

“Strong Back, Soft Front”

Sermon by Rev. Eva Thompson for the Yarmouth UU Church Dec. 13, 2011
(requested to be on the general theme of “Grace and Healing.”)

I love these little bumper stickers that say “Wag More. Bark Less.” I was going to get one for my dog, Shannon, last Christmas and stick it down by her water bowl to remind her of good behavior. That’s silly – she can’t read, obviously – but this saying is not so much intended for the dogs, is it? It’s more like a dog-person’s way of telling other people to mellow out.

It makes me smile whenever I see one, because it’s a good-natured, friendly way of saying, “relax, already. Play nice.”

Contrast that now, if you will, with another bumper sticker I saw recently on a car in front of me. This one read, “It’s not right vs. left, it’s right vs. WRONG.”

Not so friendly. Didn’t make me smile.

Now, I have nothing against honest disagreement, political or otherwise. I think we could probably **all** live with disagreement, if we felt like our views were heard and respected. But I felt like this guy put me – along with about half the rest of the population -- in a circle with a big, red slash mark through it.

He judged me wrong, and discounted me.

My first reaction was to roll my eyes and judge this guy as a closed-minded idiot, I’m sorry to say.

Luckily, after a few minutes of following his car I was able to remember that, as a good Unitarian Universalist it was my personal

challenge and responsibility to remember this guy's inherent dignity and worth, and *for me* to respect our differences.

He's just stating his opinion, in a way that he apparently finds amusing – and it's different from my view and my taste. Regardless, it's not my place to judge him.

Let me again read the words that I shared with you in my opening reading: (note: this is from Deuteronomy 6: 10-12, as paraphrased by Rev. Peter Raible)

“We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig.
We profit from persons we did not know.
We are ever bound in community.”

(end quote)

We are “ever bound in community” relying on one another for all kinds of things. We cannot afford to be thinking in terms of “right vs. left” all the time, much less “right vs. wrong.” It's **not** “us vs. them” at all. It's just **US**.

This is going to be very difficult to remember during the season of a heated political campaign that will be all too eager to divide us into various “camps” in favor of one candidate or another. We need to try to maintain an astronaut's-eye-view of the world, as though from outer space: No boundaries, just all of us here sharing this one planet.

In the Universalist half of our UU tradition, the “universal” part comes in the belief that whatever “God’s love” is, it is imparted equally to all people. Not just the ones who are baptized, or who state their beliefs a certain way – but *all of us. Universally. Because that’s what a loving God would do.*

And we, too, as UUs and as moral individuals, have to aspire to love and respect everyone, in spite of our many differences. Surely, as reasonable people, we can find ways to disagree without disrespecting each other.

I’ve heard a lot of people say they believe in God as a verb. Okay, so let’s consider that very moment; that very instant we are able to move past our small “what a jerk” reaction, to a more loving and accepting place of “I disagree with you or the way you’re stating your views, but I fully respect you and your right to express them. Go in peace.”

If ever there was a “God as a verb” moment, it’s that one, isn’t it? That pause, that allows us to open our minds and hearts – I think that’s the **moment of Grace**.

Now the issue of “grace” can be a thorny one, theologically: the very definition of that term being one of those dividing places between various faith traditions. But personally, I’m not caring whether you think that sacred moment of changing heart is given by God, or is God, or is of God. What matters to me is that we all do it. What matters is that we prime ourselves to look for that opportunity, and that we take it. It’s so easy to miss; to let the opportunity for Grace pass us by in our hurry to do the next thing on our lists.

But I do think it is a thing that we can cultivate and practice – kind of like searching for that pause at the top or bottom of a breath when you’re meditating. We can find it, if we pay attention.

For my hospice work recently I read Joan Halifax's beautiful book called Being With Dying, and she had this great way of describing two different ways that people put themselves out into the world; I'm going to be pulling heavily from her book in order share this with you.

First she describes the Buddhist meditation of "strong back, soft front."

I'd like to invite you to experience this concept: by first, sitting up as straight and strong as you can. Close your eyes, if you're comfortable doing that, or just do a soft, fuzzy gaze on the near distance in front of you.

Take a few deep, slow breaths.

Bring your awareness to your spine. Breathe into your spine.

The strength of your spine allows you to uphold yourself in any situation. Appreciate how vertical, strong, flexible, and conductive it is. You can remind yourself of this strength by silently saying "strong back."

Now let your awareness go to your belly.

Breathe into your belly, letting it push right out.

Let your breath be deep and strong as your belly rises and falls.

Feel your natural courage and openness as your breath deeply into your belly.

Shifting your awareness to your chest, be aware of the tender, open feeling of this place. Let yourself be present to your own suffering and to the fact that, just like you, others also suffer.

Imagine feeling free of suffering and helping others to be free, too.

Feel the strength of your resolve rising up from your belly.

Let your heart be open and permeable. Remind yourself of your own tenderness by saying to yourself, "Soft Front."

With gratitude, remember that your life is supported by each breath.

Through your open body, you can feel the world, which lends compassion.

Through your strong spine, you can be with suffering, which gives you equanimity.

Let these qualities of equanimity and compassion intermingle.

Let them inform one another and give you genuine presence.

This is the practice of “Strong back, soft front.”

(okay, you can open your eyes and rejoin us now)

Ms. Halifax then compares that “Strong back, soft front” way of approaching the world to its opposite, one that the religious scholar Huston Smith calls “The Porcupine Effect.”

Here’s how that is described: “Some of us have a hard time receiving support from others, thus we may repress our tenderness to each other. All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front, shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence.” (end quote)

So I ask you now: which of these two ways are you approaching the world?

Are you fully supported with a strong spine while you remain vulnerable and open with people, or are you putting up a defensive, prickly front to protect yourself from the world?

(And how’s that been working for you?!)

I suggest that it is difficult to experience those moments of Grace - - that opening of heart and mind that is so crucial to our society right now – if we are going around with our defensive shields up.

I invite you to pay attention to your behavior in this coming week, and see if you can pick out instances of acting one way or the other. Ask yourself what vulnerabilities you are trying to protect with that hard exterior shell, and what that behavior might be keeping away, in terms of open interaction with others.

You might also pay attention to the people around you, and notice: are they presenting you with a prickly, hard shell, or are they strong and open with you? We can't change other people's behavior, but we can notice it, and how it affects us and how we respond to it.

It's important to note here that I'm not asking you to deny your hurt or angry feelings, but to just acknowledge what emotions you are feeling – sit with them awhile -- and eventually move past them.

It's like when little kids come to you saying “look at my boo-boo.” Once you have acknowledged their hurt -- paid it proper attention with a band-aid or a kiss -- then they can run off and play. And by sitting with our anger and acknowledging that yes, our feelings are hurt or that we are angry, we can feel that and then we can move on, too.

There's nothing wrong with feeling anger: it's often justifiable, and powerful change can come out of it – although the veteran and peace activist Paul Chappell makes a distinction between acting out of our outrage -- which he says can lead to productive change, and acting out of anger, which he says can be dangerous.

There's a lot of outrage out there these days, and for good reason. A lot of our systems are broken. A lot of our patterns of behavior are no longer working.

I remember my father assuring me, my whole life, that the stock market would go up and down – but that, over one's lifetime, it ALWAYS gained. He showed me on charts, that this was so –

and it was, in his lifetime. I'm not sure it's going to prove true, in my own. What are we to tell our children: that if they are fortunate enough to have any extra funds at all – which seems unlikely – that burying them in a can in the backyard might not be such a bad idea?

I don't think even the experts have a clue what they are talking about any more: The very models they've been using are obsolete. It's frightening, when you don't feel that there are experts, any more. It's overwhelming when too many systems break down all at the same time. We are an “Angry People” as Holly Near said. (note: opening hymn was “We Are a Gentle, Angry People”)

Lots of our institutions and public systems are feeling broken right now. Take your pick: our banks, our stock market? The way we put the rights of iconic sports figures over the safety of children? Dare I say: Congress?

Maybe you have some of your own private systems that are no longer working, as well: a relationship is on the outs, or the approach you've been taking toward a health issue proves ineffective. As someone in an old movie said, “*knowing it* is not the hard part. Saying it out loud is the hard part.”

We need to recognize when things are not working any more, and think carefully about what steps to take to fix them. To do so without slinging stones requires our standing with a strong back, and a soft front. It requires acknowledging that we do not have all the answers; that the issues are complicated and it's not as simple as “right versus wrong.”

The trick, for all of us, is to use our voices appropriately: knowing when to speak up, and how loudly to do it. No one can *hear* anything, when everyone is just barking all the time. (hold up

bumper sticker) Whether we are occupying Main Street, or using our marketing power to influence change, we need to do it in a way that can be heard by the decision-makers.

In the fall issue of the UU World, Peter Morales wrote that our religion is something we practice together. It's not about "me," he wrote, it's about us. What matters about our faith is what we DO with it. Doesn't matter so much, what you "say" you believe. Doesn't matter, how you define various theological terms. Doesn't make you a better person, if you believe certain things and not others!

What matters is that, as UUs, we are compelled to find that place of equanimity and compassion in our dealings with the world. What matters is taking the initiative to face our challenges with a strong back and a soft belly, and not go around with our protective shields up. Only then do we really know each other. Only then do we find those moments of Grace, when we can open up our thinking and be more kind and inclusive.

May we all stand firmly and in a state of grace,
in our work to make our world better.