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**“What Truly Needs to Get Done?
What Needs to Be Protected?
Listening to What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You”**

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We are living through highly emotional times: the next presidential election is fifty days away, the West coast is on fire, we’re in the middle of a global pandemic—and that’s only the beginning of a long list of current emotional triggers. There are so many reasons right now to feel *mad*, *sad*, *afraid*—and amidst it all, things to be *happy* about and grateful for as well.

So on this emotional rollercoaster on which we find ourselves, I want to invite us to spend some time with the work of Karla McLaren, whose work on Emotional Intelligence has been helpful to me at various points over the years. A decade ago she published her first book, [The Language of Emotions: What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You](#). And this year, given the state of high anxiety in the world, she published a well-timed sequel on [Embracing Anxiety: How to Access the Genius of this Vital Emotion](#).

One aspect of her system that I find particularly clarifying is that emotions in themselves aren’t positive or negative (McLaren 2020: 23). I don’t know about you, but that’s not the approach to emotions that I was raised with. The general sense I got in my childhood is that happiness is *good*, and anger, fear, and sadness are *bad*. McLaren, in contrast, challenges us to view all emotions on a more level playing field. Rather than labeling some emotions as negative and other emotions as positive, she wants us to notice that **all emotions “bring energy and information forward”**

(McLaren 2010: 163). Whatever we are feeling is trying to tell us something. And as we become more skilled in understanding the language of emotions, we can learn to work with the energy and information that emotions are trying to communicate.

McLaren's book goes into detail on sixteen different clusters of emotions, so I'm barely going to be able to scratch the surface. But if this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, I recommend her books. For now, I'll share some about working with anger and anxiety—two dominant emotions in our society at the moment.

I'll start with a story, and as I do so I invite you to recall any similar incidents that may have made you feel angry or anxious lately. A few weeks ago I was invited to be part of planning a physically distanced outdoor gathering. (In case you're wondering, this story doesn't involved anyone at UUCF. It's not about any of you, so don't worry.) As emails started going back and forth about how to potentially set guidelines in place to gather as safely as possible during a pandemic, it quickly became apparent that one of the people involved in the planning was not—in my judgement—taking pandemic precautions seriously. And after that person made multiple suggestions that seemed unsafe to me, I found myself getting angrier and angrier.

One response could have been to listen to some of the messages I received in my childhood: that anger is a bad emotion. If I had gone that route, I might have stuffed down my anger, ignored what my emotions were trying to tell me, and potentially ended up putting myself and others at risk.

What I actually did at first is err in the opposite direction: I wrote an angry email reply, which ended up shifting the focus from the person making unsafe suggestions to me being mean.

After walking away from my computer, taking a deep breath, and letting some time pass, I was able to notice that my anger itself wasn't the problem. The way I unskillfully allowed my anger to boil over into a hurtful email was a problem. But dismissing my anger would've also been wrong. The anger was trying to tell me something important: my boundaries were being violated, and I needed to draw a line, which I was eventually able to do in a more skillful and kind way.

That's the sort of shift that Karla McLaren's work on the language of emotions is all about. Instead of either repressing our emotions or being carried away by them, she invites us to learn to interpret what our emotions are trying to tell us. Get curious.

Specifically with regard to anger, one question that can be really helpful to ask is **“What am I feeling like I need to protect?”** (McLaren 2010: 167). If you have felt really angry about something recently, try asking yourself that question: In regard to this situation that is making me angry, “What am I feeling like I need to protect?”

In my case, my anger was telling me to protect myself and others during a pandemic. Now to be clear, I didn't change the other person's mind when I lashed out—even though I still think I was right about proper pandemic precautions, and they were wrong—but it did help when I got really clear about what my own boundaries were, and what I needed to feel safe. And as soon as I did what I needed to do to feel safe and protected, my anger abated.

If you find yourself feeling angry in the coming days, I invite you to ask yourself, “What am I feeling like I need to protect?” Exploring that question may give you more clarity about what is triggering your anger, and how you might set a boundary to feel safer.

Our emotions have intelligence if we are willing to stop and listen. Our bodies also hold deep wisdom, but I'll have to save that for a future sermon. For now, having spent a little time on anger, I want to be sure to get to anxiety since we are living through a highly anxious time.

Although I was previously familiar with McLaren's work on the language of emotions, I was still intrigued when I saw that her newest book was about the genius of anxiety. That's a bold choice—to talk about the *genius* of anxiety! As with anger, it can be all too easy to experience anxiety as a negative emotion. But remember McLaren's foundational point: emotions are neither good nor bad; rather, all emotions “bring energy and information forward” that we can learn to work with and interpret in increasingly skillful ways.

With anger, we spent some time exploring how the most skillful question to ask is often “What am I feeling like I need to protect?” With anxiety, McLaren suggests that the most skillful question to ask is often, **“What *truly* needs to get done”** (McLaren

2020: 102)? Anxiety is often triggered by something left undone, so asking “What *truly* needs to get done?” can help us discern an action that might help resolve—or at least lower—our anxiety.

Along these lines, one of the most counterintuitive suggestions McLaren makes is to *befriend* our anxiety, to experiment with being *grateful for* what this emotion is telling us. Let me give you an example. I typically carve out Friday on my schedule to write my sermons. That’s close enough to Sunday morning that I can feel anxiety starting to rise; I need to figure out something to say to you all each week! And here’s where the gratitude can come in: that anxiety gives me motivation and focus that is more difficult to cultivate earlier in the week.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t wait until 5 a.m. Sunday morning to write my sermon. I’m sure at that point my anxiety would be sky high. Our relationship to anxiety is more like a dance. And from McLaren’s point of view, whenever anxiety helps us meet deadlines and complete projects, we should say, “*Thank you, anxiety*” (55).

Again, to be clear, what I’m talking about here is learning to dance with low- or perhaps medium-level anxiety. I’m not talking about panic. Conversely, a few weeks ago, since I had neglected to change the batteries in one of our fire alarms, it started beeping at 3:00 a.m. That caused panic. But, again, from a certain point of view, that’s also the sort of anxiety that I’m ultimately grateful for. If there had been an actual fire, panic would’ve been an appropriate emotion: my emotions telling me to act *now*. In McLaren’s words, panic can be a “marvelous and lifesaving emotion that gives you the energy you need to fight, flee, or freeze when your life is in danger” (11).

I should hasten to add that McLaren’s work is focused on the language of *emotions* themselves. Her work does not address emotions mixed in with mental illness, trauma, or neurological conditions all of which are best addressed with therapists or other mental health professionals (12). And I’m always glad to help with referrals to therapists for anyone who might benefit from that.

For now, keeping our focus just on anxiety, here’s three best practices that McLaren recommends from her much longer list of anxiety-reducing activities. One of the most effective tools for working with anxiety is something many of you may already do: *make a list*. If you let a worry float around in your head without doing anything

about it, it can just keep generating anxiety. But if you write that task down—and especially if you schedule a specific time you will do it—the act of writing can almost immediately release the anxiety around that task (16, 82).

A second helpful practice is similar to the sermon I did on meditation and breathing a few weeks ago: *be here now*. If you are finding yourself stuck in the past (replaying memories in your head) or stuck in the future (anticipating potential conflicts to come), try taking a deep breath and opening yourself to the present moment. Ground yourself in the specificity of what is actually happening now.

For instance, right now, if you are feeling anxiety, open your awareness to all the other things also happening. If you are sitting down, feel the chair supporting you. Feel your chest rising and falling as you breathe. Notice the other sight, smells, sounds, or tastes present in this moment. “Be here now”: shifting your attention to something that is here and now can relieve the anxiety triggered by getting caught up in thoughts about the past or future (57). As the saying goes, **“You don’t have to believe everything you think!”**

I wanted to be sure to also address a strategy for dealing with anxiety about the upcoming presidential election less than two months away. As I do so, keep in mind the core question that McLaren invites us to ask anytime we feel anxiety rising: **“What truly needs to get done?”**

If you are feeling anxious about the election, I appreciate the advice of the meditation teacher Ethan Nichtern, who has said even though he is a professional meditation teacher,

Meditation and yoga are 3rd and 4th on the list of things I recommend to work with your anxiety this fall. **#1 is volunteer on an election campaign.** #2 is unhook from any media source which covers the election like a sporting event and thus directly profits from your anxiety.

In my experience, that advice really works. If I spend time worrying about the election, my anxiety increases; likewise for spending too much time following the ups and downs of the daily news cycle. In contrast, I’ve felt better—and noticed my anxiety decrease—every time I’ve helped get out the vote by sending an email, writing a letter, or making a phone call. If you’re feeling anxious, ask yourself, what *truly* needs to get

done? (If you're not sure how to get started, there is a link on our homepage, frederickuu.org, for how to join our non-partisan #UUtheVote effort.)

For now, as I turn toward my conclusion, I'll also share with you a saying I often hear in meditation circles about how to work with the emotions that come up during meditation: **“What we resist persists. But what we can feel, we can heal.”** In that spirit, let me encourage you that it can really help to *name the emotional elephant in the room*. Be honest about what you are feeling, and open yourself to discerning the messages your emotions are trying to tell you. And as we sing our hymn of response, may we hold in our heart all that can be healed if we are willing to listen to our own deepest selves—and if we are willing to take the risk of sharing what we feel with one another.