

The Pecking Disorder

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered May 19, 2013 at the

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

I embarked on one of the strangest summers of my young life the summer after eighth grade.

It began with my parents putting me on a Greyhound bus for the 3-day cross-country trip from Syracuse, New York to Seattle, Washington. Riding unaccompanied on a 3,000-mile bus trip was an exotic experience, to say the least. I met laborers, hustlers, drifters and everything in between. I fed myself at roadside diners and bus stations with absolutely no guidance or oversight.

Free to experiment, I learned that coffee tasted terrible, but that a cigarette helped me appear older than my years.

Arriving at the Seattle Greyhound terminal, I was met by my grandparents. And then things got really strange. I don't mean perversely strange, or dangerously strange. I mean they got STRANGE.

I spent the summer of 1963 with my elderly Finnish grandparents. They were really, really old – I mean they were the same age I am now.

They were farmers, down-to-earth people who had little to say, although my grandmother would often keep up a running patter of commentary when I was around.

Once a week or so they would get together with other geriatric Finns – speaking Finnish, so I had absolutely no idea what they were saying.

Of course, the farm was a beautiful, idyllic place with fields and forests, abundant sunshine and the air full of the scent of wild chamomile that grew everywhere. Of course, I hated it.

But I wasn't alone, not by a long shot. Besides my grandparents, there was a dog, two cows, and about 3,000 chickens – laying hens – the farm produced eggs.

So I had chores to do. I fed the chickens, collected eggs, helped to clean and pack them. For two whole months, chickens were my life.

And I learned things about chickens. I learned to talk “chicken.” Although that skill has faded from disuse, I can still remember the cackling call and response of those boy-bird conversations.

I learned there were other things you needed to do in order to care for chickens. They had a dangerous tendency to peck at one another, to establish a “pecking order” of their social hierarchy. But there was a down side to this if a peck ever drew blood. Just one spot of blood on the white feathers of a chicken would draw more pecks at that spot of blood. Every nearby chicken would get involved and the victim would literally be pecked to death. And it wouldn’t end there, because in the melee, blood would spatter and spread to other chickens as well, leading to more and more frenzied pecking in a riot of bird violence. Left unstopped, hundreds of chickens could be dead in minutes.

So we fitted the bird’s beaks with clip-on spectacles that blocked their forward vision. We also clipped their beaks so they wouldn’t be so sharp. These steps tended to keep the pecking disorder under control.

But it didn’t change the chicken’s social priorities. If a chicken displayed any weakness or fatigue, its neighbors would crowd it, push it into a corner and sit on it until it smothered. Sometimes I’d come into a hen house and see a bunch of birds sitting in a huddle. I’d shoo them off and discover one, two, or more newly suffocated hens for me to deal with.

A strange summer.

Then I became a stranger. My family moved to a new city while I was out West and that meant new schools. Every student body has its own pecking order and ways of enforcing social differences. Coming in from a very different community with different customs and priorities, I was marked as an outsider as surely as if I had a spot of blood on my feathers. I didn’t fit in. The social leaders in my class mocked me mercilessly and I had no idea how to handle it. Shunned by my classmates, I withdrew, kept to myself and lowered my hopes and expectations of being accepted. I even consoled myself by looking down on classmates who were lower in the pecking order than me.

Although there was no literal pecking or bleeding, I sometimes had images of myself as one of the dead, smothered chickens back on the farm. Just like chickens, humans have ways of enforcing the pecking order in almost every relationship and group. And, just like with chickens, sometimes it can get very ugly. When it does, sometimes we call it bullying.

I can recall episodes of bullying when I feared for my safety. There were places where a young man with long hair and a beard was not safe. Name-calling didn't bother me too much by that time, but there were incidents of genuine physical threat and intimidation. Although I never was beaten, the bullies did achieve their goal – I avoided certain places where they might gather.

There was one time when I was hitchhiking out of Nederland, Colorado, when two young men in a jeep stopped and jeered. Verbal threats escalated as they approached me with knives and a hatchet. Facing them alone on a deserted mountain road was one of the most fearful moments of my life. Fortunately, I was able to flag down a passing car and got out of danger. But I was warned and I changed my behavior.

Bullying can take many forms. The most obvious is when a person or a group takes vengeful delight in causing someone to suffer. But that social phenomenon of establishing a pecking order can be so subtle that those involved can deny that it is bullying at all – because it is so simply right to hate something that is different. This has applied to race, ethnicity, gender orientation, and, believe it or not, even political philosophy.

It can even happen in church.

I once served a church in Indianapolis where a small group of people decided that I was neither a good minister nor a good person and didn't belong in their church. Of course, being human, I did make mistakes. But instead of responding to invitations to reconciliation and understanding, they engaged in a doggedly determined program of gossip, innuendo and slander over the course of several years. Eventually their hatred of me became such a problem that I had to leave.

I was able to meet this challenge a bit more thoughtfully than ones in my past, however. I could clearly see that the situation was unjust even though I

couldn't change it. I could change myself, though, and I used this time as an opportunity to grow in spiritual depth. I focused on developing the capacity to turn the other cheek and love my enemies no matter how intense their hostility. I was able to grow into a more complete person and become a better minister in the face of, and even because of, the bullying I faced there.

So I am grateful to them for giving me the opportunity to grow.

And I realized that bullying is simply one point on a continuum of the power dynamics of relationships – and not only human relationships. As with the chickens' pecking order, we see the interplay of dominance and intimidation in nearly every species we observe. Get a group of dogs together and it will happen. There will be growling and barking, nipping and pushing, and there will be a top dog and there will be an underdog.

Herds of horses do it in the wild. Gentle elephants do it, and chimpanzees absolutely do it. The anthropologist Franz deWaal reported that chimpanzees maintain a clear hierarchy of dominance and privilege, largely through displays like the one he reported in his book, *Chimpanzee Politics*, where he wrote, "A heavy steam engine, an advancing tank, an attacking rhinoceros; all are images of contained power ready to ride roughshod over everything in its path. So it was with [the dominant male] during a charging display. In his heyday he would charge straight at a dozen apes, his hair on end, and scatter them in all directions. None of the apes dared to remain seated when [he] approached them stamping his feet rhythmically. Long before he reached them they would be up, the mothers with their children on their backs or under their bellies, ready to make a quick getaway. Then the air would be filled with the sound of screaming and barking as the apes fled in panic."

So it's not just humans. In fact, this is something we share with most animals. There are many ways for an individual to deal with bullying. The first step appears to be that of individual resiliency. Bullying as a power dynamic depends on intimidation to be successful. Refusing to be intimidated is an individual choice that can make a real difference. The bulling may even stop, but even if it doesn't, taking control of one's own emotions when someone wants to

take that control away from you is a major step toward integrity and emotional maturity.

Bullying may even be codified into the norms of larger groups as patterns of power negotiation and influence. Certain individuals may be expected to wield more power than others, and others, like the intimidated chimps cringing from a dominant male, may be conditioned to stand aside and yield. This can give the dominant members the secure feeling that they get their way because they are right, even though it may simply be that others are afraid to challenge them.

The most thorough and effective way to deal with bullying, though, is through a group's adoption of an alternate moral and ethical code; a code that forbids unequal and unwarranted influence. This is the kind of thing that true religions were created to accomplish. If we take the teachings of Jesus, for example, there is no place in them for bullying. He teaches us to live a different moral ethical code from those we received from our evolutionary forebears. He taught us that God is love; that we should love our enemies, help the stranger, and turn the other cheek when struck.

This bold new way of being in community is so contrary to our evolutionary bullying baggage that it is often corrupted into very different understandings, like the Calvinism our ancestors rejected. Murdering young women accused of witchcraft and exiling Anne Hutchinson and her children to their death in the wilderness of a New England winter sounds much more like the behavior of the chickens in the henhouse than the actions of kind and loving Christians.

It is possible to create a community of fairness, justice, and compassion – in fact, that's exactly what we committed ourselves to here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley when we adopted our core values of compassion, nurture, and justice.

If we truly live compassionately, we will always be open to an awareness of the feelings of others, how our actions are affecting them, and how to behave differently if we inadvertently cause others to suffer.

If we live our value of nurture, we will be ever sensitive to the unfulfilled potential of those around us. We will look for ways to encourage and increase

feelings of self-esteem and safety because we know that people need to feel safe and secure before they can let themselves be vulnerable enough to do the risky work of personal growth.

And if we truly live our value of justice, we will be ever sensitive to the presence of unequal influence. In fact, one of the first places we'll watch for it is in ourselves! Did we dominate a conversation, or speak significantly more in a meeting than others? If so, we may have practiced an inadvertent kind of bullying, of pushing others out of the way because our needs and interests seemed more important at the time. We would be careful not to make unilateral decisions concerning our community – justice and democracy require collaborative, trusting relationships, not emotionally charged agendas.

This is important but difficult work to do. It involves changing the underlying paradigms of the ways in which we interact and create community. Even though we may have cast aside most of the unpleasant theological elements of Calvinism, many Unitarian Universalists still cling to the idea that it is so important to BE right and to disagree and disapprove of others who are NOT right. We can unconsciously perpetuate the very injustices that we say we oppose!

This is difficult work, but there are things that can help us on our way. Our core values were a start, as is our proposed congregational covenant that I hope we'll approve at our June annual meeting. But I recently discovered another valuable resource right here in our midst. Bethlehem is headquarters to an organization called the International Institute for Restorative Practices, or IIRP.

The IIRP's purpose is to help groups build healthy relationships and communities through participatory learning and decision-making. I attended an introductory workshop at their offices at Main and Walnut Streets a few weeks ago and was impressed, not only by their ideas, but by their successes. In eight years of work their programs already have an impressive record of healing discordant communities and creating social environments free of bullying, coercion, and ill-will. They have worked with school systems, police departments, and municipalities. They even have a program specifically designed for faith communities.

The IIRP is offering a subsidized four-day workshop in restorative practices that I will be attending this July 8-11 at their offices here in Bethlehem. Several others in our church have already indicated that they would attend as well.

I believe that the IIRP programs can help us realize the lofty goals outlined in our core values and covenant. I believe deeply enough that I hope as many of us as possible will take part in this training. In fact, if you want to attend but can't afford the \$80 fee, I will underwrite it myself from my discretionary fund as a worthwhile expense for the health and nurture of our beloved community.

Whether or not you take these trainings, I encourage you all to grow in awareness of the presence of unequal influence in our relationships, our committees, our church – and in ourselves. If we pay attention and dedicate ourselves to this work, we can learn to live our values in depth, sensitivity, and compassion.

May it be so.