

Sometimes Different is Better: Embracing the Both/And

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field.
I'll meet you there.*

Rumi

Embracing Paradox

Life is full of difference, paradox, polarity. Oftentimes in our lives and ministry, we find ourselves struggling with how to resolve conflict, how to engage difference, how to reconcile opposites. Yet paradox and polarity are at the very heart of reality.

What are we to do with the seeming impasses that arise from our experience—both within ourselves and in the world around us—of seemingly “irreconcilable differences,” those moments where we cannot find a way forward and there is no going back, those places where we can only see the “either/or” of the reality and not the “both/and”? The mystics speak of mystery or paradox, the poets speak of everything belonging. The philosopher, Jacob Needleman, speaks of “the contradictions at the heart of reality that are not meant to be solved but to be lived in full awareness of their contradictoriness.” We inevitably find ourselves in situations where the way ahead is not yet clear.

What are we to do, when in our lives and in our leadership, we come up against those places that just don't make sense? Those places where we simply cannot see a way through or a resolution to a dilemma or a situation? When we are pulled simultaneously in two different directions and feel as if we may break apart in our effort to hold things together? Obviously, we must go deeper. We must find a way of viewing the situation that finds a new entry point, sees in a different way and from a different place.

Rilke advised us to “love the questions themselves like locked room and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.” And John of the Cross reminds us that “if we wish to get to a place we know not, we must do by a way in which we know not.” We must make space for otherness and for The Other. It is only in and through a deeply contemplative gaze that we can learn to hold together in oneness all the seeming contradictions of our lives.



*Above all else then
be prepared at all times
for the gifts of God
and be ready always for new ones.*

*For God is a thousand times
more ready to give than we are to receive.*

*For the person who has learned to let go
and let be nothing can hinder.
Then each creature points you toward God
and to a new birth and toward seeing
the world as God sees it: **Transparently!***

*Then all things become nothing but God
And we learn to know with God's
knowledge and to live with God's love.*

*When we learn this we know everything
praises God. Darkness, privations, defects
evil too praise and bless God
for all paths lead to God
and God is on them evenly for those who
know with transformed knowledge.*

*What is best is to take God
and enjoy God in any manner, in any thing.
All my life, this has been my joy.
God does not ask anything else of you
except that you let yourself go
and let God be God in you.*

Meister Eckhart

An Invitation to Reflection

- ❖ Take some time to sit with a paradox or polarity with which you are currently struggling:
- ❖ What would it mean for you to be ready for new gifts from God?
- ❖ Take a long and loving and non-judgemental look at each of the poles of this paradox. What do you notice when you stand in that place of judgement free love?
- ❖ Rumi urges us to welcome whatever comes as all is sent as a messenger from God. What may be the message being sent to you as a gift?
- ❖ Eckhart tells us that “all paths lead to God and God is on them evenly for those who know with transformed knowledge.” How do I experience the Holy One present in each side of this polarity?

The interplay of two polarities calls forth a third, which is the “mediating” or “reconciling” principal between them. In contrast to a binary system . . . the ternary system stipulates a third force that emerges as the necessary mediation of these opposites and that in turn . . . generates a synthesis at a whole new level. It is a dialectic whose resolution . . . creates a new realm of possibility.

[Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three*, (Shambala: 2013,) P. 16]



Call Me by My True Names

*Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow—
even today I am still arriving.*

*Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.*

*I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope,
the rhythm of my heart is the birth
and death of all that are alive.*

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which,
when Spring comes
arrives in time to eat the mayfly.*

*I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond,
and I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda,
all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*



*I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after
being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.*

*I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay his
“debt of blood” to my people.
Dying slowly in a forced labor camp.*

*My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.*

Reprinted from Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (1999.) With permission of Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA. www.parallax.org

Communal Contemplative Dialogue

In preparation for this communal contemplative dialogue, take some time to touch the current reality of your life, your ministry, your world. Then reflect on the questions which follow.

- ❖ Name some of the true names that are part of your reality.
- ❖ Name some of the cries and laughter that are part of your reality.
- ❖ Which names do you claim with ease?
- ❖ Which names do you resist? Which cries do you hear more readily? To which cries do you tend to be deaf?
- ❖ What might shift for you if you were to claim all the names and listen to all the cries?
- ❖ What might shift for your congregation if you were to claim all the names and listen to all the cries?
- ❖ How might joy expand for you and for your community if you were to do so?

When you gather, take a few minutes of silence together gazing at the realities of our world, just noticing what arises in you. When you are ready begin a dialogue focused on the last three questions.

Deepening Practice

When you are speaking or thinking about a situation or issue where there is some tension, where you find yourself caught in the either/or, try changing the word “but” to “and.” Notice what effect this has on your feelings about the issue or situation and how it shifts the possibilities you are able to see.

When you find yourself in a situation involving struggle, conflict or impasse, take a “time out” and deliberately and consciously step into the field beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing.

From this place take a long, loving look at each side of the struggle. Notice what may begin to shift in you. How might this effect how you engage the situation?