

Borders and Boundaries, Inside and Out

October 7, 2018

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

Rev. Paul Beckel

WELCOME

As we come together today many feel the joy of companionship, or anticipation of a welcome day of Sabbath. Some come weary from a week of unfinished business. Others bring the satisfaction of projects completed or relationships repaired. Some of us are elated about new opportunities, other dismayed, discouraged, or furious about choices made by others, over which we have little control.

Here then, in our joy and our sorrow, confusion and determination, we gather as beloved community within a larger web of human community, within an even larger web of life, earth, and sky ... cosmos, and history.

MESSAGE

Walking in the woods once, (trespassing, actually) I came across a crumpled, rusted old car. There were no roads to this spot, no garages, nothing ... just the car ... in a gulley, in the woods! A song came to mind, one that I enjoy *and* find disturbing at the same time; it's called "The Wild Places." One line goes like this: "In the wild places man is an unwelcome guest. But it's here that I'm found and it's here I feel blessed."

I don't like the idea that I am unwelcome in the wild places and yet, on one level I fear it is true. In the places I most surely feel at home, I wonder if I belong.

==

I am a part of the interdependent web of all existence, I am a/part. Each of us is a/part.

And everything, as much as everything is connected ... everything is also a/part: time, space, matter, memories, possibilities. Any of these, as we try to conceptualize them, we may find ourselves *defining* -- declaring boundaries. Boundaries to tell us what is within any given part, and what is outside.

Some boundaries are firm; some are flexible. Some are straight, some irregular. Some are clear; some are blurry. Some boundaries are permeable, such that particles or people or pressures can pass through in one direction, or both directions. Some, are impermeable.

The complex web of being/you ... your own personal web of existence, is interlaced with parts, each with its own boundaries. Some of our parts clearly lie within us (our breakfast, for now). Other parts somehow *seep beyond* us (our pain, for example). Other things (like the collective unconscious) while *they are clearly part of us*, they seem to extend beyond -- more than within.

Some boundaries arise from our own choices. Others are beyond our control.

Some boundaries protect and promote life. Some boundaries protect too much, and isolate us.

When our personal boundary of skin isn't quite thick enough to keep out foreign bodies, our immune systems get to work. Our immune systems address a profound question: What *is us*, and what *is not*?

Of course not-us is inside us all the time. We breathe it in, we drink it in, we invite it in. So our internal "discern-and-destroy" operations have to be as regular as the beating of our hearts.

Groups, too, develop immune systems. Healthy congregations, families, and communities are those with healthy immune systems. Those that recognize what *is us* and what *is not us*. It's an awkward truth and a difficult process in a nation of immigrants, or in a creedless congregation (where inclusiveness is one of our highest aspirations)... but without boundaries, is there any meaning to the word, "*integrity*"?

==

Our immune systems, of course, can fail us by doing too much, or by doing too little to defend our bodily integrity. Allergies are often an *overreaction* to something harmless, or even delicious, like strawberries, or potentially comforting, like kittens.

In autoimmune diseases, our bodies attack our own healthy tissue. Or, rejecting an organ transplant, our bodies destroy that which would enable us to live.

And beyond our individual biological level, we need similar immune-type processes to help us draw boundaries distinguishing what is true from what is false, what is good from what is bad, what is welcome from what is unwelcome.

On one level we are responsible, ourselves, to make these determinations. But it is always wise, as we do so, to take into consideration the experience and insight of others who we have come to trust.

On another level, we cannot escape the fact that our lives are shaped by others who identify and interpret, and help us to negotiate blurry boundaries -- such as the media, scientists, teachers, and parents.

And we depend as well on those who referee the boundaries, such as judges and police.

And when we are not well-served by those to whom we have given our trust, we tend to feel angry, dismayed, discouraged ... and then angry some more. And when that cycle repeats and repeats and repeats we may find ourselves building walls around our hearts, and closing off our minds, in ways that we can hardly believe we would ever do.

We may find *denial* separating us from painful truths that could contain some of life's deepest lessons.

We may find *despair* separating us from our remarkable history of social progress.

We may find *disillusion* separating us from even trying any more.

==

Some boundaries create an inside and an outside. Some boundaries create an us and a them, a me and a you. Some of these boundaries we cross without thinking, such as the ones between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In some cases, to *not realize* that we are crossing boundaries takes a serious lack of self-awareness, or callousness, or even an *intention* to violate the dignity of others.

==

While we may not find it possible or even meaningful to attempt to define (that is, to put boundaries around) ultimate concepts such as God, or Love ... it's been suggested that *knowing the Truth of God*, or the Truth of Love (one word may be as good as the other)... knowing the truth of god, *or the truth of love* involves allowing ourselves to be broken open. But how can we let that happen when we don't feel safe?

Is it not reasonable to lock our doors at night?

==

Inside each and every one of our cells, producing the energy we need to live and to love, the energy to be conscious, the energy to experience gratitude inside each of our cells are mitochondria. Strangely enough, these vital little specks are not really us. Though they live inside us, they have their own double membrane, and their own DNA. In size and structure, they are so much like bacteria that, perhaps about 2 billion years ago (life was simpler then) one primitive cell entered into a symbiotic relationship with another cell... which was very different from itself. These two cells -- foreign to one another -- began living, one inside the other, and found the relationship highly advantageous. Both the plant and animal kingdoms seem to have developed their internal combustion systems in this way.

Lynn Margulis was the scientist who first developed this understanding about mitochondria, which is now generally accepted. She put it this way: "Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking."

==

It's a tricky balance -- to keep boundaries with just the right level of fluidity, flexibility, or fuzziness. To keep ourselves safe, and at the same time to be open, receptive, vulnerable, and even willing to experience the discomfort that comes with growth beyond our existing boundaries.

To know ourselves as we are, and know ourselves as we may yet come to be.

Everyone struggles with boundaries, barriers, and shifting identity. Even the Pope. I am not

making this up: in regard to latex barriers worn to prevent disease, our previous Pope, Benedict, proclaimed that it's OK to use condoms in some circumstances. Specifically, he said, it would be OK for male prostitutes to use condoms to help prevent the spread of disease, and death.

A married man with HIV, however, who wishes to protect his wife, must not use a condom, as this could also prevent the generation of new life. (I cannot tell you whether or not that declaration has been overturned by Pope Francis.)

The maintenance of good boundaries is no small matter. By “*good boundaries*” I mean boundaries *appropriately balanced to their setting, and adaptive to the circumstances.*

Lives are at stake when we get it wrong.

==

We are immersed in boundaries as fish in water. Our days and nights are endless negotiations within and between boundaries. Boundaries are so prevalent that we have to take them for granted in order to be able to focus. And yet it would be dangerous and foolish to accept all of them as they are.

==

It was my honor yesterday to lead the memorial celebration of the life of Dorothy Davis. Dorothy broke barriers. She broke OUT of the narrow confines of what a woman should be, as defined by the social norms of her childhood. She broke IN to the halls of academia only to encounter prejudice, rejection, and harassment from male peers when she and her female colleagues sought professional recognition and status.

Dorothy rejected the notion that her life and her gifts should be confined within a predetermined feminine realm. Her vision of justice involved the removal of unnecessary barriers that kept her students from reaching their full potential. But she was a realist, I think ... in two ways. And I would like to spend some time in the days ahead coming to terms with these two lessons.

Number 1: the transformation of borders and boundaries we seek will not be achieved in our own lifetimes ... but this is no reason to accept them as they are.

And number two: the point is not to eliminate all boundaries, but to reflect on the *character* of appropriate boundaries. That is, to what extent, and in what places should borders and boundaries be clear or fuzzy, permeable or impermeable, embracing or protecting ... in what location do we place our borders in order to establish equality and connection? And from one age to another, does our wholeness depend upon our moving in only one direction? Or is it a matter of fluidity, and sensitivity, and judgment?