

LIVING WITH PARADOX

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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March 1, 2009

Several weeks ago I began reading Barack Obama's autobiographical account of his formative experiences. The book is titled *Dreams from My Father*, but it is about much more than his relationship with his Kenyan father, with whom he had very limited contact. It is really about all of the people who helped shape his personality and outlook on life. His story took on added poignancy when my college friend Phil Neale visited this week and brought with him a CD version of the book, read by Barack Obama himself. So for the past few days, I have been driving around the Valley listening to the President of the United States talking about his life with remarkable candor and insight. In doing so, he describes the diverse cast of characters that have influenced him by recreating them **in their own voices**—ranging from his Kenyan father to his Indonesian stepfather to his Midwestern grandparents to his classmates along the way.

Even though this book was written more than a dozen years before he was elected president, I must admit that I found it a bit disconcerting to hear the future President of the United States speaking in the rough vernacular of a street-wise classmate from Los Angeles. More importantly, I also came to appreciate in a new and direct way the variety of experiences that have prepared him uniquely for his role as the leader of an increasingly diverse American population in a bewilderingly complex world.

Let me reassure you that this is **not** going to be a sermon about a new president who is at risk of overexposure. Instead, I would like to use his example as a springboard into discussing a challenge all of us face: **how to achieve a coherent identity in the midst of an unstable world.** For many people—and for many religions—the only way to achieve stability is through **singularity**—a single ultimate truth that unifies both internal and external reality. Fundamentalist faiths—whether Christian, Islamic, or others—offer such a worldview to their followers. Most often these faiths revolve around the life and teachings of a single founding figure whose ideas have been codified into a fixed written form. Let me add that religions do not

have a monopoly on such an approach to life, as illustrated by the devoted and unquestioning followers of Freud, Marx, or Chairman Mao. The final answer to all questions is, “What did the master say about this?”

While systems of absolute truth promise certainty and confidence to their devoted followers, they often fail to offer solutions to the complex issues of our time. What would Freud think of contemporary American women? What would Jesus say about the use of force to alleviate human suffering? Oftentimes, contradictions are found in the founder’s own ideas, such as the seemingly self-contradictory statements in the Koran about the justifiable use of violence. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “You will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinions; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man [sic] is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds . . .” [“Self-Reliance,” quoted in Robert Fulghum (ed.), *Words I Wish I Wrote*, p. 101]

At times of widespread tension and conflict, simple truths can be powerfully attractive. The philosophy of **either-or** divides the world into winners or losers, heroes or villains, sages or liars. Consider the example of Michael Phelps, who fell instantly from the status of national hero to condemned drug user with the publication of a single photograph. Likewise, a simplified pathway to salvation prescribes a fixed sequence of steps guaranteed to lead its followers from despair to triumph. Our hunger for absolute truth and simple solutions to life’s dilemmas is fed daily by the popular media, which offer slogans and one-liners in response to complex issues. We find ourselves tossed back and forth between hopelessness and optimism, trust and cynicism—build your own list of polarities. The most recent Woody Allen movie, “Vicky Christina Barcelona,” portrays characters who are trapped within their own contradictions, torn between commitment and freedom, self-indulgence and self-restraint, honesty and deceit. What made this movie so disheartening for me is that they are unable to reconcile these extremes and therefore remain imprisoned by them.

What is the alternative to the philosophy of either-or? The American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.” [quoted by Fulghum, p. 96] In short, we must come to recognize the contradictions and paradoxes both within ourselves and life in general. Rather than seeking to collapse one side of a polarity into its opposite, we begin to view them as **complementary** to one another. In the words of Joni Mitchell’s song, we learn to look at “both sides now.” This is the philosophy of **both-and**.

I find the spiritual resources for this approach to life largely in Chinese wisdom, especially Taoism with its famous symbol of complementarity: *yin* and *yang*. In his commentary on the *Tao Te Ching*, Thomas Miles writes: “*Yang*, the male force, is strong and forceful. *Yin*, the female force, is soft, weak, yielding, and passive, though containing great power. . . . Naturally it is good to avoid the extremes of either yin or yang. For instance, we should not be so passive (*yin*) that others misuse us, or so active (*yang*) that we give ourselves over to aggression. Rather, we should balance ourselves in the middle.” The *Tao Te Ching* is filled with examples of these complementary forces, such as this:

Nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water.
 But for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can surpass it.
 For this reason, nothing can take its place.
 The weak overcomes the strong. The soft overcomes the hard.
 There is no one in the world who does not know this.
 But no one can put this knowledge into practice. . . . [chap. 78]

My copy of the *Tao Te Ching* is so tattered that it is now held together by a rubber band.

The philosophy of complementarity—of **both-and**—has influenced a variety of Western thinkers, such as the psychotherapist Carl Jung, who added another important idea: If a person denies or represses one side of an **emotional** polarity, it can erupt with destructive force in the form of a mental breakdown or disabling physical illness. There is another less well-known writer who has been influenced by Taoist wisdom. His name is **Parker Palmer**. He has also

been influenced by the Quaker tradition. A few years ago I attended a weekend conference where Parker Palmer was the featured presenter. In the style of a Quaker meeting, he would begin each session with an extended period of **silence**. Imagine if you will a roomful of 250 UUs trying to remain silent for ten minutes. You could almost hear the teeth grinding!

In his book titled *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer offers some helpful suggestions for coming to terms with the opposing forces and contradictory ideas that we all face. “The journey toward inner truth,” he says, “is too taxing to be made solo; lacking support, the solitary traveler soon becomes weary or fearful and is likely to quit the road. The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company; finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue.” [p. 26] The format Parker Palmer offers for this kind of dialogue is what he calls a **circle of trust**. “When we sit in a circle of trust, we are given one experience after another in holding the tension of opposites, experiences that slowly break our hearts open to greater capacity. Here are some of the tensions we learn to hold in a circle of trust:

- When we listen to another person’s problems, we do not leap to fix or save; we hold the tension to give that person space to hear his or her inner teacher. We learn to neither **invade** nor **evade** each other’s lives but rather to find a third way of being present to each other. . . .
- Truth in a circle of trust resides neither in some immutable external authority nor in the momentary convictions of each individual. It resides **between** us, in the tension of the eternal conversation, where the voice of truth we think we are hearing from within can be checked and balanced by the voices of truth others think they are hearing.

[*A Hidden Wholeness*, pp. 181-82]

I believe that within our Fellowship we have our own versions of “circles of trust,” such as the Brownbaggers lunch group, the RE parents discussion group, the women’s spirituality group known as Sophia’s Daughters, and the men’s group, which has not yet chosen a name. In each of these settings, as well as the discussions that follow my Sunday sermons, we practice the delicate art of **dialogue**—of listening as well as speaking, of honoring our differences with mutual respect. To those of you who are new to our Fellowship, I want to encourage you to get

connected with one of these “circles of trust,” particularly if you are struggling with inner tensions that may be pulling you apart from within or pulling you away from the ones you love. The highest goal of our Unitarian Universalist faith is not perfection but **wholeness**. The mission of this Fellowship is not the pursuit of one single truth that excludes those who disagree, but the **inclusion** of many different truths that embrace the variety and richness of our shared experience. This is both our gift and our challenge. In the words of the Sufi poet Rumi, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” [quoted by Palmer, p. 167]

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 354 “We Laugh, We Cry”

CLOSING WORDS # 459 (by William Schulz)