

Roped Into Liberation

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Have you ever been roped into doing something? Persuaded, enticed or enlisted? I know I have and the fact is that if I was roped in I likely didn't want to do it. It took some encouragement, pushing, or force. I wonder if you've ever been there. Roped in with knots in the rope. It's not only others that can rope us in and create these knots. We can do this to ourselves. Envision the knots that you have tried to untie in your life—a gold chain, a phone charger, or a vacuum cord. Maybe a string in the waistband of your sweatpants. And did you, as I have done, worsen the problem by being impatient? Did you pull the knot even tighter, becoming angrier? I think of all the times I tried to undo a knot by poking it with a needle or nibbling at its strings with my teeth. These are the literal knots in our lives. We know, it's not the snarls in our hands that cause the most pain, but the ones pulling tightly within us—the scary knots that become unbearable. As Pope Francis once pondered, "Those are the ones that are out of our hands, the knots of selfishness and indifference, economic and social knots, knots of violence and war."

I wonder if you were affected by the Buffalo shootings this past week as I was. I'm affected by all violence such as this, but this violence cut deeper. African Americans literally being hunted down and murdered because of the color of their skin and because our national narrative allows it, supports it, assists it. This knot in our American lives is strangulating, is getting tighter and getting more and more difficult to untie as we become a nation of hate, most definitely living in the hate state of Florida.

When I was first introduced to the Sufi wisdom of seeing our inner spiritual work as a process of untying knots, it immediately resonated. It struck me as a powerful metaphor that brought clarity and insight to the often confusing world of the subconscious. Let us think about how the image of a rope or the act of tying something is used in these common expressions: "wound too tight" "bound up" "unraveling" "my stomach is in knots" "my muscles are full of knots" "tied up" "hog-tied" "at the end of my rope" "fit to be tied" "my hands are tied" "sleep tight" "tie one on" "tie the knot" "tongue-tied" "tie yourself in knots" Pretty interesting stuff.

These expressions all indicate either tension or binding. From a psychological or spiritual perspective, knots refer to the mostly hidden aspects of ourselves. Each one is a bundle of secrets, traumas and repressed memories that have been wrapped together, creating a core belief. Though they may be hidden, these influence our thoughts, emotions, behaviors and habits. In fact, the majority of our suffering is caused by them. Certain experiences and situations can trigger them, essentially activating and bringing them to the surface.

This can be excruciatingly painful, and we have a few options: 1) we can either let the experience take us over, submerging us into victimhood; 2) we can distract ourselves and stuff the feelings down with addictive behavior; or 3) we can slow down and doing nothing more than bring awareness to what is happening without judgment, allowing it to move through and out.

The first two options only create more tension and delays their integration. Awareness, on the other hand, exposes them and deactivates their power to engulf and overwhelm us. Not easy.

When we embrace our deepest, darkest knots, we can acknowledge that they are part of the entirety of our being. This moves us from feeling fragmented and scattered--disconnected from ourselves--toward wholeness and peace. When our bodies, emotions and thoughts come into alignment as a unified essence, we can be more present to what is. The tension falls away as well, because we're no longer trying to control our experience to avoid pain. We become more at ease with life because we're no longer resisting or fighting it. What knots are revealing themselves in your life? Are you ready and willing to loosen or even untie a few? Would you like to feel a little less bound up and a little more free?

The short length of rope I've given to you is a metaphor for the unforgiving knots we tie inside. To move forward, the greatest forgiveness must be of ourselves, for it's of our own transgressions and inadequacies that most knots in our ropes are tied. Once those have been loosened, we must then work to forgive others, so that we can move forward and transform our world. It will take a revolution of the mind to change this world. It will take a heart transformation to get us beyond race, systemic racism, and cultural prejudices and biases. I remain hopeful, but I know this will be a hard, long journey. We all must stop being naïve about the reality we live in. It is a constructed mediated reality where white is right.

Unitarian Universalism is very important here as a religion that seeks to reset the moral foundations of this nation and its notions of what is GOOD and HOLY. But we are guilty too. Emerson and Thoreau (even with all the good they did) held racist beliefs about African Americans. But Unitarian Universalism as a religion, that believes in freedom, becomes very important today. We must walk our talk in how we welcome strangers; in how we create more racial diversity in our congregation; in how we engage in the marginalized in our community; and in how we are honest about our own bigotry as a faith tradition.

So where do we begin? With your brain; with understanding the wiring and how it has been programmed; how it continues to be programmed—and how you can break the hypnotic shadowy spell you're under so that you can truly experience “moksha” (release) or true freedom which is that abundant agape love and the understanding of oneness where you know that ALL humanity is holy and worthy. The more we teach others to hack their minds the faster we will see systemic change. We can change our world overnight if we reprioritized our resources in the name of love.

My message to you today: Hack your mind. Think of racism as knots in your mind. Admit that there's a knot in your mind. (You can't begin to untie it until you believe that it's there). Ignoring the knot only makes the knot tighter and harder to untangle. It takes effort to untie a knot. Sometimes we have to ask others for help and advice about how to untie complicated knots. Be ready for more knots to develop as you're trying to untangle the first one. Tying and untying knots require practice and skill. Friends, racism is insidious. It is so embedded in our culture and preferences that it will take the rest of our lives to get better at dismantling it. This is the work. The inner and outer conflicts and as you wrestle with who you are as a sentient being; as you struggle to understand your privilege, and biases, remember that this IS the work. Also, if you are afraid of making a mistake when engaging in this work by offending a person of color with a microaggression, you can hack your brain by pumping your breaks (stopping) slowing down your auto-response process. Stop and allow the more thoughtful slow-thinking brain to

kick in which may mean listening to a POC or speaking up as a white all. This is the work. And be prepared because your friends might ask you, “Why are you doing this?” Just say “This is the work of saving humanity. This is the work of my church. Becoming master of my own mind—of my biases and how I function in systems set up to other everything that is not white—THIS IS THE GREATEST WORK I CAN DO. That’s what you say to them.

We are living in a glorious and scary time of change. Two paradigms—two visions of what the world can be are clashing and colliding. One says we are equal and the other says we are not. One system is dying and fighting back with all the hell it can muster. This system is tied to the old religion which said that “some souls” are better. While another better way (our way) is tied to the earth and environment and humanity. It teaches what real freedom means by professing that “All souls” are worthy. Commit or recommit to hacking your mind for good. This is my hope today for this congregation—that we will choose to be a part of faith and practice that is bold and compassionate and devoted to truth-learning and truth-telling in the name of love and untying the knots.

May it be so.