

**“How Shall We Live? Part VI:
Living in Community in a Time of Conflict”
March 20, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode**

Quotation

Fight for your opinions, but do not believe that they contain the whole truth or the only truth.

(Charles A. Dana, 1819-1819)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

We come together this Sunday

To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;

To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;

To reclaim the vision of an earth more fair, with all her people one.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: One's own self conquered is better than all others conquered; not even a god could change into defeat the victory of one who has conquered one's self.

CONGREGATION: Judge not that you be not judged, for the judgments you give are the judgments you will get.

MINISTER: We condemn in others what we ourselves would commit; we attribute to others what is a problem for ourselves.

CONGREGATION: What we acquit in others, we will acquit in ourselves; what we condemn in others, we will condemn in ourselves.

MINISTER: If you have hate for something out there, this is yourself tho' hard to bear; you hate yourself and think it's me.

CONGREGATION: Nothing we despise in the other is entirely absent from ourselves.

MINISTER: The thing we reject is what we will end up serving; the thing we resist sooner or later overpowers us.

CONGREGATION: Far indeed you fling the stone, but upon yourself will it fall.

MINISTER: To wrong those we hate is to add fuel to our hatred; to treat our enemy with magnanimity is to blunt our hatred for our enemy.

CONGREGATION: Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love.

MINISTER: You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” but I say unto you, love your enemy.

CONGREGATION: Make friends of the enemy; it is your disguised self.
(A selection of proverbs)

Reading

This morning I will be speaking about how to find our way in a world where there are different versions of truth and different judgments about what is right and wrong, good and evil. Is there an objective moral standard to which we can all appeal and upon which we can all agree?

Some of our greatest religious teachers have pointed to a paradox here, namely: the more you are able to lightly hold your own judgments, the more moral you become. “Judge not,” said Jesus, “that you be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1) And: “Love your enemies,” which I take to mean: “Love those whose versions of truth and understandings of good and evil are different and even opposed to your own.”

One of the most interesting statements I have seen related to this paradox is written by Stephen Mitchell in an introduction to his translation (version, actually) of the Tao Te Ching, that ancient book of Chinese wisdom from the hand of Lao Tzu, which means, “Old Master.”

The Master is the one who follows the way of the Tao, which could be described as a center in Nature that transcends all our intellectual concepts but which nevertheless can be known experientially. Stephen Mitchell writes:

Lao-tzu’s central figure is a man or woman whose life is in perfect harmony with the way things are [that is, in harmony with the Tao]. This is not an idea; it is a reality; I have seen it. The Master has mastered Nature; not in the sense of conquering it, but of becoming it. In surrendering to the Tao, in giving up all concepts, judgments, and desires, her mind has grown naturally compassionate. She finds deep in her own experience the central truths of the art of living, which are paradoxical only on the surface: that the more truly solitary we are, the more compassionate we can be; the more we let go of what we love, the more present our love becomes; the clearer our

insight into what is beyond good and evil, the more we can embody the good. Until finally she is able to say, in all humility, “I am the Tao, the Truth, the Life.”

(Stephen Mitchell, Tao Te Ching, pp. viii-ix)

“HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PARTVI: “LIVING IN COMMUNITY IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT”

Introduction

Early in the twentieth century William Butler Yeats began his dark and difficult poem, “The Second Coming,” with these words:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...

Sometime later in the twentieth century Robert Frost, in his light and serious way, quipped:

Nature within her inmost self divides
To trouble men with having to take sides.
(“from Iron: Tools and Weapons”)

Here, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it would seem that Nature is working overtime to trouble us. Rarely has our society ever seemed so divided and, with Yeats, we may wonder whether the center can hold, or even if there is a center.

In last Sunday’s sermon, the fifth in this series with the overall title of, “How Shall We Live?, I asked the question, What sustains us? What sustains us spiritually when things look bleak and when our ideals and visions are foundering?

As an answer to that question I spoke about the reality of Hope, distinguishing “hope” from “optimism,” with Hope being a deeper, larger reality than our individual hopes or our optimistic evaluations with respect particular goals, aims, and ideals.

Following that sermon an attentive listener came to me and said something that went like this:

“This Hope of which you speak would seem to support a variety of different ideals, different versions of truth, and different visions of reality; the same underlying power of hope that would support your version of things and give strength to you would also give support, courage and strength to others whose positions might be completely different than yours, even opposed and abhorrent to yours, positions that might distress you and actually cause you to be quite hopeless. Is this so?”

“It is so,” I said.

“Well,” he replied, “where does that leave us then, and what does it mean? How can we say that our position is a moral position, a position that is worth supporting more than any other position?”

“Ah,” I said in a burst of inspiration, “that’s what I plan to speak about next Sunday.”

“Well, good luck,” he said, “I don’t envy you that task.”

The question of moral relativism

So now next week has come. And, truly, this is one of the most difficult problems with which one can deal. And it’s not just a problem for thought; it’s a problem for living.

Persons on all sides appeal to the same reality – sometimes the same deity – to support their varied and often opposing positions on things. And hero deeds are performed on each side of enemy lines – acts of courage, devotion and sacrifice to one’s particular allegiance, ideal, and vision of goodness.

A hard truth to swallow and digest is that the al-Qaeda bombers of 9/11 performed a hero deed from their point of view. “Hero’s deed?!” it is exclaimed from another side, “that was the most cowardly, despicable, demonic deed one could conceive and carry out.”

Thus the question: Is one reduced to complete moral relativism? Is one version of truth just as good as any other? And is truth just a matter of how you were socialized, or who has the votes, or who has the bombs? Is there a center that can hold things together?

Joseph Campbell, the great student of world mythologies, would answer that, “Yes, of course, there is a center; there’s always a center. It goes like this:”

There is a plane of consciousness where you can identify yourself with that which transcends pairs of opposites. (from The Power of Myth)

One of those pairs of opposites is the moral category of good and evil.

And Robert Frost in the quip I gave you says:

Nature within her inmost self divides
To trouble men with having to take sides.

Here, Nature is the larger category that stands above the division that is within itself. That can be symbolized, for example, in the Chinese image of the tai-chi disc, the circle of yin and yang.

And Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, using different language but with the same basic idea, counsels us to love our enemies, that is, to love those whose positions are different and opposed to our own, to love those who we think are evil and unjust. And why should

we love our enemy? Because the Father in heaven “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust.” (Matthew 5:45)

In these three examples there is a deeper center or a higher reality – call it a “plane of consciousness,” “Nature,” or the “Father in heaven” – that transcends our human judgments.

A paradox

We can’t avoid making judgments. Indeed, we must make them. We should make them, and with the greatest of care – I am trying to do that now. But beyond those judgments is this larger reality that calls us to hold these judgments loosely, tentatively, and with utmost humility.

Here’s the paradox as I see it: The same creative reality that propels us toward ever more discerning and refined judgments of what is good and right also relativizes those judgments – that is, they are truths, but only fragments of truth; they are pieces of reality, but only pieces of reality that can be seen from your point of view – others will see different pieces.

Or, again, the paradox could be stated this way: The Power that unstintingly supports different visions and versions of the good, the true, and the beautiful also urges us to try to embrace those who hold different versions and visions than we do.

There is, I judge, an inner urge to stretch ourselves, to always and forever love more of reality than we have loved up to this time. We don’t always follow this urge, and we often argue and disagree about what it means to follow this urge; nevertheless, the urge to expand and to stretch ourselves beyond our present reality and point of view is always there. That urge may be disguised, deflected, and damaged, but I would argue that it is always there.

Thus, I am not a moral relativist – at least not today. I judge that there is what I would call a “trans-moral center” that manifests in our lives. That is, at the center of our being there is that which urges us in the direction of goodness and love but which at the same transcends any particular version of goodness and love.

Further, I would contend that by attending to this Center that transcends our present concepts of good and evil a person paradoxically becomes more moral. As Stephen Mitchell writes in this morning’s reading: “...the clearer our insight into what is beyond good and evil, the more we can embody the good.”

Living in two planes

Thus, we are connected to and live on two planes. One is the horizontal plane related to judgments of good and evil, “yes” and “no.” The other plane, as Joseph Campbell says, is the plane of consciousness that transcends this pair of opposites.

The trick in life is to live *simultaneously* at these two levels.

How do we do that? That is, how can we throw our weight to one side of a teeter-totter and at the same time rest at the fulcrum point in the center? How can we live on the horizontal plane of “yes” and “no” where we make our judgments, take our stands, and participate in the give and take of our life; and at the same time live in the vertical plane, which gives us an anchor point beyond this everyday reality?

A debate

Recently a person told me of a debate he had witnessed. It took place in a meditation session led by a Tibetan Buddhist lama in which an argument arose relating to the killing of mosquitoes. A woman, a Buddhist nun, claimed, “One *must not* kill a mosquito. If you kill even a mosquito, it will affect your karma.”

But a man countered, “On the contrary, you *must* kill the mosquito. If you don’t kill that mosquito, it could infect human beings, disease might be spread, and many might die.”

Back and forth the argument flew: “You *must not* kill the mosquito.” “You *must* kill the mosquito.”

The teacher, the Buddhist lama, listened carefully to each position. With interest and seeming pleasure he followed the arguments back and forth, like one observing a tennis match or a ping-pong volley. When finally the volley ended, he responded in this way:

First, he expressed gratitude that both persons had given thought to this matter and had the courage to speak their truths.

Secondly, he granted that each of the positions held merit and was rooted in a compassionate view of life.

Thirdly, he did not render a judgment as to what ought to be done. If at that moment a mosquito had landed on the teacher, you would not have been able to predict whether the teacher would welcome it, endure it, or swat it. In other words, the teacher was not going to tell them how they should individually act; that was a personal decision with which each would have to grapple and with which each would have to live.

And, fourthly, though this was not explicitly stated on this occasion, it was understood that whatever individual decision was made and whatever individual action taken, one’s commitment to that particular position ought not to lead to the diminishment, ridicule, or scorn of persons holding differing positions and taking differing courses of action.

A transcendent Center

The Buddhist teacher in this story represents a Center that exists in each of us, a plane of

consciousness that transcends the pairs of opposites in which we exist.

It's like the tennis match I mentioned: there's the court with its boundary lines, the net in the middle, and the two opponents on opposite sides of the net volleying back and forth, each trying to win points. That's the horizontal level, the pairs of opposites in our lives.

And where's the transcendent Center? That's the referee seated *above* the net at the *center* of the court. This is the one who watches the game and wants to see it played cleanly – and also, I suppose, hopes for an interesting match. But the referee is not interested, or ought not to be interested, in who wins or loses, only in the game itself.

Thus, the trick in our life is to both participate in the game *and* watch it at the same time.

Loss of the Center

The danger – a heightened danger in our present polarized time – is to neglect the transcending Center in our lives and to become so attached to what is happening on our side of the net that we lose the perspective, fairness, and balance that the Center provides. Thus, we miss the game itself.

When we neglect our connection to the Center our vision narrows. And how can others be so blind! It's all so clear! How can they not see?!

Further, our need for self-justification – the defense of our side of the net only – increases. I have found in myself, for example, having opposed the present war in Iraq, being secretly pleased when things have not gone well there, even though it meant death and destruction – “Told you so” – and perhaps now not so entirely pleased to see signs of democracy flourishing and the possibility that something good may yet come out of this.

In a time of division and polarization, such as our time, as positions get drawn and sides dug in, it becomes more difficult to believe that the opponent is operating from as sincere a motivation or as positive a human heart as we believe we are. It's not just that the other human has a different point of view, it's that the other human begins to look less human to us.

The spiritual glue that binds human community together begins to dissolve, common courtesy is lost, and in its place, on both sides, comes suspicion, name-calling and demonization – and, also on both sides, the undermining of the very values that both have proclaimed and sought.

Thus we wonder: Can the center hold?

Examples of some who were connected with a transcending Center

Let me conclude with three quick examples of persons who have lived near enough to the Center to be able to reach out and embrace those on the other side of the polar divide.

The first is Nelson Mandela. I have been thinking of him throughout this sermon series:

How he worked through hatred.

How he refused to compromise his own dignity and humanity and, at the same time, and perhaps because of this, would not diminish the dignity and humanity of those who imprisoned him.

How he wished to liberate all persons, recognizing that we all imprisoned in our own ways and that the capacity for partiality and prejudice belongs to all of us.

How he led a movement through a process of “Truth and Reconciliation” that brought about something that nobody believed possible, namely, a revolution in South Africa without bloodshed.

And the second person I think of is Gandhi, that tenacious advocate of non-violent resistance. Gandhi taught the principle of full participation in the activity of this world – you take your part, you make your stand – along with complete detachment from the fruits of one’s action. That is, he was anchored in a center beyond the action that allowed him to reach out to the opponent. He said:

The one who gives up action falls. The one who gives up only the reward rises. Our renunciation of fruit [the fruit of the action] in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action one must know the result that is expected to follow, the means thereto, and the capacity for it. The one, who, being thus equipped, is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him or her, is said to have renounced the fruits of his or her action.

(Adapted for gender)

Full participation, full detachment – that’s living simultaneously in the two planes of our existence.

The third example is Jesus of Nazareth, who by word and deed taught us to love our enemies. Again, this can only be done by being connected to a transcending Center that frees you from attachment to your particular tribe, your particular beliefs, and your particular judgments.

The story of Jesus – his life, his teaching, his spirit – has become mythologized and ritualized in the symbols of “Crucifixion” and “Resurrection,” Good Friday and Easter:

Good Friday – the dying to one’s old self, the surrender of all that you hold dear, of all you have believed and stood for – “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Easter – the rising to a new life, a larger understanding, and a greater embrace of reality than any you had known before.

In this coming week we will draw on that tradition in our Good Friday and Easter services, and that will also conclude this sermon series of “How Shall We Live?”

Benediction

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to the infinite delight and mystery of it.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this chalice,
but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community,
or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
until we are together again. Amen.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Sunday, March 20, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)