

Learning to Walk by Learning to Fall -- or -- Don't Waste a Good Mistake

There is a wonderful poem by Rumi, called "The Guest House" that most of you have heard before, which ends like this:

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Over and over in my life, I am grateful to Rumi for that poem. For sometimes my own dark thoughts, meanness, and malice pull me up short, rob me of my good opinion of myself, and leave me shaking my head in wonder and despair at how very much alive my dark side is. I'm going to tell you about one such recent experience.

Many of you know that I run a little Airbnb in the converted garage behind our house in Redwood City. It was a pretty funky living space when we first bought the house, almost 2 years ago, but we figured we could fix it up for Peter's mom to live in, and we spent a year transformig it into a – frankly – *darling* guest cottage. When it became clear last Spring that Peter's mom wasn't ready to make the move to Northern California yet, we decided that rather than renting the cottage to permanent tenants, we'd offer it as an Airbnb, so that we could still have it available for my mother-in-law or any other friends or relatives when they come to visit. It was a superb decision. It turns out that running an Airbnb is the perfect job for me. I LOVE it! And the Airbnb company makes it really easy by giving lots of support and by collecting and publishing reviews from guests and from Hosts. Reviews are key. After only three months of operation, I was designated a "Super Host" by Airbnb because of my constant 5-star reviews. So when people pull up our listing, they see a little insignia next to it that indicates that I will take great care of them. Here are a few excerpts from some of my reviews:

- Kate is such a caring and kind person.
- Kate was an awesome host and I have seen more than a few across the world in my travels
- Kate was incredibly accommodating and warm & friendly
- I have stayed at many Air BNB places over that last few months and Kate was by far the most thoughtful host I have dealt with.

Ok, so earlier this month, 4 guests from China arrived for a one-night stay. A husband and wife, their 7-year-old son, and the woman's father. Back in October, the woman, whose name is Jun, booked the cottage for three people, but a few days before they arrived, I emailed her and asked her for the names of the other guests, since I like to post a personalized welcome note on the fridge that they see the moment they open the door. So she emailed back with everyone's name, and I emailed back saying "Our cottage only sleeps 3 people, but I count 4 names. How old is your son? Will he sleep in the bed with you, or do you need me to set up an air mattress?" She responded, "My son is 7, but he is thin and not tall, I think he is sleeping with us is ok." to which I responded, "That's fine, but I could

also set up a single air mattress on the floor if you like. Just let me know.” To which she responded “If it is not a trouble, a single mattress is better. Thanks a lot.” I responded “You've got it! You'll all sleep better for sure.” She responded “I really appreciate. Thank you.!”

So, as far as Jun can tell, I am as generous and loving as the reviews portray me to be. But I was annoyed that they added another guest without asking first. It's not a huge deal to blow up the aerobed, but I have to get down on the floor to make it, and it is another set of sheets to wash afterwards, and more bedding to fold and put away, and we're already priced low for a place that can sleep three, yadda, yadda, yadda. She'd expressed appreciation for my going the extra mile for her, but really, not *enough* appreciation.

So, they were there for one night, and the morning they left, I went into the cottage to see what kind of shape they'd left it in. I was dismayed to find a fry pan dripping with grease that had been put away on the kitchen shelf as if it had been cleaned, and a stack of plates and bowls that had been rinsed but not really washed, still covered with water and flecks of food, in the refrigerator, and a very wet washcloth spread out over the top of a wooden dresser. My ire was raised. Then I noticed they'd eaten all the fruit. Now, I always tell people that they can eat or drink anything they find in the cottage, but I don't really expect them to. Often the apples, bananas, and tangerines I put out in the baskets are barely touched, and will last through several sets of guests before they disappear or become too old and wrinkled to serve. But these guys had not only eaten all the fruit in the baskets, but had also eaten the entire 3-lb bag of tangerines in the fridge. And there was a bad fishy smell, so I ran my hand down into the garbage disposal to see if I could find the source of it, and came up with half a shrimp and some shrimp shells. Ok, by now I was livid. These people were slobs, disrespectful, inconsiderate, devious pigs.

I spluttered and fumed about it for hours, feeling totally put-upon and exploited, and finally decided the only way I could rid myself of my negative feelings was to write a review, which I did, listing all their faults and then some. I posted the review, the first one I had ever published that was negative, and concluded by stating that I could not, in good conscience, recommend these guests to other hosts.

Strangely, hitting the “submit” button did not alleviate my upset, so when I picked up Isaiah from school, I complained to him about my awful guests, and when Peter came home from work, I regaled him with my tale of woe. When I told him I'd published a negative review, he raised his eyebrows, but didn't say a word.

Now, I know you should never hit the “send” button to anything you've written in a fit of pique, but when I'm in a fit of pique, I am especially convinced of my own rightness. Plus, I hated being in that fit of pique, and thought I could escape it if I just expressed myself. Oy. I hope I have learned my lesson and never do that again. I can't remember the last time I felt such regret for doing something. For two days later, I looked on the Airbnb website to see if Jun had responded to my review and she had. As I read her words, I felt her anguish and surprise at being shamed in public. This was her first experience using Airbnb, and she'd had no idea she needed to ask permission to add another person. At the last minute, her dad had asked to come along. And she had put her dad in charge of kitchen clean-up the morning they left. It was he who'd put the greasy pan on the shelf and the dishes in the fridge. It dawned on me then: he might be suffering from early onset Alzheimer's, or some other dementia. She didn't say this and she might not even know, but of course, no one in their right mind puts a stack of

dishes in the fridge. Yet that was the assumption I'd made. As she addressed each accusation I'd made, I saw more and more clearly how wrong I'd been, and how much I'd hurt her. I felt like the world's meanest bitch, and a fraud. Yes, they had done a few things that warranted a gentle correction, but not an angry vilification. All the pride I felt at being a Super-Host, at being so loving and generous with my guests, felt like a put-on. What a sham.

I wrote to her immediately apologizing for my harsh review, admitting my embarrassment and remorse for being so unkind, and pledging to get Airbnb to remove the harsh review from their website and replace it with a positive one. She wrote back: "Thank you for your message now. Indeed, your review is hurt me and my father's feelings. When we stay bnb the next day, we felt a little nervous. When we stay hotel, we felt relaxed at once. But some of your words are ok with me. I think I could do better after your remindment. For this, I should thank you."

(PAUSE)

When I first began planning today's service, I was planning to call it "Everyday Sacred" and figured I'd be talking about practicing gratitude and wonder, and prayer, as daily avenues to be in touch with the sacred. In preparation, I started reading a book I'd had on my shelf for a while by UU Minister Erik Walker Wikstrom called *Simply Pray*, and reading it right after the whole painful exchange with my guest Jun from China felt *sorta* like reading a message from God. Early in the book, Wikstrom writes "There are four types of prayer practiced in one form or another by every religious tradition. Christianity calls them "praise and thanksgiving," "confession," "meditation," and "intercession." I call them "Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving." I spent a lot of time reading about confession, or as Wikstrom calls it, "knowing."

"Knowing", Wikstrom says, is "knowing ourselves fully in both our strength and weaknesses... We are all a mixture of saint and sinner, and this stop on our journey is an opportunity to see and know ourselves in all our subtle shadings. This is not a call for guilt or self-criticism but for honest self-appraisal. Unless we acknowledge our faults and failings, we can do nothing about overcoming them. This type of prayer allows us the opportunity to give voice to the broken, wounded, worried places in our souls. It is the chance to take a "fearless moral inventory," to use the language of the 12-Step Movement, and to give voice to what lurks in the shadows. The life of the spirit calls on us to be authentic, whole people, and knowing where we are weak and wounded is essential to meeting this challenge."

Wikstrom goes on to say, "There is no question that most of us would rather not look at certain aspects of ourselves. It's been said that most people think that there are only three perfect people in this world...and that they look forward to meeting the other two! Yet that's only a surface assessment...Most of us have an inner judge who declares us unworthy, who tells us we're not good enough, strong enough, smart enough, whatever enough."

Now, I think I go around most of the time feeling pretty Ok about myself. At times, I'm rather full of myself. (pause) But every once in awhile I become aware of the undercurrent of my inner judge who tells me I'm not enough. Usually, it's that I'm not doing enough to make the world a better place. I'm not a good enough parent. Certainly not a good enough housekeeper, and, well, really not a good enough daughter or sister, or friend, and, oh yes, definitely not thin enough.

Ackkk! Why must I have to contend with these feelings of inadequacy? It's somewhat of a comfort to realize just about everyone I know struggles with their own harsh inner judge. And reading Rev. Wikstrom's book on prayer gave me further comfort. He points out that in AI-Anon there is a saying, "Progress, not perfection." He says "We shouldn't focus on attaining some imagined and longed-for state of perfection. Rather than hold ourselves to such an impossible standard, we should look to the process we're involved in and the progress we're making each and every day as the measure of our lives ... we ought not to assess ourselves by what we are not but by what we are. Still, it might be possible to reclaim the word *perfection*. In fact, it might be possible to recast the AI-Anon slogan as 'Progress is perfection.' " (pause)

Of course, sometimes that progress can feel like one step forward and two steps back. Being forced to recognize my own inner stingy critical bitch through my whole interaction with my guests from China certainly did not feel like progress at the time. But a few days later, when Peter got angry at me for something I, at first, thought he had no reason to be angry at me about, shortly into the process of trying to defend myself, I remembered how convinced I'd been of my rightness when I was railing against Jun, and realized it was fruitless to try to talk him out of that point of view right then. And, in fact, by then not being immersed in self-defense mode, I was able to notice how I'd set up the conditions for him to be angry, and could actually see that I had some degree of responsibility for his anger, and ended up apologizing rather than defending myself. That was definitely progress. (long pause)

There's an Eckhart Tolle quote that I recently came across that sort of knocks me out. I love it so much, I put it at the top of your order of service. It's the one that says, "Accept – then act. Whatever the present moment contains, accept it as if you had chosen it.... This will miraculously transform your whole life."

When I accept my whole regrettable response to my guest, Jun, *as if I had chosen it*, I see how the experience has helped me understand myself better, my husband better, hell, the whole human condition better. As Wikstrom writes, "We don't have to descend into the hell of self-recrimination, we can experience the heaven of true self-acceptance."

Perhaps the American physicist Alfred Romer puts it best when he writes, 'There has come to me an insight into the meaning of Darkness. The reason one must face his (or her) darkness, and enter into that darkness, is not that he (or she) may return purified to face God. One must go into the darkness because that is where God is.'

Or, to quote Rumi, "*The dark thought, the shame, the malice ... be grateful for whatever comes. Because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.*"