



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Stop hitting my friend

Clay Nelson © 3 April 2022

Kate Liu's reflection on beating up on herself brought back a happier memory. It was a game my mother played with me when I was little older than a toddler. She would take my arms and force me to hit myself, not so it hurt but until I gleefully giggled when being scolded to stop hitting her baby. She meant no harm. How could she know I would get pretty good at the game? Only when I played it, it did hurt.

Like Kate, I remember bringing home an anatomy test with the highest grade in the class, 98%. But when I showed my parents the test they couldn't stop laughing that my one mistake was switching uvula with anus. It was funny, why wouldn't they laugh? Again, they meant no harm. But I was 12. I was very good at feeling shame, not knowing that was different from being embarrassed or being able to laugh at myself. I was black and blue emotionally from beating up my mother's baby.

Character is one of those words we like to throw around like everybody knows what the hell it means. Sadly, we pretend to play along nodding understanding when we hear it, when we don't really have a clue. Do we consider that historically only men had character? Does it occur to us that we don't really understand what it means any more than we can define the word "honour"? Another of those patriarchal words.

The etymology of character is quite telling. The word comes from the Greek word for "engraved mark," "symbol or imprint on the soul". It has gone through many other connotations over the millennia, but this is my favourite. It suggests who we are or at least who we are becoming or became. The good part of this understanding is that it doesn't suggest our character is determined by how well we beat ourselves up. It does suggest that forming our character leaves marks engraved by life itself. I'm not all that much into antique furniture, but I'm told that that stress marks from daily use make it more valuable than when first constructed. Our stress marks are badges to be proud of, not Scarlet Letters.

To help us out, here are some other words that help me understand character: authentic, integrity, passionate, brave, humble, caring, self-sacrificing. And there is another. Accepting. Accepting who we are. Accepting our circumstances. Accepting where we are. Accepting our purpose. Accepting our value. Until we do, we will fail to become fully who we are. Not accepting is just another way to beat ourselves up. We will fail to appreciate who we are, we will fail to believe in and follow our passion. We will not quit blaming ourselves for what life throws at us. We won't seek to change what we can't accept.

Sometimes it is easier for us rationalists to understand philosophical fine points with a story rather than an argument. The following is from a reflection by Marisol Caballero. She begins with a quote by one of my favourite journalists, Molly Ivins, who regularly took the piss out of her home state of Texas: *"I dearly love the state of Texas, but I consider that a harmless perversion on my part, and discuss it only with consenting adults."* She then goes on to say:

I spent four years of my life living in New York City and a little over two living in California, and I am proud to say that I have lived every other year of my life in Texas. Texans are known for their arrogance about our home state, and this reputation isn't untrue. In fact, Texas oil man John Gunther is credited as saying, "If a man's from Texas, he'll tell you. If not, why embarrass him by asking." As much as there is to love about the beauty of my ancestral land, its people, and its cultures, those unlucky souls not from here — especially those who live on the other two coasts — are baffled by such adoration. I've lost track of the number of times I was congratulated for "getting out" during my years away ... as if instead of being my home, Texas were a hostage situation.

Oh, I understood all too well where they were coming from. Texas is known for its hostility to people of colour, LGBT people, and women. I am a member of each of these groups. What kind of masochist would willingly and enthusiastically go back?

While to some, "home" may be where one hangs their hat, I believe that for most of us, home is where we feel most connected to what nourishes our soul. There's so much about Texas that I despise and would love to change, but the same could be said of other places and spaces that feel

like “home,” such as my alma mater, my faith communities, the cultural groups I am a member of, my family of origin, etc.

We humans have both a natural desire and a spiritual need to feel connected and to grow roots, even if those roots aren't necessarily tied to a geographic place. We need to feel part of a tribe. It's no coincidence that “family” and “familiar” have the same root. With any home or community, there comes a time when its flaws can no longer be ignored. In fact, this disillusion is part of growing up. Some will cut and run, seeking greener pastures. But soon enough, the vibrant colours of newness fade, and the complex realities of the new home emerge alongside its original novelty and beauty.

The trick to remaining in love and connected with “home” becomes the same trick as remaining in love with any person, including (and maybe especially) ourselves: we find ways to actively engage with what makes us proud, remain open to surprises, and work toward fixing that which disappoints us.

As one of those who sought greener pastures after disillusion with my birth country I found my tribe in an unexpected place. It was not about escaping, for me, but finding. It was not about finding perfection, there are plenty of warts here. It was about coming home. After arriving, I sometimes felt like a verse from the theme song of *Cheers*:

*Be glad there's one place in the world
Where everybody knows your name
And they're always glad you came
You want to go where people know
People are all the same
You want to go where everybody knows your name*

Yet, it wasn't easy to get here. I had to leave a lot behind, including certainty that I could stay or would want to after getting here.

Our character development requires a lot of leaving things behind. Jen Crow, a UU minister, is the founder of Wellspring, a Unitarian Universalist programme of spiritual deepening used widely in the US. She writes of the best advice she ever got:

“In whatever situation you find yourself, take what you need and leave the rest behind.” Don’t waste your energy arguing. Just take what you need and leave the rest behind. Over the years, I’ve found this advice works not only for family gatherings and twelve-step meetings but for the larger project of spiritual living, too. And the best news of all: this taking what we need and leaving the rest behind isn’t only a one-time thing. We can do it anytime. Looking back over our lives, we can hear the stories anew, choosing where to focus our attention and where to widen our view. We can let go of old ways of understanding that no longer serve us and we can wiggle our way free, becoming the meaning makers and the storytellers of our own lives. We get to choose what we need in a given moment. And what we need gets to change.

What we definitely need to leave behind is beating ourselves up. For some of us it takes a double dose of character to do it, but it changes everything when we do. Our story of origin, of who we are, who we seek to become all improve in the telling.

We are all the same and we all know your name, so stop beating up our friend. It is not a game. It hurts you; it hurts us.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Take a chance and share one way you used to beat yourself up and how did you stop?