**“Planting Seeds of Trust”**

February 24, 2019

UU Church of Lancaster

Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman

**Reading: “It Is a Paradox,” Gunilla Norris**

It is a paradox that we encounter so much internal noise  
when we first try to sit in silence.

It is a paradox that experiencing pain releases pain.

It is a paradox that keeping still can lead us

so fully into life and being.

Our minds do not like paradoxes.  We want things

To be clear, so we can maintain our illusions of safety.

Certainty breeds tremendous smugness.

We each possess a deeper level of being, however,

which loves paradox.  It knows that summer is already

Growing like a seed in the depth of winter. It knows

that the moment we are born, we begin to die. It knows

that all of life shimmers, in shades of becoming--

that shadow and light are always together,

the visible mingled with the invisible.

When we sit in stillness we are profoundly active.

Keeping silent, we hear the roar of existence.

Through our willingness to be the one we are,

We become one with everything.

**Sermon: “Planting Seeds of Trust”**

Let’s start with a fish story. I expect some of you have heard it. A prophet named Jonah was commanded by God to go to the city of Nineveh to warn about great wickedness in the city. He didn’t want to go: he preferred to dodge his duty as a prophet. So he went out in the opposite direction on a ship headed to the town of Tarshish. En route a big storm came up and everyone on board concluded that Jonah was to blame for the weather. He told them that if they would throw him overboard the storm would subside. They threw him over and the storm calmed. Now, not to worry about Jonah! A large fish --- some accounts say a whale --- came swimming by. Rather than nibbling, the fish swallowed Jonah whole. He lived three days and three nights in the belly of the whale. Lacking much else to entertain himself in the whale belly, Jonah prayed to God and apologized for trying to dodge the call to Nineveh. The whale let Jonah go, whole, near the shore of Nineveh, where Jonah fulfilled his duty as a prophet.

Jonah experienced a paradox, a contradiction. He ended up on a sure-fire route to just the place he didn’t want to go to. In trying to go one way, he went in the opposite direction, and sat in the belly of a whale for three days as he found meaning and purpose in his dilemma. He learned that the work of prophecy can sometimes involve contradictions and tensions.

I tell the story of Jonah today because it was a story which Parker Palmer learned from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Parker Palmer, as many of you know, is the spiritual leader whose work I bring to this congregation to explore Trust, our worship theme in February. Parker heard Merton compare his sacred calling as a monk to Jonah’s story. Merton wasn’t caught inside a whale --- there weren’t so many in Kentucky where Merton lived --- but he was caught in a similar conundrum. Merton came to admit that in committing to a spiritual life, he thought he was headed in one direction, but that the reality of living kept taking him in new directions he didn’t expect and sometimes didn’t want or need, or so he thought. Merton wrote: “Like Jonas himself, I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.”

The same for Parker Palmer. He came to understand that pursuing a spiritual life --- a life of contemplation ---- as he hoped for in his younger years, was like living in a whale belly. Perhaps a parallel for us is our participation in a religious organization such as this congregation. For Merton, for Parker, for us, our expectations may be that entering a spiritual community will be calm and stressfree, when in fact we often encounter the opposite: contradiction and confusion. Parker resonated with Merton’s metaphor of being caught in a big belly --- the belly of paradox --- tossing and turning and not sure which way to go. This morning let’s explore this metaphor and any insights it offers for enhancing spiritual development and trust. Parker Palmer found great “Promise in Paradox,” the title of his earliest book, which launched his career as a famous writer.

Meaning of Paradox

What do we mean by ‘paradox?’ Paradox is that state of contradiction created by apparent opposites, which can tug at us one way and then the other. Paradox is that condition in which two seeming opposites can both be true. Recalling words from our earlier reading: “It is a paradox that keeping still can lead us so fully into life and being.“ As a monk, Thomas Merton took a vow of solitude and silence, while also writing over sixty books and becoming an international celebrity. While quietly secluded in the hills of Kentucky, he had prophetic insights into social activism which benefited people across wide geographic and social locations. Each of us have probably experienced paradox in others, whose actions are at odds with values they profess. One example which has been in the news for months: priests and ministers who abuse parishners. Also immoral people in high places who flourish and virtuous people who suffer. Contradictions and tensions may leave us feeing that we can never reconcile the world into a harmonious whole.

Merton’s image of the spiritual life as the belly of paradox was freeing for Parker. It helped him realize that he was not alone in experiencing life as an ongoing series of contradictions and tension. Perhaps you have had similar experiences? This image helped him realize that one need not resolve contradictions to lead a spiritual life. A spiritual person could be swallowed up by paradox, swimming in it, and still make it to a safe landing on the opposite shore. Perhaps stress and tension are not impediments to a spiritual life but actually integral to it, as long as we learn to deal with paradox gracefully and lovingly.

We cannot avoid paradox. It pervades the natural world and it is part of what it means to be human. Mother Nature models paradox for us. Plants flower in summer, only to lie dormant in winter. Without darkness and dormancy, there would be no new flowering the next spring, a metaphor for our human story. Paradox is not a simple or simplistic concept. Perhaps the words of humorist E.B. White help convey the meaning and dilemma of paradox. White said:  ***If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.*** A few years ago I attended a ministers’ retreat lasting several days. The retreat was completely devoted to the topic of paradox within congregational life, and we felt that we just scratched the surface of the topic.

Response to Paradox

We cannot avoid paradox: it is a condition of being alive. What matters is how we respond to paradox, to difference, to contradiction. Often we interpret paradox in a binary mindset. In the face of two opposites, we go to “either/or” thinking. Both sides cannot be true: one is good and the other bad; either I am with you or I am against you. Someone of political or religious beliefs different from my own must be wrong because I am right. We will be defeated if we assume that opposites are irreconcilable, because “Either/or” thinking leaves us in positions, not relationships. When we’re in a position --- especially when we defend our position, which most certainly must be the “right” position --- it makes it hard to hear the stories of other people. When we’re in positions, we probably abandon deep listening as we plan our next comment to defend our position.

From positioning, another common response is “fight or flight”: either we overtly challenge differences, often in confrontational ways --- has anyone ever raised your voice at family members when they aren’t doing what you asked --- or we run away and avoid the other --- has anyone ever swept tough conversations under the rug. Those conversations don’t really go away, they just create lumpy rugs. Parker came to realize that he did a lot of sweeping under the rug early in life. In avoiding contradictions, he removed himself from engagement with the other, making for a very bland life. Whether in fighting or in “flighting,” trust is probably not guiding the conversation. “Either / or” mindset does not leave open the possibility that the opposite of any truth may be another truth.

Third way of addressing paradox

Rather than either/or thinking, there is another way. Consider a mindset of “both / and,” which can move us toward a more balanced, creative life. Rather than opposition to that person of a different political view, what about considering that that person can’t be totally wrong, and perhaps I am not be totally right. Perhaps there is truth in both viewpoints and we can learn from one another. Perhaps there is yet a third way that neither of us thought about, especially if we are locked in staunch positioning of our own way. A both/and mindset can keep the conversation going, so to find a higher plane, some commonality which brings a higher unity, which some express as the core of the religious quest. We can let go of trying to win an argument, in part because there is no argument. In Merton’s language, if we can hold paradox, we can find a “hidden wholeness.” Parker wrote**The promise of paradox is the promise that apparent opposites --- like order and disorder --- can cohere in our lives, the promise that if we replace ‘either/or’ with ‘both/and,’ our lives will become larger and more filled with light.**Asone of my colleagues from the Circles of Trust program has said**:** “**The capacity to live in paradox is perhaps the only way we can hold together the sheer complexity of what it means to be alive, aware, and fully human.”**

Parker also expresses the space of contradiction at a “tragic gap.” Staying present in a tragic gap --- the space between an ideal --- which we often assume is our view --- and reality --- the realization that other people may have different views, perhaps not as ideal as our views, we can reach a higher plane. Paradox becomes life-giving, not death-dealing. Staying in the tragic gap during contradiction and tension, we may uncover larger truths we never imagined could exist. Sharing higher truths, especially with persons who might have become adversaries, we build trust, we reduce stress, we eliminate confrontation, we open the door to asking and offering forgiveness.

Of course sometimes the paradox may reside within any of us ourselves --- we may be living two or more different lives: how life-giving it feels, to find peace with either / or battles within ourselves: before we can be good for the world, we must be good for and with ourselves. As Neils Bohr wrote, ***How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.***

Stories of paradox

Consider how being comfortable in a tragic gap influences how we interpret historical figures. This is a constant challenges for us historians: making sense of people and events of the past. It seems safe to say that no one is all good or all bad. Our liberal mindset helps us make sense of paradox, of seeing multiple perspectives, of paradoxical figure like Martin Luther King or John Kennedy, both of whose faithfulness to American liberty is undeniable, yet who did not keep faithfulness to their marriage vows. Another paradoxical figure is Thomas Jefferson: a definer of American freedom and liberty who owned slaves. To the topic of Jefferson as a paradox, come this Tuesday evening at 7 pm for a talk on this very topic by our guest speaker for the UU History class, Rogan Motter. You need not be registered for the class to attend the lecture.

Applications

What do these ideas about living in a tragic gap --- living productively in paradox --- mean for you? During the coming week you might keep aware of when you want to go to “either / or” thinking, and replace it with “both / and.” Develop the capacity to live in the belly of paradox.

After this worship service everyone is invited to two important events: a congregational meeting in which the members of this congregation will vote on who will serve on the Ministerial Search Committee, followed by a Transitioning Forum on Staffing Needs. In the democratic process of elections, one way to interpret outcomes is that some candidates win and some candidates lose: that is, a binary mindset. It is correct that during the congregational meeting seven persons will be identified as UUCL’s Search Committee, but I encourage everyone to hold this election within a wider mindset, so to reach a higher level of unity by remembering that all of you --- each and every person in this congregation --- will have a role in search. In fact, I will go further to say that each and every one of you --- members and friends alike --- will have a responsibility for staying informed about the process of search and participating in the many projects, activities, and forums which lie ahead for you in the next eighteen months, including the Transitioning Forum after the election. This congregation is entering an exciting process in congregational life. I call you to engage in this process with “both / and” as your mantra. I call you to realize that whale bellies aren’t so bad if they help you find greater unity and higher truths. Remember that when we emerge from our contradictions on to the next shore --- after drying ourselves off, of course, and maybe cleaning up a bit --- new habits of being together await us, as we strive to live as a Beloved Community.

The words of Tony Schwartz sum up my message for today: ***Let go of certainty. The opposite isn’t uncertainty. It’s openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides. The ultimate challenge is to accept ourselves exactly as we are, but never stop trying to learn and grow.***

MAY ALL THIS BE SO

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