

“Backdoor Solutions”
Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
October 26, 2014
Rev. Bruce Bode

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

Let there be light – the light of joy, the light of happiness, and the light of contentment.

May it illuminate our paths and fill our lives with peace.

And let there be dark – for it is from our dark places that we are brought forward.

Tried and tested, and impelled toward growth, it is in these places that we realize compassion and learn to love.

And there was day and there was night.

And there was joy and there was sorrow.

And it was good.

(“Let There Be Light,” by Andrew Pakula, from the Illuminations App)

Responsive Reading

We are approaching Halloween, which is a transitional time of the year, recognized as such by many traditional cultures, the time when we are moving from the light half of the year to the dark half. May 1 – Mayday – six months across the year from Halloween is the counterpart.

Thus, at this time of the year the opposites come into play – not only in nature but also psychologically and spiritually. It’s a time in which we recognize and attend to the other side of things.

Chinese religion, particular Taoism, has long recognized the play of opposites in our lives, and this morning’s Responsive Reading relates to that play of opposites.

MINISTER: The Chinese image of the Tao as the interplay of Yang and Yin has endured for centuries as a symbol of a deep and abiding insight into the nature of life.

CONGREGATION: The Yang is the light of day. The Yin is the dark of night. Yang is summer; Yin is winter.

MINISTER: The Yang is the joy of life. The Yin is the sorrow of life. Yang is pleasure; Yin is pain.

CONGREGATION: The Yang is all that is out-going and active. The Yin all that is returning and at rest. Yang is high-strung; Yin is low-keyed.

MINISTER: The Yang is the blossoming flower of spring. The Yin is the fading leaf of autumn. Yang is being born. Yin is dying.

CONGREGATION: The Yang is hard like rock. The Yin is soft like water. Yang is standing firm; Yin is yielding.

MINISTER: The Yang is concerned with facts, science, logic. The Yin is concerned with theory, art, intuition. Yang is thinking; Yin is valuing.

CONGREGATION: The Yang is the intelligence of the mind. The Yin is the wisdom of the body. Yang is culture; Yin is nature.

MINISTER: The Yang and the Yin know each other and take their meaning from each other. Yang is defined by Yin; Yin is defined by Yang.

CONGREGATION: The Yang and the Yin stir within each other and flow into each other. Yang contains the seed of Yin; Yin contains the seed of Yang.

ALL: The Yang and the Yin are the pairs of opposites through which we experience the whole of life.

Reading

This afternoon's reading, which is related to our Responsive Reading, is from that little book of ancient Chinese wisdom, the Tao Te Ching, which represents a religious philosophy in which one tries to move *with* nature's energy, not pushing against the flow of the current, but discerning which way the current is moving and then moving with it. I will read two short chapters as illustrations of this perspective from a translation or version by Stephen Mitchell.

Chapter 29

Do you want to improve the world?
I don't think it can be done.

The world is sacred.
It can't be improved.
If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it.
If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it.

There is a time for being ahead,
a time for being behind;
a time for being in motion,
a time for being at rest;
a time for being vigorous,

a time for being exhausted;
a time for being safe,
a time for being in danger.

The Master sees things as they are,
without trying to control them.
She lets them go their own way,
and resides at the center of the circle.

Chapter 48

In pursuit of knowledge,
every day something is added.
In the practice of the Tao,
every day something is dropped.
Less and less do you need to force things,
until finally you arrive at non-action.
When nothing is done,
nothing is left undone.

True mastery can be gained
by letting things go their own way.
It can't be gained by interfering.

“BACKDOOR SOLUTIONS”

An opening quiz

Let's start this sermon with a little questionnaire – four questions:

- 1) First, how many of you made New Year's resolutions this past January?
- 2) Two, how many of you who made New Year's resolutions this past January are still keeping them?
- 3) Three, how many of you either can't remember whether you made a New Year's resolution this past January, or can't remember what it was, if you think you made one?
- 4) And, four, and most interesting to me: How many of you can remember a New Year's resolution from the past that resulted in a permanent change in your life?

Limits to direct, straight-forward change

Now, I'm pleased for those of you for whom New Year's resolutions have resulted in real and permanent change, and I don't wish to diminish or discourage New Year's

resolutions ... but from my own experience, and from previous informal polls I've taken, New Year's resolutions are notorious, not for the change they bring in our lives, but for being quickly broken, easily forgotten, and for almost invariably losing their force with the passage of time.

The reason for this, I think, is that direct change, like the changes that are typically attempted in New Year's resolutions, are going against the flow of one's natural energy and present interest. If this were not the case, the change would probably have already occurred on its own, and you wouldn't have to be making a resolution about it.

With New Year's resolutions, it's as if you're rowing against the current or pushing a boulder up a hill. Thus, such changes are hard to sustain. They seem not to work for very long, or, if they do work, the effort involved to bring about the change seems way out of proportion to the meager results.

The example of exercise

For example, I have found this to be the case with exercise. Exercise and only exercise, exercise just because I think it's good for me, has never been enough of a lure to develop any kind of consistent program.

I've never been able to sustain a program of exercise over any prolonged period of time or to develop any life-long habit of exercise. And I've tried a number of different programs, like running programs or weight-lifting programs; but inertia, it seems, always takes over, and either I imagine that I am too busy, or I conveniently pull a muscle, and so don't have to do them anymore.

Generally, I've found that the only way for me to get exercise is to find something active that I enjoy doing, thus getting the exercise *indirectly* and as a by-product of something else.

Fortunately, for me, there have been many active sports that I have enjoyed over the years. Much of my life has been involved in hitting, throwing, kicking, shooting, bouncing, or chasing a ball of some kind ... in a sport like baseball, softball, basketball, football, volleyball, racquetball, handball, tennis, ping-pong, bowling, and golf. All of those are sports I've been active in.

So to get exercise, I seem to need to be playing some game of some sort. This is nature's way for me, and I don't have to fight it. I get the exercise through the backdoor, so to speak, and without having to lash myself.

Golf and exercise

In recent years I get my main exercise through hitting and walking after a golf ball – and through carrying my own clubs. (I have, at least, that much discipline.)

Also, before I begin playing, I try to warm up a bit – do some pushups and stretches to maintain strength and flexibility. But I really have to force myself to do these things – I don't really like to do them at all. Only the reward of being able to play the game after doing these minimal exercises keeps me going.

Let me also give you a strange little example of how nature's way works with me with respect to golf.

I just mentioned that I walk and carry my own clubs when golfing. But I've had the experience on several occasions of inadvertently leaving a golf club at a green I've just played and then discovering a hole or two or three later when I reach for that club in my golf bag that it's missing.

And now what a long, tedious, and boring walk it is to have to go all the way back to a previous hole and retrieve the club! All of a sudden I feel tired, I didn't realize how hot it was, and it takes such an effort to go back to retrieve it.

But once I retrieve the club and return to the hole I'm playing, all of that instantly changes. After I've hit the ball toward the next green, it's no effort at all to go after it, even with a whole bag of clubs on my back! But they are no weight at all.

And now the time flies, I'm full of energy, and I get my exercise naturally and easily without mentally working and sweating at it, even though physically I do work and sweat.

My natural love of the game carries me forward, and like the lilies of the field, I neither toil nor spin, and even King Solomon with all his possessions couldn't enjoy himself as much as I do.

“Just say ‘no’”

So, too, it seems to me, there's a problem with the philosophy of direct change involved in the "just say 'no'" campaigns – “just say 'no'" to drugs, to alcohol, to sugar, to sex, to violence, to whatever.

"Just say 'no'" has no incentive in it – nothing of nature's way in it.

Or, actually, it does have something of nature's way in it, but it's the reverse of what is intended.

That's because the louder one says "no", the more one also calls attention to that object or activity in an alluring way, and the more intriguing and attractive it becomes. The more you try to push something from your awareness, the more it wants to intrude into your awareness.

Elephants in the room

To illustrate: I am about to name something that I *don't* want you to think about. Now, you may think about anything else in the whole wide world – anything except the one thing that I am about to mention.

Are you ready? The thing I don't want you to think about is ... ELEPHANTS. Please, don't think of ELEPHANTS. And I hope none of you are now thinking of ELEPHANTS!

Remember, you may think of anything else except ELEPHANTS ... but please, please, please, don't think of those monstrous, lumbering, and yet gentle, thick-skinned, grey pachyderms that you may have seen performing tricks at the circus or rolling logs and pushing over trees in films. If an image of ELEPHANTS starts to form in your mind, please, please, please, "just say 'no.'" It's that simple. Just say "no."

"Don't do as I've done"

I have a friend, a consultant for teachers, who feels there's a problem with having former offenders, like drug offenders, being the spokespersons against certain behaviors, as is or has often been done in schools. The message is, "Don't do as I have done, but do as I now say not to do."

Of course, these spokespersons don't mean to glorify their previous behavior, but often that's an indirect result. And they are present as spokespersons, and have gained their notoriety and recognition, just because they have been involved in these things.

Not only do they present a former life that is more interesting and exciting than the drab, routine, unnoticed, and uneventful life of many students, but they also increase the menu of options for those who may not have been considering these possibilities. The thought is put in the mind, even while it is being spoken against.

Thus, my friend recommends that if a school brings in a previous abuser, it at least ought to balance the scale by bringing in someone for whom abuse has not been an issue, one whose life has revolved around different concerns.

Making reverse energy work for you

There is a way, however, to make the "just say 'no'" idea work for you using its natural *reverse* energy.

Many years ago when I was in theological school and financing my education, I worked as an aide in a psychiatric hospital. There, I had an older co-worker who taught her children to like spinach based on this reverse energy principle. It's a little manipulative, but here's how she did it.

When her children were young, she said that she would cook up just enough spinach for herself. Then, saying that this was food for adults only, she would eat the spinach in front

of the children with great relish, smacking her lips and making all sorts of yum-yum sounds. Soon her children starting saying, "Mom, can't we have some of that spinach."

"Oh, no," she would say, "this is adult food."

"But mom..."

"Oh, all right, you can have one bite, but no more."

And so it went, with the portions gradually being increased. And so, of course, all of her children learned to love spinach – so she claimed.

"Just say 'no.'" It's not that simple. And why? Because "yes" and "no" are hooked together, and the louder you say "no," the louder the "yes" echoes in the subterranean regions of the mind. (Read the biblical Garden of Eden story in Genesis 3, if you don't believe me.)

Eliminating evil

Says philosopher Ken Wilber: "Trying to rid ourselves of negative tendencies, trying to destroy and eliminate them, would be a fine idea – if it were possible."

The problem, he says, is that it is not possible, that the negative tendencies in ourselves to which we try to shut our eyes nevertheless remain firmly ours. He says that we can tame evil only by making a friend of it. But in alienating it and trying to push it away, we simply inflame it. Those who would seek to eliminate evil, he says, have added substantially to its victory.

(And though I'm speaking primarily in this sermon at the personal level and not at the political and social levels, I can't help but think how all our efforts to smash and eliminate the evil al-Qaeda, rather to try to understand their grievances, has now produced the terror group ISIS, which even al-Qaeda thinks has gone too far.)

Ronald Fraser writes: "Let me ask you to remember ... that the hatred of evil strengthens evil, and opposition reinforces what is opposed. This is a law of an exactitude equal with the laws of mathematics."

Casting out one's demons

Sometimes through sheer force of will a person *is* able to bring about a change – to stop a behavior or to stop a symptom. But often what happens is that the symptom simply shifts, and the problem comes up in a new way.

At other times, the latter end is worse than the former and the "cured" person becomes brittle, more one-sided, less interesting, obnoxious, a zealot over against the thing previously practiced. When you see such a zealot coming, you want to run for the hills.

Frederick Nietzsche, the philosopher, said: “Beware in casting out your demons, lest you cast out the best that is within you.”

The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, said: “If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight as well.”

And there’s an odd and little-known statement of Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke that reads:

“When an unclean spirit goes out of a person” [– updated, we can say, “When a symptom or bad habit is cast out of a person” –] “it wanders through waterless country looking for a place to rest, and not finding a resting place it says, ‘I will go back to the home I came from.’ But on arrival, finding it swept and tidied, it then goes off and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and set up house there, so that the person ends up by being worse than before.” (Luke 11:24-26)

In other words, you can’t just cast out your demons; they’ll get irritated and find other like-minded friends.

Beneath the surface

I think of the attempt at direct change and the attempt to eliminate and push away symptoms as being like working with the top of an iceberg – the 10% that shows above the water. One is working only with the small surface part that is seen; but, really, it’s underneath, in the 90% that’s not seen, that the bulk of the energy exists and where the more major shifts take place.

Real transformation doesn’t come from the top. The top may catalyze change, or welcome change, or not stand in the way of change, but it’s underneath where the real change occurs. And when real change comes, it comes easily and quickly and seemingly without effort – though great effort may have been previously involved. But when it comes, the old simply melts away. One might not even notice the change. All of a sudden, there it is. A habit just ends. One day the desire is gone, and life moves on to new problems and concerns.

I think, in this regard, of the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the early 1990’s. A little catalyst at the top, like a Gorbachev, and suddenly the whole thing shifts – more than he could even believe at the time, different in some ways than he wanted, and once it started he couldn’t control or stop the change. The Communism of that time just collapsed, imploded, because of the energy that had been working underground for years.

A personal example of a shift

Some forty years ago in my mid-twenties I experienced a collapse in my personal belief

structure in a similar way. Doubts and questions and anxieties about my belief structure had plagued me for years, but I kept trying to hang on to my inherited belief-system, trying to find a way to make it work. But what I didn't know was that underneath the whole thing had already shifted.

I found that out when I made a change on the top. I made a conscious decision to quit the job I was doing, and when I did, just like that my whole belief structure, which had been built up over a lifetime, simply collapsed beneath me – more than I wanted, couldn't stop it, didn't know where it would take me. But there it was.

Substantial change comes from underneath. It comes from a side that is not being watched, and when it occurs, it occurs quickly, easily, without seeming effort. And, actually, you can't really control it or stop it. And to the extent that you try to resist it, you simply tie yourself up in knots.

Change through identifying with the symptom

What I am saying about change from underneath may sound a bit un-American, because we are known as a practical people. We are known as a can-do people – direct, concrete, forceful, positive-thinking, oriented to the present, oriented to immediate results.

But in fairy tales, it's the fool or the simpleton who usually brings the solution. In other words, the solution comes from the other side – the weak side, the unwanted side, the misunderstood side, the neglected side, the unattended side, the underside, the backside.

The Taoist philosophers say it's through *inaction* that action occurs – by indirection. Not aiming, one hits the target, say the Zen teachers.

Trying to remember a name directly when it won't come to you, you have to let it go, and then suddenly it may appear. Desperately tired, trying to force yourself to get to sleep, you stay awake. Try staying awake – say by reading a book – and bang! you fall asleep.

Fear of open places

Therapist Irving Yalom authored a book titled Love's Executioner in which he writes of working with a man whose wife had agoraphobia, which literally means “fear of the market place,” that is, fear of being in open spaces. The man's wife hadn't been able to venture out of the house for a very long time.

However, Dr. Yalom felt that *her* symptom was *their* symptom. She was eternally in the home *for him*, permitting *him* to venture forth into the world. He knew she was always there waiting for him. She provided him security in the home, and he provided her security outside the home. But now, since they were at the age of retirement, he, too, was in the home, and it wasn't working; they longed for something different.

Now, the straight-forward, rational solution would be to work bit by bit in a kind of

rational recovery program. And there are effective programs that work this way: slowly and step-by-step moving one along to a new way of life. It takes a lot of effort, a lot of discipline. It feels like rowing against the current – and, indeed, it *is* rowing against the current!

This therapist, however, tried a “backdoor” solution. He instructed the husband to say the following words to his wife every two hours – and to call her if he was away from home. He was to say, "Phyllis, please don't leave the house. I need to know that you are in the house at all times to take care of me and to prevent me from being frightened."

This is what may be called "identifying with the symptom" – the symptom, here, being unable to leave the house. But instead of directly fighting that, you identify with it by telling yourself, "*Don't* leave the house." What you do is reverse the energy and bring the "yes" and the "no" closer together.

And, in this case, this approach, though a bit artificial and mechanical, worked. It had the value of going with the symptom, and in a short time Phyllis was released from her bondage and able to venture out into the world. (If this experiment hadn't worked, I doubt the author would have written about it.)

Bringing in the Unconscious

The philosopher I quoted earlier, Ken Wilbur, in a book titled, The Spectrum of Consciousness, says that as long as one fights a symptom, it will only get worse. Deliberate change, he claims, never works because it excludes the Unconscious – the 90% below the surface. Instead, he recommends that we try to align ourselves with the symptom, for then we bring our conscious and unconscious selves together.

He suggests the following unusual approach for aligning yourself with the symptom, namely: *increase its effects*.

So, if you are depressed – I'm not talking here about clinical depression – try to make yourself more depressed. Think of things that make you more depressed.

If you feel guilty and regretful, think of things that will increase your feelings of guilt and regret even more.

If you feel anxious, think of things that will increase your anxiety.

In these ways, you will align yourself with the symptoms and allow nature to work. You won't be fighting nature; you'll be surrendering to it.

A simple physical example of identifying with the symptom is with regard to tension. If you are tense, one way to relax your muscles is to tighten them to the extreme – tense your muscles to the extreme ... hold them that way for a time ... and when you release them, you'll feel that some of the tension has drained away.

A backdoor cure for hiccups

Ken Wilbur says that his father had a backdoor cure for hiccups. If someone in his father's vicinity had the hiccups, his father would take a \$20 bill out of his wallet, hold it before the person, and demand that the person hiccup one more time ... saying that if the person could hiccup, then the \$20 bill was his or hers. Ken Wilbur claimed that this worked.

I had read of this example many years ago, and at a time when my own children were young, and also at a time that I was scheduled to give a chapel talk at a religious education conference at Star Island off the New Hampshire and Maine coasts. And I was planning to use this example in my talk. It was the first time I was going to use this example.

Then, walking up the path to this lovely little stone chapel, accompanied by my youngest daughter, Libby, age nine at the time, suddenly, as we were walking, I found that she had the hiccups. I thought, "Oh, what is this? Which of the gods is testing me now? Well, okay, we'll see if this hiccup cure really works."

My faith was not total, however, and so, instead of a \$20 bill, I took out a \$1 bill, and I said, "Libby, if you hiccup one more time, I'll give you this \$1 bill."

"What," she said, "why would you do that?"

"Never mind why," I said. "If you hiccup one more time, the dollar bill is yours."

Well, she tried. She strained and she strained, she stretched her throat, she grunted and groaned and tried to produce the hiccup, but all to no avail. She couldn't hiccup. She didn't get the dollar.

The next day at the noontime meal, she came running to me. "Let's try it again," she said. "Ask me to hiccup now." She had the hiccups again.

But I knew that this time it wouldn't work because it wouldn't be reversing the energy field and she wouldn't be truly identifying with the symptom, and so I refused.

Flossie, however, out of pity for her daughter, let her try it again, and, of course, this time she got the dollar bill. She was able to keep hiccupping – great!

Identifying with the symptom – not a technique

Why wouldn't this technique work a second time? Intuitively, you feel that it won't in this situation, but why?

Well, because it's a technique and life doesn't work that way. Identifying with the symptom cannot be done mechanically. You can't use it as magic; it's not a trick.

But when you do *truly* identify with a symptom in your life, whatever it is, then some kind of change will occur. But you can't do it for the sake of change, and you can't predict what the change will be.

So what is your symptom? Are you in grief, are you full of anxiety, are you frightened, are you lonely, are you in physical pain, are you addicted in some way? Don't fight it; rather, surrender to it.

This is what the 12-step programs, for example, recommend. They say, in effect:

“Give up, surrender. This problem or issue is bigger than you. Don't *try* to change, because all your trying is only working against nature. You're only dealing with the surface of the iceberg.

“Instead, let your symptom have a voice. Let it speak to you. Let it say what it needs to say ... so that you hear yourself saying, 'I am sad, I am lonely, I am full of anxiety, I am dispirited, I am empty, I am addicted, I can't manage this.' Whatever it is, give yourself to it, align yourself with it.”

A concluding example

Let me conclude with a final example I once saw on a Bill Moyers' program titled, Healing and the Mind. Much of the program had to do with chronic pain and incurable illnesses. The direct solutions of Western medicine weren't working, and cures were not going to happen, but healing of some kind could still take place. And how? The mind was to relax itself with respect to the symptom. It was to receive and embrace and speak about feelings; it was to respect the emotions.

I especially remember one teacher who was working with a person in chronic pain, saying to this person, "Now pretend I'm your pain. I'm here, I'm not going away; as a matter of fact, I'm coming at you. And what are you going to do, push me away? But I won't go away. You will just intensify the pain. Instead, open your arms, come close to me, embrace me, dance with me, work with me, breathe with me, move with me. Let nature in, even though it's painful and hard, and who knows what may happen."

Benediction

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons)

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Peninsula Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on October 26, 2014.)