

Harmony: a UU perspective

Harmony: The combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords and chord progressions having a pleasing effect. Agreement or concord.

When I asked Ramona for help, wondering about the possibility of reading a sermon on Harmony, she sent me two for consideration: One entitled "Balance" one of a series by Rev Scott W. Alexander and an excerpt from "For the Beauty of the Earth" by Forrest Church. She then suggested talking about the harmony & balance of planning and managing a garden as a metaphor for life. Never one to disagree (ha) I will draw from all of these suggestions.

The two part harmony we just sang, "Now Let Us Sing", is one of my favorite hymns. It is just simple enough that I am able to follow, and just complex enough to be interesting to my ear. I learned this hymn in East Wenatchee Washington. One of the more musically adept members there helped us master this simple tune. I describe the response from an admittedly musically limited congregation as "thrilled". Achieving even a small amount of Harmony in one's life lifts us above the normal depression we feel after stumbling through an unfamiliar hymn.

So is harmony the same as balance? In a sense it may be. It is difficult to imagine anything harmonious about a one sided anything. The point and counterpoint of the song give it balance. Both parts are necessary to achieve harmony. The monotone tulip fields of the Netherlands are stunning, but really get their punch when different colors are set side by side. And the intent for these fields of flowers is production, not achieving a harmonious garden. Taking these stunning colors to your home garden, giving the plants what they need to thrive, and balancing the colors, shapes, textures, size, and fragrance with the other parts of the garden are what create a more symphonic multi-dimensional harmony.

So what about religion? The Indian constitution supports and encourages religious harmony. The ancient Indian scripture Rigveda endeavors plurality of religious thought -- "wise people explain the same truth in different manners." The Dalai Lama holds India as a model for religious harmony.

But when I hear the news or read a history book, the term "religious harmony" sounds like an oxymoron. Kind of like "military intelligence", "happily married", or as Forrest Church mentions in his talk, "doctrinaire liberal". -- In religion anyway, one cannot be dogmatic and liberal at the same time. Religious liberalism does not require fidelity to the latest fashion, only to remaining open to new sources of inspiration. This is one of the main reasons I claim Unitarian Universalism as my religion. There is at least the chance of recognizing similarities between Islam and Christianity, or Buddhists and Jews. And perhaps that is what harmony means, recognizing similarities. Blending and balancing differences to create something greater.

Sounds encouraging, but how do I tolerate beliefs that others hold to be true that I find abhorrent? For me, the key to this conundrum is trying to understand how this apparently sane person could have come to believe what they profess to believe. If I can get a sense of their path (how they were brainwashed), I

can gain some sympathy for their position. And I can perhaps start to comprehend that I have come to my point of view based on my experiences just as surely as they reached their conclusions from their path. For now, that has got to be enough to give me enough balance to avoid trying to force them to see things my way with a stick. This is certainly not harmony, but it is not complete discord either. Baby steps.

The following is from Forrest Church's talk "For the beauty of the Earth".

"—one distinction between Unitarian Universalism and the major book-driven Western religions is that we tend to view the world as a school rather than as a corrections facility. Rather than punishing us as sinners, by incarcerating us here, sentencing us to life and then, at death, offering release only to those who have followed a strict set of guidelines for rehabilitation, our faith celebrates the creation not only as a beloved home, but also as a sacred text from which we may draw wisdom. Earth centered traditions are therefore a natural source for Unitarian Universalism. We may claim no inside knowledge of the creator, but are quick to affirm, learn from and protect the creation. "The gods and goddesses – or if you prefer, the most precious and profound – are accessible to us in the taste of honey and the touch of stone," Bill Schulz writes. "This is why we love the earth, honor the human body, and bless the stars. Religion is not just a matter of things unseen. For us the Holy is not hidden but shows its face in the blush of the world's exuberance."

Such a world-view has ethical consequences as well. It is no surprise that earth-centered traditions place a high value on protecting the environment, on saving the earth. This same commitment is manifest in Biblical texts also, especially the prophets, whose words have inspired generations of Unitarian Universalists to work for peace, justice, and on behalf of the environment. As the prophet Isaiah worried twenty-five centuries ago, "the earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant." If the letter here differs from that of the earth centered traditions, the spirit is the same. Again, common values transcend contrasting beliefs. Different sources flow into the same river, which flows into the one cosmic sea. This is the very essence of Universalism, where all that live are related to the one source, itself the wellspring of salvation.

Two part harmony, --Common values transcend contrasting beliefs. A 5 piece ensemble,-- Different sources flow into the same river--. An orchestra, --which flow into the one cosmic sea.

Designing a garden is a little like playing whack a mole. You must balance and take into consideration what plants might be able to survive. You have to take into consideration the qualities of the water and the soil you have to work with, and whether you might be able to amend or improve them. You want to consider the point of view, the view from the street and the view from the house, the patio, or the entry walk. You want to consider when the plants bloom, what their bloom and foliage colors are and how they will look at different times of the year. You want to consider the shape and texture of the plants and how these will change as they go through the seasons and how they will change as they grow. You want to consider how large they will get and how that will affect their appearance. You have to consider

what might want to eat them and how that will affect their look, and whether the purpose of the plants is to draw the butterflies and the birds for your viewing pleasure. You need to consider the setting and how a Japanese garden will look sitting on the open plains. You have to consider micro climates that can affect what plants will be able to survive. You must consider how much time you might have to work on the garden, or how you are going to maintain it once the neighbor kid graduates from high school. You have to consider how much money you want to spend on it. You must consider the area you have to work with, how much sun everything is going to have, how you might access it to work on it, whether the dog is going to trash it, whether the plants are poisonous or will exacerbate your hay fever. You need to consider what plants you want to eat and where they might grow. You can consider sounds, do you want a wind chime for those windy western nights? You need to consider fragrance, will you enjoy the smell of spring blooms on a chokecherry tree, or will the bees that are drawn in bother you. You need to consider will this plant spread and become a nuisance. In short, you need to consider everything. Achieving total harmony is impossible, but even partial harmony is very rewarding. The key is to start, and to avoid being overwhelmed by the complexity of the task. Trust your instincts and the force will be with you.

The following is excerpted from the Rev Scott Alexander talk "Balance" Every time he uses the word balance, consider inserting the word harmony.

The first problem with balance in our individual lives—is that when we actually manage to achieve it in the tricky and uneven flow of our daily living, we are not necessarily even aware that we actually have this precious possession! Balance in our lives doesn't come with a voice that somehow shouts out to us, "Hey...congratulations, Bub...you are doing great right now...you've clearly managed to intricately fit all the complex, demanding, idiosyncratic pieces of your life together in just the right pattern of measured and healthy relationships."

We obviously feel pretty good (centered might be a good word) when our lives are in broad and basic balance. And clearly we all get messages – from both our bodies and our spirits—and from those persons around us who interact with us –when we are successfully juggling and integrating the various dimensions of our lives well. But when we quietly achieve the unostentatious gift of a balanced life, we may not ourselves fully recognize the extent or importance or value of our achievement...simply because that achievement doesn't usually loudly declare itself.

The second, -- related problem with balance in human life is that it is frequently an elusive and shifting reality in our lives. Balance in your life is a possession that can and does come and go. Just because we achieve balance, (in some period of our lives, even for several years at a time) doesn't assure us that we can keep it –or re-create it later! And I am certain that balance is not something spiritual we can – on one big momentous and magical day – achieve "once and for all" and thereby have it guaranteed to be with us and bless us for the rest of our lives. Although it would be nice if it were otherwise, the fact is that we have to constantly and consciously work our whole lives long at maintaining reasonable healthy balance in our lives...

Many years ago I took a short class on making pottery. The wheel is unforgiving of those who cannot center the clay. I learned why they call it “throwing pottery”. But on those rare occasions when I approached being centered it was indeed like being in harmony with the world. The clay responds almost magically when it is in tune with your hands.

The reverend Alexander points out that finding balance or (harmony) is a constant. I suggest that even when you achieve it in one aspect there is always room to improve by finding it in another. Some religious traditions suggest otherwise. They proclaim loudly that they know the way! Have faith! God has a reason for everything! If you don't understand something just trust the lord. While there might be comfort in relaxing and denying the evidence, I find this approach uncomfortable at best.

Far from being a negative, I find this constant searching for harmony a huge comfort. We will never arrive at perfect harmony in everything. There is always a way to be better. Being able to perceive harmony around us in the garden or in your life is what uplifts me. The search is all there is, but there are a whole lot of perks along the way! -- Now let us Sing!