

“Something Judges Us, Something Accepts Us”
Edmonds Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Sunday, December 4, 2022
Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Quotes for slides prior to service

“We are all of us judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.”

(Frederick Buechner)

“It isn’t the thing you do, dear,
It’s the thing you leave undone
That gives you a bit of a heartache
At setting of the sun.
The tender word forgotten,
The letter you did not write,
The flowers you did not send, dear,
Are your haunting ghosts at night.”

(Margaret E. Sangster)

“You are perfect the way you are ... and you could use a little improvement.”

(Roshi Shunryu Suzuki)

READING

My sermon this morning is titled “Something Judges Us, Something Accepts Us.” And my reading, a poem by C. K. Williams, falls on the judging side of the ledger. It’s titled “The Gaffe” and is written in three parts, the language a little complex in places, but I think you’ll catch the drift.

The Gaffe
By C. K. Williams

1.

If that someone who’s me yet not me yet who judges me is always with me,
as he is, shouldn’t he have been there when I said so long ago that thing I said?

If he who rakes me with such not trivial shame for minor sins now were there then,
shouldn’t he have warned me he’d even now devastate me for my unpardonable affront?

I’m a child then, yet already I’ve composed this conscience-beast, who harries me:
is there anything else I can say with certainty about who I was, except that I, that he,

could already draw from infinitesimal transgressions complex chords of remorse,
and orchestrate ever undiminishing retribution from the hapless rest of myself?

2.

The son of some friends of my parents has died, and my parents, paying their call, take me along, and I'm sent out with the dead boy's brother and some others to play.

We're joking around, and some words come to my mind, which to my amazement are said.

How do you know when you can laugh when somebody dies, your brother dies?

is what's said, and the others go quiet, the backyard goes quiet, everyone stares, and I want to know now why that someone in me who's me yet not me let me say it.

Shouldn't he have told me the contrition cycle would from then be ever upon me, it didn't matter that I'd really only wanted to know how grief ends, and when?

3.

I could hear the boy's mother sobbing inside, then stopping, sobbing then stopping. Was the end of her grief already there? Had her someone in her told her it would end?

Was her someone in her kinder to her, not tearing at her, as mine did, still does, me, for guessing grief someday ends? Is that why her sobbing stopped sometimes?

She didn't laugh, though, or I never heard her. *How do you know when you can laugh?* Why couldn't someone have been there in me not just to accuse me, but to explain?

The kids were playing again, I was playing, I didn't hear anything more from inside. The way now sometimes what's in me is silent, too, and sometimes, though never really, forgets.

(“The Gaffe,” from *The Singing* by C.K. Williams)

SERMON: “SOMETHING JUDGES US, SOMETHING ACCEPTS US”

Introduction

This morning I invite you to join me in a journey of reflection on what I regard as one of the major paradoxes of our lives, a paradox that is nicely expressed in a single sentence from the Japanese Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki. The sentence reads as follows:

“You are perfect the way you are ... and you could use a little improvement.”

To adequately characterize our lives, it won't do, it seems, simply to say: “You are perfect the way you are.” We might be tempted to stop there ... but, no, we get a fuller picture of our life when we add the phrase, “*and you could use a little improvement.*”

These two forces are expressed as a contradiction, but it's one of those "seeming contradictions" that we call a paradox: dual powers that push and pull and strain and rub against each other creating the friction, the energy, the tension that is our life.

1. "YOU COULD USE A LITTLE IMPROVEMENT"

So, let's take a look at this paradox, starting with the second part: "and you could use a little improvement."

This is the capacity we have for judgment, for evaluation, for critique. It's the part of us that judges others, the world, and the nature of things. It's the part of us that judges ourselves; and the part of us that feels the weight of these judgments, both from others and from ourselves.

I suggest that this capacity of judgment that finds a home in us is part of the creative urge and surge in all reality – part and parcel of the "infinite, unoriginated, forward-pushing creative urge," to quote Albert Schweitzer – a creative urge that never rests, that always pushes forward to go beyond what presently is, that is forever dissatisfied with what presently is.

It's the "three-fold urge," as philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has described it, (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better."

That inherent dissatisfaction with what presently is is expressed in the words of a hymn in our gray-covered hymnal titled, "A Fierce Unrest," which begins with these words:

"A fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things;
it was the eager wish to soar that gave the gods their wings."

And the hymn ends with these words:

"Sing we no governed firmament, cold, ordered, regular;
we sing the stinging discontent that leaps from star to star."
("A Fierce Unrest," words of Don Marquis, hymn #304 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

The Creator's regret

We find this element of judgment and "stinging discontent" in the opening creation stories from the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible.

There, "in the beginning," the judgment is all positive ... for we read in the very first chapter of Genesis that the creator god, Yahweh, after nearly every act of creation, looked upon the object or entity just made and judged it "good." And then after everything is made, Yahweh declares that it is all "very good" and sits down to rest and to enjoy the completed creation.

Initially, the story does not report any dissatisfaction whatsoever on the part of the Creator. The Creator does not say, “Yes, good, but not great; yes, good, but could be improved” – nothing of the sort. The Creator is immensely pleased with the creation, declaring, “Behold, it is all very good.” In other words, “You are perfect the way you are.”

That positive judgment, however, that Sabbath rest, doesn’t last very long, for just a few chapters later in the Book of Genesis there is another story, a story that reports the Creator deeply regretting the creation he had made, and there we read:

“Yahweh regretted having made man[kind] on the earth, and his heart was grieved. ‘I will rid the earth’s face of man[kind], my own creation,’ Yahweh said, ‘and of animals also, reptiles too, and the birds of the heaven; for I regret having made them.’” (Genesis 6:6-7, *Jerusalem Bible*)

And then comes the legendary biblical flood that wipes out everything, save Noah and those with him in his little floating boat.

In other words, Yahweh is not just saying you could use a “little improvement,” he’s basically saying, “We’ve got to start from scratch.”

Reversal of judgment

So the mind of Yahweh here, you may be not so surprised to learn, seems to reflect a conflict in our own minds ... for that is often how it is at the time when we first create something or are enthusiastically involved in something: we’re quite proud of our work, or pleased in our activity, caught up in it as we are.

But you know how it is sometimes with the passage of time: the thing you created or the action you took, which seemed quite wonderful at the time, doesn’t seem quite so wonderful after awhile ... and you begin to see flaws in your work or in your actions ... and you begin to imagine how it might have been better, and how it could be improved.

And, sometimes, after a longer passage of time, in looking back upon your previous work or activity, you may find yourself muttering, “I can’t believe I once thought that was good. What an embarrassment!”

Late-life judgments

Thus, the very positive judgment “in the beginning” gives way to a very negative judgment later on ... somewhat like artists or authors who are tempted to – and some actually do – destroy or burn everything they’ve created.

And, on occasion, as a long-time minister, I’ve been close witness to persons who in late-life look back upon their lives with a severe negative judgment ... persons that others would judge to be beautiful persons, full of grace, who have lived rich and productive lives; and, yet, the individuals themselves do not feel this as the end closes in on them.

Some lines from poet T. S. Eliot speak to this regret that I have witnessed in some persons of older age as they look back upon their lives near the end ... and these are hard, difficult words, but which seem to me to hit the mark in these situations. Writes T.S. Eliot, somewhat sarcastically and cynically:

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

(T. S. Eliot, excerpt from "Burnt Norton," *The Four Quartets*)

My father's remark

I remember a remark my own father made to me late in his life – not anything as dark or as global as the words of T. S Eliot, but still in the ballpark.

It was after the memorial service of the brother that he was closest to ... a memorial service that had brought forth much praise and deep emotion in relation to his closest brother, also my closest uncle ... and I remember my father wondering out loud to me afterwards:

"What have I done in my life?
What has my life come to?
What could possibly be said of me at such a service?"

I tried to assure my father that there would be plenty to say ... but, sadly, I didn't detail these affirmations. And it wasn't until his own memorial service – some fifteen years ago, now – that I wrote the words I wish I had said to him then, words that, in part, read:

"Quite simply, my father was as good a man as I have ever known or can ever hope to be: as honest, as fair, as non-judgmental, as non-intrusive, as trustworthy, as guileless, as gentle, as considerate, as even-tempered, as mentally-quick, as dry-witted, as capable, as hard-working. I don't think there was a mean bone in him. I pray that he had some sense of how grateful and proud I have been – and am – to count myself as his son."

As I say, I wrote these words and they were spoken at his memorial service in 2007, but I don't know if my father ever fully received their impact ... and it's a judgment I have on myself, and a regret that I bear within myself, that my father didn't read or hear this *directly* from me.

Other aspects of judgment

So, this is part of our capacity for judgment. Something judges us ... so that often we feel that we haven't measured up and are found wanting ... judgment turned inward, as is the poem "The Gaffe" that I read earlier from C.K. Williams.

At other times, of course, our capacity to judge is turned outward so that we judge the actions and motives of others for both good and ill ... and, understandably, not always in their presence, for life is complicated enough as it is.

And, particularly in our earlier years, as we are trying to find our way in life and discover our identity, our judgment of peers, parents, teachers, and society can be devastatingly harsh.

2. "YOU ARE PERFECT AS YOU ARE"

All right, enough on the "something that judges us." Let's, now, go to the other side of the paradox, the "something that accepts us," the part that affirms and embraces us, the part that says, "You are perfect the way you are."

At the cosmic level, this is connected for me to Reality simply being what it is with no judgment in it at all ... no good or bad, no right or wrong ... Nature is what it is ... and we are what we are.

Reality/Nature/Being/God – use the term that works for you – simply *is*: active, moving, always experimenting, always becoming, always pushing beyond itself, yes; but, still, it is what it is and we are what we are, namely, part of this "is-ness," this "suchness" of Being, to borrow a Buddhist term.

The symbol of the "Tree of Eternal Life"

This "suchness" of things is represented in the Hebrew creation myth as "The Tree of Eternal Life," a symbol that stands in contrast to the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," which represents judgment.

And this "suchness of things" has to do with a capacity within us that accepts ourselves and all things as they are, that values things as they are, here and now, and not for what they might yet become.

This is the power of affirmation that accepts us no matter what we've done or what we will do. It's the power of affirmation and acceptance that the 18th century, English slave-trader

John Newton discovered in his darkest hour of self-judgment, which he characterized as an “amazing grace.”

“Grace” and the “something that accepts us”

And “grace” is the primary term that is used in Christian theology to get at this side of Reality, a radiance of light typically experienced most keenly in our darkest times of feeling cut-off, split-off, and unworthy ... the times when we feel negatively judged either from without or from within, or both from without and from within.

Nowhere I know of has this experience of acceptance and grace been spoken of more eloquently than in a sermon from Protestant theologian in the Lutheran tradition, Paul Tillich, a sermon titled “You Are Accepted!” Tillich writes:

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*”

(“You Are Accepted,” *The Shaking of the Foundations*, pp. 161-62)

That’s the reality of grace, the affirmation that “You are perfect the way you are.”

How to connect with this power that accepts us

“Really?” you say. “I should like to connect with such a place, with such a reality. But how can I enter such a place that of its nature transcends me and comes unbidden?”

And, indeed, our ego-self, our self of judgments, can’t pry its way into this place because, yes, this “place” does transcend our ego. This “something that accepts us” was present before ego came onto the scene and it will be here after ego departs.

But, perhaps, it helps to know this, and to know that this “place” is always with us – in us, beside us, beneath us, above us, and between us.

And, perhaps, it helps to know that it’s not a “place” that needs to be – or even could be – purchased or earned.

Rather, it's:

a "place" that catches us as we fall,
a "place" that we discover as we surrender to it,
a "place" that we enter as we let go of judgments,
a "place" we find as we follow our breath ... for we don't have to create our breath;
we simply have to follow it.

3. THE RELATION OF THE TWO SIDES OF THE PARADOX

Finally, how do these two sides relate: the "something that judges us" and the "something that accepts us"?

Sometimes we might like to try to ban all judgments, thinking it would be better to get rid of that side of the paradox.

But that, I *judge*, is neither possible nor desirable ... for by our power to judge and evaluate we move forward the experiment of life and being; we become "co-creators" with the creative process of all reality.

Instead, we need to find the proper place of judgment ... which must, I believe, take its place *within* the larger reality of grace and acceptance.

An analogy: "unconditional love" and "conditional love"

Perhaps, by analogy, it's the kind of paradox that parents deal with in relation to their children, namely, the combination of both "unconditional love" and "conditional love" – two different kinds of love.

The "unconditional love" a parent has for a child surrounds and supports and embraces and carries the child. Then, within that expansive embrace, is the "conditional love" that corrects and protects and pushes the child to develop the skills needed to survive and thrive in this world.

Grace embraces judgment

So, too, the relationship between grace and judgment is not, ultimately, an equal relationship. Ultimately, we rest in the power of acceptance and grace.

That is to say, in the theological duel between God as a God of Judgment and God as a God of Grace, it is the reality of grace that ultimately prevails. This, especially, is the message of our Universalist forebears.

And, so, I suggest that Shunryu Suzuki, the Zen teacher, has set up the paradox in the correct way: You don't start with the judgment saying, "You could use a little improvement;" no, you start with affirmation, acceptance, and grace, saying: "You are

perfect as you are; you are accepted as you are without any conditions ... and this acceptance, then, provides the environment for moving forward and possibly improving some of the conditions of your existence ... and to the extent that we can feel, experience, and align ourselves with the “something that accepts us;” to that extent we can offer it to others.

I believe, there is the power to do this.

Let me close my message with a poem by Denise Levertov that speaks of this power. It's titled “The Fountain,” which I think of as a “fountain of abundant grace.” And present at that fountain, presiding at that fountain, safeguarding that fountain, is a feminine presence, a goddess, if you will, eager for us to drink our fill.

The Fountain
by Denise Levertov

Don't say, don't say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts.
I have seen

the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you drinking there. And I too
before your eyes

found footholds and climbed
to drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes,
frowned as she watched – but not because
she grudged the water,

only because she was waiting
to see we drank our fill and were
refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.
That fountain is there among its scalloped
green and gray stones,

it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,

up and out through the rock.

(Denise Levertov, “The Fountain”)

HYMN: “Amazing Grace,” #205, verses 1-3

In my sermon message, I mentioned the “grace” that the 18th century, English slave-trader John Newton experienced in his darkest hour of self-judgment, an experience that he turned into one of our own most well-known and universally-love hymns, “Amazing Grace.”

I invite you, now, to sing this hymn ... though I realize that some folks stumble over the word “wretch” in the first verse. And, yes, we humans are not “wretches” in our constitution, but often we feel wretched or act wretchedly ... and, personally, I tend to sing that word “wretch” with extra emphasis.

1. Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.
2. ‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!
3. Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come;
‘tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

CLOSING WORDS

We conclude today’s service with Closing Words of Benediction from the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, words again from the grace side of the ledger:

There is a Love holding me.
There is a Love holding all that I love.
There is a Love holding all.
I rest in that Love.

There is a Love holding us.
There is a Love holding all that we love.
There is a Love holding all.

We rest in that Love. (Song: “There Is a Love;” words by Dr. Rebecca Parker; music by Elizabeth Norton)

CARRYING THE FLAME

We release this flame, but not the light of truth.
We release this flame, but not the warmth of this community.
We release this flame, but not the fire of our commitment.
These we will carry in our hearts until we meet again.

(Words of Rev. Elizabeth Selle Jones, adapted)

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the live-stream service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Edmonds Unitarian Universalist Congregation on December 4, 2022. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus.)