

“Both/And: Living With Paradox”

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UU Church in Reston

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One grounding for my ministry this year is ‘Courage’ work: the spiritual practice system established by the Quaker writer Parker Palmer. An important component of Courage principles is the role of paradox: how we may grow and deepen as people of faith by living productively in paradox, becoming comfortable with a mindset of ‘Both/And’ rather than ‘Either/Or.’

Reading: “The Shining Word ‘And’”, Richard Rohr

"And" teaches us to say yes

"And" allows us to be both-and

"And" keeps us from either-or

"And" teaches us to be patient and long-suffering

"And" is willing to wait for insight and integration

"And" keeps us from dualistic thinking

"And" does not divide the field of the moment

"And" helps us to live in the always imperfect now

"And" keeps us inclusive and compassionate toward everything

"And" demands that our contemplation become action

"And" insists that our action is also contemplative

"And" heals our racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism

"And" keeps us from the false choice of liberal *or* conservative

"And" allows us to critique both sides of things

"And" allows us to enjoy both sides of things

"And" is far beyond any one nation or political party

"And" helps us face and accept our own dark side

"And" allows us to ask for forgiveness and to apologize

"And" is the mystery of paradox in all things

"And" is the way of mercy

"And" makes daily, practical love possible

"And" does not trust love if it is not also justice

"And" does not trust justice if it is not also love

"And" is far beyond my religion versus your religion

"And" allows us to be both distinct and yet united

"And" is the very Mystery of Trinity.

Sermon: “Both/And: Living With Paradox”

The Rev. Bret Lortie is senior minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Evanston, Illinois. He tells a story about his boots. In 1984, just out of high school, he joined the US Air Force and quickly learned how a large system like the military entails a certain level of madness. Many things about military life troubled him, especially as he deepened his personal position against nuclear weapons. On his night shift, he served as a faithful airman in battle dress uniform. By

day he wore a punk rock T-shirt. His boots looked the part with both wardrobes: his boots represented the contradiction he lived in.

Contradiction and paradox in Rev. Lortie's life grew. After active duty ended, while he served Air National Guard, he was also a peace activist. The attacks of September 11, 2001 stimulated his call to ministry, but then he straddled yet more new worlds of polar opposites: should his ministry be contemplative or action-driven; should he accept what is or be driven to change society?

Today, he remains in paradox. As a Unitarian Universalist chaplain he wears his military uniform at denominational events like General Assembly. It's not unusual that some defiant UU opposed to anything military challenges his presence. A particularly angry individual confronted him recently. Lortie persuaded the person to sit and talk, to discuss the tensions between them. Rev. Lortie's goal was not to change the other's view, but for each of them to get to know the other better. The conversation helped both of them.

As he deepens his ministry, Rev. Lortie also grows in realizes the power of paradox: the power to be able to sit in tensions created by polar opposites. He hopes that listening to others' stories can open hearts and so lessen the negative possibilities of paradox. You can read Rev. Lortie's story in the current issue of *UUWorld*, the magazine of this denomination. Also, on Sunday October 5, the Rev. David Pyle, new district executive for the Joseph Priestly District, will visit this congregation. Rev. Pyle is also a UU military chaplain and will listen to your stories and questions about UUs and the military.

Paradox: Definition and Challenges

This morning we are considering paradox: you know, those contradictions which are everywhere in daily life. Paradox can truly make or break our quality of life. I recently spoke with you about my training with the Center for Courage and Renewal, based on the spiritual practice of Quaker writer Parker Palmer. In August I attended a Courage retreat completely devoted to this topic of paradox. Paradox is one of the five practices Parker Palmer calls 'Habits of the Heart,' practices for deepening this journey called life. In his own life, Parker has learned that paradox and contradiction are unavoidable. Events and people pull us one way and then the other. Parker sharpened understanding of paradox all the more from reading Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who explained life as being in the belly of paradox, like Jonah in the belly of the Whale.

Humorist E.B. White expressed paradox like this:

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.

We cannot avoid paradox. It pervades both the natural world and what it means to be human. What we humans can influence is how we respond to paradox.

Responses to paradox

As a young man, Parker Palmer tried to reconcile paradox, thinking that a healthy spiritual life was supposed to be without contradictions. He quickly discovered that trying to smooth over difference --- what someone one told me was called 'making nice-nice' --- shuts us down,

removes us from engagement, and makes for a very bland life. Another response to paradox he saw was ‘fight or flight:’ people either overtly and aggressively confront differences, or run and avoid them completely. ‘Fight / flight’ is ‘either/or’ thinking: either something is good or it is bad; either I am with you or I am against you. Binary thinking does not open us to the possibility that the opposite of any truth may be another truth. Either/or thinking leaves us in positions, not relationships, and makes it hard to hear other’s stories. Parker notes how getting locked in staunch positions often breaks hearts apart.

Through much personal discernment and community advocacy, Parker has come to understand how paradox can be life-giving, not death-dealing; how it can break hearts open, not apart. He calls us to discover ‘*The Promise of Paradox*,’ the title of one of his early books, to find new understandings of ourselves and the world. If we can hold the tension of contradiction, we can find new relationships with others that reflect a unity which lies at the heart of most religious traditions. In Parker’s language, we can find a ‘hidden wholeness.’ As Parker has said:

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.

Accepting paradox --- getting to ‘both/and’ --- is what Parker calls ‘living in the tragic gap,’ that is, deriving energy, not isolation, from living in the midst of contradictions. This does not mean giving up our opinions or making ourselves vanilla. Instead, this is an invitation to listen to positions different from our own, finding the inherent worth in all the stories and the people around us. It is an invitation to move beyond the tendency to see others by one single feature of their identity. As we live out ‘both/and,’ we engage our hearts. Living in paradox becomes a Habit of the Heart so that our hearts break not apart, but open... open to new dimensions of relationships, new dimensions of what it means to walk with our sisters and brothers. The power of paradox becomes life-giving, not death-dealing. As Neils Bohr wrote:

How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.

Mother Nature models paradox for us. Plants flower in summer, only to lie dormant in winter. Without the darkness and dormancy, there would be no new flowering the next spring, a metaphor for our human story. Parker Palmer knows this metaphor well: he has dealt with the paradox of being one of the most creative spiritual leaders alive today and also a patient of three deep clinical depressions. Talk about the belly of paradox!

I think it helps our perspective to consider understand how this capacity to live with paradox is counter-cultural. Think how modern society pushes us toward binary attitudes. Institutions and leadership are based on “either/or” mindsets, grounded in position-taking, not relationship-building: the federal government, the American educational system, the news media. Parker Palmer knows well American education: he developed his Courage program in part through work with teachers, which led to his writing *Courage to Teach*, a book some of you in the field of education may have read. I know that making this concept of paradox truly my own has transformed my spiritual life as well as connections with all life around me. I invite you to consider living in more deeply in paradox.

Paradox is central to liberal religion

Can you see how finding comfort in paradox has many applications to liberal religion? Perhaps one reason Courage retreats usually attract many Unitarian Universalists is the compatibility of values of the two spiritual approaches. It feels wonderful to find counter-cultural partners at these retreats.

Liberal religion itself is hugely paradoxical in that it offers each of us many options, and admittedly sometimes these options may even be in contradiction with one another. This liberal way is in contrast with fundamentalist faith, in which there is only one way. I expect most of us are aware of the appeal of fundamentalist religion in American life: it's easy, having only one way, and having standards decided for us. Not only religion: many aspects of modern life are fundamentalist. If one holds different ideas or standards, the pressure to conform is huge. The dominant culture usually does not benefit from contradiction and tension. Liberal religion is just the opposite: it is precisely those contradictions which enrich this faith: worshipping alongside persons with theological beliefs different from our own; working on projects with persons of different social identities from our own.

Like paradox, the premise and the promise of liberal religion is life-giving: it offers us an energized, creative faith journey. Just as in the rest of life, so too in our liberal faith life, if we attempt to dismiss or ignore the contradictions --- perhaps by smoothing over opposing sides, or keeping secrets, or taking one side or another, or dismissing others whose theologies and life styles differ from our own --- we miss the full potential of liberal faith.

Examples of paradox in personal and congregational life:

Parker Palmer invites us to tell our stories to deepen our relationships with one another. This act of story-telling may be counter-cultural for some of us personally. In so many of our communications, we tell --- or probably assert --- positions, not stories. It's very different, to tell one's story, speaking from a personal, heart base, rather than asserting a position from a rational, often power-laden base. Most academic training grooms us well to do the latter. In contrast, through storytelling, we normalize our experiences. Through storytelling, we can let go of a need to have the good prevail and the bad suffer defeat. Through stories, we see the world as 'Both/And,' not as 'Either/Or.' At Courage retreats, we hear many stories from participants about the tragic gaps they are living in and learning from, stories like that of Rev. Lortie's boots.

I invite you to consider your own stories of paradox: personal stories, stories of this congregation, stories of how letting go of 'either/or' thinking can bring new insights to situations and new dimensions to relationships. If you have something in your life for which you've found yourself saying, "I just can't make peace with this issue," it may be a story to view through the 'promise of paradox.'

For instance, life itself is a paradox: we have all been given life, only to realize that we will all die. As we grow in wisdom, we also experience physical degeneration. Hell-bent on living, we may shake our fists at dying, when a Both/And attitude can help us appreciate our productivity within reasonable parameters brought on by advancing age. Perhaps this week some of you have watched the story of one of the greatest paradoxes in American families on Public Television: Ken Burns' newest documentary about the Roosevelt family. So many of them, born into an

untold privilege, yet also plagued by unspeakable tragedies. Had Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt accepted ‘Either/Or’ for their lives, most certainly they would not have served the country as valiantly as they did. Accepting ‘Both/And’ as their life model, they accomplished great things.

Or consider the paradox of family relationships: perhaps this illustration of paradox applies to you. Thanksgiving is not that far away. Perhaps you are deliberating the paradox of holidays with extended family, perhaps with some internal debate that goes something like, ‘I’m either going to visit family over the holiday, OR I’ll stay home and have a good time by myself.’ Accepting the tragic gap instead can take our thinking to, “I’m both going to enjoy the hospitality of family visits AND take away the best I can from their stories and their squabbles.”

Let me address one other paradox, which I observed about this congregation on the first day I came here back in 2013. This paradox concerns how you incorporate your history into present and future community life, particularly your history of professional staff who exceed appropriate professional boundaries in their relationship with congregants. One of the first things I noticed in this building is that there is no photo gallery or plaque acknowledging any of your staff, past or present, even though you acknowledge lay leaders and deceased members. I wonder if this suggests some collective binary thinking that goes something like, ‘Either relationships with staff are all positive, OR we don’t recognize any relationships with a plaque or photo.’ I call you to consider how a ‘Both/And’ view on your history might persuade you to normalize the bumps you experienced with staff in the past, so you can more easily refer to them and so recognize the nearly twenty individuals who have served this congregation as professional staff. With your blanket absence of a photo gallery or plaque, you also deny yourself reminders of the many positive experiences you have had with staff.

Reframing your view of the past influences your living of the present and how you can move into a ‘Both/And’ future where relationships are based on open and honest dialogue about both joys and challenges between staff and congregation. As we continue to work together this year on reframing your history, we will also be well supported by the UUCR Safe Congregations Committee. This team had its first official webinar and committee meeting last weekend. Stay tuned for more from the Safe Congregations team. Their shared ministry is not about reliving the past: it is about how UUCR goes forward living with best practices with professional staff in the future.

Call for Courage Work

I plan to ground much of my ministry this year on ‘Courage’ principles. For one, I will offer sermons specific to the topic. Also, starting in January, I will offer an Adult Faith Development class based on Parker Palmer’s Circles of Trust practice. To prepare for this class, this fall we will have several reading groups which consider books by Parker Palmer. Stay tuned for more about these activities.

More generally, I call each of us to open ourselves to greater awareness of how we respond to the many contradictions and paradoxes of life: with avoidance and denial and “fighting-or-flying;” or with acceptance and curiosity and expansion of this experience of living. If we find ourselves reacting with ‘Either/Or’ habits, let us pause, take a moment to share personal stories,

so to rethink and reframe, asking what would any situation feel like if we approached it with a mindset of 'Both/And.' 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 this be so.

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