

Toxicity—Encountering Difficult People, Places and Times

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

March 2, 2104

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To be, or not to be, that is the question—  
Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer  
The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,  
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?....

For who would bear the Whips and Scorns of time,  
The Oppressor's wrong, the *proud* man's Contumely,  
The pangs of *despised* Love, the Law's delay,  
The insolence of Office, and the Spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his Quietus make  
With a bare Bodkin? Who would Fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death...  
Puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,  
Than fly to others that we know not of.

(After all, who would put up with all life's humiliations—the abuse from superiors, the insults of arrogant men, the pangs of unrequited love, the inefficiency of the legal system, the rudeness of people in office, and the mistreatment good people have to take from bad—when you could simply take out your knife and call it quits? Who would choose to grunt and sweat through an exhausting life, unless they were afraid of something dreadful after death, the undiscovered country from which no visitor returns, which we wonder about without getting any answers from and which makes us stick to the evils we know rather than rush off to seek the ones we don't?)

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As I worked my way into this sermon, scenes from two successive summers in my life came to mind; each took place during university years working in Utah on land surveying crews. A novice to surveying, I knew neither the maths nor engineering involved, nor how to run the various technical instruments. I was the lowest grunt on the totem pole. My job was to go where I was told by the crew chief, lug around 500' long steel measuring tape or reflector prism, a surveying rod, a plumb bob, a bucket full of wooden stakes and a sledge hammer. I reeled out the tape, steadied the rod and pounded in surveying stakes as instructed. We were etch-a-sketching future curb and gutters, power lines and establishing property boundaries. I recall a lot of tramping around, measuring, and having poor hand-eye coordination with that damn sledge hammer. I also remember long sun drenched, huge sky and looming mountain days.

But more to the point, one summer was a slow moving hell, the other almost a vacation in comparison; and it all had to do with the survey crew chiefs. In the hellish first summer, we pulled up at the work site and feverishly plunged into our labours. The crew chief ordered us around, berated our incompetence, belittled my stake driving ineptness, and showed how a real man drove stakes into the ground with a few, swift and fearsome, one handed, round house blows. Always in a hurry, he made frequent miscalculations which meant redoing the measurements and pulling up and re-driving in the stakes, thus losing the precious time calculated by the office engineers to accomplish the task. He often lost his temper; and invariably, we rushed to complete the job while sniping at each other's ineptness out loud, under our breath, or in the mute theater of our turbulent minds.

All that summer, I woke in dread of the coming day. But I desperately needed the pay and figured I could tough it out, because for me, fortunately, it was only a three month sentence to hard labour; others weren't so lucky, and I've wondered what kind of land surveyors they would become given the harsh apprenticeship under that crew chief.

Though I returned to surveying and basically the same tasks the following summer, the contrast was striking. The second crew chief had grown up on a ranch, wore cowboy boots and big silver belt buckle. But instead of *breaking* an untamed horse, I can imagine Steve Baugh—that was his name—gently coaxing and reassuring stallion or mare, while introducing it to bit, reins and saddle, that there was nothing so good in this world as to *work with* this particular cowboy and his calm voice, assured touch, and benevolent, good humored confidence.

All that second summer, we pulled up at work sites and Steve would tell the crew to take a break while he thought through the job. He'd flatten out and study the plans on the hood of our

pickup truck, and then pace the site: imagining in his mind's eye what we had to do. Sometimes, his preparations took up a half a day, and I ended up reading nearly all of *War and Peace* that summer.

Once his planning was completed, however, he efficiently and effectively led the crew through the work at hand. His good nature, confidence in his own skills, his earthy humor and professionalism were infectious. We worked calmly, swiftly and with assurance under his leadership and successfully completed our assignments with a half a day or more to spare—the remainder of which we spent fishing and cooking barbeques in the high summer alpine mountains. We were a team, and by summer's end crew members had become skilled surveyors—heck, I almost wanted to become one after working with Steve Baugh.

By means of these contrasting summers from long ago, I want to highlight a reality that perhaps all of us have had deal with or that we're suffering through right now, and that a number of you have asked me to talk about, and that's why I'm doing it today: let's call it the *toxicity* that plagues us in places of work, in family and domestic settings, in relationships with friends, spouses, lovers, and colleagues, and as we live and relate to the landscapes of particular places. To say that something is toxic is to say that it is a poison. And what is grievous about toxicity is that the very places, relationships and people that should be sites and sources for safety, healing, trust, mutual aid, and healthy, flourishing development instead, become perilous, noxious, and destructive to mind, body and soul.

The word toxic comes from the ancient Greek word *toxa*—the word for arrows, and more specifically arrows whose points had been anointed with deadly poisons. That is to say, if the grievous wound of arrowhead and shaft didn't kill you outright, a nick or slicing cut from the arrowhead would do you in: poison's seepage sufficient to work its harm. That's the insidious thing about poison.

Think about the lines from Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy we shared during the meditation. Shakespeare lists situations and characters given to us in life that should be the very places and people in which and with whom we flourish and realize our potential: Hamlet refers to time itself, to settings of love, law and labour, and other human relations. The tragedy, for Hamlet (and by extension, us) is that they've become toxic, poisonous: full of abuse, oppression, pride, unrequited feelings, injustice, rudeness, and labour unrewarded. Why would anyone put up with this? Why suffer "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," the "whips and scorns of times" like these? Hamlet asks us. His answer: dread of the unknown which makes us stick with the evils we know rather than rush off to seek the ones we don't.

The ultimate dread unknown evil is death itself, which, given Hamlet's unbearable loss, the corrosion all around him of fidelity, friendship and family, and his own self-loathing—given all

this, death, he muses, is “a consummation devoutly to be wished.” He doesn’t take his own life; instead, Hamlet endures all the way through to the play’s cathartic and violent end.

Which says a great deal about the phenomenon of toxicity: neither he nor we walk blithely away because what we’re talking about are the most important settings of life. To cut ties and walk away from any of these is a kind of death, an admission of failure; or it’s a leap into the unknown whose prospective uncertainties, ignominy and challenges may just be too much to bear. And who of us wants to admit that we have failed to succeed in the very places and with the very people where the expectation all around us is success, satisfaction, healthy relations, financial security, emotional stability and well-being, etc....

And so we don’t walk, though it may be that drop by oozing drop the poison distills into the fabric of family, religion, love and work.

When reading about toxicity I was surprised by the sheer volume of writing—both published and on the internet—dealing with toxic leadership, toxic workplaces, toxic friends, people, colleagues and family members. There are Christian evangelical sermons, Jewish websites, Buddhist blogs, popular psychology and business columns that explore, explain and exhort readers about toxic warning signs and strategies for coping. So just to let you know: you and we are not alone.

Rummaging through and distilling it down yielded a handful of ideas and conclusions to wrestle with. I’ll share what I have, point to some ground rules we’ve come up with to avert the cultivation of toxic situations in our congregation, and I look forward to your ideas and thoughts about all of this in the future.

A lot of the literature rushes to skewer and label people as toxic persons. Titles like “100 Traits of a Toxic Person,” “Warning Signs You’re Dealing with a Toxic Person,” and “20 Toxic People to Kick Out of Your Life,” are common examples. The problem here, I think, is that the blame directed at proximate human agents, be they co-workers, congregants or family members pre-empts critical examination and changes to what may be far more important systemic problems. For example, in the 1820s and 30s, instead of calling individual Calvinist Protestant ministers and church goers as toxic, heartless boneheads, Unitarian ministers like William Ellery Channing zeroed in critically and tellingly on specific systematic theological issues and power structures. Millions of Protestants in the early US and Canada marinated in a toxic theological stew that consigned believers to a state of high anxiety about whether they were saved or not, and sentenced untold millions, including unbaptized family members and friends, to roast forever in hell. By specifically naming the reasons and source of this poisonous state of affairs—from theology to inequitable distribution of power, and then offering a viable, saving alternative—Unitarians and Universalists helped to change the religious culture in North America.

Similarly, when I waded through business articles about toxic leaders and co-workers, something that stood out were the very few times where the phenomenon of the growing number of so-called toxic employees in the workplace was correlated with the phenomenal rise in the past thirty years of workplace stress. Short staffing, work overload, frequent and unpredictable layoffs, vanishing pensions and benefits, relentless emphasis on quarterly profit margins—loading up workers with unbearable stressors and anxiety gets manifested in workplace pathologies. It's a sign of the times. We fixate on toxic or psychopathic co-workers, but what about the political and managerial decisions making that create toxic work environments? Before rushing to blame down-stream victims, may we should begin by looking upstream to financial and political systems, and work to effect change there in order to improve the workplace ecology.

But before I let toxic behaving types off the hook—yes, I read down the lists of “100 Traits of a Toxic Person,” “Warning Signs You’re Dealing with a Toxic Person,” and “20 Toxic People to Kick Out of Your Life,” and guess what? According to these lists, you better steer clear of me. *Gossip*? Check. *Sad sack*? Check. *Guy of the Fence*? Check again. *Trying to Fix Others’ Lives*? Guess I should buzz off. *Half-Assed Friend*—ask some people how long it takes sometimes for me to return emails and how many birthdays I’ve forgotten. *Judge Judy* type? I’ve been known. *Snob*? It’s been said. And on and on the lists tumble down the page naming one human foible and characteristic after another, that if written on post it notes would cover me from head to foot.

Which is to say we’re composite creatures, that we house multitudes: a wide range of emotions, times and seasons of joys, grief, anxiety, fear, disappointment, loss and elation—which means each of us is a little lower than the angels. But how can one be one of those immaterial, unchanging creatures we call angels, who neither break a sweat, have to change diapers, or meet a deadline. That’s not always easy to acknowledge and own up to especially in a culture that prizes well groomed behavior, predictable processes, predetermined outcomes, and smooth efficiency root and branch—from the office to the market to the home.

I see a lot of projection going on in the literature regarding toxic people, a lot of judging; a lot of impatience with weaknesses and faults far more common to be seen in others than in oneself. Which makes me think of how a long time ago it was said:

"Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,'... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

And yet, and yet...there are people who truly are hell on wheels. People who batter our self-esteem and self-worth, whose lies, bullying and negativity drain vital life energy out of us, whose pity and condescension feed insecure feelings that we can't be self-reliant or independent, people who won't confront us or call us out on what they think may be mistaken ideas or actions on our part but go, instead, behind our backs, triangulate with others and thus create a corrosive, noxious atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust. And because we live and work with them in families, in homes, in workplaces and houses of worship, that is, because so much is at stake—intimate relationships, careers, a place where we call home—the very sites where we most need to be safe, trusted, healthy, and flourishing—we end up feeling trapped.

The crazy thing is that many so-called toxic persons, like us, are not truly bad people. Malicious psychopaths are actually relatively rare—I may be naïve about this—but if I think about it, how different are most “toxic persons” from me? *What I think I share with them—and what might make me toxic to others is fear, fear of not measuring up, fear of conflict fear of the unknown.* That survey crew chief who made my summer hell on earth years ago was actually in over his head—and unfortunately, instead of seeking help from others—fearing that he would look weak and maybe even lose his job—instead, he resorted to domineering and blaming others to cover his own incompetence. Fearing that calling out an older sibling and openly disagreeing with his stone age beliefs about race, sex, religion and politics—that is, driven by fear that open conflict might permanently rupture any kind of future as family with him—I've resorted now for years to avoiding him and barely staying in contact.

I grew up in a religious culture that believed contention or conflict was “of the devil”—and for years didn't see it for what it was: the fact is, demonizing and avoiding healthy conflict, speaking truth to power, is an insidious tool of elites to enforce their power and to control belief and behaviour. Schooled from an early age in this view, I feared raising my voice because the consequences were frightening. I was driven by fear and been warped by it ever since in all kinds of ways; and it surfaces, unawares and much to my surprise, in all kinds of settings. But knuckling under and not acting out, long ago and far away, only fed that toxic environment and the power of toxic leaders. And believe me, I don't think this scenario is unique to the religious community in which I grew up.

I told you earlier, that in preparation of these remarks I discovered evangelical Christians, Orthodox Jews, Buddhist bloggers and others are grappling with the taxing realities of toxicity within their own faith traditions. I was mildly surprised to learn this, but come to think of it, I shouldn't have been. They are social organizations, after all, filled with people very much like us when it comes to human nature. But religions, aren't they supposed to be places where we

should be able to gather in safety, compassion, justice, and mutual support—places free from toxicity, places that should be havens in a heartless world? If only.

True enough, conflict can hurt, but it can also lance festering toxic wounds of inappropriate behavior, power imbalances and it can arouse healing, needed change in persons and systems that have lost their way. Schooled in our cultures of niceness, not wanting to give offence, —ah Canadians! Oh Unitarians!—we can over focus on keeping the peace, protecting ourselves and our self-regard and thus lose a healthy adaptive perspective and edge. There is nothing intrinsically bad about conflict—I need to keep reminding myself of this. It can be an important ingredient in making possible new ideas, new ways of doing things, and new or renewed relationships. The trick, the skill, to healthy conflict, not toxic behavior, is to take a page from those Unitarian ministers in the early 19th century and their battle against the high anxiety inducing theologies of orthodox Calvinism. They stayed focused on the problem. They didn't attack individuals. They strove to avoid tearing down others. They didn't traffic in passive-aggressive tactics or conniving politics. Their language was specific and clear and they offered a generous, saving alternative.

This congregation has known and experienced its fair share of toxicity. It has wreaked damage on individuals, programs and the health of this congregation. And I grieve for those who became alienated, disaffected and chose to exit as a result. While some of it was due to egregiously bad behaviour on the part of individuals who we trusted and who should have known better; more often, the miasma of toxicity welled up in this place because we're "*nice people*," not very skilled at dealing with conflict, and we didn't have clearly defined principles and procedures for encouraging healthy relations even, and especially, when they entailed dealing with conflicting ideas and ways of doing things.

In response, this congregation and our Board of Trustees worked out and together we approved both a "Covenant of Healthy Relations" and policies and clear procedural steps for helping to promote healthy relations and conflict resolution in this congregation. They are printed in today's orders of service. I urge all of us, before we toss and recycle them, to read and think seriously about our Covenant and conflict resolution procedures.

It is my hope that we will ponder and come to embody them in spirit and deed. In so doing, we may drain away the seeping venom that can afflict even a congregation of like minded, well-intentioned, benevolent women and men. May it be a healthy legacy we bestow upon us and the generations to come who will rise up to worship, serve, and celebrate in this congregation. And may it be so.