

## "Yes, And"

Rev. Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (Online)

16 July 2023

The tree was planted some twenty-five years ago, by a landscape architect I met at a mom-and-baby group.

It was a Japanese Weeping Cherry...and she assured us it was a small tree, not destined to become very large.

But over time it grew and grew, and kept growing, far beyond our expectations...

The thick base of its trunk intruding into our neighbours' yard, its soaring branches threatening to take down the hydro wires.

But no matter! It was all worth it -- worth it for the gracefully flowing arc of willowy hanging foliage, from which hundreds of pink blossoms emerged every year.

Along with other cherry trees on our downtown Toronto street, our tree became something of a tourist attraction.

From time to time we'd catch passers-by stopping to take selfies beside our beautiful tree.

A few years ago I noticed an interesting crack growing along the side, but I didn't think much of it.

The Weeping Cherry just kept cherry-ing along, growing taller and thicker, and reliably blooming into blossom in the spring.

New branches sprang from the crack in the side, as the tree grew more mature.

As well, new blossoms appeared one year: this time, white blossoms instead of pink.

How interesting, we thought! And we didn't think anything of it.

That spring season came and went, the blossoms fell down on the sidewalk after a windstorm, and in our busy comings and goings we didn't take time to look carefully at the leaves and branches remaining.

If we had, we might have noticed that there were new leaves growing among the weeping ones...leaves that weren't weeping at all, and that had a completely different shape.

What's more, they were springing from branches that had a completely different kind of bark--a smoother variety than the original.

These new branches, now growing thick and strong like the first ones, were growing out of the crack in the side of the tree.

And last spring, it finally dawned on us.

A completely new tree was growing out of our old tree.

A completely different species of tree in fact: an ornamental apple tree, growing out of the weeping cherry.

It was a tree within a tree.

An intertwined relationship of two entities that were both like and unlike each other.

A "yes, and" of interdependence in the natural world right outside our doorstep.

If the first tree could talk, I wonder what it would have said, when it realized it had to accommodate this entirely different tree.

It might have said, "Hey, you! Your blossoms are the wrong colour."

Or "Look at me, and the lovely way my branches are weeping. Give it a try, won't you...I'll show you how."

Or, noticing just how close the new tree was growing, it might have said, "Ah, excuse me, please back off... you're not giving me enough space."

"You see, I need all of Lynn and Dave's lawn to become the fullest expression of Weeping Cherry I can possibly be."

But then, realizing that the apple tree was not going anywhere... and that in fact it was taking up ever more space day by day, the Weeping Cherry might have said:

"I didn't sign up for this! I reject this apple tree!  
And what's more, it's cracking a huge hole in my side."

The cherry tree might have declared:  
"No, I will not tolerate this!"

And it might have grieved the life it thought it was destined to live.

A life that was now forever changed, whether it liked it or not.

And then...gradually coming to realize the fact of the Other's existence, intertwined as it was with its own,

The cherry tree might have said "yes, and" lived a new life in deep relationship with another.

Indeed, that is exactly what has happened.

*(Slide: blossoms of both cherry and apple trees side by side)*

In every life, we find ourselves confronted with experiences, people, even aspects of ourselves, that at first seem unwelcome.

We think we're in control of our lives, but then, lo and behold, something happens to change our plans, alter our trajectory, and sometimes turn our life into something completely different than we had in mind.

These include not only tragic losses and traumatic events...but also the whole range of ordinary challenges... something the mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn called "the whole catastrophe."

Coming to terms with these unwanted arrivals can be extremely difficult...but there are ways we can experiment, to grow into a more expansive and welcoming way of being.

## §

The British actor Keith Johnstone, known as a pioneer in the art of improvisation, died in Calgary in March at age 90.

In his classic book "Improv" from 1981, he speaks about the connection between saying "yes" in an improv scene and a healthy spontaneity in life.

When an actor offers a suggestion and the other one "blocks" or rejects it, the scene fizzles out, because there's no opportunity for the story to develop.

On the other hand, when what he called an "offer"-- no matter how unexpected-- is accepted wholeheartedly in the moment, something new and surprising can arise--

To be met with laughter and joy.

Along with other improv pioneers such as Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone understood the effects of resistance and rejection...as well as the transformative potential of radical acceptance.

He wrote, "blocking is a form of aggression. [...] If I set up a scene in which two students are to say 'I love you' to each other, they almost always accept each other's ideas.

Many students do their first interesting, unforced improvisations during 'I love you' scenes."<sup>1</sup>

He recognized, of course, that theatre is a far cry from real life...and that blocking or saying no to many actions are necessary ways of surviving in the world.

He wrote:

*"The motto of scared improvisers is, 'when in doubt, say NO.' We use this in life as a way of blocking action.*

Then we go to the theatre, and at all points where we would say 'No' in life, we want to see the actors yield, and say 'Yes.'

Then the action we would suppress if it happened in life [if we were able to suppress it, that is] begins to develop on the stage.

If you think of something you wouldn't want to happen to you, or to someone you love, then you'll have thought of something worth staging or filming."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps that is why we are so captivated by story in all forms:

It's instructive to us, and indeed often inspiring, to see how human beings *can* respond to circumstances they had no choice but to live through.

§

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (Eyre Methuen, London: 1981), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Johnstone, 95.

When we look around, we can see that life is full of opportunities to refuse or to accept...and, indeed, we all do both of these, all the time.

The hymn we just sang, "Just as Long as I Have Breath" says "Tell them, I said 'yes' to life."

But it might equally have said, "Tell them: I also said 'no' from time to time."

And it certainly didn't say "I have to say 'yes' to everything."

"Just as long as I have breath, I must answer 'yes' to life...except when I must say 'no.' "

Because of course we do.

We all "block" from time to time... as well we should.

At the same time...and with practice, we can learn to create space in our lives for Otherness to enter.

Then there's the line, "Just as long as vision (or wisdom) lasts, I must answer 'yes' to truth."

Except that sometimes I don't know exactly what 'truth' is.

And maybe, just maybe, there's more than one truth at any given time.

Indeed, the idea that life is only about "yes" or "no"... "right" or "wrong"... "truth" or "untruth" denies the inherently contradictory aspects of life...

Which we need to learn to hold if we're to live with any degree of serenity or peace of mind.

§

In his book called "The Promise of Paradox", Quaker author and teacher Parker J. Palmer writes:

*"Contradiction, paradox, the tension of opposites:  
these have always been at the heart of my experience,  
and I think I am not alone.*

*I am tugged one way and then the other.  
My beliefs and my actions often seem at odds.*

*My strengths are sometimes canceled by my weaknesses.*

*My self, and the world around me, seem more a study in dissonance than a harmony  
of the integrated whole."*

He goes on:

*"More than once I have despaired at the corrosive effect of these contradictions on my  
'spiritual life.'*

I had thought that living spiritually required a resolution of all contraries and tensions.

I thought I was living in the spirit by railing against life's inconsistencies when in fact I was becoming more frustrated, more anxious, more withdrawn from those vital places in life where contradiction always lurks.

Perhaps contradictions are not impediments to the spiritual life but an integral part of it."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of the Contradictions in the Christian Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1993), 2.

Over the course of his career, Parker Palmer has continued to explore the concept of "wholeness"...a word that came up at the end of our meditation reading today.

The title of one of his most influential books was taken from a quotation  
*"There is in all visible things a hidden wholeness."*<sup>4</sup>

It came from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who himself struggled with a number of contradictions...not the least of which was that he was a monk who had taken a vow of silence but ended up writing more than 60 books.

He was also someone who died tragically at a young age.

Are there any contradictions living in your life?

Aspects that seem to cancel each other out, or that you've struggled with?

One for me is that I'm primarily an introvert...yet I've been drawn to career paths that put me into relationship with hundreds of people.

Now I find myself saying "yes" to both the introverted and extroverted parts of myself, rather than having to choose between an either/or.

I have learned also that any close relationship requires us to live with difference, to embrace contradictions, and hopefully, ultimately, to grow.

With that I turn back to that wonderful song, "Just as long as I have breath" and I lift up the last line...which I'm not at all tempted to rewrite.

The line is "Tell them I said 'yes' to love."

It doesn't say, "Tell them that I liked everything,"

---

<sup>4</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).



or "Tell them that I approved of everything," or "Tell them, I wouldn't wish many things to be different."

It doesn't mean I will not work for change... not speak out against injustice.

Nor does it suggest I must say "yes" to everyone and everything that ever asks anything of me.

When I hear "tell them I said 'yes' to love" today I hear a call toward wholeness, a meeting life on its own terms, a welcoming of the Other in other people and in my own shadow...

And above all, a curiosity about what surprising new meaning might unexpectedly arise from the great improvisation called Life in which we are all participating.

Re-reading Keith Johnstone's book last week, for the first time since I was a beginning improviser in my early twenties (and not a particularly good one, I admit)...

I was surprised and delighted to find, in a very lengthy footnote: an excerpt from a 1963 text called "Interacting With Patients."

It was written for nurses, but was almost identical to techniques still taught for providing spiritual care today...

Techniques that are used by our Spiritual Care Team here at First.

Imagine that: A how-to guide for spiritual care, hiding in plain sight in a book on improv comedy!

One of the first techniques identified in that training manual is simply accepting, with "mm-hmm," "ah," nodding or simply silence...and offering open-ended, accepting questions such as "what's on your mind?" or "what was that like for you?"

And then, when the answer is received, no matter how unexpected or difficult it may be to hear... to continue to stay open without any form of blocking or rejection.

That is, to meet people where they are. To provide unconditional welcome.

When we do this in spiritual care, as in all of life, we open up a space in which something new can enter...

Something we might call the Healing Creative Spirit... or any number of other names.

Growing in our capacity to meet the Other, whomever they are, and however encountered... may be one of the most challenging tasks we have as human beings.

It takes a lifetime of practice, and of course we'll never get it all completely right...

But that, too, is a contradiction we can learn to hold: the fact that we may do our best, yet we may still cause harm.

We may set out to write our life in a particular way... and end up in a different scene entirely.

There may be a large gap between how we want our lives to be and how they actually are...a gap filled with tension and contradictions...a crack in the side of our well-ordered life that may hold unexpected gifts for us.

In "A Hidden Wholeness," Parker Palmer writes:

*"As I stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility, this small, tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope." <sup>5</sup>*

May we say "yes" to that... as we grow into our capacity to love one another, and to love the world, even as it breaks us open each day.

Blessings and amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2004), 178.