

Reading:

The reading this morning is from the book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* written by the late Vietnamese Zen Master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Miracle of Mindfulness* was originally a letter written to young monks and nuns who were caring for the needs of peasants caught in the violence of the Vietnam War. Under Thich Nhat Hanh's leadership, they worked in villages on both sides of the war. They were therefore distrusted by both sides, and some of them were kidnapped and killed. By the time Thich Nhat Hanh wrote the letter in 1974, he was living in exile because he had been banned entry by both North and South Vietnam. He wrote to encourage the monastics in their work.

This excerpt is from the closing of the letter.

*We talk about social service, service to the people, service to humanity, service for others who are far away, helping to bring peace to the world—but often we forget that it is the very people around us that we must live with first of all. If you cannot serve your partner or child or parent—how are you going to serve society? If you cannot make your own family and friends happy, how do you expect to make anyone else happy? If all our friends in the peace movement or of service communities of any kind do not love and help one another, whom can we love and help? Are we working for other humans, or are we just working for the name of an organization?*

*The service of peace. The service of any person in need. The word service is so immense. Let's return first to a more modest scale: our families, our classmates, our friends, our own community. We must live for them—for if we cannot live for them, whom else do we think we are living for?*

A COMPLAINT FREE WORLD  
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton  
All Souls NYC  
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Thich Nhat Hanh's letter in this morning's reading reminds us that our work for peace happens right here. In our despair over the violence and terror in Ukraine and in so many places throughout the world, Thich Nhat Hanh grounds us. He writes, "Let's return first to a more modest scale: our families, our friends, our classmates, our community. We must live for them—for if we cannot live for them, whom else do we think we are living for?"

By focusing on our everyday actions and our nearby relationships we can build trust and harmony that ripples out. We can work to liberate our own hearts and minds from the preoccupations that keep us focused on ourselves. One of those preoccupations is complaining. It may seem far removed from the big crises of today; however, complaining is a habit that isolates us from connecting and from caring for each other. Many of our complaints are petty grievances. We know they're petty, and yet they occupy great swaths of our mental energy. When we work at reducing our complaining we change our outlook, we change our relationships, we serve ourselves and we serve our community.

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Will Bowen, a pastor at a Midwestern church, took on the eradication of complaining as a ministry in his book, *A Complaint Free World: How To Stop Complaining and Start Enjoying the Life You Always Wanted*. He proffers the challenge to go 21 days in a row without complaining. Why he chose 21 days is unclear (some of his reasoning is not well documented), but there is no doubt that the method works. Every time you complain you move the bracelet to the other wrist. The idea is to develop awareness of your complaining so eventually you can hold back. Bowen says the average person takes 6 months to go 21 days without complaining. The pattern goes typically like this: day one, day one, day one, day one, day two, day one, day one, day one, day two, day three, day one...In the beginning he gave away the bracelets, but after a

while so many people wanted them he had to sell them. My bracelet is number 14 million something.

So how do we know when we're complaining? Complaining is when we talk about a person or situation negatively without indicating how we might address the problem. We're probably complaining if we're using profanity, we're probably complaining if we're using phrases like "this always happens to me" or "just my luck."

We might catch ourselves by considering these three categories of complaining, adapted from Bowen's book:

Victim complaints - we feel powerless; we are looking for someone or something to blame because we're not taking action. We blame our parents, we blame the economy, we blame our age, we blame "them." It's not my fault that I didn't finish my taxes in time, it's not my fault I'm not getting out for a walk every day, it's not my fault I didn't get the promotion.

Self-affirming complaints - we want to make ourselves look better; we want to feel superior. So we gossip about a colleague's tardiness, a sibling's stinginess, or a friend's undependability. We are seeking corroboration for how we are virtuous compared to the person who is the subject of the complaints.

Attention complaint - we rant about our health, the weather, woe is me. But we just want to feel connected, like we belong. One couple I know made a rule that they couldn't talk about how tired they were because every night they came home from work one-upping each other on their exhaustion. They both wanted attention from each other, but instead they were just feeding each other's misery.

Pema Chodron, the American Buddhist nun, says with her characteristic warm humor: "This lousy world, these lousy people, this lousy government, this lousy everything, lousy, lousy, blah blah blah. I don't like the smell, the person in front of me is too tall, it's too hot in here, it's too cold, the person next to me is wearing perfume and I'm allergic. The only way I can be happy is if I get rid of him, and I get rid of her, and I

get the temperature right, and I'm going to ban perfume in the world, and there will be nothing that bothers me anywhere. I'm going to get rid of everything, including mosquitoes, everything that bothers me.”

This caricature has all three types of complaints covered. He is a victim of perfume and mosquitoes, he deserves the perfect room temperature to affirm his status, and he needs your attention please. Perhaps even he can stop complaining in 21 days if he works at it. But ultimately if we simply stop complaining without looking into the causes, we miss the point. The point is how to deal with all the feelings driving the complaining, all the unsatisfactoriness.

In *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, the source of today's prayer, Shantideva wrote:

“To cover all the earth with sheets of leather  
where could such amounts of skin be found?  
With the leather soles of just my shoes  
it is as though I cover all the earth.”

Shantideva recognizes our wish to get rid of all the people who bother us and all the mosquitoes, fixing the whole world to our liking, covering all the earth with leather so we can walk comfortably wherever we want to go. Since that's impossible and in fact keeps us stuck in suffering and self-absorption, he suggests wrapping the leather around our own feet, making shoes. So instead of trying to change everything on the outside, we take care of ourselves by working with our own minds to address our unsatisfactoriness.

One way to do that is to develop tolerance. Pema Chodron recommends we start with little grievances like when we're frustrated because we're stuck with the middle seat on an airplane. If we allow ourselves to be frustrated—acknowledge that it doesn't feel good but essentially we're okay—our patience with the discomfort can pay off. Sooner or later it passes, and we get a glimpse of the peace we can feel despite the plight of the middle seat. We soon find ourselves tolerating a crowded bus, a summer head cold, a motorcycle driving by at top volume, or a botched

errand when the grocery store is out of our favorite yogurt. We find ourselves not taking things so personally, muttering “this always happens to me,” “it just figures,” and “it's just my luck.” We begin to see the benefits of testing our resilience instead of feeling we should be exempt from unpleasantness.

Sometimes we can simply apply tolerance to a grievance, and with patience we can watch it dissolve. Sometimes we can benefit from digging deeper and familiarizing ourselves with the feelings driving the complaint.

I have new neighbors who moved in a couple of months ago, and they are driving me crazy with some sort of weird exercise machine. It makes this whir sound and then a thunk. The whir part is breezy, it's not so bad, but the thunk is a shot of annoyance through the walls, through my body, and into my mind. I could easily slip into letting my annoyance fuel victim complaints about my neighbor like how the noise keeps me from practicing meditation. Or self-affirming complaints to the super in which I might seek out lurking complaints about these neighbors and of course bolster my own virtuous neighborliness. Or I could get some attention from whomever will listen and bond with me over noisy, inconsiderate neighbors.

Even with this relatively petty grievance I can discover how difficult feelings are keeping me stuck in a complaining mind, focusing on myself. So what opportunities are there to create leather soles for my own shoes?

When I hear the thunk start up, I feel guilty—they're exercising and I'm not. My neighbors are probably super-fit and their kids probably eat tons of vegetables and no Nutella. But the issue is: I wish I exercised more. So what am I going to do about it? What does it have to do with my neighbors?

I've lived in my apartment for over 10 years. In other words, I was there first. Don't I deserve a quiet thunk-free life? But when I investigate, it's

clear that I have a sense of entitlement, and like all entitlement it generates self-absorption and disappointment when it's not recognized and affirmed.

My neighbors probably couldn't even fit the thunk in their apartment if it weren't for the fact that they have the biggest apartment in the building. Here is an opportunity to look at jealousy, a driver of isolation, of fear, of aggression.

Spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle writes, “Complaining is not to be confused with informing someone of a mistake or deficiency so that it can be put right. And to refrain from complaining doesn't mean necessarily putting up with bad quality or behavior. There's no ego in telling the waiter that your soup is cold and needs to be heated up, if you stick to the facts which are always neutral. ‘How dare you serve me cold soup?’ That's complaining.”

Once I apply some curiosity and I see that there's a lot more going on inside me than a noise annoyance, I can approach the actual problem with some clarity and skill. I can talk to my neighbors with a genuine wish to work things out. I can stick to the facts, free of complaining tones, and I can be considerate of their perspective.

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If you're thinking about the people you know who need to work on their complaining, I urge you to consider that this project starts with the leather soles of your own shoes. Our efforts to address our own complaining will necessarily benefit others. We spare ourselves one complaint at a time, we spare the world one complaint at a time. Our gestures need not be grandiose to increase peace in the world.

In his book, Bowen includes a few letters from people who have followed his Complaint Free World program. One of the letters is signed by a Harry Tucker in New York City who wrote about an experience at an airport one evening when a storm caused widespread flight

disruptions. Harry was sitting at the gate having already changed his own flight, watching the energy build as passengers became riled up about the cancellations. He watched the airline employee at the gate get bombarded by a line of frustrated and upset passengers who were expecting her to take responsibility for the delays and subsequent chaos. He had the idea to get in line and wait to speak with her. Finally after a long while, he got to the front of the line. She looked up, “May I help you, sir?” He told her that he stood in line in order to give her a five minute break. He chatted with her, reminded her to think of the people dear to her, to keep perspective so she wouldn't get so stressed. All the while she was typing away about who knows what. When she regained her composure, Harry said he knew it was time for her to get back to work. She looked up with her eyes welling up, and she said “I don't know how to thank you for this.” He told her the best way to thank him was to pass along the kindness to someone else.

Liberating ourselves from complaining will take us to new frontiers of kindness, connection, and service. We can care for our own suffering and the suffering of others simply by noticing and investigating our tendency to complain.

May you help create a world with less complaining. May you benefit from a world with less complaining, a world with less suffering. Amen. Peace be with you.