

Codependence Day
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Opening Words – (Responsive Reading #468 SLT, George E. Odell)

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

Reading

From [*Codependent No More*](#) (1987) by Melody Beattie:

It is natural to want to protect and help the people we care about. It is also natural to want to be affected by and react to the problems of people around us. As a problem becomes more serious and remains unresolved, we become more affected and react more intensely to it.

The word *react* is important here. However you approach codependency, however you define it, and from whatever frame of reference you choose to diagnose and treat it, codependency is primarily a reactionary process. Codependents are reactionaries. They overreact. They underreact. But rarely do they *act*. They react to the problems, pains, and behaviors of others. They react to their own problems, pains, and behaviors. Many codependent reactions are reactions to stress and uncertainty of living or growing up with alcoholism and other problems. It is normal to react to stress. It is not necessarily abnormal, but it is heroic and lifesaving to learn how to *not* react and to act in more healthy ways. Most of us, however, need help to learn to do that.

Sermon

We need one another when we mourn...

We need one another when we are in trouble...

We need one another when we are in despair...

We need one another when we cannot do it alone...

We need one another in the hour of success...

We need one another in the hour of defeat...

We need one another when we come to die...

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

I sometimes think of that reading as the holy whine (w-h-i-n-e).

We need, we need, all our lives we are in need...

But, of course, we *do* need one another...and we need to feel needed.

We come together here to figure out compassionate, effective responses to human need. It's right in our mission: creating a welcoming community of caring people where all receive emotional support, intellectual stimulation and respect for their individual spiritual paths...It's there in our covenant, where we promise to honor and care for each other. We celebrate one another's joys and share one another's sorrows and concerns. This congregation seeks to understand, acknowledge, and appropriately respond to human need.

But what does it mean to respond *appropriately*? And how might reflecting on *codependency* help us in that endeavor? What *is* codependency?

We humans start out our lives in total *dependence*, we grow to achieve some measure of *independence*, and we ideally come to an awareness of our inescapable *interdependence*...so where does *codependency* fit in?

Codependency, on the face of it, sounds okay, doesn't it? We *are* dependent in many ways--we never outgrow our need for one another, nor do we outgrow our need to be needed--*codependency* must mean that we share that dependence. We are dependent...together. We need one another, as our opening words drove home...we need one another and we try to *meet the needs of others* at the same time. So is that *interdependent*?...or *codependent*? All depends. (I just had to say that.)

Codependency speaks to a particular aspect of need and meeting needs. It is notoriously hard to define once and for all, but it is generally regarded as something to avoid rather than embrace.

Here are a few excerpts from [Melody Beattie's book](#), as she asked people to define *codependency*:

"Codependency means," said one woman, "that I'm a caretaker."

"Codependency," replied another, "means I'm up to my elbows in alcoholics."

"It means I'm always looking for someone to glob onto."

"Codependency," explained one person, "is knowing all your relationships will either go on and on the same way (painfully), or end the same way (disastrously)...Or both."

"A codependent person," writes Melody Beattie in her own definition, "is one who has let another person's behavior affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person's behavior."

In other words, codependency is allowing my desire to control your life control my life. Codependency means allowing my desire to control your life control my life.

Now there may be very good reasons for my desire to control your life. The reason that codependency is so pronounced among the families of alcoholics and addicts is that alcoholics and addicts are so needy. I may, responding to the understandable inclination to help, simply want to *take care* of the addict. Because an addict's life, by definition, is out of control, I may seek to exert control. Because an addict's behavior is destructive, I may seek to manage and minimize the destruction by using whatever emotional tools I can: with comfort and forgiveness; with anger and rage; with ultimatums; with manipulation; with smiles; with tears; with silence; with lectures; by confronting; by avoiding; by changing the subject; by never changing the subject; by hurting; by helping; by hoping; by hiding.

But all of that is understandable, right? I'm trying to minimize the harmful effects of another person's actions by trying to control them. I'm trying to protect me by controlling you. But what the writers on codependency point out is that eventually there is no me left to protect. What began as a way to protect *me* inevitably results in *obliterating* me. There is no me left, except as I exist to control you.

So if we say, in very simple terms, that independence is about me, and interdependence is about the relationship between me and you, then *codependency* is about you. I mean, it's about *me*, but really only about how *you* affect *me*. It's about a particularly obsessive way in which I respond to your need or my perception of your need.

Codependency arises most clearly amidst the stress caused by loving someone whose behavior is out of control and destructive. It is a survival tool.

But in a wider sense, I think that codependency probably touches all of our lives. As you heard in the reading: *It is natural to want to protect and help the people we care about. It is also natural to want to be affected by and react to the problems of people around us.* Codependency has an understandable origin in our attempt to meet our needs and the needs of others. Though it goes awry, it arises from some pretty natural inclinations that follow a somewhat familiar progression:

1. I (as a representative human) have an innate desire to fix what is broken, to help, to respond to need.
2. I tend to feel much more certain about what exactly *you* need than about what *I* need.
3. I *believe* that I know what you need much better than *you* know what you need.
4. Thus, as your behavior affects me, I have an innate desire to help you (and myself) by giving you what *I* think you need, by offering advice, by getting you to do what I want (which is, of course, what you need.)

Now, for some reason, when I state this to you in these very simple terms, you have a tendency to get defensive. (What is that about?) You won't do what I want you to do. So I quickly change course, and rather than being so forthright about my plans to "help" you, I resort to indirect means of influence and manipulation. I figure out ways to try and get you to do what you should have done in the first place. In attempting to control your behavior, I change my behavior...Voila! Codependency.

Let's take a quick look at our mission and imagine the congregation embracing codependency as opposed to interdependency:

The mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona is to create a welcoming community of caring people where all receive the very best advice we can give you, intellectual stimulation to allow you to understand the superiority of our opinions and respect for the spiritual path we have chosen for your own good.

Our covenant? As we journey together, sure of the truth, endlessly waiting for others to catch up, and caught in the web of codependency, we covenant to humor and correct one another.

You see what I mean? It is almost diametrically opposed to everything we claim that we are.

And I don't even say that because I find our way to be more virtuous; it is because, to me, it is most practical.

If I thought that *I* could *save you*, or that *you* could *save me*, I would covenant to affirm and promote respect for the codependent web of all life...But the other thing about codependent behavior is this: it never achieves its goal. It never changes you and it only hurts me. This is what leads to one of the painful insights I began with:

"Codependency," explained one person, "is knowing all your relationships will either go on and on the same way (painfully), or end the same way (disastrously)...Or both."

The tragedy inherent in codependency is that it is doomed to failure.

Quick poll:

How many of you have tried to change someone else?

Next question:

How many, solely through your own efforts, succeeded in changing the other person?

Now, listen, I'm not saying that people never change. And sometimes it's hard to tell what it is that inspires that change. But I *am* saying that change only happens when an individual awakens, within themselves, to the possibility and desirability of that change. It cannot be imposed, except on the most superficial level, from the outside. And nobody else can do it for you--just like nobody else can walk that lonesome valley from the old song--nobody else can walk it for you. Nobody else can *want* it for you.

So what about the mission of our congregation? If change must occur at an individual level; if we are not out to change others, what are we doing? What *works* in fulfilling our mission?

We can't change other people, but we can provide a community that nurtures and supports positive transformation, increasing understanding and inspiring compassionate action. What works? Back to our covenant...

We covenant to honor and care for each other.

We covenant to honor one another. What does that look like? What does that mean? If I covenant to honor the imperfect, screwed-up mess that is you, how will you ever change? Ah, but that is codependent thinking. That is worrying about you rather than thinking about me. That is trying to control you rather than trying to understand myself.

By honoring you, I become aware of you as a separate individual with your own experience and understandings and challenges and insights...with your own life, separate from my own and from my experience of you. It sounds simple, obvious, but we spend a good share of our lives without that explicit awareness of others. By practicing the honoring of you I increase my own compassion. My opinions are now much less important than my understanding, and even that acceptance that goes beyond my understanding. This is the fertile ground of transformation.

And when someone honors me in that way, I am able to be who I am; to rest from expectation and manipulation and worries about what you think I should be. At the same time, it inspires me to follow my best self; to reach for what is good and true rather than defend what is broken and twisted. And this experience of acceptance allows me to offer that to another, to honor another similarly.

Can you imagine a world full of people honoring one another? Can you imagine a world transformed by that kind of caring?

And though we have let go of the idea that we can control one another, though we have pledged to accept one another, that is not the same thing as “anything goes.” That is not the same as accepting any and all behavior.

That is the very reason that we have a covenant. You cannot change me, but you have the right to hold me accountable to the covenant of our congregation. It is perfectly appropriate to respectfully call one another back to that promise which sustains us.

One of the ways to rid ourselves of codependent behavior is to reflect on our own motivations, to be clear about expectations, and to set appropriate boundaries based on those expectations. The covenant is our promise to one another and our expectation of one another, and we meet it imperfectly and haltingly and clumsily, and we meet it graciously and proudly and beautifully, and we keep it before us in our order of service and our newsletter and on our web site and read it at the beginning of each Board meeting because it is meant to shape our life together and strengthen us to fulfill our mission.

We gather as a covenantal religious community. We do not come together around a single set of beliefs, but we gather around the promise we have made to treat each other with respect and compassion as we each seek out and nurture our own best selves, while encouraging others to do the same.

We reject codependent behavior and the futile goal of trying to control one another. We practice honoring and caring for one another in ways that we hope will spread around the world. We acknowledge our need for one another and our need to be needed.

The promise that sustains this community can hold a myriad of different beliefs and values and experiences, and in that spirit I welcome you all today.