

“The Four Agreements”

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It seems appropriate that this morning I am going to review for you a book written about a group of people called the Toltec who lived thousands of years ago in southern Mexico and predates Christianity. Our guest today is representing people whose culture and civilization in the mountains of Peru, is also thousands of years older than western culture and western religions. The book, “The Four Agreements” was written by Don Miguel Ruiz in 1997, and was on the New York Bestseller List for over five years. The book actually came to my attention through my daughter-in-law, Meg Paul. She had read the book and was very impressed with its message and passed it along to me. And so this morning, I would like to share with you the basic premise of the Four Agreements and then explore how they may or may not apply to Unitarian Universalism. But first I want to tell you a little bit about the author. Dr. Ruiz was born into a family of healers and raised in rural Mexico by his mother and his grandfather – his mother was called a healer and his grandfather a shaman. The family anticipated that Miguel would embrace their centuries old legacy of healing and teaching and that he would carry forward the esoteric Toltec knowledge. Instead Miguel chose to attend medical school and become a surgeon. A near death experience, however, changed his life. Late one night in the early 1970’s he awoke suddenly, having fallen asleep at the wheel of his car. At that instant the car careened into a wall of concrete. Don Miguel remembers that he was not in his physical body as he watched himself pull his two friends to safety. Stunned by this experience, he began an intensive practice of self-inquiry. He devoted himself to the mastery of the ancient ancestral wisdom, studying earnestly with his mother and completing an apprenticeship with a powerful shaman in the Mexican desert. He wrote that his grandfather who had since passed on, continued to teach him in his dreams. In the tradition of the Toltec, a master guides an individual to personal freedom. Dr. Ruiz, since the accident and his subsequent spiritual study and journey has dedicated his life to sharing the wisdom of the ancient Toltec. Now I have never been really sure what the definition of a shaman is so I discovered that it means that among certain tribal peoples – some people who are designated the shamans – act as an intermediary between the natural and supernatural world, sometimes using magic to cure illness, foretell the future and control spiritual forces. I would suggest that since the dawn of time, shamans have existed in all cultures – they were the deep thinkers of every era, who tried to answer those big questions of life. Why was I born? Why am I here? What is my purpose? And where will I go when I die? Perhaps it does seem strange to us that as late as 20th century Mexico, shamans and healers were still studying the ancient ways of the Toltec. But then again, I think we need to keep an

open mind considering that just last week, I talked about 25% of the American population who does not believe in evolution or modern science and thinks that the secular world corrupts one's very soul. So if we make room for many points of view about religion, spirituality and the divine – we are this morning being introduced to yet another way in which people view the world – or at least their world. Before we explore each of the four agreements the basic premise of the Toltec is that what we are seeing and hearing right now – this very minute – is nothing but a dream. We are dreaming right now in this moment. We are dreaming although our brain is awake. Dreaming is the main function of the mind, and the mind dreams twenty-four hours a day. It dreams when the brain is awake, and it also dreams when the brain is asleep. The difference, writes the author, is that when the brain is awake, there is a material frame that makes us perceive things in a linear way. When we go to sleep we do not have the frame, and the dream has the tendency to change constantly. For me to truly understand what is meant by the “dream” I substituted the word awareness – and then it was easier for me to comprehend. In other words, we come into the world with the dream or the awareness of a preconceived dream. Someone has already made the rules – and society hooked our attention and put information into our minds through repetition, which is the way we learn everything new. By using our attention we learned a whole reality – we learned how to behave in society; what to believe and what not to believe; what is acceptable and what is bad; what is beautiful and what is ugly; what is right and what is wrong. It was all there already – all that knowledge, all those rules and concepts about how to behave in the world. The outside dream – or awareness if you will – hooks our attention and teaches us what to believe, beginning with the language that we speak. Language is the code for understanding and communication between humans – for instance, it was not our choice to speak English. We didn't choose our religion or our moral values – they were already there before we were born. We never had the opportunity to choose what to believe or what not to believe. We never chose even the smallest of these agreements. We didn't even choose our own name. The Toltec philosophy teaches that as children, we didn't have the opportunity to choose our beliefs, but we agreed with the information that was passed to us from the dream or awareness of the planet via other humans. The only way to store information is by agreement. If we don't agree, we don't store that information. As soon as we do agree, we believe it and this is called faith. To have faith is to believe unconditionally. And that is how we learn as children, children believe everything adults say. We agree with them, and our faith is so strong that the belief system controls our whole dream/awareness of life. The result is the surrender to the beliefs with our agreement. Dr. Ruiz calls this the “domestication of humans.” He goes on then to discuss that we continue to support these agreements because we learn about rewards and punishments and we

continually strive for safety. It is during this process that we give up our own dreams to be accepted by others. And we begin to strive for perfection – in ourselves and in others. Thus, Dr. Ruiz begins to teach the “prelude to a new dream.” He talks about the thousands of agreements we make with ourselves, with other people, with our dream of life, with God, with society, with our parents, our spouse, our children. The sum total then of our personality is that we have agreed to who we are, what we feel, what we believe and how to behave. We have agreed to what is possible for us and what is not. We convince ourselves that what personal power we have we use to just to keep the agreements that we have already made. Dr. Ruiz wants us to see that if we do not like the agreements that we have made, we need to change the agreements. He writes that when we are ready to change our agreements, there are four very powerful agreements that will help us break those agreements that come from fear and deplete our energy. He says that we need to be very strong in order to adopt the Four Agreements – but if we can begin to live our life with these agreements the transformation in our life will be amazing. We will see the drama of hell disappear right before our very eyes and we will create a new dream or awareness – our personal dream of heaven. And so we begin with the first agreement, which Dr. Ruiz says is the most important. **“Be Impeccable with Your Word.”** Now that might sound easy, but this is really significant. Our words are so powerful that one word can change a life or destroy the lives of millions of people. As we learned last week when discussing the video “Jesus Camp” – one man in Germany, by the use of the word, manipulated a whole country of the most intelligent people. He led them into a world war with just the power of his word. The Rev. Becky Fisher, youth pastor for the evangelical movement in this country uses her word as a powerful tool to manipulate young people. But what does the word “impeccable” mean exactly, as in “Be Impeccable with Your Word.” The word impeccable means “without sin.” Religion talks a lot about sin and sinners – but what does it mean to sin? It quite literally means doing anything that goes against yourself – that’s a sinful act. So being impeccable means you are taking responsibility for your actions, but you do not judge or blame yourself. If we stopped to think of our everyday human interactions, imagine how many times we cast spells on each other with our word. Every word we utter has power – do we use our words to lift up or tear down. The second agreement **“Don’t Take Anything Personally.”** Are you familiar with the expression “It’s all about me.” Well this agreement is addressing that very expression. Everything that happens is not all about us – people may say hurtful things to us – but it’s more about them, than it is about us. When we take things personally, we’ll feel offended and then our reaction is to defend our beliefs and create conflicts. We’ll make something bigger than it needs to be, just to be right. And, this second agreement is not just about how to defend ourselves against cruel remarks or

behavior – it is also telling us that when we are told we are wonderful that we don't take that personally either – we already should know that we are wonderful. There is a huge amount of freedom that comes from not taking anything personally – it helps us break many habits and routines that trap us and cause needless suffering. If we can make a habit of not taking anything personally, we won't need to place our trust in what others do or say. We will only need to trust ourselves to make responsible choices. I like that.

The third agreement **“Don't Make Assumptions.”** The problem with assumptions is that we can believe they are true – we would swear they are real. For some reason, we humans don't like to ask for clarification – so we make assumptions and then believe we are right. We see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. The example the author gives in the book is something that has happened to me and I know has happened to you. You are walking in the mall, and you see a person you like. That person turns to you and smiles and then walks away. You can make a lot of assumptions just because of this one experience. With assumptions you can create an entire story as to why that person didn't stop to speak with you. And more than likely you would be wrong. There are a hundred reasons why that person didn't speak to you that day – “don't take it personally.” Don't make assumptions in relationships – I have a friend who is a very liberal Democrat. I assumed his wife was as well. I was wrong – she is a very conservative Republican. Assume nothing. Engaged couples make all sorts of assumptions about their future spouse. Assume nothing. We also make assumptions about ourselves. We can overestimate or underestimate what we are capable of doing – don't assume, gather more facts about a situation before making a commitment. And the fourth agreement **“Always Do Your Best.”** This last agreement allows us to successfully do the first three. I particularly like what Dr. Ruiz says about doing our best – he reminds us that our best is never going to be the same from one moment to the next. Everything is alive and changing, so our best will sometimes be high quality and other times it will not be as good. Obviously when we get a good night's rest, we wake up refreshed and energized – and our best will be better than if we are tired. Our best will be different if we are healthy, our best will depend on whether we are feeling wonderful and happy or upset, angry or jealous. Our moods can change from moment to moment and affect our best. And our best will change over time. I know that my best floor washing days of getting down on my hands and knees and really scrubbing are over – my best now is getting out the wet swiffer and calling it a day. But there is a bigger picture here of doing our best. Aren't you inspired by people who do their job well – no matter what that job may be. There is such joy in doing a job well – it doesn't matter what the task is. Unfortunately, many people work solely for the reward of the paycheck and they see their work as suffering. The author uses the as an example, the story of Forrest

Gump. He didn't have the great ideas, but he took actions. He was happy because he always did his best at whatever he did. He was richly rewarded without expecting any reward at all. If you do your best always, over and over again, you will become a master. The summary of the "Four Agreements" deals with the mastery of transformation. One of the masteries of the Toltec is to transform hell into heaven on earth. As Unitarian Universalists we believe that people make their own heaven or hell here on Earth – by the way in which we choose to live their life. The ancient teaching of the Toltec were preaching the same message long before we. There is nothing new in the Four Agreements – but the message of the book bears repeating. We come into the world with a clean slate – the society in which we find ourselves will, undoubtedly, bear the responsibility of our earliest dreams or awareness. Some of the agreements that we make at an early age, we may want to change. As adults, we have the power and the strength to change the agreements we made as innocent children that no longer work well for us. The tools are there for us to use whenever we choose. So be it.

Sources used in the preparation of this paper: "The Four Agreements" by Don Miguel Ruiz