

Balanced Openness as a Way of Life

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The culture that I grew up in aspired to achievement. Resolution. Agreement. Productivity and progress. These things were the drivers, the benchmarks, the objectives.

Alongside them were things like happiness, relaxation, rest, moderation. These were secondary goals. Rarely if ever achieved and often at odds with the reality of how people were living their days.

Sound familiar? For some of you, maybe not all.

This was not a world where murkiness and uncertainty were applauded or honored. They were tolerated at best—if we didn't talk about it too much—and ideally overcome.

In short, my cultural indoctrination was binary.

Things were either good or bad. Happy was good. Afraid, uncertain, sad, even mad—bad.

Life was to be understood, mastered, lived as if there were some finish line that we were trying to cross.

The navigation system for this white binary world included many “should,” a lot of “right ways,” “always,” “never,” and “but’s.” “Black and white” in both its literal and metaphorical meaning.

No wonder I always felt like I was either lagging behind or just out ahead. Anxiety, depression, and exhaustion are natural byproducts of this unnatural way of life.

Its time, I pray, has come to an end.

The binary world view has run its course my friends. If we are ever to live in peace, ever to have enough energy to keep on keeping on, ever to truly know and love ourselves and one another, the binary must make way for the interconnected.

The interconnected web of life, one of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles, is not just a pretty concept. Interconnection means that we do not survive alone and we cannot live as though no one else mattered. It means that what I do makes a difference and that it is *only* a difference. I am not the solution.

The interconnected world is circular, connected, messy. There is doubt, confusion, chaos, and energy. It is what I call the “AND World.”

The world of brown, black, and peach-colored skin. A constellation of frustration and joy. Aspirations and mistakes. The AND World is a lens where people thrive on not always having to

know the answer and where learning is genuinely valued. This is a world where we hope to die with unfinished business.

This AND World is more familiar to some of you than others. In many ways it is the antithesis of the western white binary world.

Paradox runs through the fabric of the AND World. In order to change we have to accept things. The strongest are those who are the most flexible, willing, and open. Those who understand and live from this perspective get that it is about evolution and change and simultaneously upholding the traditional. We give to one another and take care of ourselves. We seek to understand and share who we truly are. At the core, we give up hope of a finish line and start living in the waters of daily life.

I am challenging us all to live consciously this year with this understanding of the world. What better time is there than now? The 300th anniversary of this congregation and an interim minister. With the AND World view you can be honest and open to who are you today, and who you are becoming so as to have a clear enough vision of the future that you can attract the right (notice I did not say the “best”) called settled minister for this congregation when that time comes in the spring of 2018.

There are so many other reasons why now is the time to learn to live consciously in the AND World. The world which we live in is hurting. It is broken, very broken. It can be scary and overwhelming. AND it is our world. No one else is going to make it any different. The binary world view is not going to change it.

I am going to offer two things that we can do to move toward consciously living in the AND interconnected World. One is a specific act, which is to change one simple word in our use of language and the other is to move toward living in a state of balanced openness.

Let’s start with the change of language. This change is to stop using the word *but* and replace it with *and*. This may sound overly simple or silly. Listen:

I am committed to justice *but* I am tired, in need of self-care. OR: I am committed to justice *and* I am tired, in need of self-care.

AND How about this?

First Parish in Brookline has a long and proud history *but* there were early congregants who were slave owners. OR: First Parish in Brookline has a long and proud history *and* there were early congregants who were slave owners.

The use of the word *but* is actually an act of aggression. One of the trainers who led a training on multiculturalism that I took this summer explained it this way. She said, “when people use the word ‘but’ what they are really saying is, ‘Yes, I hear you and now let me tell what the real truth is.’” It negates whatever it was that was said before it and generally indicates that we think we know better than the other.

Using the word “but” lets us know that we are closed—not open to change—and not living in an AND World. In the book we are reading this month, *Radical Hospitality*, Lonni Collins Pratt writes “*but* is all about our doubts, our justifications and our own excuses. To stop accepting your own excuses is a very courageous act.”¹ So I invite us all to stop when we hear ourselves using the word But and try it again with the word And.

The second thing that is essential to living consciously in this interconnected, AND World is balanced openness. I came upon this concept while studying the concept of radical hospitality, our ministry theme for this month.

We’ll talk more about hospitality next week, but let me share this. In the book *Radical Hospitality*, Lonni Collins Pratt writes, “Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it...[and] calling hospitality a moral issue does not tell the whole truth either...hospitality is no legalistic ethical issue...[it is] a way of becoming more human...of understanding yourself. It is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice and a path to deeper spirituality.”²

In order to have the energy necessary to do our part at this time in the history of the world, we need to practice self-care and selflessness, both of which are part of radical hospitality. Be willing to say yes when we don’t feel like it and no when we are attempting more than is healthy or possible. We have to know our strengths and our weaknesses. Where we use our gifts and how to admit our failings. It is what I call balanced openness.

Balanced openness is perhaps one of the greatest skills necessary for any of us to live consciously in this dynamic and multicultural AND World.

When we become off balance we forget the reality of our interconnection. We morph back into the binary world of this side and that side. Right and wrong. Good and bad. Enough and not enough. You and me. Him and Her.

Those days are done.

No one will do this for us. Living in balanced openness is not about perfection but it is about having self-awareness, and living honestly. Balanced openness is about valuing differences and similarities between people.

As we affirmed in our responsive reading this morning, “You and I and all of us blew about with the winds of summer, Following the sun in different ways of freedom and play.”³ We all had different summers, some with travel, others with none. Some of us learning that we had cancer, grieving over the death of parents, or the state of the world.

Some of us found rejuvenation and others of us are more tired and our dreams and hopes for summer somehow got lost in unexpected demands. It is all real. It is all good in the highest sense of the word. Here is a place where we aspire to value differences big and small.

¹ (Lonni Collins Pratt with Father Daniel Homan, 2011) pg. 213

² Ibid. pg 43.

³ Singing the Living Tradition, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 1993, 2000, #729.

When we live consciously and in relationship with the interconnected AND with a balanced openness of boundaries and love then we can create the community that we all seek. The home that Starhawk says is where we are longing to go, “...a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. A circle of healing...Someplace where we can be free.”⁴

We start with ourselves, move out to those closest to us and in, but it doesn’t stop there either. No not at all. We bring this attitude, this way of being, this desire to be changed by knowing others who are different from ourselves into the world. We live our faith out loud.

We join others on Moral Mondays, and we allow ourselves to care for what needs to be tended to in our own hearts. This is not easy. It calls forth the very best in us. It is indeed a deeply spiritual practice. It is the stepping stone and the cornerstone to being a truly hospitable person.

Balanced openness and radical hospitality like many of the greatest traits in people are not things that we naturally know how to do. However, they are something that we can all learn, just as we can learn to replace “*but*” with AND. This is learning that we can support each other in becoming.

The AND World is not really an option. Sooner or later those who refuse to change and live only in a world of right and wrong, good and bad, black and white, will find themselves alone. Let us choose, now, to lean in and start living in the AND way.

Amen and Blessed Be.

⁴ “Community Means Strength” Starhawk