

The Paradox of Balance

Sermon, Sunday, October 17, 2010
Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH
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Reading - Cosmic Bowling by Christopher Buice

I think about the Buddha when I am bowling. A bowling ball that goes too far to the right ends up in the gutter. One that drifts to the left experiences a similar fate. And so, when bowling I am aware that I am seeking the Middle Way.

The Buddha sought the Middle Way between body-destroying asceticism and gluttonous indulgence of the appetites and cravings. Either extreme took him away from spiritual growth. I, too, realize that it is important to seek a middle way between the extremes of life: between firmness and flexibility, realism and hope, charity and empowerment. The Middle Way is a difficult path to tread. The Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, warn us that the path to salvation is as thin and narrow as a razor's edge. Fortunately a bowling lane is somewhat wider.

Finding the middle way is often difficult. On some occasions I feel as if bowling lanes are far too narrow. I long for a wider margin of error. Unfortunately this is not always possible. Sure, I can have kiddy bumpers placed in the gutters, but that feels like cheating. I find that my greatest satisfaction comes not from trying to change the game but from changing myself. By centering my ball to glide down the lane, I find that my life becomes more centered with the Larger Life of which I am a part. By focusing my energies toward a central goal, I find a sense of precision and balance in my life.

And yet, the way to live a centered or balanced life is not always obvious. It is not always easy to find the middle way between two extremes. That is why I sometimes wish for a wider lane in my bowling alley. I roll a lot of gutter balls when I bowl. But I find that it is by accepting life on life's terms that I truly begin to enjoy the game. History tells us that it took many, many years for the Buddha to achieve enlightenment. While I am waiting, I might as well continue bowling.

Sermon: The Paradox of Balance

Two summers ago our family went to see a performance of Cirque Shanghai at Navy Pier in Chicago. A young boy, perhaps 12 years old, suddenly appeared on stage. On the floor was a piece of metal piping about 8 inches in diameter and a foot long. He rolled it back and forth, then took a board just big enough to stand on, placed it on top of the pipe and carefully stepped on top of the board. He waved his hands and the audience offered polite applause. Not bad for a 12 year old.

Next he took another metal pipe, placed it on top of the first at right angles, added the board and once again began to balance on top of these three moving parts. The applause grew. Not bad for a circus performer.

He jumped down, took another metal pipe, added it to the pile and somehow managed to look graceful as he stepped back onto this impossibly wobbly contraption. His concentration was showing but he remained in control and the audience became mesmerized.

I forget how many more times he upped the ante – but by the end of his act he had to use a ladder just to reach the top of his tower of moving parts. Impossible it should have been, even for a circus performer, especially a 12 year old.

I love such displays of excellence. I find them inspiring, aesthetically pleasing, and somehow deeply satisfying. They seem to surpass ordinary life. Yet while I remain in awe of the balancing skills of this young artist, I recognize that he is not unique in what he is doing.

All of us are involved in many balancing acts each day. Life is at its core an attempt at balancing. We know we need to balance how much we sleep and how much we are awake. We know we need to balance our appetite for food with our ability to metabolize what we take in. We know we need to balance what we wear and the temperature around us.

There is no question that finding the right balance is critical to our wellbeing. Many books have been written to explain to us exactly how we can achieve balance, what we need to have to be balanced, what we need to buy to be balanced.

Balance has become another commodity we would like to acquire and then be done with it. But balance is no commodity. Balance cannot be purchased like a table, a car, or a house. Balance is a skill. It implies motion, motion to adjust to the never ending changes that threaten to throw us and all of life off balance.

Even the performance in the circus offered merely the illusion of static balance. The young acrobat appeared still yet was constantly adjusting to avoid falling down. There is nothing static about balance when you stand on top of a pile of moving parts.

Life is no different. Life is one big pile of moving parts. And we get to stand in the middle of that pile on our board trying to adjust to the constant movement, trying to avoid falling as the board is nudged or even thrown in new and unpredictable ways.

Getting to the point of perfect balance and holding onto it may seem impossible – because it is impossible. Yet balance has to remain the goal despite the understanding that perfect balance can never be achieved, despite our awareness that perfect balance will never last. Such is the

paradox of balance, the recognition that we are required to strive for what is impossible to achieve, and we are sure to lose at the end.

Luckily, many of the balancing acts we face each day are forgiving and don't require perfect balance. They have margins of errors like bowling on a wide bowling lane. Nothing drastic will happen if we miss the point of balance by a little. If we stay awake for a few minutes after we get tired we will not suffer greatly. If we eat another spoonful after our body tells us we are full, we will not suffer noticeably. If the temperature is comfortable and we put on an extra pair of thin socks, we will probably be just fine.

Facing wide bowling lanes instead of razor's edges - or a tight rope - in our daily balancing acts is what makes life possible. If every small misstep resulted in terrible consequences, few of us would still be around. Yet, the forgiving nature of the balancing we do most of the time can create the illusion that no matter where we step we will remain balanced and will avoid falling. We become complacent. We stop paying attention to how close to the gutter (of our figurative bowling lane) we've come.

We take out a little credit to make a particular moment more pleasant or help smooth over a tight spot in our finances. No big deal. We pay it off next month. Then we do it again. And again, only this time we didn't get to pay off what we owed from before. No big deal.

Yet suddenly, we look at a credit card statement that tells us we owe three months worth of our salary and a few days later that salary is replaced by unemployment payments (if that) and no future salaries in sight.

Suddenly the stakes in our balancing act have become a lot higher and the skills required to remain balanced a lot more complex. Over the past few years, many of us have reached a threshold or tipping point in our own personal lives in how we approach our financial balancing act. And certainly, our society at a large is in the middle of a giant effort to regain a sense of balance economically and financially.

But while the economic crisis of imbalance has captured our attention there are other dimensions of our lives that are equally imperiled by our lack of balancing skills.

For hundreds of years we have treated the resources of our earth like a credit card that carries no monthly fee, charges zero percent interest, and has no spending limit. We know better, of course.

We cannot continue to withdraw capital from the ecological endowment fund that nature has accumulated and expect that it will continue to support our out-of-balance spending habits. If

we take clean water from a lake and add pollutants instead, our access to water clean enough to drink will soon be exhausted.

Nature can be forgiving for a while. Most ecosystems have a carrying capacity that allows the system to assimilate change. But once we push beyond the limits of the carrying capacity, the ecosystem will collapse and will take a long time to recover, if ever.

It may be impossible to know and achieve the perfect balance in our interactions with our environment but we must attempt to find a point of balance nonetheless. The paradox of balance, the need for balance despite the impossibility of achieving balance, does not let us off the hook.

Trying to balance a global system of finances or ecosystems may seem overwhelming. But we can and ought to practice our balancing skills right where we are. It begins with an honest look at our responsibilities, our priorities, and how we spend our time and energy.

In the mid-1990s I was working as an environmental consultant in the Washington, DC area. I had no wife or kids yet, but I had a good group of friends and a number of hobbies. One day I was invited to a wedding by a friend. I was excited and thanked him for the invitation. Yet on the day of the wedding I ended up going to the office instead of celebrating with my friend and his new wife. Some project needed my attention.

Just recounting the story it seems absurd. Clearly my balancing skills had failed me. I had failed to look at the bigger picture on how to be in harmony with those around me. I had failed to Stop! Look! And Listen! as the Buddhists would suggest. I am sad to say our relationship did not survive this gutter ball I rolled. In retrospect I recognize that I upset the balance of the community of which I was a part.

I had another friend who learned to play Go while in grad school. Go is a 4,000 year old board game of strategy, tactics, and aesthetics. No computer can yet touch the competency of advanced human players. There are leagues of professional players in Japan and scores of devoted amateurs all around the world. Go is a fascinating game and my friend became obsessed. Six years into his Ph.D. program he was still playing Go but he had made little progress on his dissertation. A short while afterwards, he quit school without finishing his degree – a casualty of his devotion to Go. Clearly his balancing skills were also suffering.

And he knew it all along. My friend's problem was not Stop! Look! Listen! but the lack of will power to change course despite having paid attention. His wife and young child paid part of the price. His actions were not in harmony with his priorities. He behaved in a way that upset the balance of his most important community.

Diane Rizzetto in her book “Waking Up To What You Do” tells the story of an interesting community ritual of an indigenous tribe in Tasmania. “When something happens in which someone behaves unskillfully, thus upsetting the balance of the community, the group comes together around the fire to reenact the situation.

For example, if a man yells at his wife a lot and chases her out of the hut, causing havoc in the village, he is brought before the community, not to be judged or reprimanded, but rather to help him see the absurdity of his behavior. Members of the tribe role-play the scene between him and his wife in a lighthearted way. The villagers, including children, all take part, laughing, joking, and mimicking the absurdity of the behavior until the man himself relaxes and also realizes the absurdity of his actions.

Interestingly enough, even his wife takes part in the villagers’ dramatization. Before too long, the whole scene turns into a big party and the husband and wife provide food for the rest of the villagers. The purpose of the ritual is to acknowledge their fallibility openly so that they can put it into perspective, even laugh at it.”

While our urban life style may not allow our whole village to get involved when we upset the balance in our lives, the ritual suggests a valuable idea: Whether we lack awareness of what we are doing or the will power to change it we can and should hold each other accountable more creatively.

Non-violent communication, as we have studied and begun to practice it here at church, is one of these creative ways. Learning to call and facilitate restorative circles is one of the approaches we can use when our community is off balance.

Or, what would happen if we replaced the ubiquitous “how are you?” with an earnest “How are your balancing skills right now?” or “What are you doing these days to remain in harmony with yourself and your community?”

I don’t mean to imply there is no time or place for focused attention on a singular activity. Spending one-on-one time with one of my children is important to a sense of balance or harmony in our family. Yet if a week passes and I have barely said a word to my other child, the harmony is clearly broken and more skillful balancing is required.

The appropriate timeframe for balancing varies greatly. Some things need to be balanced daily, other things can wait months, years, even a lifetime. I don’t need to go running every day to feel balanced, but if I don’t get exercise for more than a few weeks I begin to sense an imbalance in my life. I don’t need to talk to my long distance friends every week, but if months pass without contact I begin to feel the balance is off. I don’t need to have a vacation every

month, but if more than a year goes by without a break in the routine, I know I am no longer balancing as I should.

What's important is that for most of us to do well at our balancing acts it helps to be held accountable explicitly. And we need each other to do so.

For some of us, our parents played this role. When we were obsessed with sports, or clothes, or grades, they nudged us to remember other interests and activities. They reminded us to pay attention to our whole lives and to accept the co-responsibility for the harmony of the community of which we are a part.

Some of us have used counseling or life coaching to create structures of creative accountability. Covenant group or other small groups can also allow for honest reflection on our commitments to a balanced life. There is no single approach that will work for all of us.

One unexpected experience with accountability I had during my internship at Unity Temple. Within the first month I had to complete a learning service agreement. This agreement spells out the expectations for what I wanted to learn and what I was expected to do during my time as an intern minister. My internship supervisor, along with the members of my internship committee helped me put together this agreement. It talked about pastoral care, social action, teaching, interfaith work, administrative skills, and, of course, worship arts, the stuff ministers do when we are up here in the pulpit. But it didn't stop there. The form also required me to spell out how I would practice self care and what my spiritual practices would look like.

At first I resisted. Why does my personal life need to get dragged into what I learn and do on internship? But soon it became obvious. Being explicit about what I need for self care and personal spiritual growth - and having my supervisor and committee agree to it - offered just the protection I needed when the balancing got difficult.

It allowed me to justify reading a book of fiction, to spend time composing music, to write in my journal, or to prioritize date night with my wife over competing events at church. I was just as accountable to do those things as I was to learn about church administration, to make pastoral care visits, or to attend regional ministers' gatherings.

An agreement such as my learning service agreement doesn't guarantee we won't fall or send bowling balls into the gutter. Yet it can help us begin to justify a transformation in how we prioritize what we do because it helps us internalize a different set of values. If balance and harmony are recognized as important ultimate goals, stress and burn-out and frustration caused by the pursuit of other goals are no longer as justified. Polluted air, eroded landscapes, lost species caused by the pursuit of other goals are no longer as justified. Poverty, hunger, and sickness caused by the pursuit of other goals are no longer as justified.

The more we accept that striving for balance remains essential despite the impossibility of ever achieving it, the more we are willing to embrace the paradox of balance, the more it becomes possible to imagine a world where harmony and peace within people, among people and with the earth are more than a dream of the future.

May it be so.