

Good vs. Good
August 15, 2010

I have a few questions for you. Is the word “heterological,” meaning “not applicable to itself,” a heterological word? If Pinocchio were to proclaim, “My nose will grow as a result of my saying so,” what would happen? What might we conclude if someone were to say to us, “The next statement I make is true. The last statement I made was false”? If cats always land on their feet, and buttered toast always lands butter side down, what happens when a piece of toast is tied, butter side up, to the back of a falling cat?

The past two Sundays that I’ve preached I’ve been pleading to you all to get out of your heads. Now, I’m just messing with them.

Or, more accurately, really, I’m just passing *along* some head messers, also known as paradoxes, all of which I happened to find handily lined up in that ever-convenient place that is not a place, paradoxically, known as Wikipedia. My personal favorite is the one about the word *heterological*, which happens to be known as the Grelling-Nelson paradox. Other paradoxes include such statements as “Ignore all rules, including this one,” and “Do everything in moderation, including moderation.”

All of these paradoxes, according to Wikipedia, fall under certain categories: logic, self-reference, vagueness, mathematics, statistics, probability, geometry, decision theory, physics, and so on. Being that I am

not always logical, that I am no mathematician, statistician, or physicist, I won't bother even trying to go down those *particular* paradoxical paths, and honestly, on seeing just how *many* different types of paradoxes there are, I'm afraid, by inviting you to explore the notion of paradox with me this morning, I may have opened up a can of worms which have painted themselves into a corner. (*That* is not a paradox. That's just a mixed family of metaphors, which I came up with all on my own.)

Fortunately, being that I have freedom of the pulpit, I can round up those worms, put them back in their can, and skip right over trying to impress you all by explaining the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox or the Klein paradox or Galileo's paradox or even why two boats happen to be tied up to a paradox. What I, having freedom of the pulpit, want to talk to you about today is the dailiness of paradox--of seeming opposites existing alongside each other--in all of our lives. And I want to do so not by talking about such seemingly obvious opposites as good versus evil, but about, as I heard it said to me last June, good versus good.

You see, last June, after I'd left you all for my various adventures, and before General Assembly started, I attended a three-day training, in which two ministers from each chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Association were trained to become trainers ourselves of our chapter colleagues. The training was entitled, "Whose Are We? A Theological Conversation." Funded by the Fund for Unitarian Universalism and the UUA Panel on

Theological Education, and facilitated by two ministers well known to the Southwest District, Rev. Laurel Hallman formerly of First Dallas, and Rev. Burton Carley of Memphis, the training was meant for us ministers, to quote the curriculum's introduction, "to 'be broken of our knowing' so that we can receive the gift of reconsidering our vows, whether made explicitly in our ordination, or implicitly as Unitarian Universalist ministers in Fellowship with one another, our Free Church Tradition and in our liberal covenant with the holy." In other words, this was some serious exploration we were being invited into. To be "broken of our knowing" meant it was time to return to Beginner's Mind, to step into humility, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to ask such questions as "Whose are we? Who calls us? To whom are we accountable?"

Being broken of our knowing also was to be reminded of the paradoxical nature of our Unitarian Universalist faith. After all, we come from a "Free Church tradition." That alone speaks volumes. As does, perhaps, the opening lines of our own Wildflower mission statement: "Wildflower Church is a deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition." Doesn't that ring too of paradox, valuing both tradition and open-mindedness?

The underlying important point here is that such opposites are not irreconcilable. We don't have to choose one over the other, whereas in some cases we do. If I were to ask you all, for example, if we would rather

choose good or evil as a guide for living our collective religious lives, though there might be debate about what constitutes good and what constitutes evil, I'm guessing we'd fall in general favor of good.

But what about times when it is not about good versus evil, but good versus good? At the *Whose Are We* training, we were challenged to explore the paradoxes, the goods versus goods, we live with every day. Now, mind you, this was a group of ministers, thinking about our particular place in our congregations, but still I offer you some of the brainstorming that we did: pastor versus prophet; heart versus mind; solitude versus community; authenticity versus boundaries; self-care versus service; Unitarian versus Universalist; being versus doing; gentle versus firm; commitment to tradition versus commitment to change; like-mindedness versus diversity; divinity versus human agency.... The list could go on and on. But I think you get the idea.

Ours is a necessarily paradoxical faith: We are called to honor opposites, to reconcile and to integrate them every day of our lives. Not to do so is to make idols of the parts, while neglecting the whole. For, imagine: what if we were committed only to our minds at the neglect of our hearts? What if we were devoted to our hearts at the neglect of our minds? What if we were so dependent on community that we denied ourselves opportunities for solitude? And, on a very literal level, how could we possibly be a *congregation*, if we valued *only* solitude?

The truth is, seeming opposites such as journey versus home, or independence versus communion, are bound together. They are bound in the very word that seemingly sets them apart: *Versus*.

Now, growing up, I'd always thought of *versus* as meaning something like "the pitting of two things *against* each other." *Mad* magazine's "Spy vs. Spy" comes to mind. Do you remember that? And, of course, in the real world, which "Spy vs. Spy" was mimicking and *Mad* magazine was mocking, there was the Cold War's USA versus the USSR; hippies versus hard hats. Today it's USA versus Al Qaida; placing a mosque at Ground Zero versus absolutely not--it would be an insult to the memory of our beloveds; Israel versus Palestine; fundamentalists of any faith versus gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and their allies; pro-life versus pro-choice. On and on.

But, just to be sure I was correct about the antagonistic nature of the word *versus*, one day admittedly recently, I decided, heck, I think I'll look it up. Now, think of words ending in *-vert*: Invert, convert, extrovert, subvert, advert, overt, covert, revert. They all have to do with turning. *Versus*, similarly, means to turn--to turn toward *or* against. Consider the subtle yet extraordinary shift when we think of two seemingly opposing bodies or ideas turning *toward* one another rather than against each other. There is a leaning in, a *relationship*.

I think of the Old Testament story of Jacob wrestling with the unknown figure by the river. Jacob, who is returning to his homeland after years away, nervous about how he will be received, sends his family ahead of him. As Genesis, 32: 22-28 note, “Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, I will not let you go unless you bless me.” So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and prevailed.’” I am not a biblical scholar, but this has always been one of my favorite passages from the Old Testament--partly because I believe Jacob is actually wrestling with himself, as we all must do. Whether or not that is the case, the wrestlers lean into each other, practically merge, and it is not until Jacob is transformed in body and in name by this “opponent” that they part. Jacob versus the man here seems to be about turning toward.

And yet not just toward. Because, as I’ve started doing yoga again, I’m reminded through my practice that for every force, there is an equal opposite force, and that in wrestling, as Jacob was, while he had to lean into to his “opponent,” his feet had to push *away*, in order for Jacob to hold himself steady. There might be the turning against.

So, pushing in, pushing away. Sound familiar? Remember the balance board I used with the children during Time for All Ages. On the balance board, success occurs when equal and opposite forces work together in creative tension. Similarly, the very planet we live upon, this beautiful place called Earth, lives in the constant tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces which keep it spinning in orbit around the sun. Same goes for the moon, spinning around the Earth. We human beings are not exempt from such creative tensions.

And, speaking of the moon and speaking of us human beings, sometimes, the tensions are not quite so creative. Remember the poem by the Dalai Lama, which Steve shared earlier:

...We have more degrees, but less sense;
More knowledge, but less judgment;
more experts, but more problems;
more medicines, but less healthiness.
We've been all the way to the moon and back,
but have trouble crossing the street to meet
the new neighbour.

Honestly, as a side note, I don't know if the Dalai Lama is talking so much about paradox as he is about irony. But he's the Dalai Lama, and I

like him, so I'm going to let that one slide. Nevertheless, his poem wakes us up to these uncomfortable and unfortunate truths he speaks of, and we are thus called to ask ourselves, "How is my life out of balance? What force am I giving too much to, good as it may be, so that I am consequently having trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor?" And then of course, as a religious people, as people who, in the words of our mission, "joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys," and who "commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice," we are called to set the balance right again.

It's not an easy task. To be alive, to be awake, to be Unitarian Universalists who honor both heart and mind, independence and community, reason and faith, freedom and responsibility, unity and diversity, we are called to live on that balance board, to live in the creative tension that keeps all of our values and our needs and our very breath flowing and alive.

It's not easy. But I can tell you, in all it's not-easy-ness, it's also not a bad deal. Not at all. In fact, I remember when I first started attending Unitarian Universalist services in Northampton, Massachusetts. I'd been attending for maybe a year or so when one day, sitting in the pews, with the very safely vague religious stained glass windows shining beautiful light into the sanctuary, I understood why I loved this faith so much. It held me in

the loving, non-constricting arms of paradox. Here, in this place that constructed no creedal foundations or walls or ceilings or fences, I was finding a religious *home*. Here, being offered the *freedom* of my own search for truth and meaning, I was taking the *responsibility* to do so. Here, surrendering to my sorrow and my grief, I was discovering joy. As the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar writes, "I am the mother of sorrows, I am the ender of grief; I am the bud and the blossom, I am the late-falling leaf." Such is the beauty of our faith. Such is the all-embracing nature of our very lives, if we but choose to see it and to practice it.

I mean it. Nothing I say to you today is heterological to ourselves. Paradox is alive and well among us, has been here from before the beginning, and will be here long after we are gone. As the great Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse said, "before creation a presence existed, self-contained, complete, formless, voiceless, mateless, changeless, which yet pervaded itself with unending motherhood. Though there can be no name for it," says Lao-Tse, "I have called it the 'way of life.'" We Unitarian Universalists are called to understand the relevance of Lao-Tse's words to our own faith. We are called to remember that while we each have inherent worth and dignity, we are not the beginning, and we are certainly not the end. We are called to accept one another just as we are, while we are also called to remember that the only constant is change.

That change is the dynamic, creative tension that pulls us toward community, then back to solitude, then back to community again. It is the creative tension that draws us up into our questioning, searching minds, then down into our loving, feeling hearts, then up again, then down, in a continuous balancing act in which, movement by movement, balance by balance, we integrate such seemingly disparate parts of ourselves into the whole. It is the yin and the yang, encircling each other, moving into and away, together making the circle complete. “People rounding the way of earth, Earth rounding the way of heaven, Heaven rounding the way of life till the circle is full.”

So may the circles of our lives be ever-widening, ever welcoming of all the parts that make the whole. So may good versus good be, in our lives, good turning toward good, with our very selves the balancing point between our various callings. Living in such paradox, may your hearts and minds be not confused, but ever expanding, ever opening to all that you, and we, as a religious community, are called to be. Amen.

Second Offering: Out Youth is a non-profit organization whose mission is to support and provide services to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth ages 12 to 19 in Austin and Central Texas. Out Youth offers peer support groups, counseling, educational programs, social activities and community outreach. Out Youth is a place where youth are valued and have the opportunity to give back to their own communities in whatever ways they wish. Here, youth can become part of the solution to the problems that most

concern them. Out Youth is a safe place for youth and their allies to learn, share, and grow. Your contributions will help Out Youth fund changes to their library and provide support for Out Youth's art program.