Center for Courage and Renewal Habits of the Hearts Series
Habit Three: An Ability to Hold Tension in Life-Giving Ways
A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
October 20, 2013

In our series on the five habits of the heart, the last habit at which we looked, was "an appreciation of the value of otherness." It's a challenging habit – because it takes us farther out of our comfort zones and requires that we not simply tolerate those who are different, but that we make ready to transform.

Parker Palmer says, "the litmus test of a democracy (or, I would add, a democratic faith) is not merely whether we allow our differences to be on display: we must be willing to engage each other around those differences."

Parker, in his gently, non-violent, Quaker way, cuts right through to the heart of what spooks our communities – even, and perhaps especially, our faith communities, which meet at what the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr called the most segregated hour of the week – Sunday morning. I'm not simply talking about racial segregation. In our religiously and often socially progressive spiritual communities it's easy to say that we welcome diversity, that we welcome the world, and quite another thing to be truly ready, willing, and open hearted enough to engage the other beyond celebration, appreciation, or appropriation. The other brings difference, challenge, tension. Tension, whether it's on the level of our more private world all the way up to the global sphere – can be either creative or destructive – it can life-affirming or life-denying.

The recent government showdown and shut down was a tremendous illustration of destructive tension. There was a lot of talk about who was going to sit down at the table, so to speak, -- but even when the parties, in this case literal, sat down at the table, in this case also literal, they weren't really present to one another. It was as though Washington was nearly empty of people and occupied largely by ideologies and, worse, by political careers.

When I read art history I became fascinated by arches because they can be thin or thick – but the fact that, instead of being two isolated posts or walls, relying on sheer mass to hold them up – by leaning together they became strong enough to hold up huge structures, to open up walls and ceiling lines, to reach higher and higher and higher, to carry intricate and delicate sheets of multicolored glass, and to stand forever. These cathedrals are works of divine beauty – and though they are alive with light and centuries of love and devotion, they are inanimate. I believe that we are called to something more alive.

Instead, you can imagine a big rubber band stretched between my hands. There's one point of view on one side and another point of view on the other. If the two sides are unwilling to move toward each other they will stay apart. They can be buffeted easily by external events – never getting closer but being pushed around. They may be invested in protecting their own view points or turf – so even when there is movement on one side – the other side may move away to safeguard its turf. Like teenagers who "rebel" or political parties who polarize.

Too often – both parties protect their turf so fiercely that they move farther and farther apart, until the band itself may over stretch and break.

Now, there are times to be firm – but in this larger society and sometimes in the privacy of our homes and congregations we can loose sight that most of the time there is a place between two points of tension that is as yet unenvisioned.

In the government shutdown the band was stretched tighter and tighter -- it crowded out all sorts of human and civic needs – from paychecks to panda cams. It was a showdown at the D.C. Corral and we the people were merely collateral damage.

The failure to hold tension in life-giving ways is an addiction to a particular understanding of life and relationship: the model of self versus other, of win or lose, of a smaller tribal view of me and mine; a primitive hardscrabble fight of each one for him or herself, or a struggle for survival that arises in our reptilian brain – the earliest, easily triggered, reactive, part of our minds.

It's an understanding of life as ego on the line. And the tensions in which this is played out can be deeply personal and broadly societal.

This congregation participated in the installation and ordination of the Reverend Colleen Vahey last year. Getting to that point involves tremendous effort and even more – tremendous risk on the part of the aspiring minister. After years of training, education, often great debt, and hard work you face a panel of lay leaders and professional clergy. You preach a short sermon and they, who have spent considerable time studying your psychological profile, your biography, your writing, ideas, reports of teachers, supervisors, and colleagues – the panel ask you the toughest questions possible and try to find your strengths and weaknesses. Later, you're given a number from one to five – one: you're well ready for ministry; two: you have a couple of things to take care of but you're largely ready; three: there's a bunch of stuff they want you to do and then return for a repeat interview; four: you have to remake yourself and try again someday; and five – well—five means you might want to get back the day job you left four or more years ago. You put yourself on the line – heart and soul, intellect, life experience, education and you get a number. When I was in school, I had a friend – we'll call her Susan – who showed promise in ministry, went to the panel and received a three. She was heartbroken but also bitter and angry. She graduated from school and decided to avoid going back to the panel. She couldn't handle the tension of that personal challenge, much less imagine that the panel may have been acting in her best interests trying to allow her more time to grow.

It's our lack of imagination that foments wars, creates schisms, oppressions, alley skirmishes. We have so few places in our society or world that encourage us to face challenge with a confident spirit. We're told to snap out of it, get over it, pull ourselves up by our boot straps, or coddle ourselves endlessly. Seldom are we taught about the courage – the power of the heart – that it really takes to thrive in our world of challenge, vulnerability, and impermanence.

Parker says, "We are imperfect and broken beings who live out our lives in an imperfect and broken world. The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to hold tension in ways that energize and draw us forward instead of tearing us apart." … The genius of the human heart and mind, allows us to choose paths of greater

possibility, generosity. We don't always make that choice – we can be deeply wounded, exhausted, challenged in this broken world – and we can rise like phoenixes – often after the pain, the suffering abates – but sometimes even during it and fly.

Shortly after Susan went before the panel I went there myself and later served with them as a student liaison. While doing that, another candidate – we'll call her Fern -- came before my panel after having received a three two years before. She'd faced an enormous tension – a wide gap between her hope and the judgment of others. In the meantime, she had truly worked, found deep strength, learned, and grown. She'd responded with creativity and grace – holding the tension so that, instead of it beating her down, she blossomed. She was inspiring as a colleague, a preacher, and a person.

The ability to hold tension in life-giving ways gives birth to new possibilities -- creates new life. But like anything that creates life, it takes courage, work, and patience. I know that we've all spent time in the grip of that tension. I'd bet that most of us know times that we faced it with grace and other times that we took a short cut.

When we run out of patience – or refuse to engage honestly in the creative tension – we defeat the possibility of new life arising. Like the two political parties sitting down together in a sort of bizarre political theater – there is no real encounter – just the empty repetition of positions and the failure to listen.

It reminds me that to live authentically – to live with integrity and to honor the integrity of those around you – to live into your own fullness and to make space and welcome for the fullness of others – calls for this deep engagement – this ability to hold tension creatively – even the willingness to seek out places of challenge and creative tension – and engage there.

Maybe you saw the old movie – the Graduate. There is this famous scene in which Benjamin is at this uncomfortable cocktail party just after college and Mr. McGuire comes up to the young man and says "I've got just one word for you… Plastics." The movie then unfolds in the gap between that moment and Benjamin's real yearnings and aspirations.

Peter Senge – guru of organizational development points out that two poles of creative tension are aspiration and the truth – what you hope for and what is – whether within yourself or with another person or between groups of people.

Pick up the "rubber band." It's that uncomfortable place where the two sides within you, between us, or around us, looks create an open space that seems so bleak and empty. Senge says that that uncomfortable space is where all the rich possibility is. To transform that possibility into reality – requires the ability to live in that place of uncertainty, sometimes pain and lack of resolution. Just like the rubber band as it stretches – when we are in that gap – that uncomfortable space – the impulse is to relieve the tension, find a resolution. But, according to folks like Peter Senge, or Robert Fritz, another creativity guy, and Parker Palmer – the longer we can endure that unnervingly open space – not killing time there – but encountering it with our hearts open – the energy and the creativity that are born there give rise to those life-affirming possibilities.

Parker points to Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861, when

he said in reference to the pending issues of slavery and secession, "My countrymen. . . think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time." Lincoln had a bit of wisdom. He knew that it's hard not to act as quickly to stop the tension. It calls for courage to live –sometimes for a long time – in that place that Parker Palmer calls the tragic gap -- the gap between reality and possibility, as he puts it. The gap between our noblest aspirations and the hard edge of reality. But that is the place from which new life emerges.

The willingness to stand in the gap is heroic and also the stuff of daily life. I don't think that the political theater that we just passed through was prolonged out of patient process and commitment to finding the wisest course of action. I think, it was brinksmanship – a game to see who'd blink first. The politicians weren't living in the gap between possibility and reality – but between possibility and possibility – that is to say -- in fiction and faction. During the Shutdown, politicians would talk about whether or not they had the votes for this or that. In a healthy democratic society the issue whether there's been a process of integrity that's included more than the voices of those who could afford to run for office or hold power.

He writes: "As you stand in the gap between reality and possibility, the temptation is to jump onto one side or the other. If you jump onto the side of too much hard reality, you can get stuck in corrosive cynicism… If you jump onto the side of too much possibility, you can get caught up in irrelevant idealism. These two extremes sound very different, but they have the same impact on us: both take us out of the gap — and the gap is where all the action is.

I call it "tragic" because it's a gap that will never close... No one who has stood for high values — love, truth, justice — has died being able to declare victory, once and for all. If we embrace values like those, we need to find ways to stand in the gap for the long haul, and be prepared to die without having achieved our goals.

That means we need to change our calculus about what makes an action worth taking and get past our obsession with results. Being effective is important, of course… But if the only way we judge an action is by its effectiveness, we will take on smaller and smaller tasks, because they're the only kind with which we are sure we can get results." Here ends the quote.

Here, the way we must measure our actions is by their faithfulness. In a community of covenant and faith – the issue is not whether we have a majority on any issue – but whether the path we take to explore the issue and the concerns held, affirm the core, religious values of the community.

It'd be great to think we always did that. After all – this is the workshop of our common endeavor. But we aren't here because we're perfect – we're here to be reminded to live up to our best, to engage in that gap, and to live into new possibilities. Parker Palmer shares an example – I suspect that any member of any religious community can relate to. He writes: "We are at a meeting where a choice must be made between alternative paths of action, and it soon becomes clear that we cannot agree on what to do. As we listen to viewpoints that seem irreconcilable, we get fidgety, frustrated. Uncomfortable with holding the tension and wanting to "get on with it," we "call the question" and take a vote,

letting raw numbers decide what course the group should take."

I appreciate this example of Parker's. It's true that sometimes we beat a topic to death – or go overboard creating a committee to make a decision about the color of paint in a classroom. On the other hand – people in communities such as ours have a remarkable opportunity to take important decisions and make the dialogue about them – the explore of them – part of the spiritual practice of the whole community – have the chance to practice a way of being together that makes us all come more alive – in our hearts, minds, and spirits. It is both a daily opportunity – not simply on Sunday as we greet one another and invite each other into deeper relationship – but at every meeting, in every group, over coffee.

We have a remarkable opportunity to practice building the habits of the heart that deepen human relationships, strengthen the bonds of community, affirm life, and heal the world. These habits are invitations to live in the world where reality and possibility reach for one another – where our aspirations and our efforts are in harmony – where our yearning for the world and the community we shape in the present are as one. These habits reawaken us so that we remember that, yes, we are all, all, all in this together, that we value otherness as we yearn ourselves, to be valued as the other, and that together we have the vision, strength, and courage to transform the tensions and challenges of our world and our lives into creative events.

In some churches they speak of the kingdom, of god, of heaven – and they even talk about it being here on earth. It is a glorious vision and yet here we are those who are faithful to a democratic vision. A kindom rather than a kingdom of peace, of goodness, of shared labor and shared harvest – earthly and yet utterly sacred – a place of heroism and miracle in daily life. A place of a love so powerful that it can liberate our hearts, our politics, our relationships, and our world.