

“Learning to Praise”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, January 31, 2010

In the decade of my birth, this country was dripping with smiley faces and self-esteem movements. I will admit that some of it came across as corny and inauthentic to me, even as a small child. I remember TV shows where actors addressed the camera telling me how special I was. I found most of them ridiculous and would not tune in again. But one man was able to convince me. He was consistent, ritualistic, and believable. Every weekday at the exact same time, I would change whatever I was wearing to my favorite shirt with a zipper. I set up my little pint-sized rocking chair in front of the television, and place a pair of shoes nearby. This was *my* ritual for the start of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. I would sing along with the opening song, zipping up my little shirt at the same time he zipped up his cardigan, putting my sneakers on as he changed into his and settle in. There was something authentic and convincing about him. Then, as he would each and every day, he would tell me that I could make the day special just by being me. Wait, did he tell you that too?! No way!

Now, this happened to be about the same time in my life that a close family friend was getting his PhD in psychology and needed a child guinea pig for his IQ testing. I remember taking tests several times over the course of the year and how excited he was that I scored so high. He labeled me “gifted” and set a course for me to follow that track in school. I don’t remember thinking much about that label again until middle school, when being “gifted” allowed me to get out of my regular classes if I finished my work. I would go to a special classroom where we played video games, built rockets, and talked about different cultures. I was stamped as one of the “smart kids.” And I remember feeling sad that my friends couldn’t come with me to that room. Especially when it was clear to me (and likely some of them) that they were in some ways smarter than me. And I remember thinking, even that early on, that I was getting away with something – that there had been some kind of mistake. I remember thinking that I’d better enjoy this while I can, because likely I would be “found out” soon.

You see, I have always been hyper-aware of my own faults. I was one of those children who knew immediately when I had done something wrong; in any realm, from the simplest mistake to a really bad choice, my self-deprecation was extreme. And the worst punishment for me was, of course, for any adult in my life to notice that I had screwed up. I would be so embarrassed –

devastated – and God forbid if they ever said “I am so disappointed in you.” It was a direct stab to the heart; no further punishment necessary. It was a wound that always felt on the verge of fatal. Something inside me, even that young, couldn’t digest all the comments suggesting inborn intelligence. I just didn’t buy it. They didn’t know how difficult I found math to be, for example, or how much I hated history, because I couldn’t remember dates. They didn’t know the difference between what came really easy for me and those things to which I struggled to apply myself. There was a lot of internal conflict going on for me about that label and no one had a clue.

In the new book called *Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children*, written by Authors Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, research suggests that when we over-praise our children, or when we praise them ineffectively: for being smart instead of praising them for putting forth their best effort, (research suggests) that we set up our children to believe that they have no control over their success or their improvement. The wrong kind of praise, or too much of it, leads to an inability to handle failure well. And so over-praised children turn out to be less resilient than their peers, even in addressing what would be considered the normal failures in life.

I believe this research has shed some light on why I had to work so hard as an adult to sort through what I labeled in seminary as my *fraudulency complex*. I was definitely not alone in my struggle; many of my colleagues suffered the same irrational fear and belittled their accomplishments. The *fraudulency complex*, as I define it, was believing that at any moment someone (likely someone “official” – whatever that means) would show up and recall all my successes. They would take everything back and would deem me a fraud: my degrees and certifications, my acceptance to seminary, you name it. I had simply fooled them all, this entire time! I used to think this belief stemmed from some old God I was still holding onto. You know the one, the God who will pull the rug out from underneath you the second you are not on top of your game? I used to believe that I had just allowed that Baptist preacher of my childhood too deep into my psyche. But now I wonder. How much of my struggle, and my colleagues’ struggle, was not about the God we praised, and instead was about how *we* were praised? **Or not praised?**

In *Nurture Shock*, the authors suggest that those children who have been told that they are smart their entire lives – that they are *special* – end up dividing the world in two: things they are naturally good at, and things they are not. Constantly hearing you are smart, it turns out, does not translate into fearless confidence when attacking schoolwork or problems. Children who are over-praised actually do not want to try things if they don’t know for certain that they will be successful. Now, some things continue to come easily for these children, but when a problem doesn’t turn out to be simple, they give up...almost immediately.

It turns out that when we tackle fewer and fewer problems that are difficult (only attempting those problems or tasks at which we know we'll succeed) it actually changes our neurobiology. It makes us more likely to give up, less resilient, and less capable of delayed gratification. If we want to be resilient in the face of struggles and difficulty, we have to practice taking risks in our lives at which we *do not* succeed so that we can *learn how to fail and keep going*. We have to practice failing. You see, it turns out that children whose failures are brushed aside or ignored, and who are consistently praised only with the positive, underrate the importance of effort. Another study mentioned in the book, claims that a child may come to believe that failure itself is something so *terrible* that the family *can't even acknowledge its existence*. It becomes this great unspoken thing that shall not be named, and therefore actually has more power over the child. So talking to our children about failure, letting them fail, giving them opportunities to fail, and then taking opportunities to coach them through that failure, with coping strategies (what they can do differently next time, how to improve specifically, etc.) may in fact be more important than positive reinforcement.

Maybe this is hard for you to believe. The authors certainly found it difficult to swallow. One of them is the parent of a young boy and she walks us through her own issues with making the switch and how her son responded. I want to share two different studies with you that they highlight in the book that might help. The First Study was conducted by Stanford faculty member Carol Dweck and involves three rounds of individual IQ testing with puzzles (very similar to the ones I took.) In the first round, Dweck sent researchers into 5th grade classrooms in New York City and gave students IQ tests that were below grade level – easy enough that all kids would do fairly well. After testing each child the researcher told them their scores and gave them a single line of praise. They either said: “Wow, you must be smart!” or “Wow, you tried really hard.” Then the researchers offered them another test; and they were told they could choose. They could take one that was explained to be “harder than the first, but they would learn a lot from trying it” or “another test just like the first.” Of those praised for their effort 90 percent chose the harder set of puzzles. Of those praised for their intelligence, the majority chose the easy test.

When we praise children for their intelligence we send a message that says: “Look smart at all costs.” “Don't risk making mistakes.” “Avoid being embarrassed.”

In round two, the test, regardless of what they chose, was in fact more difficult, well above grade level and everyone failed. Those who had been praised for their effort got very involved, wanting to try every possible solution to the puzzle. Many of them even remarked completely unprompted, “This is my favorite test!” But those praised for their smarts assumed that their failure was evidence that they weren't really smart at all. Much like my own experience, each failure was

just more proof stacking up against them that they had been found out! So the researchers essentially inserted a round of failure with the more difficult test.

In round 3, the students were given one final test. This last test was at the exact same level as the first one – below grade level. Those who had been praised for their *effort* following the round of failure, significantly increased their scores (by about 30 percent.) Those who had been praised for their *intelligence* following the round of failure, actually dropped their scores by 20 percent.

In follow up interviews with these children, Dweck learned that those who believed that innate intelligence is the key to success began to discount the importance of effort. Expending any effort became stigmatized as some kind of public proof that you do not have natural gifts. In other studies it was clear that it directly affected their moral choices as well, by “changing the game.” If the most important thing (the unspoken most powerful message) of the “real” game is to appear flawless, then the game changes, as does the strategy.

Over-praised children, it turns out, become more competitive and more interested in tearing others down to protect themselves. Image maintenance becomes their primary concern. And incidences of cheating increase. Having taught in an International Baccalaureate school for 7 years, much like Booker T here in Tulsa, I can tell you ***I know*** this to be true. My low performing students actually made more moral choices than some of my gifted students. We blamed it on pressure. It wasn't my low performers who couldn't be trusted on exams; it was my gifted kids – my IB students – and they were GOOD at it. But they did it because that was how they read the situation. The most important thing was to maintain that image of intelligence (and of course to not get caught.) So they also had to be the best at cheating!

In the second study I want to share with you, Dweck's protégé Dr. Lisa Blackwell conducted further research testing the impact of “believing that we are born smart” or “believing that the brain is a muscle.” Blackwell followed 700 students who were classified as low achieving in math. She split the children into two groups for an 8-session workshop. The control group was taught basic study skills. The test group was taught the same basic study skills, but was given a special module on how intelligence is not innate. (They took turns reading an article on how the brain grows neurons when challenged, saw slides of the brain and acted out skits demonstrating the brain as a muscle.) In a single semester, Blackwell saw the students' long-time trend of decreasing math grades *reversed*. And the only difference was two lessons (a total of 50 minutes) spent not teaching math, but offering a single idea that the brain is a muscle and must be exercised, stretched and challenged. The only difference was the idea that we can impact our outcome.

So what about the past 4 decades of self-esteem-building praise? It has gotten out of control! We give every child a trophy in sports, for simply showing up, and if we don't we hear about it. In one California school, they even have their children jump rope in PE *without a jump rope* so they can avoid the embarrassment of tripping! And how does this self esteem movement live alongside Dweck's studies? Well, In 2003 The Association of Psychological Science asked Dr, Roy Baumeister to review the body of literature that had been amassed on self esteem and praise. Out of 15,000 studies that he reviewed, only 200 were scientifically sound. And out of those 200, Dr. Baumeister concluded that having high self-esteem actually did not result in higher grades, or improved career achievement.

High self-esteem did not reduce alcohol usage or incidences of violence. In fact, highly aggressive, and extremely violent people often think very highly of themselves.

Dr. Baumeister has come to believe that the continued appeal for self-esteem is largely tied to parents' pride in their children's achievements. It turns out that parents are more the praise-junkies than the kids, (who, as we have seen, respond better to intermittent success when failure is addressed and specifics are praised.) Dweck believes that parents today tend to treat praise as the panacea for the anxieties of modern parenting. Parents may believe that generic praise softens the intensity of the competitive environments in which we place our children and makes up for the guilt we feel of not spending enough time with them. So in a way, generic praise and positive reinforcement are used as an ineffective means express **unconditional love**, instead of expressing it through consistency in behavior, affection, and authentic parent-child interactions about how to fail.

What happens when they grow up? It turns out, that when over-praised children go to college they commonly drop out of classes rather than suffer a mediocre grade, and they have a difficult time choosing a major. These students are afraid to commit to something – anything – because they are afraid of not succeeding. The good news is that it is reversible. We can learn how to fail, to be more resilient, by taking calculated risks with enough support. And how can we learn to praise more effectively? First we must learn that all praise is not equal. To be effective with children (and I would argue even with adults) praise needs to be specific, and focused on something *within the person's control*. It turns out that jumping in with generic praise is like jumping in too soon with an answer to a homework problem. It robs children of the chance to make the deduction themselves, and to learn from the success or failure on their own.

Sincerity is also crucial. Dweck believes that one of the greatest mistakes a parent can make with praise is to assume that their kids are not sophisticated enough to see and feel our true

intentions. Adults and children scrutinize praise for hidden agendas. (The looming question that accompanies the praise is, *what are your intentions of this praise? What do you get out of this? What do you REALLY want?*) In another survey, it was revealed that by the age of 12 children believe that earning praise from a teacher is *not* a sign you did well – but actually a sign that you lack ability and the teacher thinks you need extra encouragement. A teacher who praises a child may be unwittingly sending a message that the student has reached the limit of his or her innate ability, while a teacher who criticizes a pupil's work conveys the message that he or she *can* in fact improve his performance even further.

So how do we learn to praise more effectively? Praise must be based on the real thing. It must be authentic to our life experience and sincere. In reading about learning to praise our children differently I was struck by the juxtaposition of how some of us are learning a different kind of praise here in church. And I began to wonder, how do praise and our free religious faith come together to help us not only address the difficulties in life but enhance our capacity to experience the world? *Praise*, as defined in the context of church, is *an impassioned exaltation of God, typically expressed as gratitude for one's life or being*. The word comes from the Latin root of the word "preciare" which means "to value."

In worship, we gather together to name what it is we value in this world. Praise is an extension of that worship. Those who praise, praise to feel connected to God – to a community. Those who praise, praise in order to give thanks for the gifts they have received. Those who praise remind themselves in the act of praising that they in fact did not create this day – that they are in fact not God. Praise is an expression of humility, of humbleness – a reminder that we are not entirely in control, and that we do in fact make mistakes. Praise puts us in a vulnerable place, because we are clearly naming our imperfections and what we value. (Which makes it so much more important to trust those taking us, or accompanying us, on that journey!) Like the studies on the praise of children, I need my praise to also include my personal experience. It has to be real – authentic. Praise in the context of the Free Religious Tradition is not about leaving our experience, or our reason, completely out of the picture. Praise in the Free Church requires us to continue to think critically about our personal theology. Praise without that critical thinking reduces God to a being that grants favors and reduces our role to merely begging for that favor. Praise without a critical theology reduces God to a being that needs or demands our praise in order to give us what we want or need. I do not believe in that Santa Claus version of God. My God is not that shallow.

When I bring my critical thinking to my theology alongside my own experience of praise, what I have realized is: it is not GOD who needs praise. It is *we* who need *to* praise. A theology without

praise reduces God to merely an intellectual exercise, devoid of feeling. Without praise, without claiming what we value, without bringing our humility and our gratitude (our praise) to the table, we are left with only a fraction of our capacity to experience the Holy. Praise increases our experience of connectedness to God, to those around us, or both.

Now I am very clear that praise in this church will look different for everyone. I do not believe you have to hold your hands in the air, or sing certain songs to praise effectively. (Although it is an exercise in stretching for some, and could be quite useful.) Praise can also resemble contemplative prayer or meditation; it can be in a conversation naming what we are thankful for, what we regret, claiming our hopes and dreams and what we value. I believe that when we praise out loud, when we share our vulnerabilities and gratitude with another that it always magnifies the blessing. So in both praise of children and praise to God, be specific. Be genuine. Offer praise for things that *they* have control over. And practice shaping your own neurobiology. Risk failure or embarrassment in order to increase your own resilience. This church, this community, is a safe place to practice.

I love this church. And so let me praise you for a minute. I think this church is amazing because you are willing to put on your hard hats and do the difficult work that is necessary to live in a diverse community of faith. Because you are relentless in your persistence to try to understand those around you and to stretch your own understanding of what it means to be a member of All Souls. Because you bring your gifts to this community and it makes us stronger. Because you continue to struggle with the way in which you can authentically bring your *whole self* to church: mind, body, heart, and spirit. If you aren't doing these things, then hopefully I have given you some things to work on, and to think about. But know this: I praise you!

Amen.