concrete sidewalk, palms first, followed by an elbow, and a knee or two, I would lay on the ground with my arms splayed in front of me and my feet still tangled in the bars of my brand new two-wheeler. The one that I had so longed for, with the yellow banana seat and orange-flowered decals.

After the initial shock of falling, I felt the sting rising on the scraped surfaces of my tender skin, inspiring another shriek. Next the heat of embarrassment flushing my cheeks, and streams of hot tears spilling from my eyes. After freeing myself from the bike I now loathed, I’d run home, wailing all the way. Crashing through the screen door, I delivered myself to my mother in the kitchen, so she could inspect the shredded skin of my hands, pocked with droplets of crimson blood. Embedded in the skin were small grains of gravel from the sidewalk. Grit.

My neighbor, Patrick, was two years my junior and already he could ride his bike up and down and all around our block. He could ride circles around me. When he was learning and still prone to falls, Patrick jumped up in a flash, brushed the gravel from his hands and knees, and hopped right back on again. Grit.

When we're six years old, learning to ride a bike is a tough business. We need to be able to overcome the wobbles and the falls, the scraped knees and bloody palms. We need to be able to get back on the banana seat again and again and again. We need grit.

Psychologist Angela Duckworth is the leading thinker and researcher exploring the concept of "grit." Duckworth defines grit as the "the disposition to pursue very long-term goals with passion and perseverance, sustained over time."

By this definition, my childhood neighbor Patrick appears to have grit. I do not. At least not when it comes to bike-riding. After cleaning my scrapes and wiping my tears, my mother would retrieve my bike from the crash site and stow it in the garage where it would remain for weeks on end. Eventually, I learned to keep myself upright on two wheels, but I never fully mastered bicycling. To this day I am tentative.

Does that mean I lack the disposition of grit? Is grit something we're born with or do we learn it? Or might both be true? Can we build grit, like our muscles, through training and practice? Are certain environmental conditions more conducive to grit? These are questions that Duckworth is exploring in her research.

I care about the answers because, as I mentioned earlier, I want in on revolution. Your worship theme opens up the idea that revolutions of all kind—whether political, cultural, or personal—require grit. Revolutionary change entails upheaval, trials, sacrifices, injuries, and losses, and they are not won in a day. To affect revolutionary change, we need to be able to endure these hardships and, nevertheless, persist for the long haul. Revolution is a tough business. We need grit. So, how do we get it, build it, and practice it?

Duckworth's research provides an important insight here. One of the key drivers of grit that her research identifies is "valuing the goal." Gritty people are passionate because they deeply value the end they are trying to reach; they care, a lot. And that passion drives their perseverance.

Maybe I don't have grit when it comes to bicycling, because I just don't care all that much about it. I'm more of a walker, a jogger, a hiker. Maybe I do have the capacity for grit when it comes to what I most deeply value; maybe we all do.

It seems to me, then, that church is an ideal place for cultivating grit. Here and together, in religious community, we name our most cherished values.

We name belonging - liberation - freedom;
Justice and equality;
We name abundance - joy - and compassion;
We name beauty and truth;
We name community, connection.
We name love.

We name these values and we invite each other to care about them, passionately. In religious community, we envision together the world made anew according to our values. In religious community, we invite each other not only to care but also to practice our values in the world as it is, so that one day it will become the world as we desire it to be.

This is the revolution I want in on.

In this morning's reading, bell hooks describes this revolution as an "awakening to love." She invokes a new culture "where everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well." A culture built on the foundation of a love ethic in place of our existing culture of "power and domination" built on an ethic of competition.

Unitarian Universalists care about the love revolution. That's why I cast my lot here ten years ago; because I want in on the revolution and I need to practice grit. Maybe that's why you're here, too?

So, I've been wondering what grit looks like in the love revolution. What does it mean to be gritty in the service of love?

Just as I was wondering, as is often the case, the universe served up an answer. It came via my car radio and a rebroadcast of an old episode of This American Life, called "Unconditional Love." Loving someone, no . . . matter . . . what. That takes grit.

In Act 1 of the episode, journalist Alix Spiegel shares the story of a family, Heidi and Rick Solomon and their son Daniel. When Daniel was seven years old, Heidi and Rick adopted him and brought him from the orphanage in Romania where he had lived since infancy to their home in suburban Ohio. Nothing in Daniel's previous experience could have prepared him for the intimacy of family life.

Here's how Alix Spiegel describes Daniel's early childhood:

During the day, one set of adults would feed and clean Daniel . . . and the other 100 or so orphans who lived in the same room. During the night, there was a graveyard crew. But even though Daniel was there for seven and a half years, he can't tell you the name of any of the adults who took care of him. He didn't know any of them well enough to say. He also can't tell you much about how he passed his time, what he thought about. He didn't go to school. He didn't go outside. . .

Given his dramatic change in circumstances, it's not surprising that Daniel struggled to adapt to a radically new environment. His behavior deteriorated and he spent hours every day in tantrums of rage, often becoming violent, especially towards Heidi. The family called upon experts of all stripes—social workers, psychiatrists, therapists—and soon Daniel was diagnosed with Attachment Disorder. None of the many therapies they tried took, and Daniel only grew more angry, isolated, and violent. Heidi's biggest worry was that Daniel would hurt someone else.

Through it all, Heidi persisted; she remained faithful to the possibility that Daniel could live fully and well—with joy, connection, and loving support. This is the value that fueled Heidi's passion, the conviction that her son should and could have a better life, a good life.

When strategy after strategy failed, Heidi relentlessly pursued new options until she found more specialized programs for Attachment Disorder. After years of trying, a strategy called the “three feet plan” offered a glimmer of hope. For eight weeks, Heidi and Daniel spent their waking hours side-by-side, in an effort to recreate the bond of attachment an infant makes with their primary caregiver, the bond that eluded Daniel in the orphanage. About three weeks into the program, Daniel recalls that “something just changed.” The realization dawned on him that this mother loved him.

In addition to the three-feet plan, the family participated in what is known as “holding therapy.” Spiegel says, “Every night for a year, 20 minutes a night, Daniel, Heidi, and Rick were supposed to hold on to each other and talk, Rick and Heidi cradling Daniel like a newborn child. . .”

At this point, Daniel was thirteen and really big. When Heidi and Rick cradled him, Daniel's torso spanned both of their laps. Daniel admits that it felt weird, but he liked the ice cream they played him with. And, eventually, during these sessions, in the radical embrace of his gritty parents, Daniel was able to open up about his feelings and his experiences in the orphanage. Soon, Daniel began to transform in ways small and large: helping around the house, making friends, and earning the valedictorian award in his confirmation class at the family's synagogue.

I share this story not to idealize one family's journey. Plenty of families struggle just as valiantly as Heidi, Rick, and Daniel, without arriving at the same kind of transformation. I share it because for me it offers a compelling image of the kind of grit I think we need to support revolutions of love, in all facets of life, from family, to community, to culture. This story offers an image of radical embrace—of people holding on to each other no matter what.

When learning to ride a bike, the grit we need is the kind that compels us to wipe the gravel from our hands and knees, hop back on the seat, clench the handle bars, and just keep pedaling.

When working to build communities and cultures centered on love and inclusion, the grit we need is the kind that compels us to reach out to each other and hold on at all costs. It compels us to reach out and hold on when we are the ones hurting and when we are the ones who have caused the hurt; it compels us to reach out and hold on when we've let each other down, and when we fear we're not worthy or capable. The grit we need is the kind that compels us to reach out and hold on in joy and sadness, in triumph and failure, in suffering and privilege, in need and generosity, in anger and forgiveness.

"To live lives based on the principles of a love ethic," bell hooks writes, "we have to be courageous." She continues, "Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn in by other bearers of light."

When we come together, there is more light. There is more courage. There is more grit.

At the end of her story about the Solomon family, Alix Spiegel concludes, "Love is a tough business." It takes courage, passion, and tenacity. It takes grit.

Whether you are uncertainly gritty, like me, or tenaciously gritty like my neighbor Patrick and Daniel's mother Heidi, I believe you have come to the right place. We are all bearers of light, called together by our shared faith to embrace a love ethic. Here, in this religious community and in our broader faith family, we have come to practice thinking and acting according to the ways of love. Here, we have come to practice grit in pursuit of a love revolution. Here, we have come to practice radical holding-on, as if all of our lives depend on it. Because they do.

Amen, and blessed be.

Resources

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