



Polarities and Purpose

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After many years working in a print shop, a good friend of mine decided to become an electrician. This required some use of algebra, which my friend hadn't seen in a very long time. I gave him a bit of coaching on his homework. Inevitably it would boil down to the same question, actually, a meta-question: what kind of problem is this? To ask this question, and teach the habit of asking it, is more useful than any answer I might give.

Church questions can be messier than algebra. Sometimes it's a problem to solve: how to make the sound system work; the best way to upgrade the windows. These problems-to-solve may take a lot of time or money or energy, but they're tractable. Once fixed, they tend to stay fixed for a while.

Other questions are more than problems-to-solve. We may disagree on an issue because we have different priorities, even competing values. It helps to remember that we're in covenant here. We may agree to disagree, or find a consensus for now. But the question's never really settled once and for all.

If we look deeper we can see that there forces at play which do concern us, and they tend to come in pairs, for example: inreach and outreach; reflection and action; stability and change.

Inreach and outreach. A church should respond to the needs of its members – for pastoral care, for spiritual nourishment, for a sense of community. For many people, that's why they come to church and why we stay. But if inreach is all we focus on, it can lead to a culture of narcissism. As a church member my main concern becomes, what does this church do for me? As a tightly-knit group, we

become closed to outsiders: they come to visit, but they don't stay, since they don't know how to fit in. We lose our credibility: although we espouse noble principles, we don't demonstrate how these principles can change the world for the better.

So a church needs to focus on outreach: let's help needy people in the community; let's include the public in our various activities; let's spread Unitarian Universalism by our own, good example. We connect with a wider range of people. We get a clearer sense of why we're needed, as a faith community. But if outreach is all we do, we're not actually a church any more. We wither on the vine if we don't take care of our own people.

Stability and change. We have traditions and practices that made us who we are. We have a familiar place to come each week. We have ways of doing things that are safe, time-tested and predictable. But if we do the same things all the time, we may become boring and stagnant. We may become unresponsive to changes in the world around us. We may become irrelevant.

For all these reasons, some people favor change and innovation. The congregation will be refreshed by new ideas. We will be made bold by the taking of risks. We will become attuned to the world around us and we will grow. Yet too much or too-constant change can be disruptive. We can't be sure the good things we come here for, will continue to be here. We may lose important parts of our tradition, on which our identity is based.

Reflection and Action. We need to look inward, to take stock, to contemplate the truth we find in experience. But if all we do is look inward, we lose our connection with the outside world. We need to engage with the world, express the truth within ourselves, and shape the world by our actions. Yet if we focus exclusively on action, we'll burn ourselves out. In all our doing, at the expense of being, we won't learn much from experience.

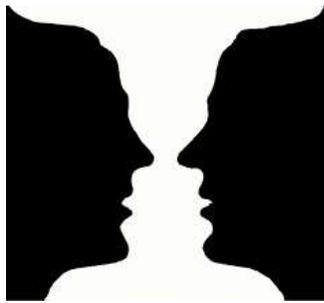
The problem isn't with these priorities which seem opposed. It's in asking the question, "should favor this approach, or that approach? Should we do X, or should we do Y"? To pick one alternative or the other will leave some people out in the cold. We could split the difference. We could mix all the colors of the rainbow into one drab, muddy grey. We could take an array of nutritious foods – each delectable

in a different way – and put them into a blender to create a smoothie. Which may be nutritious, but not so delectable any more.

We could try to establish a balance point between A and B. Decide how much stability and how much change are needed right NOW, for example. But we are hoping for a permanent solution we'll be disappointed, because that balance point will keep shifting as the world changes, and we change as well.

Still, we are moving in the right direction when we speak about balance. We honor the necessary “pull” of two, incompatible options. To hold this creative tension is a starting point for spiritual growth.

What's missing in our understanding? It's in framing a choice as either-or.



You've probably seen the picture of two faces in silhouette, facing one another. The space between them has the shape of a goblet. We could disagree about what the picture represents. You say it's two faces. I say it's a goblet. If I convince you it's a goblet, have we resolved the dispute? Not really, because there are two correct answers. More than that, each one depends on the other. The goblet creates the outline of the faces, and the faces create the outline of the goblet, even though we can't see both at the same time.

It's time now to give a name to this quality of two things that seem to oppose each other, but also depend on each other to exist: the word is polarity.



The Taoist tradition is based on a deep appreciation of this underlying unity. It's expressed in the symbol of yin and yang: a circle divided into two sections, and they flow into each other. The black dot in the white half, and the white dot in the black half, remind us that each one contains the beginnings of the other. This symbol refers to many dualities such as light and dark, male and female, birth and death. It helps us to see the cosmos as an eternal process, in which everything we can touch, and see, and imagine emerges from the emptiness of pure potential and returns to it.

For a concrete example, consider the simple act of breathing. You don't get to choose between inhaling and exhaling. You don't settle the matter once and for all by filling your chest halfway. Your body needs oxygen, so you inhale. There's an upside to this: you get the oxygen you need. There's also a downside: you need to get rid of the carbon dioxide that's built up. So you exhale. But when you've done that, you're not done yet. You're low on oxygen. So you'd better inhale.

From this simple example, we can say a few things about polarities. First, you're never done. Second, if you dwell at one extreme for too long, it becomes counterproductive. There's a definite downside to holding your breath for example. The longer you rest at one extreme, the greater the need to move towards the other. To be healthy is to move freely between the extremes in a process that includes both.

That process has a purpose: in the case of breathing, it's to continue living. We may disagree on life's purpose, but it certainly includes more life. Here is one way of describing good and evil: what's good is what upholds the free movement of life; what's evil is what blocks that movement.

When facing the competing priorities in church life, it helps to consider the purposes they serve. Consider stability and change: many churches haven't managed this polarity well. You can see their monuments on town commons all over New England. Some of these classic, Yankee meeting houses are empty now. Some have been converted for use as performance halls or office spaces or museums.

In managing the demands of stability and change, some of these congregations dwelt on the need for stability for too long. Or they misconstrued their purpose as simple survival, or serving their own people, or re-enacting their glory days. When we celebrate the opposing "pull" of stability and change, we create the opportunity to evolve towards a larger purpose. We are grounded in a certain lineage, enriched by collective memory and know-how. We are part of a living tradition whose purpose is to know and to bring about Beloved Community.

How shall we make good use of polarities, then?

We can take turns. I'm thinking of worship, in which different people have different styles. Some enjoy intellectual stimulation. Some come for the music.

Some want to be awakened. Some to be enchanted. Some, to get few minutes of peace and quiet.

We can ensure that each “pole” is attended to, in our programs. So that we have both a strong worship program and an imperative to social action, for example. When we do these in parallel, we need to ensure that people are talking, even taking part in each other’s activities, not forming isolated sub-cultures.

Finally we need to attend to the cues life gives us, and accept the seasons of change. In the words of a great Hebrew teacher, [Ecclesiastes 3:1-5]

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

I’m not going to continue with this reading because I’m not sure there’s ever a time for war, although it’s always time for peace. I don’t think there’s ever a time for hate, although it’s always time for love.

Not all oppositions are to be affirmed and celebrated.

Today’s political environment is sick because it is so polarized: because we the people can no longer even name the polarities that are driving our differences. We identify people with positions. We identify “us” with the positive side of our position, and that with the greater good. We identify “them” with the negative side of their position, and that with decay and dissolution.

Hence our most basic work, here, is to embody the work of reconciliation: in practices of hospitality, deep listening and authentic dialogue. Treating each one of us, whether we agree or disagree, as essentially good and worthy of respect. This is how we move forward, together.