

A Rose in the Wintertime: Paradoxes and Polarities

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*How wonderful that we have met with a paradox.
Now we have some hope of making progress.*
Niels Bohr

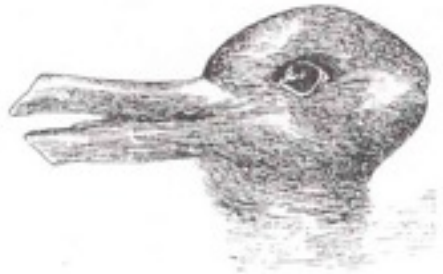
Opening Words Judy Welles

Stop me if you've heard this one...

Two physicians walk into a bar. The bartender looks up and says (*all together now...*) "Oh, look, a paradox!"

In today's service we're going to be thinking about what's a paradox and what's a polarity. And I can tell you right now, a paradox is not two physicians walking into a bar. In a few minutes, when I talk with the children, I'll have a good example of what a real paradox is — a logical impossibility, something that just can't be.

On the other hand, we live with polarities all the time. Life is filled with polarities: two things at opposite ends of a continuum, each of which has positive and negative as-



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pects, where the energy is constantly moving between the two, never perfectly balanced, never at rest.

A very simple illustration of a polarity is this: breathing. Which is more important in breathing, inhaling or exhaling? Everybody please take a deep breath now. Inhale deeply. If you believed with all your heart that inhaling is the most important part of breathing, then you'd be at that end of the polarity and pretty soon you'd be... dead.

The positive side of inhaling is that your body needs the oxygen that you take into your lungs when you inhale. But if you stop with just inhalation, carbon dioxide builds up in your system and poisons you.

You have to exhale as well, so that your body can release the carbon dioxide before it builds up to the point where you lose consciousness. The positive side of exhalation is the release of CO₂, but if that's all you ever did — just exhale — then you'd be deprived of oxygen and you'd die.

You can't just stop in the middle between the polarities, either. You'd still be dead. Breathing is this constant movement between the polarities of inhalation and exhalation; we live in the dynamic between the two.

We live in the dynamic between zillions of polarities all the time, many of them much more subtle and more difficult to recognize. Much of our life energy goes to managing polarities — not in the sense of coming to a resolution, but in the sense of learning how to navigate between the polar opposites so that we can live in as healthy and well-developed a way as possible.

And isn't church just the right place to learn how to do that? It's one of the reasons we're all here. And that's what today's service is about. Come, let us worship together.

Reading

Table Talk²
Billy Collins

Reading

adapted from "Polarity Management"³
Michael Kruse

Sermon

Duane Fickeisen

A rose in the wintertime is a paradox. Roses, grown in the garden, bloom starting about now. They are summer flowers.

A wintertime rose almost surely was imported from South America, where it is summer during our winter. They are flown to a wholesale distributor, and delivered to your florist or a nearby grocery store.

Of course we love the bright blossoms and the lovely scent that is so evocative of sweet June days in the midst of the dark and gray of mid-winter. A rose in the wintertime lifts our spirits. A dozen of them inspires some of us to wax poetic.

But they come at a high cost. They are grown, harvested, and packed in hothouses by underpaid laborers, who are not protected nearly well enough from exposure to the massive amounts of pesticides that drench the plants and the flowers — deemed necessary for them to survive in an unsuitable cli-

² The poem may be found here:

<http://cfbwe.tumblr.com/post/4326276322/table-talk-billy-collins>.

It is omitted from this posting due to copyright restrictions.

³The full text appears on Mr. Kruse's blog at

http://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2005/09/polarity_manage.html

mate. That makes a wintertime rose paradoxical.

We love to give and receive them and are willing to pay premium prices for them, even supporting our public radio station by sending a dozen or a half-dozen almost anywhere to honor someone we care about on Valentine's Day.

At the same time, their production and transport creates serious environmental impacts. Even the labor issues are paradoxical — the workers are underpaid and endure poor working conditions, yet without these wretched jobs, many would have no source of income to support their families.

The song just wouldn't be the same if we took out the rose and replaced it with — say a hug or a book of poetry. "I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find, and I'll bring a song of love, and a hug in the wintertime."

Paradoxes are conditions that are logically impossible. They include logical word traps, like the assertion by Pinocchio that his nose is growing, which cannot be true nor untrue. Or visual illusions like the M. C. Escher drawings of waterfalls that defy gravity and return to their beginning or stairs that go up and down at the same time, and never seem to change level. Or the image on the front of the bulletin. Is it a rabbit? A duck? Both? Neither?

One of Zeno's paradoxes is that if an object moves half way between point A and point B, then in the next moment moves half of the remaining distance, and so on, it will never reach point B. The arrow never quite gets to St. Sebastian.

What got our Universalist ancestors riled up was the paradox of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and benevolent God who would send *anyone* to Hell. As Archibald MacLeish wrote in *JB*, "If God is God, he is not good. If God is good, he is not God."

This paradox drove our dear foremothers and forefathers to the theological conviction that every person would be saved from Hell — all would be finally restored to communion with God because God loves us unconditionally. That radical and heretical position set them in opposition to orthodox Christianity.

But I want to distinguish paradoxes, which have no logical resolution, from polarities. In a polarity, two opposites are in dynamic tension with each other, but there is no satisfactory point of static balance between them.

Polarities are not either/or phenomena, but rather both/and by nature. Neither of the opposites in a polarity is inherently better than the other. They depend on each other. Both are necessary. Think back to the inhale/exhale example. Both are necessary for life. The static balance point between them, the pause between inhalation and exhalation, is also not a viable resolution of their dynamic tension. We can't just stop breathing in and breathing out and expect to continue to live anymore than we can either exhale continuously or inhale without ever stopping.

Or consider the lessons of the cycles of the seasons. Which is better, winter or summer? I know, probably most of us have a seasonal preference — mine would be spring — but our world would be a much poorer and impoverished place if there were no seasons. Apple trees and daffodils require a period of cold to flower. Without freezing weather, we wouldn't have apples or for that matter cherries, which are just coming ripe, or any number of other fruits. The cyclic nature of time can teach us much about managing polarities. We swing from one to the other, from too darn hot and humid to too darn cold and icy.

Maybe those seem like obvious examples, but consider

some aspects in the life of a congregation. Which is better, creating a safe and welcoming place removed from the threats of the society around us — a sanctuary and a refuge — or creating an active and engaged social action program that is constantly out in the community, working for change?

If we focus only on the safe sanctuary aspects, we will soon lose touch with the community around us and become isolated and irrelevant except to a dwindling few seekers of safety. If we focused only on action in the community, we would lose the cohesion that comes from worshipping together in fellowship and the heart-connection with first principles and values that matter to us.

We could do a little of each. But it would be so much better if we could do a lot of each and do it exceedingly well! So we try that as best we are able given the resources of human skills and energy and the fullness of our purse. Our focus cycles from one to the other and back again. Some of us are disappointed that we don't do more in the community, that we have not yet solved more of the world's problems, fed the hungry families around here, provided quality education for every child, put an end to violence, and brought justice to more oppressed people. Many of us are deeply disappointed that we have not yet been able to get the Carlisle Borough Council to adopt legal protection against discrimination in housing and employment on the basis of gender expression and sexual orientation.

And they are right. We could and perhaps should do much more. What if instead of painting and carpeting we spent that money on social justice?

At the same time, others are concerned that we have not put as much attention toward making the congregation as welcoming and nurturing as we might. We have not yet found

the perfect programs to offer religious education to our children, we have not yet discovered a formula that would bring families together in real intergenerational community, and we do not support those who are grieving as much as we might, nor offer every help to those who face difficult life decisions and personal struggles. There is so much more we could do to make our building greener. Why are we sending all our coins each month to outside agencies, when they might enable us to improve our own programs?

There is no single best balance between these poles. Instead what is called for, as it is in any polarity, is to do both and to engage in constant movement between them.

Is it better to strive for breadth or depth in theological understanding? Yes, both/and. Even better to dance between them. Is it better to focus on individual rights or responsibility to the community? Yes, both/and. And when these conflict, whatever should we do? We are constantly in danger of focusing too much attention on one at the expense of the other. It's a broad generalization, but I do think one of the ways we UUs fall short is by putting too much attention toward theological breadth and not enough to depth and by focusing too much on individual rights and not enough on communal responsibilities.

Let's turn to something very present among us — the matter of our leaving and the transition in ministry.

Is it paradoxical to feel sad and to grieve the ending of a successful and long ministry and at the same time to look forward to the space that opens for fresh and new ministry for you and hopefully a satisfying and active retirement for us? Or is that another polarity to manage — both grieving and celebrating? Joy and woe are woven fine as the song says. The leaving is bittersweet and poignant.

These past several months have been a very busy time in our ministry. We have been trying to make the transition as effective as we are able, to hand off tasks, and to finish our work with you well with a healthy ending, all the while continuing to do the tasks of ministry that have always been with us.

But suddenly now it seems that we've already done many things for the last time. We can put away our calendar and appointment book when dates for next meetings are being set. And we are moving now toward what seems to be a gentle ending.

We are anticipating next Saturday evening's farewell event, about which we know very little. You've either not planned anything or kept the plans well hidden. I strongly suspect the latter.

Next Sunday will be the last worship service we conduct here. It will include a ritual of leave taking and ending, a celebration of ministry, and a no-doubt-tearful farewell. Then we will leave for a week in Charlotte, North Carolina for the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. While we are in Charlotte, we expect to meet with your incoming interim minister, Roy Reynolds. We will return for just four days to clean out our office and wrap up the remaining loose ends before the ministry formally ends on June 30.

Roy Reynolds will start his ministry with you on August 15. In the seven weeks between, you will experience worship lead by our worship associates and David Glasgow. Should a pastoral emergency arise before Roy gets into town, UU ministers from neighboring congregations will be on call and can be reached by your board leadership if needed.

While our ministry has been winding down, the logistics of our relocation to Portland, Oregon, have been taking in-

creasing amounts of our attention. Although we are leaving UUCV and Carlisle and so much that has been important to us behind, we're already anticipating living in the Pacific Northwest.

The leaving brings grief, of course. We will miss you. We will miss our work with you. We will miss our engagement with the community. And the house and garden we have made a comfortable home. We will miss friends and neighbors who are close and dear to us. And the leaving brings joy. We anticipate the adventure of being in a new city, the process of settling in there, the opportunities to engage in community activities and a new-to-us congregation. We look forward to making new friends, to creating a home and garden, and to the deep and welcome respite that we hope lies ahead soon.

Endings are necessary to create the space for beginnings. So much of our whole lives is about letting go, living as fully as we are able, entering into relationships of value and import, striving to make a difference in the world, and then letting go of attachments, responding to losses, and navigating the ensuing chaos while awaiting new beginnings.

So is it paradoxical that grief and joy are so closely married to each other? That we will be sad and grieve this ending, even as we celebrate the new beginning? Or is it a polarity to be managed by doing both/and? By recognizing that these two aspects are interdependent and that they dance together in tandem? Joy and woe are, indeed, woven fine. Under every grief and pine runs a joy of silken twine. And when we get that — when we understand it well — we can navigate the world and our lives much more safely.

So let us now sing with gratitude, with thanks and praise, for all of our life, for successes, for regrets, for work and for rest, as we recognize that our fears, our joys and our sorrows,

our loves and frustrations are all a part of life, and that living it fully makes our days glad.

Amen.

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