

We all have it, don't we?

That inner critic.

The snarky self.

Isn't that a great word: snark?

It's almost onomatopoeic.

Snark comes from a melding of the words "snide" and "remark"
and it is that cutting, sarcastic, attack we know so well.

We all have that inner snark in us.

We also have in us the downer.

The na-bob of negativity,
the to-hell-with-it-all spirit.

We all have it.

I assure you that I do.

My inner critic is strongly developed.

Reading the news, I find it easy to think to myself:

"idiots."

I have an internal voice that can be pretty harsh –
why would they do that?
don't they know anything?
come on, hurry up!

this inner voice is often directed to those I don't really know:
other drivers on the road,
check-out clerks (and more often, people in front of me in line).

I save some of my most snarky, critical thoughts
for media –
that's not right, that's not the full story, why don't they explain this,
and so on.

But you know at whom I direct more snark,
more criticism, more you-are-no-good feelings at than anyone else:
well, me, of course.

The inner critic is often never harsher than when judging oneself.

We doubt.

We mull over what we've done and think of all the ways we could have been better.

We don't even try to do something because we know –

we know or we fear or someone told us one –

that we can't do it right –

can't sing, can't dance, can't love, can't ...

Naysayer.

We all have this inner critic, this inner snark, this inner naysayer
within us.

And of course, a little inner critic can be a good thing –

it can help us do better,

it can help us decide who to trust,

and make our society better as we reward those who do their best.

A little inner critic is OK, even helpful.

But sometimes we get off the rails, don't we?

Sometimes it seems we get into a context, or a time, or a place,
where everybody seems to start unleashing their inner critic.

No restraints, no hesitation, no decorum.

We just go full-on snark,

full-on attack.

And everyone else does too,

and so we think this is just the way it is.

There are some places where we have just come to expect it:

cable news, for example.

We don't have cable in our home,

but when I'm in a waiting room somewhere or catch a minute of it,

I think to myself,

my god, does anyone find this – two people yelling over each other –
remotely enlightening or informative?

This kind of critical, snarky attitude is also de rigueur in the comments section of many websites.

These comments are full of attacks, insults, and tear-them-down blow-them-up kind of writing. And it's not just national blogs and papers – there was a story in the Register Star a few weeks ago about an effort to provide continuing education for school professionals. Community organizations were volunteering to lead workshops – it was a great, feel-good, look-what-we-can-do together story. And the first comment on-line was a rant about how dare the Rockford Rescue Mission work with the public schools, and it was a waste of money, and they weren't going to give anything more to the mission, and so on. It was just nasty – and totally uncalled for and unhelpful.

Indeed, I often find the comments on the RR star website to be some of the most hurtful, ill-informed, vicious writing you'll find anywhere. Also, often the most un-grammatical.

One easy way we could make this community better, and look better, is to shut off the comments on the paper. Maybe I should start a petition.

It seems recently that the naysayer attitude is seeping out of its usual confines of cable news and blog comments to our wider culture.

For some years it has dominated our political discourse. Instead of saying that we disagree, we call our opponents traitors. Instead of assuming good will, we think everyone has an ulterior motive. If someone doesn't do things exactly the way we want them, then we won't work with them at all. We elect a leader, and then we attack them for not doing everything we want right away, when it is, truthfully, we ourselves who must be the change in the world,

and leaving it all up to our leaders is a recipe for disaster.

And this has lead to a kind of paralysis.

The extremes insist on purity –
especially, let's be honest, the right-ward extreme –
and so nothing gets done.

When a president of one party proposes an idea
that was first introduced by members of the other party –
suddenly that idea is unconstitutional and a socialistic plot to
pull the plug on grandma and, I don't know,
sell baby kittens to arms-dealers or something.

It's ridiculous –
and we've come to expect it as normal.

A lot of folks, in the last presidential election,
hoped that Obama's promise:
that we could disagree without being disagreeable –
would come to pass.
Obviously, not so much.

And there is, then, a kind of resignation to negativity.
I guess this is just the way it is.

Can you feel this negative, cynical energy settling over this country
like a too-warm blanket?
Because I can.
It's oppressive and debilitating.

I've also seen this negative, cynical, nay-saying spirit
settle over this town of Rockford.

We made the choice to live here –
there were a lot of things we liked about Rockford,
and we were happy to come.

And after we told people we were coming,
we heard – from those who live here and from those who used to live here –
very negative comments.
Oh, that's a lousy town.

The schools suck there.
There's no life downtown.
It's all chains and strip malls.

And so on.

And this critique is easy to fall into –
to start sharing our own complaints and dissatisfactions.

But we also heard something else:
that the problem, really, was that we were too negative about this place.
Too critical, and if we could see what was good and promote it,
we'd do a lot better.

When I first hear that, I kinda laughed about it.
I thought it was wishful thinking,
or an attempt to cover up the problems.

I thought, come on.
We don't need to ignore our problems,
we need to fix them!

But now I see that there is a lot of truth to this.
Some folks who live here are too hard on us.
There are problems,
but when we just complain,
when we just say,
oh, well, that's Rockford,
then this doesn't have the effect of solving problems,
it has the effect of disempowering people who are trying to make a difference.

Let me give you an example.
I've devoted a lot of my energy to the public schools,
and when I started working on this,
I heard a lot of folks say,
why bother?
Nothing ever changes,
you can't make it better.

When I knocked on doors for a candidate,
I heard, why bother, it's not going to make a difference.

When I started working with Alignment Rockford
to design programs that would help disadvantaged parents,
I heard, oh, forget it. That won't work.

H.L. Menken once said that a cynic
"is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin."

And that's what it is like, sometimes,
working for better schools.
A lot of folks looking for the coffin.

But you know what?
The cynics are wrong about our schools.
In the last few months, things are better.
Much better.
You talk to teachers, parents, community leaders –
you'll hear the same thing.
More responsive, more respectful, more visionary.

Now, I'm sure some people still have complaints and concerns.
And I know some folks are just lying in wait,
ready to pounce at the first mistake,
and say "I told you so."

But the question –
do we work to make it better or just give up –
on this question we cannot allow the cynic to win.
Attitude matters:
and when we believe that there are some good things,
and there could be more of them,
well, then, we stand a chance.
But when we think it is all lousy, all useless,
then we just give up.
And our prophecy is fulfilled.

Attitude matters.

Whether you are a naysayer or a yeasayer matters –
it matters, I believe, more than any other choice you will ever make.

Can you only ever say no, I don't like it, it won't work?

Or can you say, yes, I like this, we can do it?

The cynics and the naysayers are wrong about Rockford, by the way.

Yes, our unemployment and poverty are high.

But there is great life downtown, and wonderful parks and gardens,

and lots of independent restaurants and shops,

and a spirit of neighborliness and resilience,

artists and musicians and culture,

and for a town of our size,

and for all the struggles we have faced,

there's a lot to celebrate and be proud of.

And so we arrive at the question:

if we accept that it is better to be a yeasayer than a naysayer,

and we know that we can fall into contexts in which

it is too easy to say no, where everyone is a critic,

how do we change?

how do we change ourselves,

and those around us?

Since I struggle with this sometimes, I've learned what works for me.

I know some of the things that works for others,

and so here, for you to take home with you and paste on your fridge,

is my list of the top ten ways to

change from a naysayer to a yeasayer.

It's OK to take notes in church, so go ahead and write these down.

10. Don't watch cable news. I'm serious about this, OK? Don't watch FOX, don't want CNN, don't watch MSNBC. Not even Ms. Maddow. Turn it off. You won't learn anything you can't read on the Washington Post website or by watching the PBS Newshour. Other than people shouting at each other, the only thing you'll miss is hyperventilating about the latest pretty white girl to go missing. Turn it off, and your soul will thank you.

9. Remember that some people are nasty, and they don't speak for everyone. Just because one person complains, or makes a nasty comment, doesn't mean that everyone thinks that way. Toddlers throw fits to get attention, and sometimes we never grow out of it. They are just one voice, and rewarding nastiness with your attention will only encourage more people to be nasty so they can get you to do what they want.

8. Take a walk outside. Notice the world. Remember the good news "that you have wonderful eyes to touch the blue sky" and see the dandelion there by the sidewalk, smiling at you. Breathe in the outside air and feel the breeze on your skin. Remember that you are alive and the world is a gift to you. Now, in late summer, soon to be early fall - such is the perfect time for such experiences.

Mary Oliver wrote, once, these lines:

"some things, say the wise ones who know everything,
are not living. I say,
you live your life your way and leave me alone."

And she wrote,

"So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe the stars sing too,
and the ants, and the peonies, and the warm stones."

I think she's right, and so take that walk. You'll feel better for it.

7. Associate with other yea-sayers. This is what turned the tide for me on the school work. Working, week after week, with folks who believed we could do better, who are hopeful, who say, "sure, I can do that" – this is what made it possible, for us, in fact, to do it. Find people like this in your life, and spend more time with them. Follow their lead. Try it. Have hope. Don't try to tear them down, but build them up. Let the brainstorming spark spread, the good energy spark spread. The more time you spend with folks like this, the easier it will be to say yes to life and change and hope.

6. Remember history. You know that quotation from Margaret Mead, the one that says "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

That's not a cliché or a naïve sentiment. It's absolutely true. Those who stand up, those who struggle, those who say yes to hope, they are the ones who bend the arc of history. The parlor generals and field deserters – they never make history, they are forgotten with the dust of time. I take great solace from the lessons of history – how things can change over time, how so much has gotten better, how things come and go, how when it seemed most bleak and hopeless, there was yet another story, to be written.

5. Remember our theology. We are Unitarian Universalists – and that means that we reject those snarky and negative ideas like original sin, predestination, damnation, and so on. Instead, we believe that whatever is holy is love, that if there is a God, then God says, Sweetcakes, Sweetcakes, What I am Saying is Yes, Yes, Yes. Whether

or not we believe in a deity, we agree that humanity is beautiful, that each person has worth and dignity, and deserves our respect and honor. So before you or I turn up the bird on some other driver, remember they are a person with hopes and dreams and fears. Before we lose our temper on-line or on-the-phone with someone, try to remember or imagine what it feels like to look into their eyes. Remember that each person is a wonder, a blessing and an opportunity for connection and discovery.

4. Remember that evil is the exception. Most people are good and decent and just doing their best. But that headline – public servant works hard for her constituents – or “family has nice dinner together before story time.” -- these headlines don’t sell papers or advertisements. They don’t get our blood boiling, and they don’t propel us, through fear, to blind support for a cause or leader. You hear a lot about crime, but crime is way down over the last generation. You hear about war, but there is less of it then there used to be. Doesn’t mean there isn’t evil, and tragedy, and things to fix. But it is the exception, not the rule.

3. Play. Play is good for the soul. Laughter is curative and joy is contagious. It doesn’t matter if you play with your kids, or your grandkids, or if you play golf or tennis or bridge or mah-jong or beer-bong. Play. Do something fun. Spend the \$10 for ticket and go sit on the first-base line at a Riverhawks Baseball game, or, in the winter, go to a hockey game. Cheer, no matter who wins or loses. Fly a kite, or go fly-fishing. We’ve been hard at work building a playground here at church, and so you can come right here and play – no matter how old you are.

2. Be grateful. I have a friend who every day makes a list of five things she’s grateful for. She was really getting negative, and her partner said to her, you got to snap out of it. This isn’t OK. She posts the list on-line so we can all help hold her to account, and you know how many days it was before she reported feeling happier, more adventurous, more excited to be alive? Two. Two days.

Gratitude, thanksgiving, this is the proper response to the gift of being alive. Not snark. Not nasty critiques of others who are living their lives the best they can. You can disagree, but you don’t have to be disagreeable. Life is a gift, and we did not create the universe, or the earth, or each other. Everything worthy: beauty, friendship, love, art, life – these things are gifts larger than ourselves. Galen Geugenrich, the minister of one of our churches in New York City, put it this way:

“We happen upon a sense of inexpressible exhilaration at being alive and a sense of utter dependence upon sources of being beyond ourselves. This sense of awe and dependence should engender in us **a discipline of gratitude**, which constantly acknowledges that our present experience depends upon the sources that make it possible.”

A discipline of gratitude. Say grace at a meal, or make a list of things you are glad about, or say thank you to everyone you meet, or include thanksgiving in your prayers – whatever you do, make gratitude your practice and habit.

1. Sing. Even if you've been told you can't – especially if you ever been told that you can't do it – sing. It's good for the soul. Really, it is. I'll show you what I mean. Please rise in body and in spirit.