

Filters and Feedback (on Equinox)

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev. Paul Beckel

There are very few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic. —Anais Nin

Sometimes, surely, truth is closer to imagination—or to intelligence, to love—than to fact? To be accurate is not to be right. —Shirley Hazzard

To criticize is not to reject. This point must be emphasized, for it is the dividing line between the free mind and fanaticism. It is the doorway to a universal religion that rigorously seeks the truth, and yet is also inclusive and welcoming to all. —Ken Patton

*The unexamined life may not be worth living,
but the over-examined life sure wastes a lot of it. —Edwin Friedman*

Say what is true, kind, and necessary, or at least two out of the three.

OPENING WORDS “Connections are Made Slowly” by Marge Piercy #568

CHOIR *Connected*, by Brian Tate

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG *All Creatures of the Earth and Sky* #203

CHILDREN’S FOCUS

A wanderer carrying a large pack came along the road and at the edge of a small town she saw a man fishing from a bridge. She greeted the man and told him that she was looking for a place to settle down—she was looking for a place where the people were friendly and kind and would be good neighbors. “Well,” replied the man, “what were the people like where you came from?” “They were nasty,” said the stranger. “They were shallow and boring and stupid as goats.” “I’m sorry,” said the man fishing, “you’ll probably find the same kinds of people here.” And the stranger, disappointed, kept moving along.

Later another stranger appeared. She told the man that she was tired of traveling and she wondered if this would be a good place to settle in. “Well,” asked the man, “what were the

people like where you came from?" "Oh they were wonderful," said the stranger, "they were kind and generous, interesting and very happy." "Well," said the man fishing, "Take a look around... I suspect you'll find about the same kinds of people here."

MEDITATION poem (first eleven lines) by John Soos, expanded by Paul Beckel

To Be of the earth is to know
The restlessness of being a seed
The darkness of being planted
The struggle toward the light
The pain of growth into the light
The joy of bursting and bearing fruit
The love of being food for someone
The scattering of your seeds
The decay of the seasons
The mystery of death
And the miracle of birth

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To Be of the earth is to know
The restlessness of being a seed
Imagine someone you know who is restless. It may be you or someone else you love.
They may be young or not so young. Have you known this restlessness?

Do you remember what it is about? Could it simply be about an urge to grow...an urge for that seed to become all that it has the potential to become?

To be of the earth is to know
The darkness of being planted

You are a restless seed. You feel the urge to grow. You've heard that it's a frightening process. And now you are being planted. It is dark. You think about turning back. But you're a seed, you don't have that option.

To be of the earth is to know
The struggle toward the light

You got used to the darkness more quickly than you expected. Even got fairly comfortable with it. But the urge to grow remains, and a part of you splits through your protective shell. You leave it behind, now, and begin to scratch upward, through the dirt, with anticipation...

To be of the earth is to know
The pain of growth into the light

You were once a seed. You were born in the light and were once accustomed to it. But now you've grown used to the dark. You've forgotten what it's like out there in the sunshine. It is a shock.

Sometimes a shock will stop you or send you backwards. This time, without your understanding how, the light seems to propel you forward. You grow. You become what you had always known you could become.

To be of the earth is to know
The joy of bursting and bearing fruit

It all happens so quickly. In the summer sun and rain you have reached maturity, and in one last rapturous explosion of self, you put forth fruit containing...to your amazement...tiny little near-copies of your infant self.

To be of the earth is to know
The love of being food for someone

You are through. Spent. Exhausted. But it is not over. You find that you have become more than yourself, you have become a part of a chain of life. You are needed by something larger than yourself.

To be of the earth is to know
The scattering of your seeds

A breeze or a passing animal take your fruit, your nourishment, and your gift to the chain of life. You are gone now. You can only gaze from the place of spirits as your fruit is broken into thousands of pieces and scattered to unfamiliar lands.

To be of the earth is to know
The decay of the seasons

Those bits that are no longer you lie waiting, now. It is hard to watch. You gave them, as dreams, to the seasons, but you were unprepared to see your dreams stepped on in the rotting leaves.

To be of the earth is to know
The mystery of death

From your perch in the land of the spirits, your future is no longer visible. Every bit of you has been absorbed by eternity.
[long pause]

To be of the earth is to know
the miracle of birth

The cycle continues, without us. The earth is stirring, again.

I invite you now to enter the stillness for a few minutes. Knowing the cycle, loving the cycle, finding yourself within the cycle. Do not attempt to force yourself into the station labeled: “happy ending”—the miracle of birth. Rather...find yourself and feel yourself wherever you are, and know that—there you are...swaddled in the full expanse of being ... a unity that cannot be grasped, but only loved. [...instrumental music]

MILESTONES

- If you have a joy, a sorrow, or a personal milestone to share please come forward, light a candle, and tell us about it in one sentence or less. Please honor these sacred sharings with warmth and silence.
- And to end: We light one more candle for the joys and sorrows still too tender to share.

MESSAGE

Once upon a time people had to make their own soap, and candles, and bread. Life was hard, and complicated. Or, wait a minute, I think that means life was *simple*. Whatever.

Things were changing, so Henry David Thoreau retreated into the woods—because he wanted to get away from it all. Or, wait, no, because he wanted to get *closer* to it all.

I don't know. It's confusing. Let's go to the source for a moment and hear what he says for himself [responsive reading #660]:

Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life?

We are determined to be starved before we are hungry.

I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.

I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.

I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear, nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary.

I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.

If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world;

or if it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

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I want to know, *really know* life, he says. Even if it's coarse...mean...even if it's brutal. Give me the full experience.

I don't want to live through a filter that would remove the pain from my life—because that would remove the beauty as well.

This sentiment has been roughly translated into the first of what Unitarian Universalists call our Sources: “direct experience” of the transcendent reality in which we dwell...in all its majesty, in all of its mayhem. We want to know and experience firsthand, personally, without interpretation...be it divine or be it offensive...that should be for me to decide.

Unfortunately further down the list of sources we find a conflict. Because, we say, we also draw upon science, and its warnings against idolatries of the mind.

And science tells us that there is no such thing as direct experience. It's not that Thoreau was naïve, but he was a bit of a Romantic. And since his time we've come to better understand how our human perception and cognition are inescapably biased...that filters of culture and context intercept and re-arrange everything we see, hear, and feel, everything we think that we think.

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Then fifteen or twenty years ago the internet seemed to offer us something new: unfiltered, unlimited, the whole shebang. Direct experience, drawn from every source. Complete connection: complete truth, and falsehood, all of humanity's ideals, and horrors, complete information and opinion, all set out on a level playing field.

But this quickly became too much for us to handle. The amount of data recorded by human beings between the dawn of civilization and 2003—that amount is now being collected every two days.

So information may want to be free, but human beings want to—need to—reduce it, distill it into comprehensible chunks and categories. We need filters. Fortunately, sometimes, we get to *choose* our filters, as human beings always have. We take it for granted that we get to choose our friends, our music, what we read, and pay attention to. Unitarians even get to pick their own preachers. We acknowledge that we're shaped by these various external influences but at least we expect that they are our own choices.

For better and for worse, that's changing. Today the selection of what we see and what angle we see it from are often made for us according to what we shopped for yesterday online, and what our friends watch on Netflix, and how our precise demographic voted in the last election. Public and commercial databases now know so much about us (or a frighteningly accurate composite of people like us) that the potentially paralyzing flood of choices that we would otherwise have to make minute by minute are now made for us—instantly, invisibly, ubiquitously, and pretty well.

Considering the amount of inane, irrelevant, and corrupt media floating in the wifi all about us...it's surprising how little we actually have to put up with.

But I'm often not aware of those things of which I am unaware. Only a few years ago I imagined that I would get (if not objective at least) a diverse news feed on Facebook because I had “friends” (relatives, actually) whose views are very different from my own.

But gradually my Pinterest and Pandora personal profiles have begun to “protect” me. I do still see family news when it involves babies and travel and kittens, but my family’s political and religious postings are now apparently ranked far enough down that I don’t ever see them. More and more, my siblings and I not only see things differently, we also see different things.

So now when I search for what I hope will be objective news or information, it seems inevitable that I will be nudged toward sources that will tell me what I want to hear. If my brother and I both ask Siri about climate change, it seems very possible that she will send us down two different paths of “learning.”

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Last month in order to get a sense of your experience of our Sunday morning gatherings at BUF, I wrote up a survey and got buy-in from the tri-chairs of our Worship Arts Team. We received over 100 responses, about half instantly aggregated online, and about half on paper that we’re going to look at this coming week. A few trends are strong enough that I can already say that on the whole you would prefer more from our amazing musicians, more congregational singing, and even longer sermons! With the exception of announcements, you’d like more of just about everything—as long as the services don’t last longer.

That’s an oversimplification, of course. And to make sure we’re not just hearing what we want to hear, we’ll share details with you when they’re fully compiled. The goal, though, won’t be to precisely conform what we do here every week to the preferences of an imaginary average BUFster. Our goal will not be to arrive at the least objectionable Sunday service. On the contrary, the initial results indicate that you’re looking for more challenge here, not more comfort.

So my hope is not for a five star rating on buf.org...as much as for meaningful dialogue about who we are...and what shifts in perspective might inspire us to grow beyond who we are.

This kind of dialogue is challenging for religious liberals, who might consider just about anything inspiring: novelty or tradition, music or silence, movement or stillness, reassurance or provocation.

To communicate means to find common meaning, and it’s not easy to find common meaning in these wide-open emotionally-laden religious terms that hit each of us differently.

It’s a funny thing about liberal religion: on one level we have high intellectual standards—great BS detectors to filter out religious nonsense. But on another level, we tend not to draw boundaries. Here at BUF we could include just about anything within the scope of our mission. The arts, education, health, recreation, social fun and social justice...it all seems to fit.

The problem is, as comedian Stephen Wright has observed: “You can’t have everything. Where would you put it?”

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About fifteen years before Facebook, Rabbi Edwin Friedman wrote a short story called “Narcissus.” In this story, set some decades into the future, scientists have discovered a way to build an electronic display window into the human forehead so that all of our thoughts are visible to one another.

The idea is that this will set the stage for total transparency, no deceit, and perfect communication. To see how well it will work they create an independent society on an island. They rig up everyone with thought-readout windows and one day at noon, turn them all on at once. The results are amazing. People cooperate with one another flawlessly. Traffic moves briskly because everyone knows exactly what everyone else is about to do. The city goes to bed and the scientists give one another high fives.

But the next morning is a disaster. Everyone wakes up, goes to the bathroom and looks at themselves in the mirror, where they notice for the first time the readout of what is going on in their own mind. And each one becomes so fascinated with what is in their own head, that they just remain there, frozen, and none of them ever functions again.

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Is it possible to receive critical feedback effectively? What if it's unfiltered, raw, or ill-timed? What if your plate is already full?

Is it possible to engage with feedback non-defensively, non-aggressively? Non-anxiously, with simple curiosity?

Is it possible to receive feedback without resistance when it comes from strangers, from your boss, or your spouse? I think it's possible, it's important, and it's much more likely when the giver and receiver are allies.

In one of my favorite readings in the grey hymnal, we say that we need one another. We need one another for companionship and to share each other's experiences, but we also need one another's feedback. Unitarian Universalism is a congregationalist movement. Not an individualist movement. Here we find ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses, and our higher purposes not by staring into hundreds of separate mirrors, nor by isolating our experience in such a way that we only hear what we want to hear about ourselves. We know ourselves, rather, in the context of our community.

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Not all feedback is helpful. Unfortunately these front speakers have to be kept at a volume insufficient for some people in back—because if we turn them up it will create a horrendous screeching noise. I'm happy to say that we're working on some electronic tweaks and filters to make this better. And I'm chagrined to say that this inevitably takes us one further step away from the good ole days on Thoreau's Walden Pond, where you would have had a more direct acoustic experience, whether you liked it or not.

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There are three kinds of helpful feedback. Evaluation: which tells us whether we are in, or out. Coaching: which gives us guidance of how to do better. And appreciation: which is soul food, a necessary periodic reinforcement.

Each of these three types of feedback has its place. And each can be unhelpful if we're expecting something different. For example, when you want advice on how to do something better, it's not helpful to receive a pass or fail evaluation. When you just need a pat on the back, it's not helpful to get practical advice. But we can't always get what we want...especially if we don't ask for it.

So I would like to ask of you this: in the days and years to come, tell me what's on your mind. Call me if you'd like me to come visit. Speak to me when I've offended you. Because it's pretty likely that if we engage in anything relevant, there are going to be misunderstandings. I can't promise that I will take every critique with a smile, but I do firmly believe that to criticize is not to reject. And that we cannot have liberal religion by pretending that everything everybody does and says is ok.

To criticize is not to reject. And my goal is not to get a five star rating on minister.com. My goal is to grow in our relationships.

So do this with me. And do this with one another. Though make a point first, with one another, to build up the rapport you'll need to engage in such meaningful conversations.

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Equinox is not a turning point; it's not even a new beginning. To tell the truth I had never thought about this until this week. I had always thought of spring as some dramatic cosmic shift in which the earth responds to new input from the sun. But what happened this week is simply that our days, which have been getting longer for three months, got a little longer still. And somewhere in there, our days and nights were briefly "in balance."

Spring and fall equinox are not like the summer and winter solstice when there is an actual change in direction of longer days or nights. Spring is actually a very delayed response to a change that took place some time ago. It can be a good reminder to us not just that things change, but that sometimes dramatic change takes place so slowly as to be almost imperceptible.

And the healthiest changes usually involve some cycles of back and forth.

Equinox can be a reminder for us that connections are made slowly. That feedback may not bring instant insight, but that together, eventually, we will come around.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Wake Now My Senses #298

BENEDICTION