

*Healing Bitterness***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on October 24, 2021**

Several years ago, a member of the congregation I was serving gifted me a book. To my surprise the book was titled, *How to Be Miserable: 40 Strategies You Already Use*. Now, let's be clear. I wasn't receiving the book because I'm miserable. I'm fluffy, not miserable. I was given the book because of its tongue in cheek humor—yet everything in the book is true. It was literally a guide on how to be miserable. If there were an ad for the book it might sound something like this:

Are you tired of overly earnest self-help books promising love, happiness, and a fabulous life? Would you rather hone the habits that keep you feeling stuck and unhappy? If so, *How to Be Miserable* will help you pinpoint the tried-and-true behaviors that increase feelings of dissatisfaction, zap your energy, and ultimately sabotage your life. Following the advice within these pages you'll develop important dysfunctional skills to help you cultivate discontent—such as focusing on the negative, dwelling on what you aren't, isolating yourself from friends and loved ones, eating junk food to excess, and much, much more.

The book is sometimes called “the don't do it guide.” The author, Randy Patterson, tells us how to adopt a miserable lifestyle. There is a checklist:

- 1. Avoid all exercise
- 2. Eat what you're told
- 3. Don't waste your life in bed
- 4. Live better through chemistry
- 5. Maximize your screen time
- 6. If you want it, buy it
- 7. Can't afford it? Get it anyway!
- 8. Give 100 percent to your work
- 9. Be well informed
- 10 Rehearse the regrettable past
- 12. Blame inward, give credit outward
- 13. Practice the "three bad things" exercise

- 14. Construct future hells
- 15. Value hope over action
- 16. Become a toxic optimist
- 17. Filter for the negative
- 18. Cultivate your presence--elsewhere
- 19. Insist on perfection
- 20. Work endlessly on your self-esteem

Most of our decisions are designed, to some extent, to make us feel better. We often get it wrong and wind up making ourselves feel miserable instead. It can feel as though happiness is a barricaded door against which we keep banging our heads. What if we stopped? What if we turned around and looked in the other direction instead? If, for some reason, our goal was to become less happy, what would we do? This may sound like a nonsensical quest, but it's been sitting there, unexamined, all your life. Why not take at least a quick look at it? By doing so, we may discover something unsettling. We are already doing many of the things that we know make us less happy. Perhaps part of the problem is not that the realm of happiness is barred and locked against us. Perhaps we are spending much of our time voluntarily walking through the doorway to misery. Maybe to feel happier we don't really need to do anything. Maybe we just need to stop what we're already doing.

One of the things that makes us less happy and that we should stop doing is providing a home for bitterness. Bitterness is anger and disappointment at being treated unfairly. It is an attitude of intense and prolonged anger and hostility which is synonymous with resentment and envy. Often, it also involves feelings of resentment and a desire for revenge. It is the result of not forgiving someone, which makes hurt and anger to grow until the pain and resentment hurt the person's view of life. John Ortberg tells us, "Bitterness is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. I like to talk about bitterness with the notion of bitter fruit. In the book of Hebrews we are told, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled." In the Hebrew culture, any poisonous plant was called a "bitter" plant. Poison destroys, and the result of ingesting a poisonous plant would be bitter, indeed. The author of the book of Hebrews uses a "bitter root" as a metaphor for that which would bring harm to the church. There is a verse in the Pentateuch that closely mirrors the wording in Hebrews. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses reviews the covenant between God and Israel. In this context, he says, "Make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison"

So, the "bitter root" in Hebrews refers to a source of evil or wickedness. A root may be small and slow in its growth, but, if it carries poison, it is malignant; it is dangerous. The seed of bitterness is a hurt that is planted in someone. It may be intentional or unintentional. Someone does not mean to hurt you, but you were hurt. Sometimes the hurt is only imagined. No one has hurt you, but somehow you feel that someone has done something wrong to you. The soil of bitterness is a heart that harbors hostility and does not deal with hurt. When someone becomes bitter, the

bitterness takes root in the heart and grows deeper. The world is full of people who have not dealt with an old hurt. They look for things to criticize, people to find fault with, and ways to justify the way they feel. Generally, they are bitter people. The root of bitterness is underground; it is easy to hide and camouflage. Seldom do you find anyone who will admit that they are a bitter person. They will either deny it or disguise it. A bitter person is hypersensitive, ungrateful, insincere, holds grudges, and has mood swings. Bitterness will affect you physically, emotionally, and spiritually because the fruit of bitterness is an acid that destroys its container. Because hatefulness and sacredness do not dwell in the same heart.

Bitterness takes root in all of our hearts. Bitterness once almost cost me one of the most significant relationships I have. I have a very close cousin who is like a sister to me. We were raised like brother and sister. We were so close that our parents didn't allow us to see each other for a couple of days as a form of punishment. They knew this would change our behavior. We are still very close today. There was a time as adults when we argued about something completely idiotic. This argument led to us declaring we would never talk to each other again. And we didn't for about a year. Bitterness had taken root and I was determined I was right, offended that she felt the way she did, and held my poisoned ground. She did the same. After a year, our husbands had seen what this was doing to us. They called one another and set in motion a plan for reconciliation. We did reconcile and our closeness returned. We laugh today about how stupid we were sacrificing something so wonderful succumbing to bitterness.

When we've experienced the pain of a hurtful event, it's easier said than done to simply- "get rid of bitterness." Our emotions become tangled up and we react to hurt feelings. While it is challenging to do the work of healing from bitterness, we have the ability to do so. Healing from past events takes time. However, time alone doesn't heal the heart. So often, I find we push the past down and refuse to address it. We stoically forge ahead because we don't have time for the pain. Unfortunately, whenever a painful event is pushed down, it simmers beneath the surface. We do have the ability to heal our heart. I recently read that "all things can be mended, Not with time, as they say, but with intention, So go, Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally" Soren Kierkegaard tell us, "Never cease loving a person, and never give up hope for him, for even the prodigal son who had fallen most low, could still be saved; the bitterest enemy and also he who was your friend could again be your friend; love that has grown cold can kindle

And so, we have a choice. We can follow the guide on how to be miserable and live in our disappointment, resentment, and bitterness, or we can be intentional about freeing ourselves. Bitterness is difficult to get rid of. Bitterness can sometimes even seem to us that it is the only thing we have left after a an unfairness or injustice that has occurred. After all the pain and suffering, the one thing we have left is the precious right to be bitter. We feel that if we were to give up on this right, we have let evil win. However, I think a lot of us who have fought with bitterness know that there is no joy in it. We know that it binds us to the hurt. We may want to give up on this bitterness from time to time, but when we try to give up on it by own "will power" we find it is not easy because we have to look inside ourselves to get rid of something that is already an extreme focus on ourselves.

Forgiving and being forgiven are not simple acts, quickly and easily done. They can be, however, moments of powerful transformation, leading to peace and strength and relationships more beautiful than any that were possible before. A wise and unknown person once said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover that prisoner was yourself." It is a hero's journey, to offer or ask for forgiveness. Going forward from this day, "let us look at the elephants in our personal living rooms ... and commit to the work of forgiveness. On this road, may we find the help of many friends who have traveled this road beside or before us." (2005 D. Audette Fulbright, Roanoke VA).

May we be filled with loving kindness; May we be peaceful and at ease, May we be whole.

May it be so.