What's in Your Toolbox?

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Metaphor:
The use of a word or phrase to refer to something that it isn't, invoking a direct similarity between the word or phrase used and the thing described

Analogy:
A relationship of resemblance or equivalence between two situations, people, or objects, especially when used as a basis for explanation or extrapolation

Overused:
used too much, or too often

We use an analogy or metaphor to make a point – when it works it gets overused until it's no longer immediately compelling, in fact it begins to seem obvious. It is interesting to think back to the first time you heard a cliché and recall that back then, it quite possibly seemed quite striking.

Humans are often likened to computers as if we were just some sort of Central Processing Unit with Random Access Memory in both local and remote storage. This seems awfully trite, and make some of us uncomfortable for various reasons, but also often seems too true a comparison to reject.

<pause>

In the mid seventies, an architect named Christopher Alexander proposed a novel way of looking at design. Architects don't design buildings, bridges and cities, architects design solutions to problems.

All of design (so suggested Alexander) was the attempt to solve a myriad of set problems in a multitude of ways. All of design could be boiled down to a small set of specific problems and a language could be developed which would describe any solution to any problem.

How do you keep your self and your plate from sitting on the floor while eating dinner?

Patterns give us chairs and stools; tables, counters and shelves to place our plates and/or be-hinds on.

How many legs does a stool have? A Table? Different patterns may specify different numbers, but all solve the same essential problem.

Alexander's ideas mostly failed to catch on – either this distilling of an individual art into something shared and somehow less "arty" was unappealing to, or just too obscure for, the rest of the architectural world to adopt.

Interestingly, his ideas have found a devoted following in information technology. The idea of a general reusable solution to a commonly occurring problem is very appealing to programmers. The

patterns don't provide a shortcut to finished software by any stretch, but they do provide a description or template for how the program could be designed and a head start in producing that program.

In my job when I am working on a network design, I frequently make use of patterns to help make sense of the various over-hyped sales-pitches I get from vendors competing to sell me their solution to my problems. I can see some of why architects didn't like the idea much when I reduce an hour-long stream of marketing pitch down to three small boxes with an arrow or two on the white-board. Most of the vendors have the same pattern underlying their solutions and are trying to convince me that their solution is somehow more exciting than that.

When a programmer is trying to develop a new piece of software, she might save herself some trouble by looking at how others before her have solved similar problems – not to steal or reuse their solutions but to grasp the underlying design principles and see if she can find a way to solve a prior problem better than those who went before.

<pause>

So much for the esoteric worlds of Architecture and Computer Science, how does this idea play in our lives? Surprisingly well.

Think of a three-year-old you've known. No, not the happy memory of everything going well, look at that tense moment when that child first realized that things weren't going their way.

What did the child in your memory do to get control of the situation?

The stories most of you could tell right now are probably quite varied but I'll suggest that we could boil them down just like Alexander did with design to just a few basic solutions or patterns of behavior used to solve the general problem.

There are a few common problems which three-year-olds face and not a large number of common solution patterns.

The list is short, including but not limited to: yelling, crying, or begging to get back control, or perhaps changing what they want to seem to have been in control all along.

<pause>

You've all seen a young child with a hammer – suddenly everything needs banging as if the world had turned to nails.

If we think about the pattern for solving the not-getting-my-way problem like a hammer is it that far of a stretch to see that the child tries to solve other problems with the same hammer.

I'll give you the analogy of a toolbox. The first time you find a tool which works on a problem that tool goes in the toolbox. The next time a problem crops up, check the toolbox. Use the tool again and

again. Whenever you find a problem, hit it with the hammer.

This will work for a surprisingly long time, but eventually you'll run into a problem which can't be solved with the hammer and you'll have to work out a new tool.

The analogy breaks here since it's hard to liken social problem solutions to screwdrivers and saw-blades without distracting ourselves.

In many conversations with people where I've trotted out this idea, we've observed that most people needed their first problem-solving tool or pattern in early childhood and probably got by with that one tool until puberty set in.

It makes sense that the whole hormonal blood-boiling and brain re-write the body goes through would throw the old pattern out of whack with everything else. So, often a teenager will need to add to their toolbox, solving a problem not likely to have confronted the three-year-old, to continue their way in the world.

Once the brain and body start to settle and that teen has gotten pretty good at using tool number two, whenever number one fails to work, life changes the rules again and they go to college or move out and there are more problems. Quite probably they will be confronted by something which neither the childhood nor the teen solution works for and they need a third tool.

If you want evidence that this model for human interpersonal relations fits whatever is really happening surprisingly well, look to office life:

Have you ever had a boss or coworker who relied on these three: yelling, doing it themselves and telling Mom (or HR) in nearly every situation?

As far as I can see, most people go through life using their three-year-old and teen patterns for solving their adult problems – never having needed to come up with anything else to get by.

These tools we develop work to get us over or through the problem situation, but they are seldom satisfying. In Architecture the pattern for chair actually solves the problem of where to sit. In Computer Science the pattern actually makes the problem go away. In human interactions we're hampered by memory, so the pattern may solve the problem, but the problem situation remains in our memory.

We can look back on the problem and see that the solution wasn't necessarily good for all parties, or look forward and see that the solution might have dire consequences in the future. Worse, we can look back whenever we like and see that there was a problem to begin with and get worked up over it all over again.

I can't help with that last one but I have some ideas problem solving improvements.

I have been studying myself over time, and have picked out my most frequently used solution patterns.

Generally speaking these three patterns solve most of my problems. Also in general I dislike the solution they provide – when I use them on autopilot. If I just let myself hit everything, I'll be fairly happy with my effect on nails but breaking everything else, less so.

Now that I can see the patterns I fall back on, I have been practicing stopping myself to check and determine which of the three will work best on the problem at hand or if I'll have to actually work out a better solution. It's not as easy and often messier, but I usually like the solutions better.

If one of my tools is the right tool to use, the I use it on purpose, and focus it on only what needs metaphorical hitting. Or I will use my tools to buy time to invent an actual solution.

Whenever I'm confronted I try one of three things:

I hide:
        Not usually in the crawl under the covers and hope the world will leave me alone sense, although the urge to try this has struck me often in the past week leading up to speaking here today.

On auto-pilot, I hide by looking like I'm trying to be involved but sneakily trying to get out of it.

Did you know that if you're afraid to make telephone cold-calls, you can call lots of people during dinner or mid-day on a beautiful Saturday, and no one will pick up the phone.

I can't say I've worked out a great use for this solution for "on-purpose" use, but I'm sure I'll find one.

I know everything:
        On auto-pilot I can get people to leave me alone because I know so much better or more than them. On purpose, I can help people out by knowing exactly what to do to solve their problem, even if sometimes all I really know is enough to ask the right questions.

I become increasingly reasonable:
        I can take whatever is happening around me in stride, act like it's all normal and going exactly the way it should. On auto-pilot I can convince the people around me that they're the ones being silly or wrong getting all worked up over something. On purpose I can help those around me calm down and discuss their issues and more easily look for a solution.

<pause>

Einstein once said something about religion which is so often mis-quoted that I can say pretty much anything I like here with his name on it and folks will accept it. My memory of the quotation went something like this:

        "There are ages of religion, some are the religion of three-year-olds and others are for adults" What he really said turns out not to apply so well, as the actual quote says that religion is childish. So I'm going with my beloved misquote.

Consider the metaphysical problems a three-year-old has and the sort of religion which addresses them. I imagine the pattern of a kind parent-figure who loves you and makes everything safe and good.
As an older child the pattern for rules and consequences is added.
A teenager may drop the parent figure and may want to drop the rules as well.
A 20-something might actually want the rules back, and may even want the parent-figure as well.
Somewhere along the way the pattern of rewards for good behavior may get thrown in.

I realize that this view of our religious quest is almost unusably oversimplified, but I think its a useful metaphor.

As Unitarians we have many different patterns we might apply to solve our religious problems.
We have our seven principles, we have our welcoming congregations, we have social justice programs and more.

My question for us is: "Are running on auto-pilot?"
My answer for us is (not disparagingly) "Yes" - not because we're not good people, but precisely because we ARE people, and people do most things on auto-pilot.

How different is the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person when it's an active belief practiced on purpose than when we just say it and don't change the way we act.

Can justice get done if the belief in justice, equity and compassion is just something we do without active intent?

In closing, I ask each of you to look at the successes you have in life with the patterns you've come up with so far. Look to see if you could use them better, or if they're even the right tools for you.
Look at BUUF and see what we have accomplished and think about what we could do if we used our tools better.

I've badly overused the "tool" metaphor today, and I ask you to forgive me and try it out in your lives for a bit.