

Order of Service
Paradox: Synergy of Opposites
May 9, 2010

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting Leah Harrison

We come to this time and this place:

To rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community;
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and full heart;
To rekindle the flame of memory and home; and
To reclaim the vision of earth made fair, with all her people one.

Let us worship together.

Readings

Tao te Ching, by Lao Tzu, #'s 56 and 63

#57, Leah Reads

If you want to be a great leader,
You must learn to follow the Tao.

Stop trying to control.

Let go of fixed plans and concepts,
And the world will govern itself.

The more prohibitions you have,
The less virtuous people will be.

The more weapons you have,
The less secure people will be.

The more subsidies you have,
The less self-reliant people will be.

Therefore the Master says:

I let go of the law,
And people become honest.

I let go of economics,
And people become prosperous.

I let go of religion,
And people become serene.

I let go of all desire for the common good,
And the good becomes common as grass.

#63, Bruce reads

Act without doing;

Work without effort.

Think of the small as large

And the few as many.

Confront the difficult

While it is still easy;

Accomplish the great task

By a series of small acts.

The Master never reaches for the great;

Thus she achieves greatness.

When she runs into a difficulty,

She stops and gives herself to it.
She doesn't cling to her own comfort;
Thus problems are no problem for her.

Sermon Paradox: Synergy of Opposites Rev. Bruce Davis

My friend, Robert, has cancer in an advanced stage. From the original site of presentation it has now spread to bones and internal organs in a way that cannot be reversed with medical interventions. And yet his sole intention is to cling to life. He has requested of his oncologist yet another round of chemotherapy, certain that this time it will achieve the remission of his disease that has, over three years, eluded him.

Fierce in his determination for a cure, strident in his demands for the latest therapies, Robert rejects the counsel of his friends to begin to work with hospice. When friends and family try to talk with him about end of life matters, they are met with icy rejection. Even those who help out with rides to the doctor for treatments must bear the brunt of his cantankerous attitude. What was once a rich and loving life has now shriveled into rigid intention for survival and bitter denial that death is at the door. Even spouse and children keep their distance these days.

The more he clings to his life, the more he pushes his life away. It is a common and unfortunate paradox in late-stage illness. My hope for Robert is that sometime soon, at least before his dying breath, he can once again embrace all that has been his life. But that can't happen the way things are right now.

Clinging to life the way he is, his whole attention and intention are focused on the clinging—not on the life.

Many years ago Alice was in the same situation. Because the cancer went on for years, and because, like Robert, she put her full attention on beating this disease, she had alienated her now adult daughters, divorced her husband, and secluded herself in her workplace. Her tunnel vision on the cancer and its treatment had robbed her of so much that had once been of paramount importance in her life.

Finally and quite suddenly she realized that further curative medical treatment was not even possible. Her own image of the situation was this. She had been waging a war on this cancer on many fronts. She now knew the war was lost, the end was near, and she had been defeated.

Deeply despondent, she told me that all she had left now was losing—was “giving up.” I asked her what other words she might use to describe this giving up. “You know, losing, giving in.” I waited for more. “Letting the cancer take me. Accepting the fact that I’ll die.” She paused, then said, “Acceptance.” She took a deep sigh. “Allowing,” she added slowly. “Surrendering.” “Letting go.”

In about fifteen minutes she took a profound turn. Fully committed to clinging to life for many years, sometimes by her fingernails, she now realized that she had great power in the acceptance of death. Her whole body relaxed. She looked like a different person.

She realized that in the acceptance of death she had new life. Not long life, perhaps, but potentially rich and loving life.

I asked, what would she like to have in that life now. She thought of reconciliation with her daughters first. Then she thought of sunsets at the ocean where she grew up near Santa Barbara. With a flood of enthusiasm she realized that she had work to do to build up her life again, and not much time to do it. She quit her job, moved to Santa Barbara, married her boyfriend, and reconciled with her two daughters. Six months later, she died, a happy woman.

Grasping at life as it slipped through her fingers, she had none; letting it go toward death, life emerged abundantly!

Both of these people, struggling with cancer, clung to life desperately, and in so-doing lost their lives. Paradoxically, by embracing imminent death, one of them found life again. What will Robert do? Will he die an embittered soul? Or will he surrender to his death and rediscover his life and love before it is too late?

The human mind appears to be wired to experience the world in terms of opposites and contradictions. From our earliest years we learn that death opposes our life. With our minds we simplify the complex world we are in, perhaps to make it less mysterious and easier to control, by reducing it to pairs of conflicting energies or

values. What we give up is the possibility to have it both ways—to let our truth emerge from the complex interaction of these opposites.

The spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle suggests that life and death are not opposite values at all. Birth and death are at opposite poles within the wider and more mysterious context of life. We are called to embrace life, and to embrace death as well.

What is the opposite of hot? Cold of course. Or is it? Doesn't science reveal that there is simply a continuum of heat, from lower heat to higher heat? What is the opposite of light? Darkness, of course. Or is it? What we call light occurs in many wavelengths, some visible and some not. Some places have more light passing through and some less. And even visible light is not seen by our eyes until it strikes an object or particles in the air. The complexity and mystery of light is the stuff of physics and poetry. It's not bad that we over-simplify into these simple polarities, as long as we are open to a reality that is much richer and stranger than our simple minds can easily grasp.

Paradox is a deeper way of apprehending our world than simple opposites. Seemingly contradictory elements can be more deeply perceived in a way that reveals the truth of both poles. Sometimes the two apparent opposites may resolve in our minds to be seen as essentially the same thing. Sometimes, by embracing one pole, the other paradoxically is strengthened in our experience. Sometimes the two poles dance together, not diminishing each other but synergizing in a way that produces a wholeness that is greater than the sum of its parts.

If by embracing paradox we encounter a deeper way of knowing, why do we persist in seeing the world in terms of simple contradictions? Well, for one thing, it's our habit to look at things as black or white. It's also easier than delving into the complexity that paradox opens. It also produces a world that, we believe, will submit more readily to control by our rational minds. But I think there's a deeper reason.

If I live in a world with opposite poles, I can align myself with the one and against the other. Let's say I choose black. Then black becomes my home element. Black becomes my place of safety and comfort. Black is my friend. Black becomes the mode of my sense of beauty. Black is good. Conversely, I reject white. White is the stranger, white is the enemy. Black is self, white is other. Living black, I enhance my sense of self, reveling in the nature of black. And yet, I may even more potently

enhance my sense of self by rejecting white. The more I separate myself from white, the more I actively reject or attack white, the more righteous I feel in my blackness.

By living out the conflict between the black and the white, I am enhancing my ego or sense of self at the expense of the other. This is the core of judgmentalism and prejudice, and it presents in our lives in so many ways.

Yet, by shifting my perception and understanding away from contradictions toward paradox, a big change takes place in my black and white world. I realize, as with life or light, that my world is filled with myriad tones of gray. The black of the Taoist Yang and the white of the Yin are of equal value. No thing is purely the black or purely the white. The Yang symbol always carries within it that white dot of Yin, and the Yin symbol always carries within it that black dot of Yang. When I realize that the world before me is always a complex admixture of the Yang and the Yin, of the black and the white, I can no longer maintain my simpler worldview of contradictions. I begin to be open to the unique beauty, the unique possibilities, of what had previously been intensely “other.”

The opportunity to embrace paradox is everywhere. The fool may proclaim the greatest wisdom, while the wise leader gets caught up in foolery. How can we join this dance between wisdom and foolery? The person who has everything, struggling to get more, struggling to take care of it all, may ultimately enjoy nothing, while the person who has very little may find long episodes of deep contentment and peace. How can we join this dance between simplicity and abundance. The person who loses her job may lament that her life as she knew it is at an end, only to realize that it was really the fresh start she needed. How can our own endings be realized as important new beginnings?

Allowing ourselves to feel the pain or the suffering may be the first step toward healing. Being always together, we may feel alone, but taking some time alone, we begin to look forward to being together again. Retreating from our fears, we give them strength, while facing our fears diminishes their power over us and transforms them into more life energy.

One of my favorite paradoxes over the years is this. “Do less, and accomplish more.” In my work life and home life both, I’ve been an over-achiever over the years. The more I got done, the more satisfied I felt. Conversely, when I didn’t get much done, I doubted my value. Until I learned, at one point, that doing more things does

not necessarily mean better outcomes. Outcomes are best supported by doing the right things, which may mean not doing some of the wrong things.

Sometimes contradictions in our lives resolve spontaneously into useful paradoxes, as the Zen Buddhist koan suddenly makes sense. But there are other times when we feel caught in a contradiction that just won't go away. There's a polarity practice that comes out of the work of Barry Johnson, whose book is called *Polarity Management*. It is as useful with organizations as it is with individuals.

Say that you are facing the dilemma between having too much stuff and having not enough stuff. At one pole is having a surfeit of stuff. At the other pole is having a scarcity of stuff. There are pluses and minuses to both poles. The advantage of lots of stuff is that you always have at hand things that you want. The disadvantage of owning lots of stuff is that the stuff begins to own you. The advantage of having less stuff is that you feel the freedom of less clutter and the openness for new possibilities. The disadvantage of less is that you don't have something you may want or need.

The idea of polarity management is to realize that both poles are true in your life. For a while you enjoy the abundance of stuff. Then it becomes a burden. So you get rid of some stuff and enjoy the freedom of less stuff. Then you start hankering to get something you need, and you're back on the road to more stuff. Polarity management says that there's no right and wrong here. Both poles dance together in an organic way. By letting go of that tension of contradiction, it is possible to simply accept the dance between the poles. Ultimately you may be able to live the paradox of those two poles without all the drama and the teeth gnashing.

The experience of paradox is a step away from self-righteousness toward the acceptance of a reality whose beauty emerges from its complexity. Living paradox means honoring diversity. It means relinquishing that drive of ego to be the best, the most powerful, the rightest. It means acknowledging that there is no one way of being, no one path to salvation. It means moving into and feeling our way through the apparent contradictions in our life, until we begin to realize the complex dance of polarities.

It's a lifelong practice. It's the dance we do