

## WHOLENESS AND THE SELF

### Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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This past week we have learned about the shameful actions of two men—Herman Cain and Jerry Sandusky—who apparently used their positions of power and status to meet their own needs at the expense of others. The case of Jerry Sandusky, a former assistant football coach at Penn State, is particularly disturbing, because he allegedly used his position as the leader of a charitable organization for helping boys from dysfunctional families to exploit them sexually. What he hoped would remain a private secret has now turned into a major public scandal, and it has permanently scarred the reputation of one of the most respected coaches in American college football: Joe Paterno. The suffering caused by this one man's irresponsible behavior has now rippled out into the universe in true *kharma* fashion.

These now very public violations of trust encourage the rest of us to condemn the behavior, seek punishment, and then move on to the next scandal. Our attention-deficit media eagerly feed that need. What I want to suggest is that these episodes of shameful behavior should also challenge us to face the conflicts and contradictions of our own lives. **All of us have done things we should be ashamed of.** The more we can project our faults onto others, the less we will have to confront them in ourselves. Rather than just clucking our tongues at these two most recent examples of abuse and exploitation, let's reflect on their behavior as symptomatic of a wider and deeper issue in our culture: the **fragmentation** of our public and private lives.

As I suggested in the first installment of my monthly sermon series, many of us suffer from **wholeness hunger**. Sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof describes wholeness hunger this way. "Modernity severs connections to place and community, alienates people from their natural environments, separates work and life, dilutes ethical values, all of which makes the need for unifying experience so deeply felt." [*Spiritual Marketplace*, p. 62] We long for wholeness, but we are uncertain about how to pursue it. In my sermon last month, I talked about what wholeness is **not** about. Wholeness is **not** about **happiness**. Wholeness is **not** about **perfection**.

And wholeness does **not** require **uniformity of beliefs**. I also suggested that the journey toward wholeness moves from the **inside out**, beginning with the search for wholeness in oneself. So today I would like to offer my thoughts on how the search for wholeness within ourselves might proceed.

In our search for wholeness, we need to resist our longing for one-sided solutions. We need to find a way to avoid the dualities that are so prevalent in our culture. The wise authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection* challenge us to avoid the traditional dichotomies between body and mind, head and heart. “Weaving in and out of this debate are the gentle voices of an august company of spiritual thinkers who resist these efforts to make the human being a one-sided conversation, a monologue, with either the head or heart running the show. Our two-sidedness, our being both/and rather than either-or, means that we may be distinguishable, but we are not divisible. To be ‘mixed’ is not to be *divided*: **a stew is not a salad bar**. The head and heart are not only connected, but if we are to live a spiritual life, that essential connection must be nurtured and protected. How can we discover wholeness if we persist in dividing ourselves into conflicting parts?” [p. 73]

One of the most significant steps in the journey toward wholeness is acknowledging the paradoxes in our personal lives. **A life of integrity is not a life without contradictions**. Each of us embodies the paradoxes of human existence whether we realize it or not. Most of us are at various times **both** compassionate and judgmental, selfish and generous, hopeful and cynical, kind yet sometimes hurtful toward others. In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer says, “The deeper our **faith**, the more doubts we must endure; the deeper our **hope**, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our **love**, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love. [pp. 82-83] I am reminded here of a poem titled “The Journey,” by Mary Oliver:

One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began,  
 Though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice—  
 Though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles.  
 “Mend my life!” each voice cried.

But you didn't stop. You knew what you had to do,  
 Though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations—  
 Though their melancholy was terrible.  
 It was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and  
 stones.  
 But little by little, as you left the voices behind,  
 The stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice,  
 Which you slowly recognized as your own,  
 That kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,  
 Determined to do the only thing you could do—  
 Determined to save the only life you could save.

[Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, pp. 114-15]

Drawing together the fragments of our personal lives that can be somehow directed  
 toward a sense of wholeness is indeed a challenge. The book that I mentioned earlier, *The  
 Spirituality of Imperfection*, suggests that a good starting point is to acknowledge our own  
**weaknesses**. This book is based on the authors' experiences working with Alcoholics  
 Anonymous, leavened by stories from a variety of wisdom traditions. "Human beings," say the  
 authors, "connect with each other most healingly, most healthily, not on the basis of common  
**strengths**, but in the very reality of their shared weaknesses. *Among those who accept their  
 imperfection* there seems to be a special sense of likeness or oneness in their very flawedness. . . .  
 In such a context of *shared weakness*, qualities in other people that might, in different  
 circumstances, irritate or anger instead elicit compassion and identification. **Shared weakness:**  
*the shared honesty of mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged*. That's where we connect. At  
 the most fundamental level of our human-ness, **it is our weaknesses that make us alike; it is  
 our strengths that make us different**. . . . Spirituality [or as I would say: wholeness] begins  
 with this first insight: **We are all imperfect.**" [pp. 198-99]

Arising from this foundational insight are other qualities of wholeness: **honesty,**  
**humility, gratitude, tolerance, and forgiveness**. I will not attempt to elaborate on each of these  
 themes this morning. Parker Palmer suggests that one of the hallmarks of wholeness is

continuity between our inner and outer selves. Our inner self is our private world of thoughts and feelings and actions that we often conceal from others. Our outer self is what we present to the rest of the world—our image, our work, our publicly observable behavior. For those who suffer from a divided self, these two worlds of inner and outer self are in conflict or opposition with one another—especially if we think there are parts of our inner self that others would not approve of. One of the more insightful analyses of the Penn State tragedy is that no one seemed to really **know** Jerry Sandusky, because he kept his dark side—his inner self—so well hidden, or so he thought.

To illustrate the relationship between inner and outer self, Parker Palmer uses what he calls his “Quaker PowerPoint”—a Mobius strip. If the inner and outer selves are not integrated with one another, the inner side of the strip is hidden from others. He writes, “We may fool ourselves into thinking that we are hiding our truth behind a wall or using our truth to screen out what is alien to us. But whether we know it or not, like it or not, accept it or not, we all live on the Mobius strip all the time: **there is no place to hide!** We are constantly engaged in a seamless exchange between whatever is ‘out there’ and whatever is ‘in here,’ cocreating reality, for better or for worse. The implications of this simple truth are widely ignored in a culture that separates inner from outer, private from public, personal from professional.” [p. 47] Ultimately, the truth of our lives will be revealed, **for better or for worse.**

The search for wholeness is never complete, but that does not mean we should shrink from the challenge. Let me close with an excerpt from another one of Mary Oliver’s poems. This one is titled “When Death Comes.”

When it’s over, I want to say:  
 All my life I was a bride married to amazement.  
 I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.  
 When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder if I made of my life something particular,  
 and real.  
 I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.  
 I don’t want to end up simply having visited the world.

[*New and Selected Poems*, pp. 10-11]