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The Dance of the Open Heart

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

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Message for All Ages

Finding Your Balance

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Good morning, friends! I bet some of you are wondering what this big old thing is doing up here in the chancel this morning. Well, I can tell you! This is a circus apparatus called a balancing pipe. Yes, you heard me correctly, I said circus apparatus. In fact, this is MY apparatus, or one of them anyway, which I use to perform and teach on. I have another one that is at least twice this height. Maybe I'll bring that one in next time.

In addition to being a religious educator, I am also a professional acrobat. I love getting to say that – totally worth the price of circus school. More specifically, I am a balancing acrobat, which means that the particular circus disciplines that I study and practice have a lot to do with balance. These particular disciplines, which include wire walking and hand balancing, are considered some of the hardest to master. Why? Because balancing is really tough!

In order to walk on the pipe we have to find our center of balance. And here's the tricky thing: even once you find it, staying balanced and not falling off is still constant work. You can't just find the right spot and the right position and freeze there hoping to balance. If you do that, you'll fall. You have to move constantly around that center in order to stay balanced. And that's the other thing – no matter how good you get at walking on the pipe, no matter how expert you become at dancing around that center of balance, you will fall sometimes. That's just the way it goes. And the funny thing is, the possibility that you might fall is also what keeps things interesting.

So now I'd like to share with you a bit of what I've learned about balance, but this time without the microphone....

(Transition to moving on the pipe while Yukiko plays "Spirit of Life")

(To finish)

I hope the idea of balance continues to unfold in your hearts until we meet again.

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READING: The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology
– the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

While we are open to many things, you can't really believe anything and be a Unitarian Universalist. There are limits. Unitarian Universalism is not an empty cipher. It is not nothing. It is something. And there are theological options that are beyond the pale. For example:

You can hold a view that there is no God or that God exists. But you cannot hold the view that God is the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens, such that there is no exercise of human freedom. Unitarian Universalism is clear that there is some measure of freedom accessible to every living being, given in the nature of things. We hold that freedom is a real and essential characteristic of life.

You can define salvation, healing, and wholeness in many ways. But you cannot hold to the view that there will be an ultimate separation of the saved from the damned by which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering. Unitarian Universalism is clear that all souls are of worth. There is no final solution to be had by the privileged protection of some and the destruction of others. We hold that salvation is universal.

You can be devoted to a specific religious practice—Christian prayer, Buddhist meditation, or pagan ritual (to name a few). But you cannot hold the view that there is one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places. Not even Unitarian Universalism. We are confident that revelation is not sealed. The sacred impulse towards justice, compassion, and equity moves in many times and places, in myriad ways that call to us and teach us.

Finally, you can see this world as tragically flawed, wondrously gifted, or both. But you cannot hold the view that salvation is to be found solely beyond this world—in some life after death or a world other than this world. While remaining open to mysteries that may be revealed beyond the grave or in realms beyond what we know at present, UUism is clear that the ultimate is present here and now, and can be grasped and experienced, even if only partially, within this limited frame of our mortal existence.

This means we do not hold to a hope that is only attained in the sweet by and by. We hold that this world, this life, these bodies are the dwelling place of the sacred.

Within these theological boundaries there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent. But there is also a defining focus: a devotion to the flourishing of life. Our sacred circle draws us together in passionate love for life.

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Meditation

Spirit of Life, of wellness, join us, won't you? Dance with us awhile? Help us to feel that our burdens can be made lighter. There are those among us with more than their share. May we attend and be present. There are those among us with joy in abundance. May we see it and be grateful. On this beautiful day, between snowstorm just passed and snowstorm ahead, may we delight in possibility, in hope, in love and service.

And in the quiet that follows, find some peace.

SERMON

The Dance of the Open Heart the Rev. Anne Bancroft

In the e-news about today, I mentioned that our theme for the month of March is balance, something, I suggested, that we might think of in static terms like a scale, for example – two sides having reached equal weights – when in fact it may be more useful to imagine balance in our lives more like walking a beam or a tightrope, a constant shifting and responding to elements that would otherwise unsettle us. We can imagine the number of things that would knock us off course but for a good dose of steadiness and centering. We can imagine our tender hearts being wounded and in need of some capacity to heal. And I wondered how our tradition equips us to find balance in our lives, to keep finding balance so that our hearts can remain open.

I loved watching Amanda bring her pipe into the sanctuary this morning and show us what it looks like to effortlessly dance her way back and forth across it, when we know it's not really effortless at all! As Amanda reminded us, staying balanced actually requires constant attention and a lot of work!

And in our conversations, she made it clear that the acrobats she admires the most have enormous range of motion **because** their circles of balance are so tight, so small, so strong. It made me wonder if this faith – which often feels so open and wide – equips us with a sufficiently strong circle of focus.

This isn't a new question necessarily. Any faith worth its salt deserves to be questioned and tested, or GETS tested and questioned whether it deserves to or not! While meandering through some thoughts over the last few weeks, I got a call from a colleague – a Unitarian Universalist minister – who has recently started serving a federated church, which means it is not singularly Unitarian Universalist but a blend of Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, and American Baptist. Their website offers that they are "Gathered in the spirit of Jesus. Committed to creating heaven on earth." My colleague expressed enormous relief at now serving a congregation where she can comfortably reference God, and where she can offer a prayer without having to figure out how to say to whom, or what, it is being

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offered. “Oh, it used to be so hard,” she exclaimed, “trying to find words that would work for some and not offend others; and now I just say, ‘Dear God’ and pray.”

I could feel her relief and understand it. It is simpler. I appreciate her call to that theology even as I’m aware that it doesn’t work me, particularly, or for many among us, right? But it begs the question of what balance, what centering, this tradition does offer us in lieu of that kind of certainty.

Did you know that this church used to follow the Ames Covenant? Charles Gordon Ames offered this promise for congregational life in 1880 and a lot of Unitarian churches used it for quite a long time. Some still do. “In the freedom of truth, and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of humankind.”

The second half of the 20th century saw our Unitarian Universalist churches growing beyond that covenant to a large degree, exploring elements of humanism and Eastern traditions that made room for perspectives other than Christian ones, perspectives other than theological ones, even. We welcome many beliefs and no beliefs. Every Sunday, we invite you to bring your perspectives, your beliefs and doubts, and your unique identities to this community.

As we wend our way towards the middle of the 21st century, it is useful to consider how we are challenged to find balance in our lives with this evolving faith.

I am stunned to think it will be 2020 in just two short years, aren’t you?!

I’ve probably mentioned to a few of you that my early forays into Unitarian Universalism involved a trip to the library. I found one book on the subject, called *The Wind in Both Ears*, first published in 1965 and written by the Rev. Angus MacLean, a colleague of our very own David Parke! I was anxious to learn more about this tradition that I had only recently discovered, and this book seemed a good place to start. It became, for me, a brilliant and challenging early introduction to this faith. “Religion, without the adventure of becoming,” Rev. MacLean wrote, “is a poor business.” The adventure of becoming, I thought – how exciting would that be! I loved the invitation to this journey of discovery. He spoke not of a path to certainty or answers provided for me, but of what felt like an encouragement to a kind of dance, and a discovering of my own center in the process, my own soul – which is, by the way, the invitation of this tradition that in the company of others you might discover yourself.

My father sent me up from the root cellar, MacLean writes, to see about the wind. ... Was there a steady breeze, he wanted to know. Yes, there was. “Now face it,” he said, “so that the wind sings in both your ears. Then tell me where your nose points to.”

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Can you imagine, or do you remember engaging first with this sense of freedom? This twirling into discovering one's true direction, knowing – of course – that like the wind, it may shift a bit over time. So, we keep turning, keep dancing, keep looking for that balance.

I love the metaphor and the invitation. It is a rich journey we are invited on, this becoming ... even if sometimes, just sometimes, we might wonder if we are spinning endlessly in the wind to no end. Do you ever feel that? I confess there is a part of me that envies the relief my colleague felt, even as I know their solution doesn't quite fit for me. The sense of envy reminds me that it's not easy to practice such an open-ended faith. Sometimes it feels like it is demanding more of me than I have energy or patience for.

Paul Razor, in his book *Faith Without Certainty*, writes: "Liberal theology is not for the faint of heart. It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make. ... It calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention."

This is hard work! And life is already challenging, isn't it?

And then I read Rebecca Parker, and I am reminded of what I love and what keeps my heart open to this dance. "We hold that this world, this life, these bodies are the dwelling place of the sacred." That for whatever time we grace this earth, our tradition "is clear that the ultimate is present here and now, and can be grasped and experienced, even if only partially, within this limited frame of our mortal existence."

I remember what I value so much about this open road that we are invited to journey on together and why it is the only path I could choose because it grounds me to a circle of balance in the right here, right now, in my responsibility to the present and myself and to each of you with as open a heart as possible so that then I can stretch and reach and turn and dance more broadly than I would otherwise be able, so that I can stretch and reach forward to the future with greater perspective and more appreciation for difference than I would otherwise be able. In that strong legacy of curiosity and questioning, I can reach out to the myriad paths of wisdom and well-being, and I am so grateful for that.

Balance is a curious thing. We wonder: What is the right amount of worry to expend on something when we know worry can't change things anyway? How do we balance the need to feel safe even as we know that a life with no risk is hardly worth living, if it's even possible? What is the balance between that which we think of as sacred and that which we see as secular, and how much they each absorb our time? Is there really a difference? How much of our lives – of our religion – do we lead with our head, and how much with our hearts?

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We have long been a church of the open mind. Through much of our history, our trinity was freedom, reason, and tolerance. We thrived on the Enlightenment's encouragement to challenge tradition. What we have learned as we move further into our new century and more than 50 years as a merged tradition is the need to be the church of the open heart, as well. That small circle of balance that allows us to stretch out far and wide is a function of hearts that are willing to risk and to love, as the Rev. Thandeka puts it, "beyond belief."

We are learning that balance is as much a function of courage as it is of thought, if not more, and courage is a capacity of the heart. As long as it is open – to mystery, to awe, to gratitude, to each other – we are saved. We can know that as we turn into whatever wind is blowing, we will feel it in both ears, and find our footing.

Yes. So then, why not dance?

Closing Hymn 311 Let It Be a Dance We Do