

Earth Day 2018: The World Within Us,
Laura Gossman, UU Casper 4/22/18

Please breathe deeply with me. Inhale.... Exhale. Again. Feel the air rushing through your nasal passages or between your lips/across your tongue/traveling your throat/filling your lungs. We inhale, and exhale, again and again countless times every day. Inhale...at what point does air become breath? Exhale...when does breath become simply air? That particle of air that just traveled into and then back out of my lungs, forever changed for having been a part of me... where is that particle now? Where will that particle, that part of me, be tomorrow? Or next week? Or in 10,000 years?

Barbara Deming, (Note 1) wrote:

Our own pulse beats in every
stranger's throat, and also there
within the flowered ground
beneath our feet.
We can hear it in water, in wood,
and even in stone.
We are earth of this earth, and we
are bone of its bone.
This is a prayer I sing, for we
have forgotten this...

Our interconnectedness with all living things, with our world, is spiritual, yes. But it is also literal. Physical. Grounded in science. What we do to each other and to our world, we do to ourselves. I'd like to share a brief video featuring scientist and engineer Tom Chi (Chee), head of innovation at Google X.

<https://www.facebook.com/soulseekers.worldwide/videos/1911099472539672/>

Tom says: We are that. That is us. Literally!

We are of the earth, and the earth is in us. Again: "What we do to each other and to our world, we do to ourselves." In a few minutes, we'll explore that statement, and the ambiguity and paradox we face when we try to apply it in our day to day lives, when we try to figure out how to live in ways that respect the interdependent web of all existence and ways that help protect our precious earth.

One of the things I love about Unitarian Universalism is its focus on "deeds" not creeds. Belief is one thing. Principles are one thing. Aspirations are admirable, but empty without true commitment to spiritual growth and to changing how we live day to day, to come closer to the person we aspire to be. Walk the talk. Salvation is for this lifetime. So, this statement "What we do to each other and to our world we do to ourselves." If we accept that as true, what's the problem? Let's get it done? Not so easy....

Here's a paradox – two statements, both true but seemingly contradictory, or inconsistent:

- We value ourselves and want to be healthy.
- We do really bad things to ourselves.

It's true! Even when we know it's bad for us, we smoke, drink to excess, eat too much, exercise too little. We self-medicate – did you know Americans consume 30% of the world's opioids (Note 2)? Did you know adult obesity rates in 30 states are in excess of 30% (Note 3)? We sleep too little, rot our brain through too much reality TV and are glued to our cell phones. We seek immediate thrills and avoid thinking about consequences. Just because we understand that we're hurting ourselves when we hurt others or damage the environment is NOT enough for meaningful change. After all we're human.

Ah another paradox: Here's two statements: We're perfectly human. We're imperfectly human. Yeah.... Humans are inherently imperfect, perfectly.

Before we explore the ambiguity and paradox we encounter when figuring out how we can best honor and protect the world within and without, let's talk about dealing with paradox, and remember first that what matters is our perception of paradox. We may perceive paradox when no contradiction actually exists. Wayne Pollard (Note 4), a leadership consultant, offers three rules for dealing with ambiguity and paradox:

1. **“When confronted with an apparent contradiction, do not default to cynicism.** Cynicism leads to frustration, anger, disengagement, and toxicity. Look around, it's all over our political system, the media.”

Do not take the easy way out and start yelling “oh their just a bunch of hypocrites!”

(Pollard) “Just to clarify, we can say that

- **Paradox:** *the existence of conflicting truths*
- **Hypocrisy:** *say one thing and do another”*

2. Pollard's second rule is to “continuously gather information and knowledge.” before you decide that someone is a hypocrite, “...seek to clarify beyond the apparent contradiction. You may simply be being confronted with a paradox.” Or, the situation may be ill-defined or subsequently changed to where the actions people are taking appear to be conflicting with the facts as you know them.
3. And thirdly, Pollard says to “develop your critical and creative thinking skills.” Pollard warns us against relying on “common rules of thumb, since what appears as common sense may be clouded by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and **ambiguity** (VUCA).” He recommends what he calls an “uncommon sense” approach... which involves intentionality and digging for more information. Remember several years ago people making fun of the government spending taxpayer dollars on studying cow farts? Turns out methane emitting from animal agriculture contributes significantly to greenhouse gases and therefore to climate change.

What are some critical thinking skills we want to remember to use?

1. First, there's the skill of “continuous thinking” – acknowledging that almost all issues are better analyzed using a spectrum approach, rather than using “binary thinking” (yes or no, right or wrong, where one result excludes the other. Binary thinking can lead to false conclusions and polarization. Binary thinking and mistrust lead to the “slippery slope” argument, that to give an inch, even a reasonable inch, is to lose the battle. Not helpful...

Just as an aside: consider this paradox: In Taoism we learn that to exist, good needs evil, light needs darkness, joy needs sorrow. So in our political system, we need both conservatives and progressives (and everyone in between), to provide the tension that hopefully leads to a balanced and healthy democracy.

2. Use the skill of “interchangeable perspectives.” This is similar to empathy, but not emotional. A person may not be able to emotionally empathize with someone else, but they can still practice putting themselves in another person's shoes, looking at an issue from their perspective. This skill can help us find common ground. It leads us to what one writer called “The Platinum Rule” like the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have done unto you), but using interchangeable perspectives becomes “Do unto others as they would like done unto them.” That is a way to get out of our own egocentrism, you know... how we see the world is the way everyone should see the world?

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3. Critical thinking demands that we consider ethical orientations. Ethics assessment show that people have very different ideas about what is ethical. If the ends are good, does that justify any means? Or are means that cause harm to any single being inherently unethical even if good results for more people in the end? Must all actions be fair to everyone to be ethical? Must all means be nondiscriminatory? I found interesting a recent column in the Casper Star Tribune (Note 5), written by Walter Williams, a professor of economics at George Mason University and an African American. Williams opined that discrimination in providing city services could be a good thing: discrimination could be necessary to help a decaying city that needs to attract middle and upper income residents, create jobs, to build a broader tax base which can then provide revenues to help recover blighted areas. Discrimination in city services is good?

And let's talk about the concept of time in ethical orientation: What is a person's time frame for defining what is ethical? To me, decisions being made in our country and in corporate America often seem short sighted and therefore unsustainable over the long haul, and unwise for those of my granddaughter's generation. In fact, there is a new legal theory called "the principle of intergenerational equity" that is the basis of a lawsuit against the federal government: this suit, *Julianna vs. US*, was filed by 21 youth in 2015, asserting that the government "has violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life, liberty and property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources." The theory holds that humanity is simply holding the planet in trust for future generations, and has a responsibility not to trash it. The UU Ministry for Earth, UU Young Adults, and the United Church of Christ Justice Council are co-sponsoring a program to support the lawsuit (Note 6).

4. Another skill important to critical thinking is acknowledging and taking into account our personal, inherent bias, or as Wayne Pollard says "Illuminate your own blind spots." (Note 4.)

In July 2016, during the memorial service for the Dallas police officers shot by a sniper, Pres. George W. Bush said "Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions." That is worth repeating: "Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions." (Note 7.) We have a way of filter incoming information to suit our pre-existing beliefs.

Here's a possible paradox: The Casper non-profit Food for Thought promotes healthy eating, and locally grown fresh produce. Food for Thought also gives out Raman noodles to school kids. Is there anything less healthy? Okay, maybe Twinkies. Hypocritical? Paradox? No – I'd call this a moral dilemma. They first and foremost fight hunger by providing food to over 600 school children every week, which they could not do if they only provided "healthy foods." As Director Jamie Purcell explains, they do what they can. Kids need to eat – that comes first.

So here's one: Zoos are bad for animal welfare. Zoos are good for animal welfare. Zoos take animals from their natural habitats and put them in cages for our enjoyment – that sounds bad. Zoos also help people connect with animals – allow them to get up close and personal, which makes people care more about animals, and make people more likely to donate money to and support efforts to protect endangered species and habitat – now that sounds good.

So here's another paradox: Plastic is good. Plastic is bad. I have shared with you all my feelings on the evil of plastic, my light bulb moment when I realized that reuse/recycle would never be enough, that the only way to save our oceans and sea life from the evils of plastic pollution is to reduce the amount of plastic we consume. And yet... it is in the fibers of my clothes. I have a fake hip joint that has plastic in it that I'm very thankful for. Plastic in our cars has made them more fuel efficient – my Subaru is over 8% plastic. Does this make me a hypocrite to refuse to buy or drink bottled water, or to say "no straw" when I order a drink at a restaurant, or to advocate for policies that might reduce our reliance on disposable plastic? This reminds me of the off-shore drilling protestors who paddled out to

the drilling rig in their plastic kayaks. The sounds of “what a bunch of hypocrites!” resounded throughout social media land. Or Al Gore flying around the globe in his private jet, using up jet fuel while filming “An Inconvenient Truth.” Hypocrisy? I don’t think so – this is an example of paradox: the fact that a person is a consumer of plastic or fossil fuels doesn’t mean that person loses their right to speak out for more responsible and sustainable extraction, production, and transportation methods, or to advocate for policies that support development of alternative energy sources or reductions in consumption. However – I do feel that it is important that everyone recognize and take into account the paradox in their own lives, and learn from that.

Washington State is in the process of banning plastic straws. I’m all for whatever we can do – it will take efforts from all sources (industry, consumers, and governments) to solve the problem. However, a study from the University of Georgia estimated that 8 million metric tons of plastic entered the ocean in just the year 2010 (Note 8). The top 20 countries (of which the US was #20) accounted for 83% of that. (#1 was China). Banning straws is a drop in the bucket, or the ocean if you will, but at least it’s a drop. At least it’s something.

Here’s one called the “Environmentalism’s Paradox” – according to *Bradford Plumer is an assistant editor at The New Republic* (Note 9):

“Most ecologists would agree that we’re ravaging the Earth’s natural resources at an unsustainable rate — and pushing up against some dangerous thresholds in the biosphere. Broadly speaking, the planet’s ecosystems are in terrible shape, and this is widely believed to have negative consequences for humanity. And yet, at the same time, human well-being has never been better. People are living longer, healthier, and richer lives. “
“So what gives? Why the disparity? And does this mean that we shouldn’t worry too much about global warming, ocean acidification, and other ecological crises-in-waiting, since it sure looks like we’ll just continue to get richer even as we cause irreversible damage to the planet?”

A team of researchers have come up with four possible explanations for the "environmentalist's paradox."

1. Maybe humanity isn’t *really* better off. – The research found solid evidence debunking this argument.
2. Advances in food production are more important than anything else. – Yes, the researchers found some evidence generally supporting this theory.
3. Technology makes us less dependent on the ecosystem – yes, the researchers found this to be true to some extent. Maybe technology will save us from ourselves.
4. The worst effects of ecosystem degradation are still yet to come – although there was not solid or extensive evidence for or against this theory, it’s the one that the researchers felt was most likely the main reason for the paradox.

Speaking of continuously gathering and evaluating new information, I’ve long felt ethically uncomfortable eating meat, but recently began exploring the environmental impacts of raising animals for food. It’s possible that the one thing I can do in my life that would have the biggest positive impact for the environment is to stop eating animal products. There is growing evidence of significant disparities in resources consumed, greenhouse gases emitted and environmental damage done by animal agriculture vs. growing food for direct human consumption, and that eating animal products is not a sustainable practice for the human race, especially considering projections of population growth. That’s a whole other discussion, but if you are interested in learning more in this area, I would recommend that you watch the documentary “Cowspiracy,” which we have in our UU library in the lobby.

We live in a very complex world, with limited information, and we can only do what we can do. On this Earth Day 2018, my last little bits on dealing with paradox as we find ways to live out our 7th principle:

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- Life is a journey – your journey. Just keep on it – continue your journey toward that person you aspire to be, connect spiritually with the earth, keep learning, maybe find ways you can honor the world within and without. Maybe pick one thing, one small change. Don't get caught up in the overwhelming complexity of it all. Don't become cynical! Just keep on.
- And draw from this place, this religion, whatever helps you with that.

I feel that religion is at its best when it is used for self-reflection and personal growth: those are acts of spirit. And, religion is at its worst when it is used as a weapon – to judge, condemn, blame, or to create division: those are acts of ego. It is more important to understand and learn from the paradox and contradiction in our own lives than it is to spend our time seeking and calling out the apparent contradictions in the lives of others.

And, remember always, that where ever you are on your journey, you are welcome here.

Closing thoughts from Edward Everett Hale (Note 11):

"I am only one, but I am one.
I cannot do everything, but I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

Notes:

Note 1: Barbara Deming, excerpt from Reading #571, Singing the Living Tradition

Note 2: <http://www.modernhealthcare.com/article/20180419/NEWS/180419915> retrieved 4/20/18

Note 3: <https://stateofobesity.org/adult-obesity/> retrieved 4/20/18

Note 4: Wayne Pollard, Blog: #3 Ambiguity: Paradox or Hypocrisy,

<http://leadfromyourcurrentposition.com/wordpress/2017/12/13/3-ambiguity-paradox-hypocrisy/#.Wt94Xi7wapo>, retrieved 4/19/18

Note 5: Walter Williams, http://trib.com/opinion/columns/williams-a-mayor-s-most-important-job/article_198e40e3-4bc1-514c-bf88-eb329fcd2f8f.html retrieved 4/18/18.

Note 6: <https://www.uumfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/UUMFE-Justice-for-EachGeneration-Resources.pdf>

Note 7: <http://time.com/4403510/george-w-bush-speech-dallas-shooting-memorial-service/>

Note 8: Jemback, Jenna, et al., Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean, Science, 768 13
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https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/17969/Plastic_waste_inputs_from_land_into_the_ocean.pdf?sequence=1, retrieved 4/21/2018.

Note 9: Plumer, Bradford, September 2, 2010, "The New Republic: The Environment Paradox,"

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129598408>

Note 10: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/409499-the-more-we-learn-about-the-world-and-the-deeper>

Note 11: Edward Everett Hale, Reading #457, Singing the Living Tradition.