



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

David Rohe © 28 January 2018

Sharon Got Scared when I Said 'I Don't Care'

It was last month, early December in my 75th year, and something slipped. It was a Saturday, and I actually mentioned the situation to Clay at church the next day. So did Sharon. She also mentioned it to a few other people because she was worried about me. The responses I received were varied, mostly expressions of worry for my mental health with a few "Maybe we can talk about this sometime" type remarks.

What happened that Saturday is fairly easily described, and I suspect worth the telling here, among friends and family. Why it happened is pure speculation.

What happened is that I found myself in a unique situation in my life, one that was unexpected, felt great, felt light and scared the daylights out of Sharon. I literally began to not care about many, many things I had expended tons of energy on right up until that morning. Some of those things were: the devastation inflicted upon US society by the Trump administration, the fact that our house is still chaos following a move, the fact that I am officially obese, that Life has apparently disallowed my ever again owning my own home, the shiny paint has disappeared off my car. That's a partial list I discovered when I started writing this presentation. There's more, but I don't care to list them.

So Sharon asked, “Don’t you even care about yourself?” and I said no. That was true at the time, in the midst of my euphoria, still partially true now, and probably the crux of her concern. She is not so worried now, and neither am I. Actually, I wasn’t worried then, simply because -----

Why? I bet you’re asking yourselves, eh?

I have only vague reasons, some I think are true. The main one has to do with my father, a wondrously duty-bound man raised during the Great Depression and who was my example of a duty-first life. Much of my adolescence and young adult life, older adult life too, I disliked my father because he was an emotionally-absentee parent. He did it on purpose; it’s a long story. My distaste for my father did not prevent me from acquiring much of the basic underpinnings of ethics and responsibility that he demonstrated. I value truth telling, loyal relationships, fair play, all values absorbed from my father. However, here’s an example of the level of duty-boundness I experienced living with my dad. It comes from a conversation he had with my hell-raising brother, who was in high school at the time, and was a hell-raiser only in comparison to me, Mr. Goody 2 Shoes. Dad sat Dan down and pointed out the finer points of a good and proper Life: first you get your education, get a good job, keep that job (Dad had a total of 3 different jobs in the 50+ years of professional employment), get married once you can support yourself and a family, have that family, raise the kids to adulthood, and once they are out of the house and on their own, then you can start to have fun. In this sort of life style, it is really hard to figure out what you really want to do, what you really feel, what is really important, to you, to me. If your plan is laid out, your responsibilities preset, your life well organized to a certain pattern, then there are few decisions to be made. Duty takes precedence, you always come second, or somewhere further down the priority scheme.

I have paraphrased Dad’s “Life talk” with my brother Dan, but you get the picture.

Another factor influencing my orientation to duty is that I am also the oldest of 4; birth order does matter. I had unstated responsibilities for the younger ones. My life seemed to revolve around caring about everything, many of those items I could do little or nothing about, but caring about them was important. This sort of preset makes for a person who is a fairly effective rescuer of programs and people, someone everyone can count on to be sure it gets done, whatever it is. I am (was) the perfect volunteer. Nothing escaped my care and concern, nothing. Not US politics, Auckland Unitarian Church congregation size and budget, interpersonal relationships among my children (birthed and acquired), whether there are enough tables for the church's Christmas shared meal and how they are arranged, where do we put all this STUFF Sharon and I have acquired and is still in boxes in our house, and on, and on, and on. I can be a fairly happy fellow, but after a while carrying this basket of duties gets difficult.

So, I had a little break that Saturday and decided to put my basket down. The next day, Sunday, was one of the best days of my life (after my wedding day to Sharon) because I literally did not care about anything. If it was broken, I had no interest in trying to fix it. I was a religious convert to the first church of carelessness. Ever met any religious converts? They typically seem most interested in helping you along their conversion path, but this new church I had discovered had the opposite effect, simply because.....

There are a few aspects of this story that still need explanation or pointing out. First, I have no idea why I needed to tell you all this, but it seemed important, and many of us are friends, so I thought I ought to share.

Second, Sharon may have had good reason for concern because I suspect there was/is an element of depression involved in the urge to not care. So, am I depressed? I gotta tell you that shedding my sack of burdens felt too good to

worry about whether I fit the description of clinical depression, and besides....

Third, my early epiphany (January 6 was still a month away) produced great feelings of lightness, and obviously a strong emotional response in me, resulting in my initial reaction being typically overblown, as are most strong emotional reactions/religious conversions. Initially, I felt like I did not care about anything, as in ANYTHING. That's what probably freaked Sharon a bit. But, a short conversation with my buddy, Mike Allwright (the Salvation Army officer who spoke here recently) was illuminating. He simply said, "You mean you don't **have** to care." Let that sink in a minute. Whether I care about something is up to me. Wow! It's true, it's obvious, it's simple, as are most really important truisms.

So, what do I do as a result of that understanding? I start the process of making decisions about letting stuff into my first church of carelessness. I am still sorting. How do I decide what goes and what stays? I don't know. Life has suddenly gotten a lot simpler and much more complicated. My current reactions to situations, conditions, semi-emergent happenings probably fall into several diagnostic categories such as defensive reaction, passive aggression, depressive response, rational prioritization, whatever. You know what? As far as investigating the deeper motivations behind my choices, actually....

I'll leave you with this phrase that has become more meaningful to me, in Life, those with the most choices are the most free. But, freedom's not a benign asset. With all these choices, ya still gotta choose. Making the necessary choices means you gotta care.

--- Oops. Time to take a rest.

Amen.