

SO...YOU'VE HAD A BAD DAY!

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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My sermon this morning “So You’ve Had a Bad Day” is unashamedly inspired by one of my favorite popular songs of the same title, by singer/songwriter Daniel Powter. So that you can follow along with the words as we play it, we’ve put them on an insert in the order of service this morning. I have also arranged a very special slide show that fits right in with the music...so here we go...oh...and feel please free to sing along with the chorus if the spirit moves!

SONG BEFORE THE SERMON – “Had a Bad Day” by Daniel Powter [with slides of various folks exhibiting a “bad day” face, including many from the UUFVB congregation]

Did you have fun with that? I gotta tell ya...I just love that song. I just love this simple, melodic, toe-tapping melody...and I love the lyrics! Every time it comes on the car radio (especially when I’m driving alone in the car) a big smile comes across my face, and I launch into singing along at the top of my lungs! Other drivers may think I’m about to drive off the road, but I totally get into that song. belting out the lyrics I love!...And by the way...isn’t that one of the best parts of driving (or showering) alone...you can sing along with your favorite music with all the gusto you want, and nobody can tell you how terrible – or off key – you sound!

In any case, after repeatedly enjoying this song on the car radio, I began thinking as a minister a little more seriously about the universality and power of this experience we call having “A Bad Day,” and wondered if this common phenomenon wasn’t something we would all benefit by reflecting on in a sermon on Sunday morning. I mean, everybody knows about having a bad day...bad days are a universal human experience...and maybe these “out of sync and irritating” days have something to teach us spiritually...and maybe it spiritually matters (really spiritually matters!) how we deal with them. So let’s spend a little time together this morning reflecting on the little, everyday misfortune of having “A Bad Day.”

This morning, I have seven things – count them! – I want to observe and affirm about having “A Bad Day.”

Now...let me make a comment about a seven-point sermon. Way back in seminary – some 40 years ago – my preaching professor, the wise and crusty Rev. Dr. Joseph Barth, emphatically said to me one day in class, “Kid, an effective sermon always has three points, no more...no less!” But you people here in Vero Beach – like the clever and smart folks of Lake Wobegon, are all “above average,” so I know you can handle the intellectual complexity of seven intersecting points this morning!...so here we go.

One. The first point I want to make about “a bad day” is that there really is objectively something in life called “a bad day”...and, like it or not, we all at least occasionally have them.

Every last person in this room right now knows full well what “A Bad Day” looks and feels like...because we all have had them break over us! To me...a bad day is when in one single 24-hour period a sequence of little irritations, complications, difficulties and strokes of bad luck – none of which in-and-of-itself is earth-shatteringly awful or irritating – occur, one after the other and/or simultaneously – often exacerbated by your feeling physically or emotionally down or out of sorts...which steadily nibbles away at your normal sense of enjoyment, fluidity and ease.

Let me take a stab at describing such a day. A bad day starts when you get up the morning after not having slept particularly well because you're worried about one of your kids or grandkids, and can only find one of your slippers at the foot of your bed. So you stumble barefoot to the shower to wake yourself up, and the hot water knob in the shower comes off in your hand while it's set at scalding hot. After you get in your bathrobe, you step outside to get the morning paper, that you love to read first thing, only to discover that the delivery folks have once again not produced it on time.

Now in a thoroughly grumpy mood, you sit down for breakfast...you empty your favorite box of cereal into a bowl, add a sliced banana and sugar, and pour milk from the refrigerator carton all over it, only to discover, with the first anticipatory spoonful, that the milk has soured. You settle for a breakfast of orange juice, and decide to get to the computer to order a couple of things online before your doctor's appointment. Everything goes just great on the computer, until you try to complete your complicated order and the site – through no fault of your own – times you out or drops you just as you are entering your credit card number, forcing you to start all over again.

Now running late for your doctor's appointment, you try to quickly get dressed, only to discover that the shirt you have chosen is missing a critical button. You fly to the car, and back up only to hit the overloaded trash can you put out for pickup the night before, spewing trash all over the street. After cramming everything more or less back into the trash can, you head off to the doctor, only to have every light – every one of them mind you! – turn against you. Finally arriving at the doctor more-or-less-on-time you see that the waiting room is full of sullen-looking folks, and sure enough, it is fully 87 minutes before you are ushered into the examination room.

After another 14 minutes of cooling your irritated heels, you see your doctor who isn't sure what's going on with you, so she orders more tests...two of which involve long, sharp needles. You finally get home mid-afternoon to find the morning paper waiting for you, but as you head to your study to hide yourself in the morning's news, you are ambushed by your spouse who asks you to help with a grocery shopping trip – a common task you have secretly hated for decades!

The dinner cooked for you that night is not exactly a favorite of yours, but you put on a good face...only to have your beloved beg you to watch a movie with her – you know, one of those smarmy movies about enterprising and empowered women you so love to watch. By the time you are ready for the day to end, you're feeling totally put upon, so you go to the bathroom to brush your teeth, when the tube breaks oozing sticky, peppermint flavored paste all over your hands. Finally having reached your breaking point from all the irritations and bad luck of the day, from a room away your spouse hears your cosmic protest... "ARRRRGGGGGHHHH!" You've had a bad day!

Now tell me if it is any different for you...but in my life, there really are days like this. They don't come along all that frequently, thank God, but they do happen now and again, when all kinds of little, difficult things conspire together in mischievous amalgamation, preventing me from spending the day in ease and enjoyment. A friend of mine describes such bad days as like "getting nibbled to death by ducks." Each nibble, each irritation or difficulty of such days, isn't by itself significant, but by the end of the day, they all add up and you just feel done and defeated! Have any of you ever had a day when you have been nibbled to death by ducks??? Of course you have... this is a part of life that we all know about first hand...and to imagine that you can skate through life without experiencing bad days everyone now and again is to ask way too much!

Two. The second thing I want to affirm about “bad days” is that: When you find yourself in the midst of one, don’t take it personally, because it really isn’t about you.

Now...a bad day, of course, is in one sense a very personal thing...it’s your bad day, and no one else’s...and that’s in fact one of the most frustrating parts about having a bad day...all kinds of little things are, for no apparent reason, going wrong and out of sync for you, and you are aware – in the midst of all these personal irritations and difficulties – that most everybody else around you is sailing through the day just fine.

On such days, It feels like the entire universe has purposefully singled you out for a hard time...but this, of course, is not the case. Bad days happen...not because God or fate or the President of the United States, even has ordained them...but simply because they happen! This universe, in case you haven’t noticed, is not paying particular, cosmic attention to you...the grand scheme of “all that is” does not care about or notice your little needs, wants, desires, or demands...life just rolls ahead as one big, complicated mystery...and when a day doesn’t go particularly smoothly for you, it really doesn’t mean a whole lot to anyone or anything other than yourself. So, when you have a bad day, you can, if you existentially want to, wallow in self-pity or feel sorry for “your-little-own-put-upon-self.” But please don’t spiritually imagine that this is all about you...because it’s not...the universe really isn’t picking on you...and that realization should make the complicated day go just a bit better!

Three. The third thing I want to suggest about a “bad day” is that: when you find yourself in the midst of one, acknowledge this reality, first to yourself and then as appropriate to others in your immediate circle, for you don’t really have to carry “the bad day” completely alone.

I am passionately persuaded that when a bad day is in the process of “declaring itself” in your life – you know, when, by lunchtime several unrelated things have already gone askew – it is spiritually and emotionally important to acknowledge to yourself that the day, at least so far just isn’t working out very well. Speaking personally, when I feel out of sorts on one of those days when nothing seems to go smoothly, I find it is helpful to my psyche to say to myself with a little ironic smile, “Well...lookie here...through no fault of my own, I’m having a rough day, I guess today is just going to be one of those exasperating days...maybe I better just gird my loins and lower my expectations.” Such internal acknowledgment helps me to cope with what is apparently before me...a less than sterling day!

And I also find it helpful, matter-of-factly...without excessive drama or self-pity, to share my emotional and spiritual state of being with trusted people who are close to me -- my spouse... my co-workers...friends. When, for example, I’m having a bad day at the office here at the fellowship I find it helps to go next door into Deb’s office and say to her, “Yikes, Deb... it’s only a little after 11:00 a.m., but I’m already having a bad day...I had a flat tire on the way to work, the arthritis in my knees is acting up, my sermon isn’t coming together, my printer cartridge just ran out of ink, the phone won’t stop ringing, and violent evening thunderstorms forecast for my commute home this afternoon are almost certainly going to make my bike trip home a wet and unpleasant ride.” And Deb, bless her heart, is always sympathetic...she listens attentively to my existential complaints, nods her head in understanding, invariably says something empathetic like, “Oh, I know what you mean...I’ve had days like that!”...and sometimes she even helps me to laugh at some humorous aspect of what I have described, or helps me by talking in through to put the little irritations into perspective. I’ll talk a bit more about putting bad days in perspective in a moment.

Now kind and sympathetic people around you probably can't (all by themselves) turn a bad day around for you...sympathy usually isn't enough to undo all the irritations. But allowing good folks around you to share in the knowledge of what you are going through and express their sympathy and understanding – lightens your burden, and helps you to feel less alone and beat up in the day that's not going well...and, take it from me, that can go a long way to making “a bad day” less discouraging.

Four. The fourth thing I want to suggest to you this morning is that: when you find yourself in the midst of what is shaping up to be “a bad day,” trust that you may, may, be able to turn things around before sunset.

Now, I must admit that sometimes, when I personally have been in the midst of a bad day, try though I might, I have been unable to turn the day around. In my life, some “bad days” declare themselves early, express themselves insistently, and hang on to the ankle of my heart and soul, holding me back from enjoying myself, until I crawl into bed, defeated, at night. Some bad days are mean and strong and tenacious...and simply, in my experience, must be tolerated (endured!) until they end.

But other “bad days” (again, in my experience) can be turned around...they can be turned around by my making the right emotional and spiritual decisions...specifically by my refusing to sit helplessly in the soup of the bad day. Sometimes, I have broken the spell of a bad day by taking a restorative nap...or by calling an old friend up and going out to lunch. Sometimes I have broken the spell of a bad day by putting down the work which isn't going well and getting out on a glorious early summer day like this one and riding my bike hard on A1A, or going home a bit early to prepare a comforting dinner of my world-famous meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and fresh asparagus (Hummmmm). I'm sure that for each of us, different decisions, activities and techniques help us to break out of the gray stupor of a bad day. The point is that when we find ourselves in the midst of “a bad day” we are quite often capable, if we will just get up the gumption to try, to take positive action...thereby flipping ourselves out of the negative pattern...and turn the day around...transforming it from “bad” to “altogether tolerable”!

Five. The fifth thing I want to remind you is to please: remember (when you find yourself in the midst of “a bad day”) that – by definition – it can last for only 24 hours!

This is probably the most obvious observation I can make about a bad day...but it also might be the most important. “A bad day” (unless we choose to otherwise empower it) is just that...one...bad...day. “A bad day” does not have to shape the rest of your lifetime...it does not even somehow have to set the pattern for the rest of your week or month...it doesn't have that kind of power. All bad days come to an end – at the latest, remember – at the end of the day. And, as I just affirmed a few minutes ago, bad days can even end earlier if you succeed in turning them around by positive decisions you make.

A bad day -- by definition...and in my experience, in reality -- disappears entirely when you fall into the embrace of sleep that night. And just a quick-but-important word here about the restorative power of sleep...no matter how complicated or irritating a day you have had, sleep (the simple balm of unconscious rest) has the power to set all the pieces of your life back into order and calm for the next day. How many times have I gone to bed all out of sorts, only to have eight good hours of sleep put everything back into healing perspective. Perhaps the most merciful thing about “a bad day” is that it has no real staying power beyond its own 24 hours -- unless, of course, you foolishly fixate or focus on it when you wake up the next day, erasing the benefit of the fresh start you have, in fact been given!

So next time you are having “a bad day,” remember that it is trapped in its own particularity and brevity...and that “This too shall pass...and pass soon.”

Six. The sixth thing that I urge you to consider: when you find yourself having “a bad day,” is to keep the irritation and unpleasantness of it all in true perspective.

This idea is, of course, related to the last one – about bad days only being able to last 24 hours. The irritations, complications and difficulties of “a bad day” are, by definition, small, little, and fleeting. But if you blow them up in your mind as big, pervasive, and permanent and – even more spiritually and emotionally dangerous, as I have already said, hold on to them, past the day itself – then you have given “the bad day” much more pernicious power over your life than it ever could have dreamed of having on its own! I also think it helps – profoundly helps – to keep a sense of self-deprecating humor during the course of a bad day about how things just aren’t working out for you.

Now some of the aspects of a bad day aren’t all that funny, but others are, and it helps to be able to laugh at the bad luck of our situation. Just one example, the other day I had three flat tires on my bike, all within about 15 minutes. The first flat was an irritation...the second, more maddening...and the third downright infuriating. But rather than stand there with smoke and frustration coming out of both my ears, I decided to chuckle to myself about the whole unlikely situation. “What is the chance of finding three little bits of sharp glass in such rapid succession?” I said to myself with a bemused smile...and then I thought to myself, “The bicycle-flat gods threw their best at me...are probably laughing it up in heaven right now, but by God I quickly fixed each one those weaklings threw at me!” And on my way I went...late but not bent out of spiritual or emotional shape.

Please don’t forget, friends, all “a bad day” has to throw at you is lots of little stuff...and as Dr. Richard Carlson reminds us in his famous book with the same title, “Don’t sweat the small stuff...and it’s all small stuff.” I quote him, “Often we allow ourselves to get all worked up about things that, upon closer examination, aren’t really that big a deal.” Most of the little irritations and complications that make “a bad day” bad are not, in fact, all that big a deal. One glorious early Spring day – when I lived back in Boston -- I saw a guy who must have been in his mid-70’s driving a great big old yellow Cadillac – you know, one of those with great big 1950’s fins – top down...puffing away on a huge, stinky cigar...in a tee shirt and shorts...with a smile on his face a mile wide...and on the rear bumper of his car was a sticker that simply read, “Every day above ground is a good day!” Now that puts things in perspective, doesn’t it?

So perhaps one of the most important strategies for spiritually and emotionally surviving “a bad day” is to keep everything in perspective, and realize that each component of “a bad day” is in and of itself, by itself not that big a deal...certainly not a big enough deal to make you miserable...unless (of course) you want it to!

Seven. And finally, I would have you remember today: that occasional bad days serve to spiritually remind us how generally good and pleasant and congenial normal, everyday life is!

Look... maybe this is an example of me (the ready optimist) trying to make “a spiritual purse out of a sow’s ear,” but I really do believe that the fact that we all occasionally have bad days can serve to wisely remind our hearts how life is – generally speaking...day in and day out...in the normal, unexciting flow of things – pretty darned good and gracious and gentle to us. I think it can be fairly said that all of us make the spiritual mistake of falling out of the habit of being

grateful for the great gift of just a normal, old day. In her essay "The Riddle of the Ordinary" Cynthia Ozick reminds us how easy it is to take ordinary life for granted:

"The ordinary," she writes, "by making itself so noticeable...has got itself in a bad fix with us: we hardly ever notice it. The ordinary, simply by being so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant and neglectful; when something does not insist on being noticed, when we aren't grabbed by the collar or struck on the side of the skull by a presence or event, we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude...And this is the deepest point concerning the ordinary; that is does deserve our gratitude...the ordinary is above all what is expected. And what is expected," Ozick concludes, "is not often thought of as a gift."

Let me give an example of this from my own life. Every time I get a really bad chest cold – and am physically miserable with the accompanying aches, and fever, congestion, sore runny nose and cough – I say to myself, "Oh, if I could just feel normal again...if I can just get over this cold and feel like I usually do, I will never take that normal state of affairs for granted again." But – spiritually darn it all – just as soon as I do get over the cold, I forget my promise to on a daily basis be grateful just for a normal, ordinary non-sick day. I slip right back into my bad habit of forgetting what a great gift just a little, old ordinary day is! And I'll bet a lot of you fall victim to the same spiritual mistake...taking the gift of a normal day for granted.

Look...no one enjoys having "a bad day" (or even a lousy four-day chest cold)...and I am certainly not trying to suggest that such "unpleasantries" are some sort of necessary spiritual corrective in our lives. But I will say to you today that having "a bad day" every once in a while can serve to remind our stubborn, often ungrateful hearts what a simple, blessed gift an ordinary day of our lives really is!

For example...let's all take just a moment now to take stock of the ordinary day we are now sharing together...

We awoke this morning in a beautiful part of the world! It's a warm and gentle tropical day in this serene and natural part of Florida. We've digested breakfast – and maybe even some or all of the Sunday paper! – and now we are comfortably sitting here...in this pleasant air conditioned room...in the good company of friends, family, and caring , like-minded strangers...and when we leave here we still have much of a day set before us to enjoy – at the beach...on the water...in our backyards, kitchens, and living rooms.

I pray you, dear friends, each and every day, take spiritual stock of the holy, ordinary blessing you have before you! Life – ordinary, everyday life -- is good, dear friends... "every day above ground is a good day"...even with all its inevitable complications, challenges and difficulties. That's all I really know, dear friends. Life is good...even with an occasional bad day thrown in to keep us on our toes. Life is good. Let our hearts rejoice.

AMEN.

So...have a GREAT day!