

## Spirituality of Paradox Hannah Wells

When I first began to write this sermon about the spiritual merits of paradox, I thought I would first have to convince you that reason has its limits; that we can only get to the wisdom of paradox if we suspend the use of reason. What ended up happening with this line of thinking was I have another sermon to write with the title, "Reason vs. Faith." That seems like a sermon every UU minister ought to write at some point, and perhaps you'll get to hear it at some point.

The limits and merits of reason is a whole 'nother can of worms. So that we don't waste any time, I ask you to humor me and trust me that reason is not a useful tool for today's topic. Reason is a good tool, but it's not the one for the job today. Today I think we need a lathe, something that works with curves and circles and swirls, rather than straight lines and right angles. What kind of tool is paradox?

I always think the definition in the dictionary is a useful place to start, and this one is a fun one. There are two meanings for the word paradox. The first says, "A seemingly contradictory statement that nonetheless may be true." The second is, "One exhibiting inexplicable or contradictory aspects." You can see how reason might find itself in odd company here.

First let me ask you. Are there any statements you could make about your own life that are contradictory, but nonetheless may be true? Such as, I'm surrounded by people but I'm lonely. Or, I have so many choices in life that I can't make a choice. Or perhaps more optimistically, I'm broke but I'm happy; I have so much because I have so little.

Paradox has become a useful tool in today's world because it has a unique capacity to identify non-sense, or shatter so called conventional wisdom that turns out to be false. I don't know if you've noticed, but there is a high degree of baloney going on at this time, and it seems to be getting more baloney-ous all the time. A lot of it has to do with the silliness of capitalism, such as bigger or faster is better. There is actually a movement well on its way in favor of slowing down, of slower and smaller and simpler being better. That would be yet another sermon topic.

What I'm trying to get at are that there are paradoxes that can help us identify the values that are the most valuable and sustaining to us - even if at first they seem to go against traditional American values. Ironically, or paradoxically, this contradictory wisdom can help us return to a way of living that aligns with solid American values we are proud of, such as integrity and honesty and peace of mind. More specifically, today I'd like to rip on three traditional American values we hold near and dear: that is, strength, comfort, and freedom, and argue instead for weakness, difficulty, and constriction.

One fix I think we easily find ourselves in, due in part to a culture so wrapped up in image, is trying to be someone we're not. This isn't so much lying as it is working too hard to 'keep up appearances.' We're so convinced that we have to appear strong all the

time, that we've got to have our act together, that we appear content, that the transitions in our lives are seamless, that all systems are a go. But the fact is, we live in ways where we are more alone than ever - we live further from our families of origin, we have less help bringing up our children, we are more isolated in our homes than ever, thanks to self-contained entertainment like TV and computers. I guess we place a high emphasis on self-sufficiency, but frankly I think self-sufficiency is for the birds.

Don't get me wrong. I want to be able to pay my bills and show up on time wherever I'm supposed to show up. But self-sufficiency, not unlike reason, has its limits. This is one of the hardest lessons I've had to learn. Since I may be revisiting this fellowship in the near future, I think I should share some about myself, and let you know what the most important sources of my strength are - because that's how I write my sermons. I tend to preach on what I'm learning at the time, and much of what I'm learning about now comes from the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, because I am an alcoholic in recovery. I've been attending AA meetings for two and half years.

There's actually a lot of paradox to be found in recovery, but whether or not you have had matters of addiction in your own life, we can all relate to the inflated sense of self-reliance we sometimes have, and the exhausting effort that can go into 'keeping up appearances.'

When I was drinking a lot, I had a lot I had to hide from others; this illness was a secret that I had to put a lot of energy into covering up. There was an essential dishonesty at the heart of the matter, which made so many other things in my life impossible, such as emotional development and character building. I spend a lot of time in my recovery now getting to know myself, because for so long I ran away from who I really am. Who I really am is an alcoholic, and certainly in the beginning, to admit to this seemed like a great weakness.

And it was painful. At this point, I want to pause in my story here and allow you a moment to think of a time in your life, which could be now, or a time in the past, a time when you have felt deep pain. A time when you have felt deep pain because you finally decided to be honest with yourself, honest about who you really are, or honest about what truth you have been running away from. Think about this time for a second. Surrender to it.

It can hurt, and I have good news. The paradox is that it is so often only this pain that can precede health and happiness in our lives. The weakest times in our lives when we finally break are gifts that can take us out of that darkness, the darkness of trying to be someone we're not. I am not such a strong person that I can do recovery on my own. I couldn't stay sober very long without the help of others, especially the help of others who are just like me.

It is only through becoming aware of and comfortable with my weakness, that I can find my strength. In AA language, I say I am powerless - powerless over alcohol, but also powerless over so much more; I'm powerless over the lives and decisions and behavior of

others. There is a lot in life I can't control - and what a great power I have when I really understand this. Being powerless allows me to have humility in my life. What on earth is humility?

Just recently I have been studying and thinking a lot about what humility is, because before recovery I really didn't know what it is. What I've learned so far is that humility is one of the strongest and most enduring paradoxes of all. Humility is what brings strength out of weakness. Humility reminds me that I'm not above feeling pain. There are so many things we do in life to avoid emotional pain, whether or not that's abusing substances. It is whatever we do to avoid the void, or try to fill the void, the empty hole in our spirits that we try to fill with material goods, with food, with sex, with sports, with gambling, with television, with whatever distractions that become harmful habits.

Humility says, you know what, you need to feel this pain, and it's going to be okay. It's going to be okay, because the pain is how we heal. And once we begin to heal, we understand we don't need to fear the pain quite as much, because there is a reward for feeling the discomfort, which is growth and health. *We begin to see and love ourselves as we really are*, and we begin to want this humility as a way of maintaining our health and wholeness. But we can't have this humility without embracing our weaknesses, without embracing the discomfort of emotional pain and heartache. There is comfort to be found in our difficulty.

Along with keeping up appearances is the illusion that we have to be right about everything. God forbid we make a mistake or someone proves us wrong. To have to be right all the time is terribly paralyzing because we don't move for fear of making a mistake. Another thing humility helps us with is that we don't have to be right all the time. All we have to be is be accountable to ourselves, and trust ourselves to act with good intention on what little information we have. Often we don't have the benefit of seeing the bigger picture, often we only have a small view of it, but life is in constant flux and we are always needing to act and move forward. It is really hard to move forward if we have to be right all the time. A lot of what life is about is stumbling blindly into uncharted territory; in time we can see but at first we just don't know what the outcome will be. Humility makes the uncharted territory less terrifying; we actually gain more freedom in our lives when we allow ourselves to be wrong, to fail.

Ah, freedom. I'm pretty sure the emphasis placed on freedom is one of the more misconstrued values in our American identity. One of the outcomes of our freedom has been the freedom to choose, and the proliferation of choices seems to grow exponentially. I know that in my generation, it seems folks have put off beginning a career until their 20's are nearly over because they can't decide what they want to do their lives. Meanwhile, life happens, life is what happens while you're making plans, as John Lennon wisely noted.

Or an image I have that illustrates the dilemma of choice quite well is something that Sylvia Plath once wrote. She has a dream and she describes it like this. She is sitting at the base of a tree, and looking up she sees beautiful and delicious-looking fruits at the

ends of several branches. She's looking at them all and trying to decide which one to reach for, but even as she's trying to make a choice the fruits begin withering right before her eyes, and she can't get a fresh fruit because she's waited too long to pick it.

The point is that too many choices can have diminishing returns. They distract us from what's at the core of our being, the knowledge of what's most important to us. So many choices cause us to second-guess ourselves. Will I or did I make the right choice? Maybe the solution is to intentionally limit our choices for ourselves. Maybe there are things in our lives that we can decide are no longer an option for us. When we set limits and boundaries for ourselves, we are actually volunteering to constrict our choices, to constrict our freedom. But I want to call this "so-called freedom" because a freedom that is so wide and limitless that I lose my values in it, a freedom that is so big that what is most sacred to me becomes diluted in it, is not the most noble definition of freedom at all.

The most noble definition of freedom is a freedom where my freedom is limited. A freedom where it's really not okay to self-indulge. A freedom where I understand clearly what I'm not free to do. See, the paradox here is that there is freedom in constriction because I know I am safe in the confines of good boundaries. It's said that kids and adolescents respond well to discipline that has clear and enforced boundaries. They prefer that because it feels safer, and we adults are no different. We need strong boundaries that keep us safe as well; we too need our freedom constricted to healthy limits.

It is said in recovery that the path becomes narrower, but the vision becomes wider. I do have less choice in my life now. Not only can I no longer drink, but I also can't do anything that might cause me to drink over it. I can't have any dishonesty in my life anymore because the shame of it might lead me to drink. With less choices of what I can do, I have found a good way to live.

One of my favorite paradoxes is 'less is more.' Rachel Rieman, the author [Kitchen Table Wisdom](#), has a great story about more being less. She has been playing with the 6-year old son of two friends of hers and she and the boy become friends themselves. They play a lot with his two Hot Wheels cars, and Rachel thinks the boy must love these Hot Wheels match-box cars, and she sets out to collect every kind of car Hot Wheels makes, and then she gives all these cars to the boy in a huge box. In the story she writes,

"They filled every windowsill in the living room, and then he stopped playing with them. Puzzled, I asked him why he did not like his cars anymore. He looked away and in a quivery voice he said, 'I don't know how to love this many cars, Rachel.' I was stunned. Ever since, I have been careful to be sure not to have more Hot Wheels than I can love."

I worry about the emphasis in our culture on having so much stuff. More does not appear to be more. All this stuff seems to paralyze us too, because we can have everything and experience nothing. I don't want us to have so much that we have nothing - that is a paradox to be avoided. I think this culture we live in would have us believe that when we feel empty, we don't have enough. But we need to really ask ourselves, what is it that I

don't have enough of? Surely I have enough books and clothes and CDs and kitchen gadgets. There's always going to be something I want to buy if I can, whether it's small or large. But what if less really is more? What if when I'm feeling empty, I try to fill it with experience, the kind of experience that is not a commodity?

Another paradox I've heard recently is that "my salvation is that there is no salvation." That is a good one for religious liberals. The interpretation of this one can go many directions, but what it makes me think of is that life does not easily offer salvation, in fact, life is rarely easy at all, or light and fluffy, and that is a good thing. Milan Kundera posits a compelling question in his book, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. In the pair of opposites that is light and heavy, which is the negative and which is the positive quality? Is it better to have lightness in our lives, or is it better to have heaviness?

The thing is, is that it's only the heavy things in life that really matter. If we never made the choice to commit ourselves to someone or something that we really love, we could mostly have lightness in our lives. But that would be tragic, because so much lightness truly is unbearable. We need this heaviness; the heavy is positive. To have heaviness is to live.

What are the heavy things in your life? Whatever they are, whatever is burdening you at this time, I want to gently suggest that these burdens may also be the angels in your life. What burdens you challenges you to the core of your being and forces you to ask what is really important. The burdens force you to make choices and changes.

We can make the heavy light, we can find freedom in constraint, and we can find strength in our weakness. Is there reason to this?

I said that reason wasn't a helpful tool for singing the praises of paradox, but the reason would be to know and love ourselves as we really are, to honor what is most sacred.

And that is reason enough.