22-01-30 **Coming to Peace in the Tension of Opposites SUUF**

***VOICE***

**How do we make choices when we’re faced with apparent opposites? Is there a reasonable and ethical way to discern the pros and cons of the situation and come to a logical decision in which the heart, the mind and the soul are at peace, regardless of the circumstances and consequences?**

**Let’s start out by looking at: How not to Make Choices:**

It was 1994 and I was at Vancouver School of Theology in a Philosophy class when the Professor, recommended that we read a particular book on Just War. After class, one of my friends – a Unitarian who knew of the author of the book, told me that she had a friend in one of his classes, who reported that he was given to fits of temper and throwing books at students. I, a self-righteous first year student, refused to read the book. I could not separate his behavior from any potential wisdom on a very sticky subject. So in spite of the fact it was recommended by a reputable person, my professor, I never did read that book and I didn’t learn anything from the situation. This black and white thinking is a lot of what we are seeing amongst people who can’t give up the Trump presidency, or like my neighbor, Steve, who’s wife was in the hospital with Covid, but when I asked him why he wasn’t vaccinated, he put his head down and turned away and said: “I don’t like having something shoved down my throat.” This is a man who was in the military and took all the shots they required – when there was no pandemic. Young children often think in black and white: “It’s mine – you can’t have it!” People who have not traveled outside of their place of upbringing, or have a low level of education, or have parents who teach them to think in black or white, right or wrong terms, are inclined to think in opposites and have difficulty in reconciling differences.

**If that’s an example of failure to reconcile options, Here are a couple of outstanding leaders facing difficult and consequential choices in fragile and dangerous political times.**

Some of you will know that Bonhoeffer. was a Lutheran minister and professor of religion, who, through most of the 2nd world war, refused to join in plots to kill Hitler. Imagine the moral dilemma he found himself in, being a pacifist, on one hand, and observing the vile acts of the Hitler regime and knowing that he had the power to effect change. **In his book: *The Cost of Discipleship***, he writes about the [Sermon on the Mount](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon_on_the_Mount), in which he not only attacked "cheap grace" as a cover for ethical laxity, but also preached "costly grace."

In order to shelter him from the dangers of one who had preached against Hitler, he was given a professorship in the US. But just a couple of weeks after coming to the US, amid much inner turmoil he wrote to his friend and fellow theologian, [Reinhold Niebuhr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reinhold_Niebuhr):

“I have come to the conclusion I must live through this difficult period in our national history ***with*** the people of Germany. ***I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.”*** So Bonhoeffer returned to Germany aware of the mortal danger. He rightly names the moral dilemma and decides which side to come down on.

Bonhoeffer modeled behavior consistent with his values.

Back in Germany, in the face of Nazi atrocities, B stretched his moral compass and joined a plot to kill Hitler, which, sadly was unsuccessful and he was imprisoned. During his time of incarceration, he wrote ***The Cost of Discipleship*** in which he said of his actions: ***"the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live."*** He did not justify his action but accepted that he was taking guilt upon himself: ***"When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it... Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace."*** This is the voice of a true leader but sadly, very shortly before the end of the war, he was hanged for his part in the plot. Nevertheless, his legacy of courage, clear reasoning and faith in his moral rectitude lives on as an example for others. Bonhoeffer was at peace with his decision to return to Germany. Although he accepted his guilt, he never quite came to terms with having chosen the possibility of killing a human being.

**Another leader, in our own times, Bill Moyers**, in 2018 wrote: “***To take a stand, we must prepare thoroughly and be aware of our own biases, which can cloud our judgment. That’s the reason I did not label Trump in his first two years of office. For the past two years under President Trump (and not in his first two years of office), I have referred to him as a racist and a sexist. Now I call him an American fascist, who attempted a coup to stay in power and overthrow democracy. It is our duty as journalists to be honest purveyors of information- to tell as close to the truth as humanly possible, and when the facts are abundantly clear, there are times we have to take a stand on an issue in order to do that. January 6th is one of those issues and this is one of those times***.”

Moyers understood his propensity to speak the truth to power could cost him jobs. In fact, he was laid off 11 broadcast journalism jobs and by his estimation, 4 times were for reporting the truth. Hard choices. Despite, and perhaps because of the layoffs, we as his listeners trusted him to tell the truth as he saw it.

**In spite of the hard choices they made, THEY knew they had done the right thing. Bonhoeffer and Moyers were powerful influencers and guides.**

**And What of Us Mere Mortals?:**

**We too need to know the truth within ourselves – to tell it to ourselves and to others to the best of our abilities. You will know the truth and it will set you free. Brene Brown – noted Sociologist and author has written several books. In one of the best known:** *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. She counsels people to be Awkward, Brave and Kind. God knows, we could use more of that in the world today – in ourselves and others.

**There’s one kind of imbalance that we have control over and can resolve- even, long after the original story.**

Shankar is the protagonist in the book ***Night Jasmine Tree*** – a story of an Indian man who grows up in a very conservative, religious Brahman family. He falls in love with a woman in a lower caste but when Shankar tells his father, without even meeting her, he disowns his son. They decide to marry and immigrate to the US. Shankar vows that he will never think of his family again, nor will he return to Calcutta. For some 30 years, he successfully buries his past. But finally, the separation overcomes him when he receives a letter from his sister, who is dying. He knows nothing of his sisters’ lives. And as the only son, he has not given his parents the proper rituals surrounding death, which begins to trouble him.. Shankar thinks of the Buddha’s teachings: The way to end suffering is through loving kindness, compassion and awakening one’s mind. Compassion cannot arise when one is angry.” He thought of how long he had been angry with his father and felt remorse and sympathy rising in his heart. His anger and his vow to himself to shut out the past, including all his family, made his life smaller and deprived his son of a family. Through the stories he told his grandchildren, the letter from his sister and the teachings of the Buddha, he was finally able to break through the wall that he had created, to be free. He returned to India, got medical help for his sister, and she recovered. He carried out the religious rituals for his dead parents, which was which assuaged his guilt. He gave his son and grandchildren the gift of his family and heritage, and he finally discovered a calm that he had hitherto not known- an ocean of peace.

How many of us have made covenants from a wrong in the past, which protected us as young people, but which we have not examined as mature adults. Our lives would be so much more peaceful if we could reconcile those differences.

**There is another kind of tension of opposing realities over which we have little or no control.**

Sometimes we don’t have a choice of whether to do one thing or another. The only choice we have is how to live in the situation that we have, with the best possible attitude - to change our relationship to the situation.

Lisa is a 76-year-old woman who was an airline stewardess. She married Ross, raised a son, got rheumatoid arthritis shortly after her son was born and now, cares for her husband.

Ross was a chef, a poet, a song writer, a bicyclist. He got early onset Parkinson’s after a bike accident on Chuckanut Drive and now suffers from sometimes extreme anxiety, inability to play his guitar and sing, occasional loss of muscle control resulting in loss of balance and falls. He also is very intelligent, and when he’s feeling good, has a great sense of humor. His poetry is exquisite, and he has published 3 books. He’s also written some beautiful music.

Ross could sit home feeling sorry for himself, but he works hard to find things to enjoy and be grateful for: The reception his poetry gets, spin cycling at the Y, Interpretive dance for people with Parkinson’s with a very creative woman at Western, running on the track at the high school, and outings in nature.

I remember the day about 15 years ago, when Lisa said– I can’t do this – this being the long haul of watching her husband leaving her, little by little, and becoming his caregiver. Now she teaches Ti Chi and Chi Gung, belongs to a women’s group, meditates with a group on line 5 days a week, swims weekly, and attends a Parky Partners’ group to keep herself healthy. She cares for her husband with grace and wisdom. She has learned to go with the flow, to maximize their good times and be patient with him when he is in the depths of depression.

You might have read Michael J. Fox’s article in the most recent issue of AARP, where he describes his Parkinson’s as “the thing that’s attached to my life – but it isn’t the driver”. He notes that after a particularly dark time in his life, he recognized that gratitude was the answer. He says: “it makes optimism sustainable”. Furthermore, he says, - “you don’t just receive optimism, you’ve got to behave in a way that promotes it.” We can all learn from that.

Lisa and Ross have adjusted their attitudes as his disease has progressed. Not that it’s all easy. But in general, they have been admirable in the ways that they have embraced gratitude and the large and small opportunities for celebrating who and what they are.

**Let me close with a poignant and beautiful love story:** Susan Hirst was a beautiful, vigorous, intelligent volunteer for the Red Cross, gardener, and one of my companions on 2 working trips to Ghana. Five years ago, within 2 weeks, she went from all of that, to a diagnosis of stage 4 lung cancer, which had metastasized to the brain, and death. Just 2 weeks! It was shocking – to her, to her family and her community, but perhaps to no one more than her husband, Eric.

A couple of years later, Eric began to search for a new partner. He found love in the person of Laurie. And now they have been together for 2 years. I met him recently, walking around Lake Padden and asked how he was doing. He told me: “I miss Susan terribly, every day. And I love Laurie so much. She makes me very happy”.

In a way, it took my breath away. And yet – has he not found the perfect balance between opposites?

May we all rise in the vicissitudes of our lives and find our own direction, with equanimity, embracing what is and finding joy and meaning, where we can.

Amen and Blessed Be.