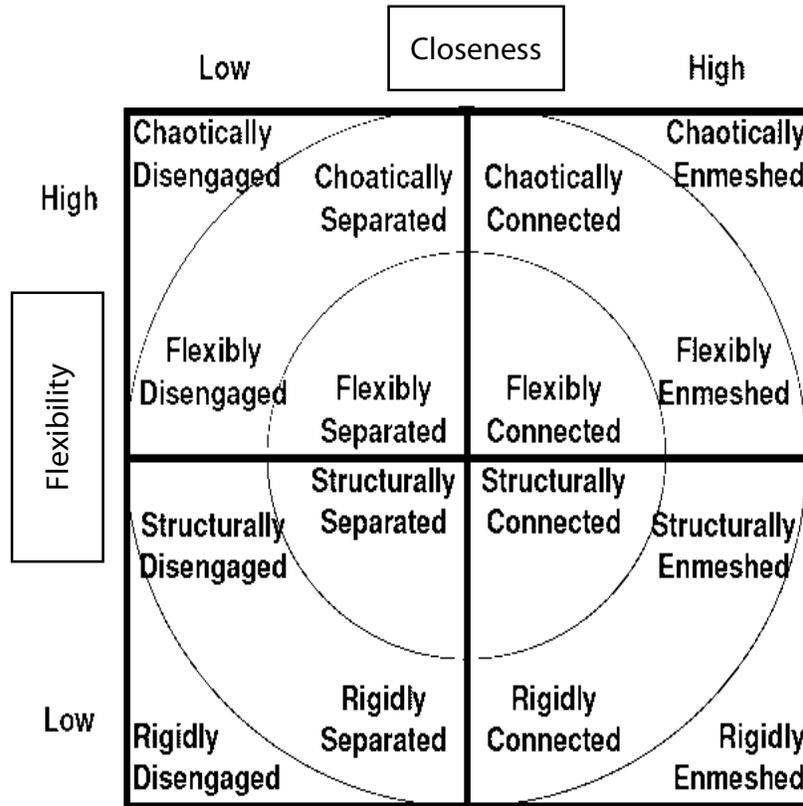


~ *Tending* ~

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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May 22, 2016



REFLECTIONS, Part I

When couples talk to me about getting married, I offer them a relationship inventory — a long series of questions about themselves and their families and their expectations for the relationship. It's not a test in the sense of pass/fail, but the couple gets a computer-generated analysis of their own responses and differences between their responses. It's a useful tool to generate conversation and to point out areas of potential conflict. It's a good exercise for young unmarried couples and also for those who have been together for a long time; in fact there's a version specifically designed for couples over age 50 or those who are facing retirement together. It's inexpensive and I'd be happy to help any of you through the process. Let me know if you'd like to give it a shot.

Among the most powerful pieces of feedback that this inventory offers are two scales that address couple closeness, and family flexibility. It's eye-opening to call attention to these qualities on a scale rather than as absolutes. Initially we might think of flexibility as a totally

good thing, but as you can see described in the chart on the cover of your order of service, flexible is a midpoint between rigid at one extreme and spineless at the other.

Healthy closeness is also a point of balance. When we're in love, we can mistakenly aim for as much closeness as possible. But no, healthy closeness is a balance between disconnected at one end of a continuum, and fused/enmeshed/inseparable at the other extreme. Couples encounter problems from being too close, just as from not being close enough.

Ordinarily we move around on these scales from time to time. That's healthy — to be able to move in response to changing conditions — as long as we tend to return to the middle of the range where we're neither rigid nor spineless, neither so close that we can't think for ourselves, nor so separated that we can't appreciate each other's point of view.

It's not easy and not obvious how we should relate to the people and the places and the things that are important to us. If we love something should we hold it tight, hold it loosely, or let it go? What is the most loving tendency? And what is the most loving way to tend?

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Thank you for attending BUF today. Attend-ing (as in showing up) and paying atten-shun are ways to tend to what we value.

Tending, attending, attention: these words suggest listening, applying ourselves, caring for, watching over, waiting, serving, taking charge of, cultivating, fostering, standing by in case of trouble. Tending then is active -- even when it means waiting, or standing by. For example when we're tending at the edge of a trampoline, we can't be passive. We think of tending in this sense as firm, unwavering, reliable. By these kinds of tending we show what we really value, what we take care of.

Another kind of tending is tending toward, to have a tendency, to indicate a general orientation. This kind of tending is not absolute. It conveys direction but flexibility, openness to variation as new influences are encountered. This kind of tending gives us room to move, to shift, to respond to changing conditions. This kind of tending comes from a different etymological root that means "to stretch" (like "extending.")

Tending (as in caring for) and tending (as in inclining toward) might seem to be related. But I wonder: is it possible that tending and tending can come into conflict with one another? That is, can our caring attention come into conflict with our momentum in a particular direction? And when that conflict arises, which should we choose? Tending, or tending? I know that's kind of an abstract question. So I'll illustrate it now with a story called "The Bridge" by Edwin Friedman, who was a pioneer in family systems theory and its application to congregational life. (This story

is kind of long, and potentially disturbing, so I'm going to ask you to get comfortable, and breathe.)

“The Bridge” by Edwin Friedman (adapted)

A man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life, who had experimented with different ways of living and had had his share of both success and failure at last began to see clearly where he wanted to go.

Eager to arrive, he started on his journey. With each thought about his goal, his heart beat quicker. Hurrying along, he came upon a bridge high above a river. He started across. Then he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. The other man had about his waist a long rope, wrapped around him many times. The other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they were coming close, the stranger said, "Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end a moment?"

Surprised by this polite but curious request, he agreed without a thought. "Thank you," said the other, who then added, "two hands now, and remember, hold tight." Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge. Instinctively, he held tight and was almost dragged over the side. He managed to brace himself against the edge, and after having caught his breath looked down at the other dangling, close to oblivion.

"What are you trying to do?" he yelled. "Just hold tight," said the other "This is ridiculous," the man thought and began trying to haul the other in. "Why did you do this?" he called out. "Remember," said the other, "if you let go, I will be lost." "But I cannot pull you up," the man cried. "I am your responsibility," said the other. "Well, I did not ask for it," the man said. "If you let go, I am lost," repeated the other.

He began to look around for help. But there was no one. He examined the bridge, searching for a place to tie the rope. But there were no spaces between the boards. "What do you want?" he asked the other hanging below. "Just your help," the other answered. "How can I help? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I can go and find someone to help me help you." "I know that. Just hang on; that will be enough. Tie the rope around your waist; it will be easier." Fearing that his arms could not hold out much longer, he tied the rope around his waist.

What should he do? "If I let go, all my life I will know that I have made this choice. If I stay, I risk losing the momentum I've finally found. Either way, this could haunt me forever." With ironic humor he thought to die himself, instantly, to jump off the bridge while he was still holding on. "That would teach this fool." But he wanted to live and live fully. "What a choice I have to make; How shall I ever decide?"

Time went by; still no one came. As his endurance faded the critical moment of decision drew near. Then a new thought occurred to him. While he could not pull the other up solely by his own efforts, if the other would shorten the rope from his end by curling it around his waist again

and again, together, they could do it! Actually, the other could do it by himself, so long as he, standing on the bridge, kept it still and steady.

"Now listen," he shouted down. "I think I know how to save you." And he explained his plan. But the other wasn't interested. "You mean you won't help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don't think I can hang on much longer either." "You must try," the other shouted back in tears. "If you fail, I die!"

The point of decision had arrived. What should he do? "My life or this other's?" And then a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact, it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking. "I want you to listen carefully," he said, "because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you."

"What do you mean?" the other asked, afraid. "I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here." He began unwinding the rope from around his waist and braced himself anew against the side.

"You cannot mean what you say!" the other shrieked. "You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. Do not do this to me!"

He waited a moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope.

"I accept your choice," he said, at last, and freed his hands.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

REFLECTIONS, Part II

In 1921, Universalist minister L.B. Fisher wrote: "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand, we move... We grow and we march, as all living things forever must do."

What does this mean? Does it mean that we are always moving on, never sticking around to attend to the needs around us? Tending is a tricky word for Unitarian Universalists. When we are asked what we believe, since we don't have a creed, it seems necessary to respond that there are UUs on every side of every issue. And there is some truth to that. But it hides another truth: the truth that there are tendencies within our movement.

Every summer the Unitarian Universalist Association has a big gathering called General Assembly. At General Assemblies UUs from around the country learn and network, do business and get inspired. And for decades, they have made collective public statements on all sorts of

social issues: environmentalism, reproductive freedom, civil liberties, gun control, the war on drugs, separation of church and state, torture, sex education and many other topics.

These statements go back to 1961 when the Unitarians and Universalists, who had been separate denominations for about 150 years each, finally merged into a single association of congregations. It's interesting to look at these public statements from the beginning to get a sense of where we've been and where we might be going: in 1961 there was a statement calling for the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee (which had been persecuting suspected communists), plus a statement against capital punishment, one for desegregation of public schools, and another in support of migrant workers.

But also from the beginning there's been real uneasiness about making such collective statements. Already in 1962 a resolution was passed to clarify that while we wished to utilize our collective voice to call attention to matters of social ethics ... at the same time we wanted to ensure each congregation and each individual the right to come to their own conclusions without being bound to a communal dogma. Therefore it was clarified that such resolutions were to be considered expressions of the majority of delegates attending that particular General Assembly, without implying that these were views held unanimously by any UU congregation or individual members of our congregations.

Still, if you look to statements like those made at General Assembly, and more importantly if you look at what is actually being done in our congregations—in our efforts toward social justice at BUF, in the way our Humanitas ministry attends to the needs of people in difficult situations, in the way we gather for Sunday services and religiously educate our children, it's not hard to recognize tendencies within our movement. And I like that: being known by our tendencies—how we walk our talk—this is a good mid-point, I think, between the extremes of being defined by strict official doctrines...and not having a clue who we are.

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But tending evokes another image: stretching. And stretching can be a good thing – stretching our minds or our hearts to become more broad-minded or compassionate... stretching our arms and legs and backs to make ourselves more flexible. Yeah that's alright. But what about taking this to an extreme: tend-erizing? Now that's a different level of stretching. To tenderize is to destroy the connective tissue within a piece of meat by pounding it with a bumpy mallet, or by applying salt and other chemicals. Ouch, who would ever want to tend toward tenderness in this sense?

And yet, we all go through it. The repeated cycles of the seasons of life: freezing and thawing, freezing and thawing, freezing and thawing in a cycle that is both wicked and healing....breaking down the intricacies and complications of our lives to be recycled and loosely stitched back together again.

A common spring observation in the great lakes states is that three snows will fall on the crocuses before the winter will be gone. It's an aggravating reality every year. Yet still somehow it always surprised me and grated at my nerves. Still I appreciate a sweet and melancholy song

about this phenomenon that somehow invokes tenacious hope for those times when we think we've made it through a long winter, but then face another setback.

I like the song because of what it says (implicitly) about tending: there are cycles within the larger cycles of our lives; the time for tending will come; but even this lies within a larger trajectory.

Martin Luther King Jr. used a similar metaphor when he stated that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. I understand this to mean that breakthroughs, disappointments, progress, and doubt will be scattered throughout our individual lives, and through the course of history. But our lives are part of something larger.

So can we tend compassionately to the here and now? And can we bend, and stretch, and open ourselves toward new understandings and broadening horizons... all at the same time?

How are you tending today? What are you caring for, and attending to? Answer that and you can know who you are.

And where are you tending tomorrow? In what manner are you shifting and moving and adjusting and responding? We can only reveal this to ourselves over time. My prayer for us today is that, independently and together, we may stretch and bend and tend in the direction of justice.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

I'm on my Way

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