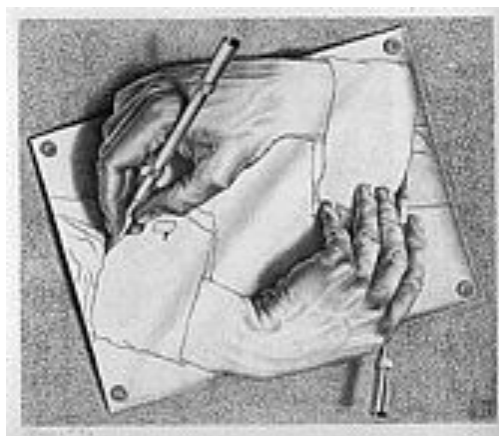


*Paradox: It Is, But It Isn't*

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*Drawing Hands, M.C. Escher*

How many of us like to think? How many of us come to this doctrine-free church/spiritual community because we hope to encounter something to take home to think about? Perhaps we like to have our ‘thoughts provoked?’

At the same time, how many of us have given ourselves a real or virtual headache or lost hours of sleep from too much thinking? So, too much of a good thing can be bad?

I don’t know about you, but at some point, my eyes will glaze over if I keep thinking about whether or not a barber shaves himself; because, a barber by definition is someone who shaves every person who does not want to shave them self, so if the barber shaves himself is he really a barber?

Or, here’s an easy one, “Impossible is not a word in my vocabulary.”

Did you hear the one about the genie? If a man talking to a genie wishes that wishes couldn’t come true, and if the genie grants his wish, he did not grant his wish; but if the genie refuses to grant this wish, he did indeed grant his wish.

Here’s another easy one, all chairs are quite different; but if all chairs are quite different you cannot not call them all chairs.

Here’s one I had to stop and think about: “The following sentence is true.                      The previous sentence is false.”

Here’s another true statement: this month’s theme, “Ambiguity/Paradox” is actually two themes because ambiguity and paradox are two distinct concepts. If you are writing or speaking,

*unintentional ambiguity* is not always a good thing; for example, any minister in any church knows how easy it is for unintentional ambiguity to cause misconstruing of words and phrases, leading to confusion, and sometimes downright hostility. Historically, ministers have been called to be vessels of divine revelation – interpreters of God’s words here on earth, so being a good preacher traditionally has meant being **unambiguous** while preaching!

But, being the intriguing humans we are, and with our amazing capacity for imagination and creativity, *intentional ambiguity* can be an indication of more complex levels of language function because words have an astounding capacity for operating with two or more meanings at the same time.

Linguist and scholar, I.A. Richards calls this ‘resourcefulness of language.’ Intentional ambiguity is like a skilled supercharging of words resulting in simultaneous streams of thought, all of which make sense, and when formed into a rich and concentrated form, can result in great poetry and, in some instances, great preaching!

Paradox, on the other hand, involves a more structured type of language capacity based more on sound reasoning and true premises which create contradictory, yet interrelated elements existing simultaneously. Hence, the following phrase is paradoxical: *The following sentence is true. The previous sentence is false.* Sometimes, successful paradoxical statements can leave us with a sense of irony because of the truthful logical dimension.

After giving this some thought, I have come to the conclusion parents begin indoctrinating their children with paradox from the moment they are born. Think about it, is one of your earliest memories someone saying to you, take this bad-tasting medicine, it’s good for you? Or I am doing this bad thing, i.e. punishing you, for your own good. By the time most of us reach the formal stage of logic, it doesn’t have to be explained when someone says, ‘you have to break some eggs to make an omelet, or out of lemons you can make lemonade.’ In other words, bad equals good and good equals bad – contradictory in one sense, logical and true in another.

So at what point, do some of us get tired of the mental gymnastics? Why is it some of us *never* get tired of the mental gymnastics, unless of course, it is 3 o’clock in the morning and we’re stuck in the grips of circular logic?

The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century English writer, social critic, historian, and columnist, G. K. Chesterton had a style of thinking and writing that was uniquely his own and to which he referred as using “uncommon sense.” One of Chesterton’s contemporaries and friends with whom he engaged in an ongoing and light-hearted public debate was the playwright, George Bernard Shaw. In one of his books, Chesterton wrote of his friend,

After belaboring a great many people for a great many years for being unprogressive ... Mr. Shaw is doubtful whether any existing human being with two legs can be progressive at all..... But, if man as we know him, is incapable of the philosophy of progress... then why not ask for a new philosophy of progress instead of a new kind of man.... It is rather

as if a nurse had tried a rather bitter food for some years on a baby, and on discovering that it was not suitable, should throw away the food and ask for new food, and not throw the baby out the window and ask for a new baby?

Chesterton and Shaw's literary contributions and intellectual banter are a good example of a time when ideas about what it means to be human were evolving into the Modernist era.

In 1934, the poet, Ezra Pound proclaimed, "Make it New!" in reference to what he and his contemporaries saw as the obsolete culture of the past. In the West, many saw this new movement as a socially progressive intellectual trend which affirmed the power of human beings to create, improve, and reshape their environment with the aid of practical experimentation, scientific knowledge, and technology.

From this perspective, modernist ideas encouraged the re-examination of every aspect of existence, from commerce to philosophy and even the capabilities of women; all with the goal of finding out what was 'holding back' progress and then replacing it with new ways of thinking about everything.

Chesterton described this time in history when he wrote,

...The Tolstoyan's will is frozen by a Buddhist instinct that all special actions are evil... but the Neitzschette's will is quite equally frozen by his view that all special actions are good, none of them are special.... They stand at the crossroads, one hates all the roads and the other likes all the roads. The result is... well, some things are not hard to calculate: they stand at the crossroads.

When deconstructionist thinkers, like Michel Foucault and bold thinkers like America's own Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began adding to the mix, previously discounted influences like historical context, cultural situatedness, personal experience, and eventually gender and race were beginning to be taken seriously.

For those of us who enjoy paying attention to something like the philosophy of progress, it is fair to say, in general, human understanding of who we are as a species, how we arrived at this place in time, and how we know what we know is probably more authentic, germane, and inclusive than ever before. Progress happens whether you agree with it or not.

As someone who loves language, I am fascinated by how a simple literary tool, such as paradox, has contributed to the maturation of our collective metaphysic. To encounter a paradox is an opportunity to stop and think; and if we do, our thoughts will drift out of a literal plane where the words are accepted at face value and we will find our awareness in the realm of abstract associations and deeper thinking, as Piaget described it, more formal levels of logic.

Even though I'm no expert, I do believe each human brain, ideally, has the capability of using abstraction as a gateway to creating meaning, not to mention self-entertainment like puzzles, because brains are hard-wired for intermingling experience and imagination. And even though I'm not very good at writing it, I believe poetry is the highest form language can be formed into. A good poem draws our mind into the crossroad of paradox where we encounter the existence of two valid realities with an outcome that is totally up to the individual.

The gifted poet Denise Levertov wrote a poem in response to a June 1966 article in the New York Times reporting that as part of the Buddhist campaign of passive non-resistance, Vietnamese children were building altars in the streets of Saigon, effectively jamming traffic. Her poem is entitled, *Altars in the Street*.

Children begin at green dawn nimble to build  
topheavy altars, overweighted with prayers,  
thronged each instant more densely  
with almost-visible ancestors.

Where tanks have cracked the roadway  
the frail altars shake; here a boy

with red stumps for hands steadies a corner,  
here one adjusts with his crutch the holy base.  
The vast silence of Buddha overtakes

and overrules the oncoming roar  
of tragic life that fills alleys and avenues;  
it blocks the way of pedicabs, police, convoys.

The hale and maimed together  
hurry to construct for the Buddha  
a dwelling at each intersection. Each altar

made from whatever stone, sticks, dreams, are at hand,  
is a facet of one altar; by noon  
the whole city in all its corruption

all its shed blood the monsoon cannot wash away,  
has become a temple,  
fragile, insolent, absolute.

True premises streamed into contradictory yet interrelated elements existing simultaneously. Yes, this poem is paradoxical because good and bad exist at the same time: the repulsiveness of war and the beauty of the uncorrupted human spirit formed into one exquisite image. A poem like this also is a good example of how our collective thinking is able to challenge the literalism of a status quo; for example, in its uncorrupted form, warriors defend with honor, in its corrupted form we have ISIS.

Ironically, many of the modernist ideals which began revaluing human dignity and individual worth were propelled by the French and American Revolutions and the American Civil War. By

the end of WWI, the concept of a 'Just War' was being debated by the general populations more openly, and WWII brought it to the forefront. One of the consequences of this enlightened public discourse was the revaluing of individual choice especially for those who were brave enough to face the consequences of declaring themselves morally opposed to any war – even if its cause was just.

By the time of the Viet Nam War, not go to war, to be a conscientious objector, became a viable option despite possible prison-time or exile, but the guillotine or firing squad were not a guaranteed consequence anymore.

Controversy still gets stirred up when the paradoxical pairing of justice and war comes into play because justice (i.e. a fair and honorable peace) is the highest ideal and war (i.e. sanctioned violence) is its antithesis.

Ideally, striving for justice through the rule of law calls us to be our best selves. War, as history has taught us, too often brings out the worst in people. We have been stuck in the either/or, hawk/dove, warrior/pacifist, friend/enemy dichotomy forever.

For most of my life, I have thought there is no viable alternative to a just war because humanity's desire for peaceful resolution of conflict is still not the primary go-to response. It also didn't help that when I joined the Unitarian Universalist church 35 years ago, I encountered an institution which had taken a direct philosophical hit from the Viet Nam War and so my new church stood, and still does, stand officially on the philosophical side of Just War. We are not officially a Peace Church, but the conversation is still taking place and we are standing in the crossroads now more than ever.

But, I have a theory. One thing contemporary Unitarian Universalism has contributed to the larger conversation is the concept of both/and. So here's a thought: why do we have to look into the just war paradox for a way out of its circular logic? Perhaps the crossroads really is a both/and place and perhaps a viable alternative has finally presented itself.

My theory of a viable alternative to war is this: human ingenuity. Instead of being drawn along the ancient well-worn either/or paths of violent conflict resolution or demoralizing acquiescence, why not stay where we are and pick up a smart phone?

Human innovation, in the form of the internet, smart phones, and social media and networking -- all the cool gadgets being created by information and technology innovators are effectively circumventing the love-them or hate- them dichotomy humans have lived with forever.

More often than not, the invitation into this emerging world community starts with the words, 'Hey look at this cool thing (i.e. app) I found, I'll send you the link!' Perhaps the phrase, citizens of the world is starting to mean, I'm playing this cool game from America, I'm playing it from Indonesia, I'm in Russia, I'm in South Africa, and I'm in Brazil..... how cool is this?!

In 2018, violent factions and state-sanctioned armies are still engaged in violent struggles for dominance and power, while at the same time, a beautiful world built from innovation, imagination, connection, inclusion, and enjoyment is thriving and growing.

Since our collective capability for more rational and innovative problem-solving and building right-relationships has been improving, perhaps the paradoxical notion of both/and is some of that uncommon sense that is making all the difference!