

Human Agency



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According to Lorelei Gilmore her daughter Rory knew that she wanted to go to Harvard from the time she was 10 years old. Rory knew she wanted to go to Harvard and become a journalist. In order to achieve this goal, from a very young age, Rory worked very hard to get good grades in school, she read and she studied constantly. The whole town of Star's Hollow where this mother and daughter lived knew what Rory wanted. They knew and they supported her constant reading and studying.

I, on the other hand, was pretty much clueless when I was 10 years old. I barely understood that I had to go to school Monday through Friday and that attendance in turn would lead to the next grade and the next, on to graduation from High School. I did not really get it. My mother rarely talked to me about my future, my grades or talents. I made good grades because I was naturally bright and my mom was pleased, but beyond that, she never really paid attention to what I was doing or where I was headed. She was a single mother like Lorelei, but with two children, my older brother and me.

She worked two or three jobs most of the time and my brother and I pretty much cared for ourselves. We were fine. We survived and we managed to have fun.

Lorelei and Rory are fictional characters from the hugely popular TV show *The Gilmore Girls*. I started watching it on Netflix recently, after a number of my friends said they liked it. I started from the beginning and I think I am on season 6, so no spoilers, please. Rory is a fictional kid growing into an adult, but I can't help thinking when I watch the show – what if? What if I had been focused on what I wanted to be at such an early age?

According to Google-- **Human agency** is the ability of people to control their own lives. Everyone has the capacity to exert control over the quality and nature of their own lives. Aspects of **human agency** include intention, foresight, self-regulation and self-reflectiveness.

This question of what we may want to be when we grow up is just a small part of what it means to exercise your own agency. Poverty and oppression because of race, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity can adversely influence how much a person can express her agency. For example, when I was 10, I never saw a woman minister; I, certainly, never saw an out gay person as a minister.

I never got the idea that Rory thought for a minute that she would **not** be able to attend Harvard because of money. Maybe, Lorelei never felt that disparate fear around money because she came from an ultra-rich family. Maybe she knew in the back of her mind that her parents would pay, and they did end up paying. Lorelei never passed on money as a limitation to her daughter. Spoiler alert-- If you continue to watch *Gilmore Girls*, you might get a little sick of the money they throw around. At one point, there is an argument about who gets the honor of paying for Rory's tuition..... seriously.

On the other hand, I was always acutely aware of the limitations poverty put on my life. There were many things we could not do because we were broke. There was the constant worry whether we could pay our bills, keep the lights on, etc. It was not something my mother keep from us, I don't know how she ever could have kept it from us. It just was.

Besides poverty, prejudices, and ignorance that may act upon our ability to express our own agency there is also the problem of trauma. My colleague, Emily Kellar, recently wrote a paper pertaining to human agency in the after-math of trauma, specifically rape.

She stated, “The self feels stripped of all agency. Gone is the ability to feel safe and the freedom to make decisions about one’s body. The body has itself been violated. The mind and spirit are also affected and feel separated from the physical body which has been broken. The ability to act freely has been taken. Victims of rape will even describe this as a loss of voice. Their voices have been removed. They have effectively been silenced.”¹

She goes on to say that regaining agency after trauma is the most important task of healing. She explains that agency can be regained through combinations of psycho-therapy, spiritual practice, and art therapy.

Despite these obstacles to our human agency it is extremely important that we pass this ability and willingness to influence their own destinies along to the next generation. In a paper published by the Gordon Commission on the Future Assessment of Education, the authors, Ana Mari Cauce and Edmund Gordon claim that “perhaps one of the most important outcomes of schooling or education, whether it is a direct goal or not, is to make sure that youth, whether privileged or disadvantaged, understand this link between the exertion of effort, aiming for goals beyond oneself, and true happiness or fulfillment.”²

Even when our ability to express our own agency has been severely limited by outside forces, there still remains within us, ways of expressing our agency. We see this in the insight of concentration camp survivor, Victor Frankl, who wrote, “Everything can be taken from a [man] person but one thing, the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

In this example, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Frankl who survived the Nazi concentration camp while most of his family died, states a fundamental part of his

¹ Emily Kellar, *Love Heals*, Ethics paper at Andover Newton Theology School, Nov 2015

² Ana Mari Cauce and Edmund Gordon, *Toward the Measurement of Human Agency and the Disposition to Express It*, The Gordon Commission, <http://www.gordoncommission.org/>

approach to physiological healing. As I understand it, his method seeks to empower human beings to seek and create their own meaning for their lives.

Our own actions have direct correlation to the outcomes of our lives. It seems so simple, but it is not, as I already explained there are a number of factors that can dilute the effects of our actions. However, there are sometimes in which we allow negatively to affect our outcomes, needlessly.

Again, the Gordan paper says, “Those with a strong sense of perceived self-efficacy are most likely to persist in the face of initial failure. They are more likely to attribute failure to lack of effort, while those with lower levels of self-efficacy view failure as stemming from a lack of ability, and so are less likely to persist.”³

Even in the face of failure, a strong sense of one’s own agency can give a person the persistence to continue fight toward their goals. If you believe you can chart your own course, when you fail....when you miss your mark.....you do not think it is because you can’t do it, you think it is because you did not try hard enough.

The Gordan Commission people think this is the thing we need to teach our children. They say, “While education is certainly important for both of these, we believe, as did the ancient Greeks, that it is first and foremost an activity that is required for the formation of citizens and for the affirmative development of an active and informed citizenry that make a true democracy possible. This goal of education puts the development and fostering of human agency at the center of the educational effort, not only because it leads to better academic outcomes, but because it is, in itself, a desirable outcome of the educational enterprise.”⁴

Every child....every person needs someone beside them, saying you can do this, you can change things.

³ Ana Mari Cauce and Edmund Gordon, *Toward the Measurement of Human Agency and the Disposition to Express It*, The Gordon Commission, www.gordoncommission.org

⁴ Ana Mari Cauce and Edmund Gordon, *Toward the Measurement of Human Agency and the Disposition to Express It*, The Gordon Commission, www.gordoncommission.org

As a minister (almost), I tend to think a lot about how faith communities work. I wonder-- What brings these particular people together? Why do they show up? What do they want to get? What do they want to give? What do they want to do?

My friend Emily found a correlation between individual human agency and community in the work of German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. She wrote, "Human beings act as moral agents in their community by living in mutuality with their surroundings. The individual is both servant and participant in an undertaking that is much bigger than their own selves. The self thus acts as moral agent and exists in what Schleiermacher calls 'a relation of reciprocity' and Schleiermacher claims 'acts in the ways aimed at the highest good.'" Emily again. "This requires that each individual act as an agent of self while seeking to be the best selves for the interest of all others. If this state were obtainable by all people then violence would have no place. People would maintain their agency and seek to do good for all humankind. And if this was possible and violence had no place then trauma would not exist."⁵

In other words if we are aware of our own agency, if we act as if the things we do matter in the wider world we can effect change for the good of humankind.

I believe we exercise our agency in the smallest things we do. I think it even matters what we allow to have our attention and our attendance.

Have you ever done a search on your computer for something that is really tangential in your life? I once did a search for Ugg boots just because I wanted to know what all the hype was about, I wasn't interested in buying boots. I think you can guess what happened. For days after, I was constantly getting advertising for boots on my server. My interest had sparked this maelstrom.

When we act in the world, in our communities, in our relationships matter because there is "a relation of reciprocity" as Schleiermacher calls it. Our attendance and attention matters. It is one of the ways we exercise our agency.

I have a friend with whom I lost contact with for a while. When she found me again and she learned that I was going to seminary she was quick to tell me that she was attending church.

⁵ Emily Kellar, *Love Heals*, Ethics paper at Andover Newton Theology School, Nov 2015

People in the south have very little understanding of progressive religion and they tend to justify their choices to me when they learn I am studying for the ministry. Weird but kind of relevant in this context. She was taking her children to a somewhat conservative church in North Carolina. Having known her for some time and knowing that she was, in fact, very liberal I asked her about the inconsistency. She claimed that she did not agree with their “politics” but her children liked it there because they had so much for them to do. I was confused and a little taken aback. How could she think that situation was ok? Her answer was basically, she knew people there.

I was reminded of another friend who was constantly deprogramming her children after church. She and her husband would tell them on the ride home, “Kids, you understand that we really don’t believe those things, right?” This went on for a while until finally one of her children asked her, “Why do we go there then?” Only then did it dawn on her that she needed to make a change and that is how she and her family became Unitarian Universalists.

I don’t know if my other friend ever made the connection, we lost contact again.

Since then, I have met a number of people who attend churches who when asked will tell you they don’t really believe in the creeds that they profess every Sunday. Or they will say they don’t agree with the doctrines of their church but they continue to go because of tradition or family ties. To be completely fair, many of them are working within their churches to change attitudes around such things as GLBT acceptance and other social concerns. But still others just do not see the inconsistency as a problem.

As Unitarian Universalists, I think we have this problem licked. We have no creeds to profess every Sunday, so there is nothing to trip us up theologically. I have yet to meet a Unitarian Universalist who just attends church because of tradition or family ties while confessing a disbelief or disagreement with anything we do.

The reason behind this lack of inconsistency as I see it is our unique understanding of human agency. I believe that we, Unitarian Universalists, get it. We can see the correlation between individual human agency and our collective human agency. We get it because of our roots in the Humanist tradition. Agency is what humanism is all about according to Wikipedia-

“Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence over unthinking acceptance of dogma or superstition.”

Humanist thought in relation to religion can be traced to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, where it was introduced as a “new kind of religion”, a philosophy of human ethics and morals without reliance on the supernatural or any deity. The idea was that we could use our human agency to effect positive change in the world. However, in the aftermath of World War II and the Nazi atrocities many abandoned the philosophy as being far too optimistic.

The Humanist Manifesto has undergone two re-writes in the years since it first shocked the nation by abandoning God. I think it has been the victim of our need for simple answers. In the same way scientist search for a unified theory of everything, we would like there to be one definitive answer to all our social problems. In the after math of World War II and all the horrors that continue to happen all over the world, it is hard to fathom that the same creatures that commit such evil also hold the power to bring about the beloved community and serve the common good. In the face of that paradox within the hearts of humankind many people can only find hope through the belief in a benevolent force working through us or with us.

As an agnostic my own belief in that benevolent force waxes and wanes; and for me that force often takes the form of the spirit of community or the spirit of love... a force created from a combined effort that is in itself much bigger than the force you and I can create as individuals. So if you think about it I guess you could say that our combined expression of human agency is my god.

Despite differences in our personal theologies or philosophies we Unitarian Universalist continue to exercise our human agency by doing things that we feel will help people and contribute to the common good. Here in this church we have the Grains and Greens program that feeds people in need, the 15west coffee house providing a place for GLBT youth to socialize, we provide space for various 12 step groups, and during the Christmas season we are helping with Toys for Tots. On the national and international levels, Unitarian Universalist are exercising our collective agency through

various programs that aim to undo the rages of poverty, prejudice and oppression on the lives of all people.

Interestingly, I tend to think of individual expression of human agency as effecting the expression of communal agency but not the other way around. In other words agency starts in me and you and then is expressed through us in community. However, in my own experience, I only came to understand my own personal agency after I had witnessed agency expressed communally through my church. In other words, the community church has an important role in providing space where people feel empowered to express their human agency. It helps people and it is healing.

I have seen first-hand the polar-opposite of our way. My mother is a Primitive Baptist and she believes in pre-destination. She believes in an all-powerful God who has determined her fate from the beginning of time and there is nothing she can do to change it. It is no wonder she did not teach me about agency, right? I remember attending church with her when I was very young and asking her about this belief. It all made sense the way she explained it. However, I was still left with the question, "What is the point?" What is the point of life if it is all worked out and we can't do anything to change anything?

My mother and I have come to an understanding. I don't try to argue against pre-destination with her and she understands that I cannot live like that. I choose to live as if what I do matters.

I have come to believe that this understanding of human agency is one of the most important gifts we, Unitarian Universalists have to give to people. Knowing that my efforts matter, knowing that I can make a difference if only in a small way has led me to a much more fulfilling life. I am still hindered by circumstances and I sometimes fail. But understanding my own self-efficacy helps me to start again. To keep trying.

Spoiler Alert--- Rory Gilmore ended up going to Yale. When she was grown-up and ready to go to college, Yale just seemed a better choice for her. She never showed any indication that Yale felt like a failure, it is still an Ivy League college. She is still on her way to becoming a journalist.

I have never been accused of being too optimistic, far from it.... but I intend to continue to exercise my own agency to the best of my ability.