

A Faith in Process – 2/7/10

A few years ago – about the time that I began to identify as a Unitarian Universalist - I ran across “There Are Roughly Zones”ⁱ as I was looking up something else by Robert Frost. I could not recall having read it previously, but since then I have been drawn back to it repeatedly. Some of that appeal may stem from my involvement in caring for a couple of peach trees. (I’ve had many a conversation with my father-in-law about them.) Primarily, though, I think this poem exerts a pull because it connects with our Unitarian Universalist principles.

When Frost wrote it in 1939, he may have had intended his use of the words “man” and “he” and “him” and “his” to refer only to the male gender. It is equally possible though, that he was describing our whole species, so I’m going to rephrase him just a bit:

*“What comes over **[humans]**, is it soul or mind---*

*That to no limits and bounds **[we]** can stay confined?”*

and

*“Why is **[our]** nature forever so hard to teach*

That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,

There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?”

According to Frost, the answer to these questions is that people have a “limitless trait”: a characteristic that impels us to chafe against the confines of convention - to push the limits of propriety - to break through the bounds of customary thought and practice.

I agree with him.

I think this trait is in the hearts of all of us, women and men alike. It is innate, the very stuff of human nature. It is curiosity, and then some. It is the inclination to explore, to seek novel experiences and better opportunities. It is the inclination to experiment, to see if we are able predict the result. It is the inclination to try something - just to see if we can do it.

Sometimes we simply feel compelled to find out for ourselves.

That was the case around two thousand years ago for the disciple known to history as “Doubting Thomas”. He insisted on seeing with his own eyes. It was the case in the 17th century when the world’s first scientific society (England’s Royal Society) was established, and its founders adopted the Latin motto “*Nullius in verba*” - which translates

roughly as “Take nobody’s word for it”. I believe it is the case today among Unitarian Universalists as we “covenant to affirm and promote” our Fourth Principle: “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Of course, we affirm and promote all seven Principles, not just the Fourth, and we affirm and promote not only with our words, but with our actions as well. Affirming and promoting is a process of expressing the values contained in the Seven Principles. We do this, however imperfectly, with as much intention and integrity as we can muster, in every aspect of our lives, and whether we express our values individually or in community, doing so is a process.

I put my faith in that process - and I find that my Unitarian Universalist faith is inseparable from that process.

I also find that the Fourth Principle does have a central role. I am not the first to observe that three Principles come before it and three come after. In January of 2008, we held a workshop on the Seven Principles here at UUCC, and I’ve retained from that a distinct image of a teeter-totter. It has with the first three Principles on one end, the last three on the other end, and the Fourth Principle as the fulcrum. In this arrangement, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning helps us to balance the

individual orientation of our First, Second and Third Principles with the community orientation of our Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Principles.

More recently, in a sermon last July, Reverend Martha described us as living “in tension between our First and Seventh Principles.”¹ She did not mention the Fourth Principle, but to keep our balance as we maintain that tension calls for ongoing evaluations of how our Principles apply to the choices we face. We do much of that evaluating subconsciously, but to the extent that we make it an intentional process – to the extent that we are conscious of assessing, identifying and adjusting the proper relation and significance of the myriad aspects of our lives – it can feel overwhelming.

It is overwhelming. How can it not be overwhelming? As Julia read earlier,

“My life span is but a flick in the passing of time. How can anything I say or do or think matter at all?...The answer...does not reside in a structure we humans have pieced together, whether scientific or philosophical or theological. It is found in the structuring...in the ongoing process of discovery...”²

¹ “The Excellent Self”, July 19, 2008, <http://www.u2c2.org/docs/sermon2009july19.pdf>

² Howlett, Duncan; The Fatal Flaw at the Heart of Religious Liberalism; Prometheus Books; Amherst, NY; 1995; p. 209 - 214

I believe this describes us as we act on our Fourth Principle, as we freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning, and as we freely and responsibly piece together what we find. I agree with Duncan Howlett that

“Therein lies the joy, the exultation, the worth of living.”³

At the same time, I do remember that I’ve identified our Fourth Principle with Frost’s “limitless trait”, and I recall his closing lines:

*“But if it is destined never again to grow,
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men.”*

This indicates that a negative result - the death of the tree - could be the consequence of doing something we would like to think is positive - acting in accordance with our Fourth Principle, and in assigning the potential for blame, Frost places responsibility for the survival of the peach tree squarely upon us. He rails against humans’ persistently obdurate resistance to learning:

*“Why is **[our]** nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?”*

³ Howlett; *Ibid.*

and the implication seems clear. The risk these particular humans have taken was irresponsible. They brought the peach tree far out of its comfort zone, and they should have known better than to do that.

Are there any mitigating factors or circumstances? Even though the humans “can’t help feeling more than a little betrayed” by the peculiarities of the weather, they do admit to bringing the tree “very far north” and there is no hint that the decision to do so was anything other than voluntary. They made a choice, prompted perhaps by a desire to become more self-sufficient. They made a choice most probably informed by some knowledge of the local climate. (In addition to the mention of feeling betrayed, we hear that “the house has long been tried” by wintry gusts.) We might also take into account that if the tree loses its life, the humans will not escape completely unscathed. They may feel dismay and regret for the tree itself, for the loss of the peach crop they were anticipating, and for the loss of the time and resources they had invested in acquiring, transporting and nurturing the tree. Surely they knew it was a risk, and why bother with it unless they felt they had a reasonable chance of success?

Perhaps we can reconcile these views for now by following Reverend Martha’s example cited earlier. Let us posit that we live in tension between our Fourth and Seventh Principles, too. Let us continue to affirm and

promote our Principles in community, as faithfully as we are able, and I am confident that we will improve our ability to achieve an ongoing balance.

I am confident of that because I have confidence in our process. We are a “covenantal” faith, and when we covenant we exchange promises about how we are going to interact with each other. This is emphasized in our Fourth Principle by the word “responsible” - the origin of which is in the Latin for “to promise in return.” I believe that when we say that our search for truth and meaning is “responsible”, we are saying that we will share the results of our searches and faithfully consider what others share with us.

So, let me share just a few more thoughts...

Roughly seventy years have passed since Frost wrote this poem. During that span, our “ambition to extend our reach” has driven us into the sub-atomic and out to the interstellar. We have split the atom and then produced armaments capable of destroying the Earth. Now we fear that such weapons may be acquired by stateless groups (also known as terrorists), and such groups are among those imbued with that “excess of certitude” that George Will identified as “the greatest threat to...civilization.”⁴

⁴ Will, George F.; “The Oddness of *Everything*”; Newsweek magazine; May 23, 2005; p. 84
<http://www.newsweek.com/id/52148>

We also are using nuclear technology (in the form of decaying radioisotopes) to power spacecraft. A couple of those craft - Voyager I and Voyager II – carry multimedia greetings from we Earthlings, and have flown far beyond the orbits of our fellow planets. At some point in the next few years they may leave this solar system entirely, becoming the first human artifacts to do so. There are reports of concern that the greetings on board would divulge our location to hostile or hungry extraterrestrial entities - yet another threat to civilization, but one that might finally unite humanity by providing that most typical catalyst - a common enemy.

That typical catalyst, however, traps us in the age-old pattern of demonizing the “other” - the out-group made up of those who are not like us - and we need to break that pattern if truly “We Would Be One.”

As individuals, as a congregation, and as a society, we yearn for certainty and security, but all of our yearning cannot change this fact: we will not find what we seek by persisting in our old ways. When we pledge ourselves to the “high cause of greater understanding”, we do so knowing that we face great dangers, and knowing that chief among them is to allow our fears and insecurities to define our actions.

We do, of course, have reasons to feel fearful and insecure. Our science and technology - so successful at providing the basic necessities of life for some - cannot provide us with the will to make those necessities

available to all. In the United States, and in our State of California, our political processes are polarized and show signs of becoming paralyzed. We are “awash in an unpleasant surplus of clanging, clashing certitudes”, and apparently unable to disavow the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Our interwoven systems of production, distribution, finance and governance are so complex that any policy or course of action is practically guaranteed to produce unintended consequences. In short, we find ourselves in quite a mess.

It is a mess of mostly our own making, however. If on occasion the “wind should rise to such a height, just when the cold went down so many below”, we must still take responsibility for how our actions contribute to the situation. We must take responsibility and we must take further action of some kind.

Adrienne Rich has observed that “We might hypothetically possess ourselves of every technological resource on the North American continent, but as long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in the old cycles, our process may be “revolutionary” but not transformative.”⁵

However bleak our prospects seem, we - individually and collectively - have the ability to choose our attitudes, our actions and our words. If we

so choose, we can identify the choices presented to us as inadequately framed, or even false, and we can reject them. The isolated individual who does so risks insanity, but within our congregation and denomination, in the crucible of our covenant, we can employ our “limitless trait” to our advantage. As for developing language that will be adequate to forming a vision of the future, adequate to transcending our current thinking and feeling, and adequate to creating transformative processes, I believe that we have already begun.

None of us can foresee exactly what the future holds. In some very important respects, “we must wait till some months hence in the spring to know.” Let us therefore act courageously and faithfully in accordance with our Principles. Let us willingly take considered risks, embracing the uncertainties and the mysteries of life, and let us always choose to build the Beloved Community. Blessed be.

⁵ In the introduction to [The Work of a Common Woman: the collected poetry of Judy Grahn 1964 – 1977](#)

i "There Are Roughly Zones" by Robert Frost

We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside.
And every gust that gathers strength and heaves
Is a threat to the house. But the house has long been tried.
We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves,
We'll know, we say, that this was the night it died.
It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach.
What comes over a man, is it soul or mind---
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
You would say his ambition was to extend the reach
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?
There is nothing much we can do for the tree tonight,
But we can't help feeling more than a little betrayed
That the northwest wind should rise to such a height
Just when the cold went down so many below.
The tree has no leaves and may never have them again.
We must wait till some months hence in the spring to know.
But if it is destined never again to grow,
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men.
