

**“Necessary Tensions: Practicality and Liberality:  
‘Home is the place where...they have to take you in’”**

**March 14, 2010**

**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

**Rev. Bruce Bode**

**Poetry for bulletin**

For every parcel I stoop down to seize  
I lose some other off my arms and knees,  
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns,  
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,  
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.  
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind  
And heart, if need be, I will do my best  
To keep their building balanced at my breast.  
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;  
Then sit down in the middle of them all.  
I had to drop the armful in the road  
And try to stack them in a better load.

(Robert Frost, “The Armful”)

**Lighting the Chalice (in unison)**

We come together, compounded of the ancient elements,  
mud and fire within it we call life, vast waters, and something – the intangible substance  
of hope – out of which the human dream is made.

(Loren Eiseley)

**Opening Words & Musical Response**

This is a new day that has been given unto us,  
Let us then rejoice in it and count our 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 for 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.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: For those of us who live at the shoreline, standing upon the constant edges  
of decision, crucial and alone;

CONGREGATION: For those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice;

MINISTER: For those of us who were imprinted with fear, like a faint line in the center of our foreheads, learning to be afraid with our mother's milk;

CONGREGATION: For by this weapon, this illusion of some safety to be found, the heavy-footed hoped to silence us;

MINISTER: For all of us, this instant and this triumph, we were never meant to survive.

CONGREGATION: And when the sun rises, we are afraid it might not remain;

MINISTER: And when the sun sets, we are afraid it might not rise in the morning;

CONGREGATION: And when our stomachs are full, we are afraid of indigestion;

MINISTER: And when our stomachs are empty, we are afraid we may never eat again;

CONGREGATION: And when we are loved, we are afraid love will vanish;

MINISTER: And when we are alone, we are afraid love will never return;

CONGREGATION: And when we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed.

MINISTER: But when we are silent, we are still afraid.

CONGREGATION: So it is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive.

(Audre Lorde, "A Litany of Survival," from *The Black Unicorn*, adapted)

### **Introduction to Reading**

Our reading this morning is a dramatic poem by Robert Frost titled, "The Death of the Hired Man." It's found in his second book of poetry, North of Boston, first published in England in 1914 but written seven years before in 1907, while Frost was farming in Derry, New Hampshire. This poem is the second poem in his book North of Boston and follows "Mending Wall," on which I based my message last week.

"The Death of the Hired Man" is not written as a play, but it lends itself to being read as a play. I've asked Dick and Esther Conway to join me in reading the poem this morning.

The poem consists of an extended dialogue between a husband and wife in relation to the appearance of a farmhand who had previously worked on their farm, and who now shows up in a condition of poor health. The question is whether or not to take him in.

The part of the wife, Mary, will be read by Esther Conway; that of the husband, Warren, by Dick Conway; and I will read the part of the Narrator.

## “The Death of the Hired Man”

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table  
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,  
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage  
To meet him in the doorway with the news  
And put him on his guard. "Silas is back."  
She pushed him outward with her through the door  
And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said.  
She took the market things from Warren's arms  
And set them on the porch, then drew him down  
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

"When was I ever anything but kind to him?  
But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.  
'I told him so last haying, didn't I?  
'If he left then,' I said, 'that ended it.'  
What good is he? Who else will harbor him  
At his age for the little he can do?  
What help he is there's no depending on.  
Off he goes always when I need him most.  
'He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,  
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,  
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.'  
'All right,' I say, 'I can't afford to pay  
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.'  
'Someone else can.' 'Then someone else will have to.'  
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself  
If that was what it was. You can be certain,  
When he begins like that, there's someone at him  
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,--  
In haying time, when any help is scarce.  
In winter he comes back to us. I'm done."

"Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you," Mary said.

"I want him to: he'll have to soon or late."

"He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.  
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,  
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,  
A miserable sight, and frightening, too--  
You needn't smile--I didn't recognize him--  
I wasn't looking for him--and he's changed.  
Wait till you see."

"Where did you say he'd been?"

"He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,  
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.  
I tried to make him talk about his travels.  
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off."

"What did he say? Did he say anything?"

"But little."

"Anything? Mary, confess  
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me."

"Warren!"

"But did he? I just want to know."

"Of course he did. What would you have him say?  
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man  
Some humble way to save his self-respect.  
He added, if you really care to know,  
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.  
That sounds like something you have heard before?  
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way  
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look  
Two or three times--he made me feel so queer--  
To see if he was talking in his sleep.  
He ran on Harold Wilson--you remember--  
The boy you had in haying four years since.  
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.  
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.  
He says they two will make a team for work:  
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!  
The way he mixed that in with other things.  
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft  
On education--you know how they fought  
All through July under the blazing sun,  
Silas up on the cart to build the load,  
Harold along beside to pitch it on."

"Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot."

"Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.  
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!  
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.

After so many years he still keeps finding  
Good arguments he sees he might have used.  
I sympathize. I know just how it feels  
To think of the right thing to say too late.  
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.  
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying  
He studied Latin like the violin  
Because he liked it--that an argument!  
He said he couldn't make the boy believe  
He could find water with a hazel prong--  
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.  
He wanted to go over that. But most of all  
He thinks if he could have another chance  
To teach him how to build a load of hay----"

"I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.  
He bundles every forkful in its place,  
And tags and numbers it for future reference,  
So he can find and easily dislodge it  
In the unloading. Silas does that well.  
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.  
You never see him standing on the hay  
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."

"He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be  
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.  
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.  
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,  
And nothing to look backward to with pride,  
And nothing to look forward to with hope,  
So now and never any different."

Part of a moon was falling down the west,  
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.  
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw  
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand  
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,  
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,  
As if she played unheard the tenderness  
That wrought on him beside her in the night.  
"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:  
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?"

It all depends on what you mean by home.  
Of course he's nothing to us, any more  
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us  
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in."

"I should have called it  
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,  
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back  
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.  
"Silas has better claim on us you think  
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles  
As the road winds would bring him to his door.  
Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.  
Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,  
A somebody--director in the bank."

"He never told us that."

"We know it though."

"I think his brother ought to help, of course.  
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right  
To take him in, and might be willing to--  
He may be better than appearances.  
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think  
If he'd had any pride in claiming kin  
Or anything he looked for from his brother,  
He'd keep so still about him all this time?"

"I wonder what's between them."

"I can tell you.  
Silas is what he is--we wouldn't mind him--  
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.  
He never did a thing so very bad.  
He don't know why he isn't quite as good  
As anyone. He won't be made ashamed  
To please his brother, worthless though he is."

"I can't think Si ever hurt anyone."

"No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay  
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.  
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.  
You must go in and see what you can do.  
I made the bed up for him there to-night.  
You'll be surprised at him--how much he's broken.  
His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

"I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.  
But, Warren, please remember how it is:  
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.  
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.  
He may not speak of it, and then he may.  
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud  
Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.  
Then there were three there, making a dim row,  
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned--too soon, it seemed to her,  
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

"Warren," she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

**“Necessary Tensions: Practicality and Possibility:  
‘Home is the place where...they have to take you in’”**

## **Introduction**

This is the second in a sermon series exploring what I am calling “necessary tensions” in life – tensions that are inherent in life and that belong to life, tensions that one needs to learn to live with and not try to escape.

Problems in relation to these “necessary tensions” come when you think that it might be nice to try to live without the tension, when you think that you might be able to by-pass or avoid the tension.

A member of our congregation sent me a short e-mail after last Sunday’s sermon indicating that a part of this person’s life right now was sorting out “unnecessary tensions” from “necessary ones” ... and saying that knowing what the necessary tensions are was a helpful thing in this sorting process.

## **A catalogue of “necessary tensions”**

One place a person might go to find a catalogue of “necessary tensions” in life is to ancient wisdom, such as you find in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew scriptures. There, in a well-known passage from the third chapter, we find an author who has surveyed the whole of existence and discovered a great many “necessary tensions” in our lives. Chapter three begins with these words: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” And then follows a catalogue of polarities in our lives:

A time to be born *and* a time to die;... [How different things might be if as a culture we embraced death as a natural part of our lives rather than trying to split it off and deny it]  
A time to weep *and* a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn *and* a time to dance;...  
A time to seek *and* a time to lose;...  
A time to keep *and* a time to cast away;  
A time to tear *and* a time to mend;  
A time to keep silent *and* a time to speak....

These are examples of polar opposites in our lives – opposites that belong to each other, like the negative and positive poles of a battery. You need both poles to get any energy. The poles are not independent, but inter-dependent. They belong to each other. They take their definition from each other. You don’t know one without knowing something of the other.

The two poles together are part of a greater unit, and the whole is comprised of the two poles *and* their tension. If you break that tension, as with the two poles of a battery, you have no energy.

So it’s not that one side is right and valid and the other side wrong or invalid. Both sides are valid, *as is the tension between them*. The problem comes when you think you can live on just on one side of the equation.

## **A modern cataloguing of “necessary tensions”**

For a more modern cataloguing of these polar opposites and necessary tensions in life, I would refer you to a little book by Robert A. Johnson, titled Owning Your Own Shadow. There he says:

“Every single virtue in this world is made valid by its opposite. Light would mean nothing without dark, masculine without feminine, care without abandon. Truths always come in pairs and one has to endure this to accord with reality. To suffer means to allow [as in the old scriptural translation from Jesus, “Suffer, the little children to come unto me;” that is, “*Allow* the little children to come unto me];

and in this sense one suffers the mystery of duality. Whenever you do *this*, something immediately does *that*. Such is reality.” (p. 82)

Robert Johnson compares these tensions in life to being on a teeter-totter. And the holy place on this teeter-totter of life, he says, is not at either end of the teeter-totter, but at the center. That’s the place of creativity; that’s the place of wholeness. That’s the place where you take in the pairs of opposites and hold the tension between the two. Wholeness is true holiness, not being at one extreme or the other, as is so often thought.

### **The tension of practicality and liberality**

So the tension I will briefly look at today on this “Stewardship Sunday” is the tension between practicality and liberality, or practicality and possibility, or necessity and generosity. It’s the tension between securing and caring for your own needs, and caring for the needs of the larger community and extending yourself to the needs of others.

How do we work with this tension? It’s a major tension in our country right now ... with the gap growing between the rich and the poor, the tension stretching, it seems, almost to a breaking point. Do you have the right to care for yourself alone and not be concerned with others? Can you grab as much as you can get and somehow believe that everyone doing the same will raise all ships and that everyone will benefit?

This tension between practicality and liberality is nicely illustrated in the dramatic poem of Robert Frost that we read a few minutes ago, the poem titled “The Death of the Hired Man.”

In this case, the practical side of this polar tension is carried by Warren, while the side of liberality and generosity is carried by Mary. It might be interesting to speculate whether the positions might have been reversed if Warren had been the first to see what condition Silas was in rather than Mary. But let’s stick with the drama as Frost has set it up.

### **Two understandings of “home”**

The tension between the poles of practicality and liberality is illustrated in what “home” is.

Mary says to Warren that Silas has come *home* to die.

“Home,” Warren gently mocks.

“Yes,” says Mary, “what else but home? It all depends on what you mean by home.”

Then Warren responds with words that have become famous:

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in.”

In other words, if you can't make it on your own and have no place else to turn, then you go to your family and they are obligated to take care of you, whether or not they would like to, whether or not you would like them to.

Warren's position holds that Silas doesn't have a right to be taken in by them because this is not his home. They have no obligation to take him in. This is the position of duty, of law.

But Mary responds with a more "liberal" view of home saying:

I should have called it  
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

In other words, home is not related to something earned or deserved; home is larger and different and more magnanimous than that. This is a position of grace, of liberality, of generosity, of extending the boundaries of self and of home. Not law and duty, but grace and mercy.

### **A "spiritual home"**

Mary indicates that there is something that one might call a "spiritual home" – a place where you feel a kinship of spirit, a place where you feel accepted and wanted; and, thus, a place where you want to be.

Silas returns to a place where he feels accepted for who and what he is, something he apparently didn't feel in family's home. Mary says:

Silas is what he is – we wouldn't mind him –  
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.  
He never did a thing so very bad.  
He don't know why he isn't quite as good  
As anyone. He won't be made ashamed  
To please his brother, worthless though he is.

### **New Dealer or no New Dealer**

In 1960, when Frost was eighty-six years old, he was interviewed for the poetry magazine, The Paris Review, by Richard Poirier. The interviewer, Mr. Poirier, said to Robert Frost at one point, "Well, you don't have a reputation for being a New Dealer," referring to Roosevelt's New Deal, which embodied a position of liberality and generosity. Frost replied:

They think I'm no New Dealer. But really and truly I'm not, you know, all that clear on it. In "The Death of the Hired Man" that I wrote long, long ago, long before the New Deal [the poem, as I indicated earlier, was written in 1907], I put it two

ways about home. One would be the manly way: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in.” That’s the man’s feeling about it. And then the wife says, “I should have called it/ Something you somehow hadn’t to deserve.” That’s the New Deal, the feminine way of it, the mother way. You don’t have to deserve your mother’s love. You have to deserve your father’s. He’s more particular. One’s a Republican, one’s a Democrat. The father is always a Republican toward his son, and his mother’s always a Democrat. Very few have noticed that second thing; they’ve always noticed the sarcasm, the hardness of the male one [way].”

Indeed, in Frost’s poem, even though Warren carries the side of duty, of law, of practicality, of necessity, of earning your keep, of getting what you deserve; he’s not completely one-sided. He recognizes some of the value of Silas. And he says with greater tenderness after listening to his wife, Mary, for a time, “I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone.” And, at the end, when he returns from seeing Silas who has died, it is he who reaches out and takes Mary’s hand. There law and grace, duty and mercy, the practical and the possible are joined together.

And for her part, Mary recognized a validity to Warren’s argument – acknowledged that Silas had no claim on them, and that, if need be, she would go to Silas’ wealthier brother and ask for money for his keep.

### **Holding the tension**

And so one of the things I like about this poem is the way it holds the tension, each side being given its due. There is a maintaining of a position, but also a willingness to listen to the other side. The tension is kept, not broken.

Where the tension is not kept and the other side becomes the enemy; there is splitting, separation, pulling apart, loss of energy, defending of position and territory at all costs. *There is polarization rather than polar tension.*

But where the polar tension is kept, where one stands on one side but also looks toward the other side – or, perhaps better stated, where one is simultaneously and paradoxically holding to a position but also standing in the center of the teeter-totter – in that place there is creative interaction, and there a creative solution can be found ...

... as was the case in this poem: Warren would have been willing to take Silas in. And, perhaps, in other circumstances, Mary would have said it is not now possible, but would have sought other solutions.

### **Conclusion**

So on this Stewardship Sunday, as we consider our financial pledges to care for our spiritual home and the extent of its reach, we have a conversation between these two poles, the practical and the possible.

This conversation may be between you as a couple or family. And who is it that tends to carry the practical side and who is that tends to carry the possible side? Listen to each other. Or, perhaps, even try to switch roles sometime, saying, “Why don’t you argue the other side of this topic for a while. Let’s switch sides on the teeter-totter.”

Or, if you are single and live alone, invite a friend to discuss these matters with you. Or, have a discussion between two sides of yourself. It might be helpful to write them out and have a dialogue between them.

But this is a conversation we have not only within ourselves or within our families as we approach Stewardship Sunday, but also within this congregation. We are always in a discussion in our religious community about what is practical and what is possible – about how much is needed to care for our spiritual home and how much we can we extend ourselves in generosity beyond our home.

My point this morning is to recognize the validity of both sides of the discussion and the necessity for continual conversation related to current circumstances. This is the way toward creative interaction and greater wholeness.

In relation to this new building, we’ve been having this discussion of what is practical and what is possible right along. And we’ve definitely felt the tension.

But I’ve been very pleased to see that the tension has held and not unraveled. We have kept the polar tension without becoming polarized. And this has been a creative thing, and I trust will continue to be a creative thing into the future.

### **Closing Words**

Love is the doctrine of this Fellowship,  
The quest for truth its sacrament,  
and service its law.

This is our great covenant:  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek the truth in love,  
And to help one another.

(James Vila Blake, adapted)

### **Extinguishing of Chalice**

We extinguish this flame,  
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 sermon given by the Reverend Bruce A. Bode on March 14, 2010, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the second in a sermon series on "Necessary Tensions in Life." The spoken sermon, available on CD disc at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)