

**“Yes’ to Everything”
Third Sunday of Christmas
December 13, 2009
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode**

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We light this chalice
For the renewal of faith,
The wonder of hope,
The beauty of love,
And the gift of joy.

Opening Words

This is indeed a beautiful day in this festival season 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 all the blessings of this season – for lights and bells and songs.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love that bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: On this third Sunday of the Christmas season, we celebrate the miracle of love, the creative power linking each to all, enabling us to find life good and beautiful.

CONGREGATION: Though I speak in human tongues or that of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

MINISTER: And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries, and though I have all knowledge, and faith strong enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

CONGREGATION: Love is patient and kind and envies no one. Love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

MINISTER: Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

CONGREGATION: Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

MINISTER: Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will fail; as for speech, it will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

CONGREGATION: Faith, hope, and love remain; but of these three, the greatest is love.
(St. Paul, I Corinthians 13)

Lighting the Candle of Love

Well, children, have you noticed that Christmas is getting closer and closer? All over town and in the countryside, houses and yards and trees are lit with bright lights of many colors.

And here in our sanctuary, too, the decorations of Christmas are appearing: Two weeks ago only the purple banner was hanging on our sanctuary wall, but now look! There's a green banner from last week. And now this week a blue banner. And next week there will be a red banner.

And with our candles, too: Two weeks ago we lit the purple Candle of Faith. Last week it was the green Candle of Hope. This week it will be the blue Candle of Love. And next week it will be the red Candle of Joy. And then, finally, on Christmas Eve, we will light the Christmas Candle itself, the Candle that contains all the other colors in it.

This week we light the Candle of Love. Love means so many things, but certainly it means saying "yes" to life – "yes" to your own life, and "yes" to the life about it. Love says, "Yes, I see you; yes, I care for you; yes, I am connected to you."

When the teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth is celebrated at Christmas, was asked to summarize the principles by which we live, he summarized all the principles with the word, "Love." "Master," he was asked, "what is the greatest of the commandments?" And he answered, "Love – love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself."

Peri Muellner (9:15), Camille Ottaway (11:15), will you please light the third candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Love.

Lighting the Hanukkah Candles

There are a number of different spiritual traditions that meet and overlap at this time of the year: Christmas, Hanukkah, and the earth-centered Solstice ceremonies.

And whereas the Christmas and Solstice celebrations are always on the same date, being related to our calendar that follows the cycle of the sun, the Hanukkah celebration is on different dates because it is related to the lunar calendar and the cycles of the moon.

On the Jewish calendar, which follows the cycles of the moon, today is the 26th day of Kislev in the year 5,770, which dates back to the traditional Jewish date for the creation of the world.

And, since on a Jewish calendar the new day begins not at midnight as in the Western calendars but at sunset, the first candle of the Hanukkah menorah was lit this past Friday evening at sunset, the beginning of the 25th day of the month of Kislev.

In Hebrew, “Hanukkah,” means “dedication,” and it celebrates the re-dedication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the triumph of the ancient Maccabees against a superior military force in 165 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era).

Legend asserts that at the time the Temple was reclaimed, the Maccabean warriors wanted to rekindle the eternal flame that burned in the Temple, but they could only find one container of holy oil, which would normally last just one day. However, says the legend, that container of oil burned not for just one day but for eight days, until additional holy oil could be prepared.

In memory of that event a *special* menorah is lit at this time of the year that contains eight candles, plus the ninth servant candle in the middle of the menorah, called the *shamos*. Thus, for the eight days of Hanukkah, each evening Jewish families light a candle of the menorah and say a blessing to celebrate the triumph of freedom over persecution and of light over darkness.

We cannot perform this ritual precisely as it would be done in Jewish homes or houses of worship, but still we seek to honor the Jewish heritage within the Unitarian Universalist faith as well as individuals of Jewish heritage and spiritual practice within this congregation.

Nan Toby Tyrrell, a member of this Fellowship, as well as a member of Bet Shira, will now light the first three candles of the Hanukkah menorah, reciting the traditional Hanukkah blessings in both Hebrew and English, and she will be accompanied by Paul Becker, also of Jewish heritage, who will sing the blessing with her.

Following the lighting of these first three candles, we will be led by Paul in singing hymn number 221, “Light One Candle,” a hymn that celebrates Hanukkah.

Credo Statement

Again, this Sunday, I’ve invited a member of last year’s “Building Your Own Theology” class to share his credo statement with us. Joe Braun will now read his Credo Statement.

Credo Statement Joe Braun

- Extend and insinuate yourself into uncomfortable situations. (Like I’m doing today)
- Inquire into all manner of situations, ideas, concepts, cultures...

- Accept/Reject based on assessment and/or evaluation. (It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.)
- I have learned to Question Authority, which is the credo of Donald Kennedy, a former president of Stanford University when my sons attended the university. Luckily, this concept was not known to them while they were living at home. But this has become an increasingly important concept for me during the last decade or so.
- Deepen my Compassion for those who cross my path. Lessen my Judgments. (Certainly there is such a thing as God's grace. He undoubtedly tempers the wind to the shorn lamb).
- Despite intellectual and scientific evidence to the contrary, Dream of, Believe in the dailiness of A God's transcendent or (spiritual) presence.
- A wise woman, Dorothy L. Sayer, once said, "A facility for quotation covers the absence of original thought." With that in mind, here are some quotations I have folded into my credo.
- Everything you do is either life-enhancing or life-diminishing. Make choices accordingly. – This is a principle espoused by Deborah Szekely to all of her guests at each of her health spas, The Golden Door and Rancho La Puerta.
- On March 4, 1993, Jim Valvano, the men's basketball coach of NC State, while accepting the inaugural Arthur Ashe Courage and Humanitarian Award, implored all present to, "Never give up, never ever give up". Eight weeks later he died of cancer.
- Above all, be steadily, patiently & relentlessly (crudely, brutally & mercilessly) Honest, primarily with myself while being careful not to hurt anyone else needlessly or cruelly with the truth.
- The above are ideals for which I must constantly strive. To me, each ideal interacts with and is dependent on the others.
- To continue my absence of original thought, apropos of today, I will leave you with a quote from Leonard Cohen where he says, "Let me tell you something that is not easily contradicted...there ain't no cure for love!"

Reading

My reading this morning is from the 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi. The poem is titled, "The Guest House."

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

(Rumi, from The Essential Rumi, versions by Coleman Barks)

“‘YES’ TO EVERYTHING”

Introduction

My message on this third Sunday of the Christmas season is related to the theme of a poem written this past July by a member of our congregation, Dr. Katy Ottaway. I'd like to begin by reading that poem, which I use with the author's permission.

In this poem, there's a reference to "Joey." Many of you will, no doubt, recognize this as a reference to Joey Pipia, a world-class magician and teacher of improvisational theatre here in Port Townsend.

The title of this poem is "Say 'Yes.'"

At the improv tryout
for Lark in the Park
Joey said

Say "yes" to everything

He said

It is easier to say "no"
But then the improv ends

He made us try
Saying “no” to everything

Each skit was a fight

He made us try
Saying “yes” to everything

“Yes”

We bloomed

And is that it?
All the Beloved wants?

He said
You learn to say things
Without a question
With a hint
With an idea
With a suggestion

The other actor responds

I've noticed
People don't respond well
When I say
“Don't”

I need to learn
To suggest
To let them choose
To change their direction
Offer
Offer
Another idea

I need to learn
To listen
When they offer
Offer
Another idea

Say “yes” to everything

Is that what the Beloved wants?

I say “yes”
“yes”

(“Say ‘Yes,’” Katy Ottaway)

The inspiration for this poem by Dr. Ottaway came, as the poem indicates, from a technique that her teacher, Joey Pipia, taught in an improv theatre class that Katy took this past summer. This improv theatre technique of saying “yes” to everything was then expanded by the poet beyond the improv theatre setting into a more general principle for living. And that’s what I would like to explore with you this morning in this Christmas season: to look at what it might mean to say “yes” to everything.

The frames of Joey Pipia

I had the opportunity to get together with Joey Pipia earlier this week to converse with him about what was behind his improv technique. I wanted to know how he had come to develop this technique and how important it was to his overall work – whether this was just a minor tool in his teaching tool kit, or whether he saw this as a more general principle for approaching life.

As I discovered in our conversation, this technique was nothing minor for him at all. Rather, it was a major principle at the heart of his teaching and of his overall approach to life, a technique born out of his life experience, which then fed back into his life.

Joey’s improv theatre teaching technique involves two basic “frames,” “structures,” or “corrals,” as he variously names them.

The one frame is always saying “yes, and…” to the stated reality of your acting partner.

So, for example, if your acting partner says, “I found this large, spotted dog as I was making my way here tonight,” then you might respond by saying, “Yes, and, uh, you know, I saw that same spotted dog frolicking with the river otters down in the boat haven last week.” And now you’re off to a marvelous, imaginary adventure.

What this technique does, says Joey, is to free the actors. They can’t possibly make a mistake. Each knows that the other will be affirming, and so they feel safe. Out of this, a trust begins to develop, as well as a self-regulating factor. And it is endlessly interesting and vitalizing.

A second frame that Joey Pipia uses in teaching improv theatre – a technique that goes along with the first – is that you are not allowed to ask questions or make requests in your acting engagements; you can only make statements.

So, for example, you don’t ask your acting partner, “Could you, please, turn up the heat?” That would require a *specific* action on the part of the other actor and pretty much end the inter-action. Instead, you would say, “I’m going to turn up the heat.” This opens up a number of responses from your acting partner. Or, you might say, “I’m cold,” which also

opens up a number of possible responses from your acting partner, such as, “Yes, and, you know, I’ve been thinking about taking a trip to New Zealand where it’s warmer this time of the year.”

What this frame does is to push individuals toward taking responsibility for themselves, not asking others to decide for them. You affirm yourself.

So here we have a combination of two techniques or frames in improv acting that have to do with affirmation. The first frame is to affirm the reality that comes to you – don’t argue with it, but move with it. And the second frame is to affirm your own reality – to try to get clear on it.

And how does this relate to larger life? In my conversation with Joey Pipia, we talked about the value of changing our default setting in life from “no” to “yes.”

We agreed that there’s a strong human tendency to take a “no” posture in life, to make “no” our default setting, to make “no” our first response.

Perhaps we say “no” to try to protect what we have and to defend our territory. Or, to keep from being bothered. Or, because we don’t want to spend energy re-examining our beliefs and current way of life.

I would not wish to argue against the need for and the importance of security in life, or against the value of guarding one’s energy; but I would note two things: first, having “no” as your default setting may not be the best way of achieving whatever security in life is possible; and, secondly, in seeking security by having “no” as your default setting, you may be missing out on the whole adventure of life. You may find yourself closing off to life, like the tragic figure of Ebenezer Scrooge, who quite clearly had “no” as his default setting.

So what would it mean to have “yes” as your default setting in life? What might it mean to say “yes” to everything?

Let me give some examples.

Saying “yes” to your children

When I was a parent of young children, I was aware of the tendency to have “no” as one’s default setting. I was also aware of some of the pitfalls of such a setting – always being in the position of resisting, of holding the line, of pushing away, of dampening down, and of being at odds with my children. This was not a posture I wanted, either for them or for myself.

And so, as a parent, I consciously tried to cultivate the art of saying “yes” to my children whenever possible. Within the parameters of what my wife and I believed was good and

healthy for our children, I would try to find a way to say “yes” to what they sought – what conditions would make it possible to say “yes”?

And, even when it not presently possible to say “yes,” still to have “yes” as my first response – “Yes, certainly, you may see that movie ... in five years ... and so what movie would you like to see today?”

Having “yes” as the default position with your children is far different than permissiveness, though the charge may be made. “Permissiveness,” it seems to me, is related to the default setting of “no,” and it occurs when you are worn down and give in despite your better judgment and despite having previously said “no.”

With “yes” as your default setting with respect to your children, you and your children are *both* looking for a way to make their interests and desires work; *together* you explore the boundaries of what is possible.

With “yes” as your first response, you are, first of all, respecting them and affirming them by listening to them. They will learn that you love and value them and want to say “yes.” And so even when you must say “no,” they will realize it is out of concern for their well-being and not out of your own inconvenience or disinterest in them.

And, secondly, with “yes” as your first response, you are helping your children to take responsibility for their lives ... because they will learn that what they are seeking has a good chance of being made actual. So they need to ask themselves, “What is it that I really want to do?”

Saying “yes” to different frames of reference

What does it mean to say “yes” to everything?

A week ago I heard a woman describe a situation in which she had gone to a movie with her grown daughter. Their response to the movie was very different: her daughter loved it, and she was mostly put off by it. And this different response to the movie was indicative of how they looked at the world – very different frames, very different ways of seeing things and responding to things.

But then, upon reflection, this woman realized that she wasn’t going to change her daughter’s response to the movie – or to life in general – anymore than her daughter was going to change her response to the movie or to life. Each of them had grown up in different times and circumstances, and each had their own personality types and aptitudes and interests. And so to make their relationship work, to maintain the bond of love between mother and daughter, she realized as never before that she had to open up and allow space for her daughter’s “frame of reference.” It was a way of saying “yes” to the reality that presented itself to her, and then going with it.

The practice of the PNWD ministers

What does it mean to say “yes” to everything?

When I became the minister of this congregation, I also became part of the Pacific Northwest District Unitarian Universalist ministers’ group. And I remember at my first District meeting being introduced to one of their practices. It was the discipline of making your first response to a request from other ministers be that of “yes.” For the good of our Association and for the support of each other they said, “When you are approached with a request to do something in this District, we ask that your first response be ‘yes.’”

And the other side of this discipline is that if you are the one doing the asking, then you must carefully consider what you are asking, because you know that the person you are asking will want to say “yes.”

“Yes” to Alzheimer’s

What does it mean to say “yes” to everything?

One of the places I am learning to say “yes” to everything is in relation to my mother, who is progressing deeper and deeper into the world of Alzheimer’s. My mother can still read and write and recognizes her children and living siblings mostly, but more and more her reality does not match the reality of others, more and more she is imaginatively and emotionally present in other times and places, and more and more the realities from her past overlay and crowd out the reality of the present, actually becoming the present.

And so I never know when I visit my mother in Bellingham what her time frame will be or what issues she will be dealing with. Hardest is the fresh mourning for her husband, my father, who is deceased now nearly three years ... but for her at times it is as if he has just died.

It’s difficult, then, to be present in that space. But to the extent possible, I try to say “yes” to whatever world is present for her. I don’t try to correct her sense of things and say, “No, mom, it’s not like that; here’s what’s really happening.” Rather, I go with her world. I embrace it. I enter the play. I take it as play. It’s real-life improv theatre, if you will.

And, you know, taking this route, saying “yes” to my mother’s present reality, I’ve had some of the sweetest times of my life with her. In earlier life, we both spent a fair amount of time saying “no” to the reality of the other – me saying “no” to a good bit of the world-view that she believed was correct and best for me, and she saying “no” to a good bit of the world-view that I was embracing. Most of that nay-saying has now slipped away, and we joke and laugh ... and weep a little, too.

The power of positive thinking

Now, I want to make a distinction between the principle of “saying ‘yes’ to everything” and the principle of the “power of positive thinking.” Though these two principles have outward similarities in that both are related to being affirmative, to me they are quite different principles.

The power of positive thinking has to do with trying to shape one’s world. It has to do with ego strength, with ego power, with pushing forward, with never giving up and never giving in. It has to do with the overcoming of obstacles, with surviving, with not letting troubles or difficulties get you down, with saying, “Yes, I can; yes, I can.”

Here’s a poem by Robert Frost that has to do with pulling yourself together and not letting grief or difficulty take you over ... even though, interestingly, the poet wonders whether he’s not being a bit too fierce in this regard. The poem is titled, “A Leaf Treader,” and is appropriate for this season of the year.

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up than I.
To come to their final place in earth they had to pass me by.
All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.
And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.
But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.
Now up my knee to keep on top of another year of snow.

And so, says the poet, there’s a place for this principle of positive thinking, a place to say, “Yes, I can. There’s a time when it may be necessary to push grief away, to quit feeling sorry for yourself, to pull yourself together, and to take the bull by the horns, so to speak.

The principle of saying “yes”

But this, I would suggest, is a very different approach than the principle that I’m talking about this morning, the principle of saying “yes” to everything.

Both are ways of affirmation, but the principle of saying “yes” to everything is a different kind of affirmation that doesn’t have to do with ego strength or ego power but, rather, with ego opening and with embracing the other side.

With the principle of the power of positive thinking one resists the dark and the sorrowful and tries to stay in the light and with the upbeat.

In one temple of positive thinking – the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California – I’ve heard through knowledgeable sources that the organist is not allowed to play musical pieces that are written in minor keys.

But the principle I’m talking about today has to do with saying “yes” to everything, the dark as well as the light, the sour as well as the sweet, the sorrowful as well as the joyful. It has to do with opening to whatever guest comes to our door, as in the Rumi poem that I read for this morning’s reading.

“Love your fate”

So this principle of saying “yes” to everything is about embracing your fate and with opening to whatever reality sends your way.

My primary teacher in regard to this principle has been Joseph Campbell. “Love your fate,” he used to say. He said that if you say “no” to a single thing in your life, you have unraveled the whole thing. (See The Power of Myth, p. 161)

Whatever you reject, whatever you refuse, whatever you are not able to assimilate, narrows your life and draws off your energy.

And, on the other hand, whatever you are able to affirm, whatever you are able to swallow and digest, whatever you are able to take in and own as part of yourself, enlarges your life and increases your vitality.

Campbell gave this example in his interviews with Bill Moyers in the mid-1980’s.

I had an illuminating experience from a woman who had been in severe physical pain for years, from an affliction that had stricken her in her youth. She had been raised a believing Christian and so thought this had been God’s punishment of her for something she had done or not done at that time. She was in spiritual as well as physical pain. I told her that if she wanted release, she should affirm and not deny [that] her suffering was her life, and that through it she had become the noble creature that she now was. And while I was saying all this, I was thinking, ‘Who am I to talk like this to a person in real pain, when I’ve never had anything more than a toothache?’ But in this conversation, in affirming her suffering as the shaper and teacher of her life, she experienced a conversion – right there. I have kept in touch with her since – that was years and years ago – and she is indeed a transformed woman.

(The Power of Myth, p. 160)

In interpreting this conversion experience, Campbell believes that what he gave this woman was the idea that she was the agent of her own life. Her situation was not the punishment or plan of some outside deity, but rather part of the play of the universal energy *of which she herself was a part*. And to the extent that she could affirm that – not necessarily like it – but affirm it and say “yes” to it, to that extent she could enlarge her life.

Saying “yes” to your own soul

This brings me to my final thought for today, namely, that this principle of saying “yes” to everything begins with saying “yes” to your own life and to the creative energy that has given birth to your individual being.

This is related to Joey Pipia’s second frame that has to do with making statements, with getting clear on who you are and what you are called to do.

The first act of affirmation, therefore, is affirming the life-energy that is closest to you, your individual soul. You can’t truly affirm the life about you until you have affirmed the life within you and what that life within you is calling you to do and be.

This is typically seen in the struggle of youth in coming to grips with one’s identity, though it present throughout our life. And, paradoxically, then, it might seem like you are saying “no” to a whole lot of things in order to find your way. But in a larger sense, it’s saying “yes” to the voice of the Beloved within.

So let me end with Mary Oliver’s great poem on saying “yes” to yourself, on affirming yourself, on finding yourself, on saving yourself, on taking responsibility for yourself ... so that you are in a position to affirm larger life. This poem is titled, “The Journey.”

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,

as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Closing Hymns

I've chosen two hymns to conclude our service. The first, "Just as Long as I Have Breath," is a lovely hymn about affirming life and pushing forward despite pain and disappointment. The second hymn, "Let It Be a Dance," is more about embracing the whole of life and opening to life's pain and sorrow. For this hymn we will sing only the third verse, and, as I have mentioned before, when you come to the last part of the third verse where it reads "bear the pain," the author, Ric Masten, wanted "bear" to be spelled "b-a-r-e," not "b-e-a-r," as it is printed in the hymnbook.

Benediction

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons)

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 service of The Reverend Bruce A. Bode given at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the Third Sunday of Christmas, December 13, 2009. The spoken message may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)