

“The Principle of ‘No Blame’”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 13, 2008
Bruce A. Bode

Quotation for Order of Service

“Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”

(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

The words for the lighting of our chalice on this Flower Communion Sunday are from Robert Frost’s poem, “A Prayer in Spring.”

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

Opening Words

This is a resplendent new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Musical Response

To see the world in a grain of sand,
and a heaven in a wild flower,
hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
and eternity in an hour. (William Blake)

FLOWER COMMUNION

Introduction

We just sang the words of poet, William Blake: To see a World in a Grain of Sand/
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower ...

Today, near the beginning of Spring, along with many other Unitarian Universalist congregations at this time of the year, we celebrate a Flower Communion, a ritual in which each of us is invited to bring a flower to the service, place it in a vase along with flowers that others have been brought, and then in a simple processional select a flower different than the one you brought.

In this simple ceremony we are called, first of all, simply to pay attention to the flower that we have chosen. Can we, like William Blake, see a heaven in this flower we have selected?

And then one step further, we are called to see ourselves as flowers – to see ourselves as beautiful, fragrant, fragile and holy forms of life that have sprung from of the earth, that have arisen from the deep mystery of Being, and which are here upon this earth for a short time.

This simple Flower Communion ceremony was introduced to the Unitarian congregations of America in the mid-1900's by a minister from Czechoslovakia named Norbert Capek. At one time Rev. Capek led the largest Unitarian congregation in the world, a congregation of 5000 members in the beautiful city of Prague in the Czech Republic. That congregation was decimated by both World War II and the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia following World War II, and Rev. Capek himself was arrested, imprisoned, and executed in a concentration camp in Dachau, Germany in 1942.

The congregation he built still exists and is trying to re-construct itself, and the Flower Communion ceremony he started lives on in many congregations. When Rev. Capek would lead this ceremony he would offer a prayer of consecration for the flowers that were brought to the service.

So before we come forward to select a flower from these vases, let us join together in reading Rev. Capek's, "Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers," found in your Order of Service.

Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers (in unison)

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection, and devotion to thy holy will. May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike. May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts. May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that, whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world. Amen.

Processional

Now I invite each of you to come forward *in silence* beginning with the back rows and coming down the outside aisles. We have extra flowers in case you did not bring one. And if you did bring a flower, please select a flower that is different from the one you brought – one that attracts you – and then return quietly to your seat up the center aisle. After everyone has selected a flower and returned to their seat, we will stand and sing the four verses of hymn #8, a hymn whose words were written by Rev. Capek.

Responsive Reading

This morning I will be talking about an attitude and an approach to life – a kind of spiritual discipline, if you will – that enables one to detach from the past in order to look forward with possibility toward the future. I am calling this approach, “The Principle of ‘No Blame,’” a principle succinctly expressed by Jesus in the words, “Judge not,” and a principle also found in this responsive reading by poet, Kahlil Gibran.

MINISTER: Often I have heard you speak of those who commit a wrong as though they were not one of you, but a stranger to you and an intruder upon your world.

CONGREGATION: Yet, even as the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest in you, so the wicked can fall no lower than the lowest in you.

MINISTER: When some among you fall down, they fall for those behind them – a caution against the stumbling stone.

CONGREGATION: And they fall as well for those ahead of them, who though faster and surer of foot, yet did not remove the stumbling stone.

MINISTER: The righteous is not innocent of the deeds of the wicked; the guilty is often the victim of the injured; the condemned is often the burden-bearer for the unblamed.

CONGREGATION: You cannot separate the just from the unjust, nor the good from the wicked; they stand together before the face of the sun.

MINISTER: If any of you would punish in the name of righteousness, and lay axe to the evil tree, let them see through to its roots;

CONGREGATION: For they shall find the roots of the good and the evil, the fruitful and the fruitless, all entwined together, in the silent heart of the earth.

(Kahlil Gibran, from The Prophet; adapted)

“THE PRINCIPLE OF 'NO BLAME'”

The principle of “no blame.” What is it?

Basically, it’s the idea that the more we can move beyond worrying about who or what is to blame for a situation, the more quickly we are in a position to do something about that situation.

This morning I will explore five different applications of this principle:

1. Not blaming the universe for our fate
2. Not blaming others for our fate
3. Not blaming ourselves for our fate
4. Not blaming others for their fate
5. Not blaming the universe for its fate

1. Not blaming the universe for our fate

First, not blaming the universe for our fate.

There's what might be called the “if only game.” *If only* things were different than they are. If only the universe had tumbled in just a little different direction than it has, then I

would be happier and better off than I am now. If only I were a few inches taller.... If only I had been born a few years later, etc. ... an endless and fruitless game, in which we waste our time and spin our wheels.

You've heard it said, perhaps out of your own mouth, "Life's not fair."

I hear in this statement, without even listening very carefully, a kind of grudge or resentment against life for being what it is – an assumption, an expectation, that reality should be *other* than it is, that the world ought to have been created more for my delight and service, and when it turns out not to meet those expectations, then it is thought to be unfair. This sense of the world's unfairness sometimes provides an excuse for our attitude and behavior:

“Life’s not fair, so why should I be fair.”

“Life has cheated me, so I can cheat on life.”

“Life has not dealt me a decent hand, so I can cut corners on it.”

We have an excuse for having a sour attitude, an excuse for being irritable or unethical. We're not responsible for our attitude and behavior; it's the universe's fault.

But blaming the universe for our fate or acting as if life is unfair is like cursing the rock upon which we have stumbled, or kicking the chair upon which we've stubbed our toe. The rock and the chair are not after us personally, and neither, presumably, is the universe. In these reactions we are just wasting our energy and not learning much about ourselves or reality.

Thus, we need a principle of “no blame” with respect to the universe. And what this principle has to do with is embracing fully the hand that has been dealt us, whatever that hand might be.

I considered saying that this principle has to do with “receiving *with gladness* the hand that is dealt us.” But that might be a little much, though I suspect that the more we can receive with gladness the hand that has been dealt us, the more gladness we will find in our lives.

But let's simply say that the principle of “no blame” has to do with fully embracing the hand that is dealt us. This will give us plenty to work on. Actually, it will be the task of a lifetime, for it probably takes a lifetime to give up our attitude of thinking that we deserve better than we do from the universe. It takes a lifetime to learn about our own

secret pockets of specialness ... little hidden pockets where we somehow think we are special and deserve special treatment ... that what befalls others can't or shouldn't befall us.

It takes a lifetime to learn that there is nothing special about our fate. It takes a lifetime to become ordinary, and not to blame the universe to discover that we are – oh, so very – ordinary.

The demon you can swallow

In Bill Moyers' interviews with Joseph Campbell a number of years ago, there's an example of what it means to fully embrace and accept the hand that has been dealt us. Joseph Campbell speaks in those interviews of an encounter he had with a woman who from her youth had an affliction that caused her severe pain – and not only physical pain but also mental pain, because she believed her affliction was a punishment from God, that somehow a divine intelligence had singled her out for special affliction.

This woman wanted release from this situation and asked Joseph Campbell how she might obtain such release. Campbell replied that if she wanted release from her suffering she should affirm and not deny her suffering, that she should say “yes” to the situation and take her suffering as if – *as if* – it were something that she herself had chosen – not literally chosen, but yet take the situation *as if* she had chosen it ... and thus own the situation.

Meanwhile Campbell, as he was speaking to this woman, was thinking to himself: “Who am I to say such a thing to this suffering individual when I've never had much more than a toothache in my life?”

And yet through this conversation this woman experienced a conversion of attitude, and it transformed her. She accepted the fact that she couldn't escape her condition. She understood through this conversation that if she was going to move on, she had embrace her life; she had to swallow her affliction.

Campbell said that he kept in touch with woman in the following years and saw that her capacity to swallow and digest her circumstance made her a noble person. It became her source of strength.

The spiritual law here can be expressed as follows: “The demon that you can swallow gives you its power.”

In other words, take the circumstance in your life that you find is the most difficult to accept. Take the thing that has upset you the most, the thing that is the most bitter to you, the thing that haunts you the most, that thing that won't go away, the thing that won't change, the thing that you can't get around, the thing that you can't undo. To the extent that you can receive and accept it, and not begrudge it or blame it for being in your life – to that extent, its power becomes yours.

The image that comes to my mind here is of a snake, like a boa constrictor, unhinging its jaws in order to swallow an object that appears to be larger than it could possibly take in.

Thus, the thing here is not to blame, or to explain, or to look for meaning; but, rather, the thing is to receive, to accept, to embrace, and to work with the situation.

This is not fatalism, which is a diminishment of life; this is an acceptance of life in its *totality*. It is an active working with the circumstances of your life – not avoiding them, denying them, or giving up in the face of them.

It's a matter of accepting chance ... a matter of accepting *your* chance in life! This is who we are! This is the hand that has been dealt! We are not someone else; we are not some other possibility; we are not some other configuration of circumstances. This is how the universe has come together in this specific instance. This is how the universe has been instantiated – made substantial and real. Out of the myriad of possibilities – and we can imagine ten thousand, thousand such possibilities – out of all the potentialities and possibilities, this is the one possibility that has been made actual and real.

Could it have been different? We can imagine how it might have been. Why wasn't it different? Again, we can speculate on reasons. But this is what is! This is the life that we have! This is how reality and the universe has unfolded in concrete time and space!

And when we quit blaming, or looking for a cause or reason, or an explanation, or a meaning, or a way out; then we can engage our will. And such engagement of will gives us power. The demon, the disaster, the circumstance that we can swallow gives us its power.

2. Not blaming others for our fate

A second application of this principle of “no blame” has to do with not blaming others for our fate, which is really just another aspect of not blaming the universe.

But how do we not blame those who have damaged our lives, even when our life may have been turned upside down by another person or by a group of persons?

Let’s say, for example, that a person driving recklessly and irresponsibly causes an accident in which we are injured or in which loved ones are injured or even killed. Or, let’s say, a thief steals from us, or we are cheated in some way, or there is abuse, or cruelty, or neglect, or betrayal. All of us can think of a thousand examples of recklessness or irresponsible behavior, some of which are absolutely hideous.

Does the principle of no blame apply here? Or how does it apply?

I believe it must apply or we'll simply get stuck in life, become bitter, sour, and cynical.

A distinction needs to be made between holding persons responsible for the consequences of their behavior and blaming them for their behavior. There's a difference between justice and vengeance. There's a distinction between bad behavior and a bad person. It's the distinction I was taught as a youngster between the sinner and the sin – “Love the sinner, but not the sin.”

The principle of no blame teaches that any human act belongs to all of us (as in this morning’s responsive reading from Kahlil Gibran). We belong to humanity, and any human act belongs to all of us. We are connected with it, and under other circumstances it would be possible for us to have done something similar.

Thus, we need to give up blame, because in blame we are pretending that some human actions are not part of us, and that we are above them. To the extent that we can understand a situation and move beyond blame, to that extent we're in a position to help to change the situation. Blame does not change a situation, it only perpetuates an unwanted situation by diminishing self-worth. And a diminished sense of one's worth diminishes one's power of response.

It's not right and it does no good to call people “scum,” or “slime” or “vermin” or “trash,” or any other such words, no matter what they've done. It seems to me by doing so we're only touching our own sense of worthlessness and finding a convenient hook to hang it on.

As long as two persons or two groups of persons are blaming each other, the battle rages. It is only when we can begin to drop the blame for the past that a movement toward a new future can occur.

3. Not blaming ourselves for our fate

Thirdly, not blaming ourselves for our fate.

In contrast to the first two applications of this principle, which had to do with blaming outside factors for our fate, this third application has to do with blaming ourselves for our fate – and these are not mutually exclusive of each other.

Often, it seems, we operate on an assumption that our lot in life is solely our responsibility, and if things are not going well, then we are totally to blame.

The woman in the example I mentioned earlier believed her affliction was a punishment from God. That is, it's preferable to think that our problems have come about because we've fouled up, rather than to think that God is weak or that the universe is just made this way. This, perhaps, is the psychological basis of "original sin." The original sin is ours. We're to blame for the way things are and the way we are.

We know the tendency of children to take things as their fault, things for which they are not at all responsible. Incidents of incest and rape, for example, are taken as their own fault. For these children, it is preferable to take the shame and guilt upon themselves than to risk losing the support of the parents, or to think that the parents might have problems. The imperfection, the flaw, the problem must be in me. Painful years later they may wake up one day – if they're lucky – to the fact: "Hey, I was just a child. I was used and abused."

Psychologist Edward Edinger interestingly says in this regard: "It is the almost universal mistake of the ego to assume total personal responsibility for its sufferings and failures. We find it, for instance," he says, "in the general attitude people have toward their own weaknesses, an attitude of shame or denial." That is, our weakness are something totally of our own doing.

Thus, we need to see our personal issues in a larger framework. Our problems, disasters, difficulties, and struggles are not just our personal issues; they are, first of all, the struggles of the universe and of reality as a whole. We are dealing with powers, problems, and paradoxes that are larger than our little ego – conflicts and tensions that

are inherent in life and Being itself. Once we see this larger picture, hopefully, we can let go of a little of our self-blame for our lot in life, and then we have a little lever with which to move things.

Making mistakes

Another aspect of blaming ourselves has to do with blaming ourselves for our actions – not just for our lot in life, but for our actions.

There's a tendency to think that we should not make mistakes. Any little mistake and we beat up on ourselves. We castigate ourselves with: "What a dope am I." "What a fool I am." "How could I have been so stupid?" "I must be the dumbest person in the whole, wide, world, maybe even in the whole universe." "Never before in the history of the universe has anyone ever been so stupid as I am." A kind of reverse pride.

So how do we deal with our mistakes without blaming ourselves and thinking that we are unworthy creatures with hardly the right to exist?

Let me give you some tough examples: What if we get lung cancer after years of smoking? Or cirrhosis of the liver after years of drinking? Or heart problems from lack of exercise or overeating? Or AIDS from unprotected sex in a risk situation? Or ulcers from constantly pushing ourselves? Or the breakup of our marriage and family from inattention and neglect? Or what if we injure or kill someone after driving irresponsibly?

How do we live with ourselves when we get the consequences we are asking for? Do we in some way want these consequences? Do we think we deserve these things because we are bad? How does the ego maintain itself through all of this?

Again, blame does no good. It does no good to beat up on ourselves. Somehow we have to see that whatever we've done, whatever we will do, we are still acceptable. We are the experiments of the creative power of being.

The idea is to accept our humanness and to take a look at our patterns of behavior – to see what seeds have sprouted and grown, and what fruit has been produced. Our mistakes are a wake-up call to responsibility, *if* we can get through blaming.

This doesn't mean that we don't live with our mistakes and weaknesses or that we don't live with our past actions. Of course we do. And if we take them in responsibility and

not in blame, they can become a source of strength rather than a weakness.

The psychological trick in 12-step programs

The 12-step programs employ a little psychological trick that moves people beyond blame and beyond being victims toward responsibility for their actions. The program basically says, “This problem you have, this addiction, this pattern of behavior, is larger than yourself. It is a disease. It is an illness. You can't do anything about it. Everything you've tried hasn't worked and won't work because this is larger than you. So stop this approach and stop beating up on yourself for your failure. Instead, surrender to it. Surrender to it, let go of it, become free from it, and now take responsibility for your future action.”

In other words, stop the blame and take responsibility. And the two things go hand in hand. It's only as we are able to get through the blame that we can begin to act responsibly. Self-blame diminishes our power of response. Release from blame, as in 12-step programs, frees us to change.

We all have weaknesses. It is not possible not to have weaknesses. And one of these weaknesses is the tendency to think that we are unworthy as human beings because we have weaknesses. And this sense of unworthiness keeps us from working with these weaknesses.

So don't blame yourself for blaming yourself. But if you can't keep from blaming yourself for blaming yourself, that's all right too.

4. Not blaming others for their fate

A fourth application of the principle of “no blame” has to do with not blaming others for their fate.

This is an issue that is addressed in the biblical book of Job. Job's friends assume there is some connection between his disastrous fate and his attitude and approach to life – “What have you done, Job, to bring this disaster upon yourself? What secret sin? What attitudinal problem?”

We tend to think we know why others are the way they are, what they have done wrong to get in the situation they are in, and what they need to do to correct it. Would that our own problems were so easy to diagnose and correct!

And how many times have we felt unjustly accused because others were not aware of the circumstances of our situation?!

The principle of “no blame” counsels a more humble approach. It says: We really don't know what others go through, what circumstances they've experienced, what patterns were given them, what forces are at work in them.

And beyond this, again, it simply does no practical good to blame others – “Why did you knock over that glass of milk?” “Didn't you see that car coming?” “I don't understand how you could do something so stupid?”

Here we're in the category of statements that start with: “I can't believe that you...” or “Why didn't you...” or “Don't you know that...” or “I thought you knew better than to...” or “What were you thinking when you...”

Calling other persons stupid after they have done something stupid does not add useful information.

And why do we tend to blame in this way? Again, such blame by us just comes out of our own pool of self-blame. It's an off-the-mark attempt to deal with our own sense of unworthiness and shame. If we think about this at all, we know such blaming does no good, but our pool is so deep and the sides so slippery leading to it, it's hard not to fall into it.

But let us say we are talking about some horrific crime such as murder or rape or incest or torture. What then?

Again, there is a distinction between blaming persons and having people live with the consequences of their actions.

The attitude of blame says: “How can this have happened? This shouldn't have happened. We'll get the culprit; we'll string him up; he'll pay; he'll be punished, etc., etc.”

The “no blame” approach is like this: “This has happened; I understand this has happened; I understand that this could have happened; I understand that the seeds of this happening are also in me; and I understand that there are consequences that go with this happening.”

In other words, one judges the action or behavior, but not the person. The person remains a human like us. And by making this distinction we affirm the possibility for good in another, for development in another, and are in a position to prevent such happenings in the future.

Here is how I would like to express the operating principle here: *Assume that others are doing the best that they know how, and they then begin to do even better than they think they know how.*

By operating on the assumption that another is doing his or her best, we address the best in that individual, and help that person to discover the best that in him or her.

5. Not blaming the universe for its fate

A final application of the principle of "no blame" has to do with not blaming the world, the universe, or reality for its fate.

Sometimes in looking at the world we feel overwhelmed with what we regard as its problems. We see and feel all the pain and cruelty. We see hunger and disease and anxiety and fear. Particularly, with mass communication, we are aware of so much that we might like to change. We wish we could reach out and heal the world, and we feel the futility in not being able to do so. We wonder why the world can't be different than it is. And the sorrow of the world is strong upon us.

The principle of "no blame" says that it's okay for us to feel this sorrow. It is part of our fate to feel it, and we're not going to escape that fate. Sorrow is a part of the creation and we're not going to change that. We can do some things to alleviate the sorrow. We can do what we can do. But the sorrow will always be there in one form or another. "All life is sorrowful" – the first of the Buddha's four noble truths. It's where we start. It's something we have to swallow.

And the principle of "no blame" says that the world needs to go through its changes, its agonies, its ecstasies, its experiments.

And we are part of that. There's no need to blame the universe for what it is, because the creative power of the universe is not first of all outside of us acting upon us, but *we are* that very creative power. It is working itself out in and through us. To blame the universe for its problems is ultimately to blame ourselves, for we too are the creative

power.

Every single day our life is muddled by our dissatisfaction with the way things are. Every day our life is filled with a host of things that we can imagine should be different. But we know, if we think about it at all, that things will never, ever be as perfect as we can imagine them.

Somehow we have to come to the point of saying that life *right now*, as it is, is okay, that the universe is unfolding as it, apparently, must unfold, and that we are part of that unfolding.

And if we can give up our need to shift it around, then we'll find life's glory. The glory will open itself to us.

And, finally, paradoxically, when we can give up the need to shift things around, then, surprisingly, things have a way of shifting on their own and coming more into balance. We find it was not the circumstances themselves that wouldn't shift so much as it was our attitude of blaming things that was blocking life. And when we let go of blame, then life flows, the natural life of the world; and, indeed, we see that in the end all is well, and all will be well.

I close with one of Mary Oliver's most appreciated and loved poems, titled "Wild Geese." It's a poem found in her book, Dream Work, a book that struggles with suicide and self-acceptance. And this poem follows immediately in the book after a poem titled, "Rage," which is about rape. And then we read these startling words:

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

(Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese," Dream Work)

Closing Words

My closing words are from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our 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.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 13, 2008. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)