

A COMMUNITY OF BALANCE
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
March 4, 2018

OPENING WORDS *The Music of the Spheres ~ Ernesto Cardenal*

The music of the spheres.

__A harmonious universe -- like a harp.

Its rhythms are the equal, repeated seasons. The beating of the heart.

__Day/night. The going and returning of migratory birds.

The cycles of stars and corn.

__The mimosa that unfolds by day and folds up again by night.

Rhythms of moon and tide. One single rhythm in planets, atoms, sea,

__And apples that ripen and fall, and in the mind of Newton.

Melody, accord, arpeggios. The harp of the universe. Unity behind apparent multiplicity.

__That is the music.

Come, let us be together, in this space, at this time, within the harp of the universe.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Righty and Lefty: A Tale of Two Feet ~ Rachel Vail*

(In this story, we hear how two feet on the same body have different likes and needs, and yet they need each other...and can't really go anywhere without the other.)

READING *Inexplicable* ~ Karen G. Johnston

Inexplicable.

How we rise each morning,
instead of burying our heads
under bedcovers,
sewing them shut.

Why we keep on
welcoming babies
with bone-deep joy
to this sordid world.

How we fill burlap sacks
with grit and gratitude,
our hands shredded
as we drag one over the other.

How we refuse the daily pull
towards greedy dark,
keeping at least one toe,
some of us whole torso,
in the light.

Inexplicable.

It's what makes a poem
worth writing, worth reading,
worth flooding the world

with redundant, flawed attempts
at explanation.
It's just the way it is.
There is no other way.
Stumbling every time,
practice or no.
Just part of the bargain...
the unavoidable,
intractable,
inexplicable
bargain.

MESSAGE

When I was a little girl, my family went out to the league baseball games whenever our church team played. The field was across from the Lutheran Church in Center, South Dakota...really just an intersection among the corn fields. Believe me, the game was not the draw for me; I simply loved the energy of a rural community gathered on a summer night under the lights. I loved the dusty air and the smells. I loved the concession stand...and I loved the teeter-totters. I remember the physical exhilaration of pushing off the sandy ground...traveling skyward while sending my partner toward earth. If my partner was a different size, the game was more challenging. There was the anticipation of hitting the ground hard if I was the heavier of the two...or, if the lighter, or weaker, the thrill of being flung into the air and hitting the 'ceiling' with the same kind of force. Finding the perfect balance meant that the game was carefree and easy, but it was certainly not as exciting!

And so it is with life. When things are chaotic or akimbo, we long for more balance in our routines and activities. But when there is too much calm, we seek excitement and drama. Always a balancing game.

On the first Sunday of the month, we nearly always focus on the month's theme, and what I like to do, when possible, is find some new twist on the concept...some way of thinking about it from a perspective that let's us engage with the theme in ways previously un-thunk. This month, that 'new twist' is to see balance, not as a destination, but more as a momentary, but ever-shifting, still point.

Being 'out of balance' is considered almost pathological...something to be avoided. It can imply poor health or even incompetence. So, balance is something we've learned to desire. We believe we need more rest to balance our stress... more exercise to balance our sedentary-ness... more connection to balance our isolation... more quiet time to balance the noise... more nature to balance the screentime. And if we could just achieve balance, well, THEN life would be perfect! Stress free! Easy!

When someone says they're trying to find more balance in their lives, isn't this generally what they mean? That one part of their life has simply become too much...is unmanageable...and they want to even things out...to achieve peace...for as long as possible

But I'm inviting you to think of balance differently. Imagine a teeter-totter. Or maybe better, think about balancing, by yourself, on something that requires you to find your 'sea

legs'...maybe one of those half exercise balls...or a plank on a ball...or a stepping onto any small watercraft. Can you picture it? Imagine yourself in that moment. Feel that wobbly insecurity. And then, find the still point.

How long can you stay there?

Before long, we lose our focus, or we reach for something, or a wave rolls in...and suddenly we are off-balance again. And isn't this really how it happens? Balance happens only for a moment; it's fleeting. Things are always in motion. The world is turning, the wind is blowing, the idea is digesting. A shifting environment makes balance temporary.

There's a game that is sometimes played to demonstrate systems theory. Might some of you be willing to play it right now? I need about ten people to volunteer. If you've done this exercise before, you're an especially good candidate. I'll give you instructions.

The rest of you, just watch. See what happens, and I'll ask you later what you noticed. Okay players. Begin.

(Players move around the room, apparently trying to achieve something about their position in relation to other players, but not able to find a still point.)

Now stop. *(Name three of the players)*, will you remain standing? Everyone else can sit down, with my thanks for your brave participation. Now, will you do the same exercise with just you three as players? Done? Thank you. You can sit down.

So...observers, what did you notice? What was going on? *(Comments: they were trying to get between others...there was avoidance...lots of eye contact...trying to find their place...always moving.)*

As I said, this exercise was designed to demonstrate systems theory...which is a way of thinking that expresses the realities of interdependence. It assumes that everything is part of a system with linkages and interactions. While the elements comprise the whole, each moves on its own and influences all movement within the whole system. *(The instructions were to silently, without telling who, choose two other players and move around until able to form an equilateral triangle with them.)*

So this exercise came to mind when thinking about balance, because each of us, as one player within an interconnected system, is dependent on a lot of moving parts over which we have little or no control. Looking at it this way, it makes complete sense that it's difficult, if not impossible, to find balance...at least balance that is static or long-lasting.

Did you ever think that balance might not be so desirable?

How did the exercise seem when just three people played? *(Name the participants)* How did that feel to you?

This sort of balance is motionless, inert. It can only be attained if nothing else ever changes. As has been said, "Strictly speaking, the only balanced person is a dead one."¹

So, if balance is really only a temporary stillpoint on which we pivot...at that moment when the teeter totter might go either direction...the pause before being swept back into action...how might balance benefit us? How can we use those fleeting moments to best serve health and happiness, and to better engage with all that is?

¹ Wooden, <http://archive.uuworld.org/2000/1100musing.html>

Well, first, there's no question that a moment of pause is good and necessary. I can tell you from recent experience that recuperation after a time of stress is critical. (*Name three final players*) probably felt a bit of relief when the dynamics of the game shifted.

There. Take a breath. Find solid footing. Use the moment to look around and get some perspective. But, at least for me, lying in rest, stillness, has its restorative limits, making a place of balance much more like a rest stop than the final goal. When we are balanced, perhaps we're always on the brink of change. It's a place to catch our breath, re-gain our composure and gather our courage for whatever comes next.

Go back again to imagining yourself standing on something unsteady. Get those sea legs, take a breath, feel your body relax. And then...then...see if you can capture the inevitable feeling just as things shift...just as you lose your balance... that split second when you get a quick jolt of fear...as you feel insecurity coming on.

This is the fertile moment, I'm thinking. This is the moment of choice. This is the imbalance that requires us to move. We balance for that split second before something turns...before shift happens or new life emerges. This is when we can make a choice about the direction in which we are going to go. But, without that still point, a shift or change might not have happened. And we might not have had the courage to act.

Parker Palmer speaks of a tragic gap in the human condition.² He describes it as a place between two ever-present poles. On the hand are the hard realities of life...greed, isolation, violence, racism, sexism... On the other hand is what we know to be possible... generosity, connection, love, inclusion, equality, peace... He suggests that to flip out on the side of too much reality leads to corrosive cynicism, where we are unable to act for lack of will. And to flip out on the side, of too much 'what's possible,' leads to irrelevant idealism where we float disconnected from the daily struggle.

He suggests that to engage in all human processes, and to act for change, we have to be able to stand in that tragic gap, witnessing the realities and visioning the possibilities. As I think about that point between two poles, as described by Palmer, I can't see it as a stillpoint, really, but more of standing in the moment of imbalance...being forced off center and into one direction or the other. Which will we choose? Resignation, or possibility?

Wendell Berry has expressed something similar. He wrote this:

"There are, it seems, two muses: the Muse of Inspiration, who gives us inarticulate visions and desires, and the Muse of Realization, who returns again and again to say "It is yet more difficult than you thought." This is the muse of form. It may be then, that form serves us best when it works as an obstruction, to baffle us and deflect our intended course. It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings."

The impeded stream lives in that tragic gap. It is there that we struggle with what to do and which way to go.

² <http://www.couragerenewal.org/723/>

Just a couple of days ago, Ben Taylor sent me an article that he had saved from the UUWorld magazine...a piece written by W. Frederick Wooden called Dynamic Balance.³ Wooden says that balance is a seductive word, because, as we have already seen, it promises an imagined yet impossible, peace or wholeness.

But, he said, if we understand that living is dynamic...that to be alive is to co-exist within an ever-shifting system, then balance needs a dynamic definition too. The question isn't how to find static balance but how to move while keeping a kind of imperfect imbalance. For example, walking, or riding a bike, Wooden wrote, is actually controlled falling. We are simply doing our best to stay erect.

Dynamic balance. Those moments immediately on either side of the still point. The exercise of finding and using our sea legs. The ability to adjust and re-direct. To consciously choose a goal. To move forward in our struggle, one step, one adjustment, at a time.

When we think of balance as momentary, as a constant 'controlled falling', we are not so inclined to think of it as an ideal state to be achieved for once and forever. Because again, if we see balance as a perfection to be achieved, we set ourselves up for failure.

On the other hand, to stand in dynamic, but unstable balance, is to accept the imperfection of our lives...AND to find the gifts inherent in that imperfection. Brene Brown's⁴ work on this subject reminds us that it is in accepting our imperfection that we can truly be vulnerable with one another. These places of dynamic 'imbalance', in our very unsteadiness, are where we can cultivate courage, connection, and compassion. It is the place where we choose authenticity and embrace the whole of who we are.

In this week's blog, I included a few lines from T.S. Eliot where he speaks about the still point of the turning world:

Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.⁵

Except for the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance. The impeded stream is the one that sings. The practice of imbalance is actually where we find our courage to go on to face another day.

So, stand at the stillpoint and catch your breath, my friends. But then, let your body shift and adapt to all that is moving. And dance!

So be it.

READING *Like Pendulums We Swing* ~ Don W Vaughn-Foerster

Like pendulums we swing from hunger to hunger -- from hunger for the one great Truth (absolute, eternal, mystical) to hunger for simple, near-in, familiar truths that

³ <http://archive.uuworld.org/2000/1100musing.html>

⁴ Brown, Brene, The Gifts of Imperfection See also https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

⁵ From *Burnt Norton*, the first of TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*

change as we change, grow as we grow. Like pendulums we swing from hunger for cosmic imperatives commanding us to expand ourselves, to hunger for immediate and authentic inner promptings urging us to be ourselves.

We would be right with heaven, so we swing outward; we would fulfill our own heart, so we swing inward. We would grasp the holy and we would create ourselves. We have this dual hunger: to serve the cosmos that commands us to become more than we would and to be our genuine selves, content with what we are. So we ride this pendulum in hunger for life. We ride from Truth that calls us out to truths that call us in.

And all because the gravity of life pulls across our hunger, never allowing us to stay on one side or the other, always moving us into new urgency for the wholeness that would bind both the cosmic and the personal.

And so life pulls us and we swing from Truth to truths, from cosmos to self, from mystery to clarity, from out to in. It is our state to swing and to be drawn ever into another swing. This is the motion that makes ours a human life.

May the great gravity of life which pulls us along an unknown holy axis never let the pendulums we are cease swinging, until the Truth we seek and the truths we are, are one.

CLOSING WORDS

~ LR Knost

Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and the awful, it's ordinary and mundane and routine.

Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life.

And it's breathtakingly beautiful.

Go and balance in the beauty that you are. Blessed be.