

NON-ZERO

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, September 13, 2009, 10:30 am
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Some years ago a colleague of mine, minister-mathematician Sarah Voss, published a little book of photos and essays called *Zero: Reflections about Nothing*. I wrote a jacket blurb saying,

‘It just doesn’t add up!’ many people complain about religion. These reflections . . . may start with zero, but they make the probability of an enlightening insight, even for a skeptic, nearly infinite. Read, and have your faith and joy multiplied!

Still, I suspected the little book wouldn’t be a huge publishing success, not at \$33.95 a copy. After all, at that price, most book shoppers want *something*, not just “reflections on nothing.” Even though Sarah’s insights, and the photos, far outshone the “Sayings of the Jewish Buddha” that one of you sent me this summer, and which included such great one-liners as:

If there is no self, whose arthritis is this?

If Torah says, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” but Buddha says, “There is no self,”

Yippee! Are we all then maybe off the hook?

Be here now. Be someplace else later. This is so complicated?

Wherever you go, there you are! Your luggage, however, is another story.

Accept misfortune as a blessing. Do not wish for perfect health, or life without problems.

What would you talk about?

Zen is not easy. It takes effort to attain nothingness. And then what do you have? *Bupkis*.

(That’s Yiddish for *nada*.)

My hope is that this summer you had time just to do nothing, nada, relax, and laugh, and that you found it re-creative; because bringing something out of nothing is what creativity truly is. Although, God knows, there are also those who know how to make something out of a big nothing is a way of being destructive. Like lying about end-of-life counseling as a big “socialist” scheme to “pull the plug on grandma.” You know, it takes more than *chutzpah* to yell “You lie!” at a joint session of Congress when one’s own pants are on fire!

Sadly, it also seems to take a widespread political calculation on the part of the party out of power that any accomplishment by the majority, no matter how worthy, must be shot down; because if one party wins, the other then loses. This practically defines zero-sum thinking.

As a minister, I am a long-time student of how various people react to losses: to losing an election, a job, a spouse, a house, some value in their 401-K, some other sense of security. Certainly we all encounter losses in life. But some people seem to conclude, overtly or covertly, that if they lose, someone has gained, and that in any case there has to be someone to blame. What the Jewish Buddha says in response to this is “Breathe in; breathe out; breathe in, breathe out. Stop doing this and attaining Enlightenment will be the least of your problems.”

Because sometimes we all lose, as in the recent financial crisis; and in the end, we all die. Looking for someone to blame can be a fool’s game. Very zero-sum. And if you fall into thinking, as so many Americans have been encouraged to do, that if someone else gets something from government, like help in obtaining health insurance, that means I’ll surely lose, well, then, maybe that just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because in fact, I am convinced, surviving and thriving, both for individuals and for groups, favors non-zero sum thinking. Whenever we’re drawn toward God, or wider wisdom, or deeper compassion, that’s involved: some sense of win-win, and that we’re all in this together.

This summer two pieces of reading helped me understand this far more clearly than ever before. The first was a negative example. Sometimes I have a hard time comprehending the people like those who were waving signs and screaming at the August town hall meetings about health care, saying weird things like “Keep your big government hands off my Medicare!” But then I ran across a story about how even good Buddhists can become violent and mean. That’s right, Buddhists! In Sri Lanka, the island nation just south of India, Sinhalese Buddhists are a majority. Yet earlier this year, with violence, repression, and thousands of fatalities, they ended a 30 year civil war with the Hindu Tamil minority. The article explained that European colonialism had taught Sri Lankan Buddhists to be defensive, frightened, ready to be violent in their self-defense. But what made them aggressive toward the Hindu Tamils wasn’t religious or ethnic differences.

Rather it was simply this: a majority that fears becoming a minority can turn violent and mean. And Sri Lankan Buddhists see the Hindu minority as just a part of a huge wave to the north.

Just like the cab driver I recently had in Boston – white, male – who clearly got his opinions from right-wing talk radio, and his news from the Herald and Fox News – who within minutes connected his outright hatred of President Obama, and his fear of “socialism,” with a tirade against immigrants. “We never had mosques in this country before!” he yelled. And I had to recall this saying: “The Tao does speak. The Tao does not blame. The Tao does not take sides. The Tao has no expectations. The Tao demands nothing of others. No, the Tao is not Jewish!”

The other reading that helped me was a book by Robert Wright, a writer who manages to make even wisdom derived from evolutionary science both enlightening and funny! His current best-seller, *The Evolution of God*, is about how the concept of the divine has gotten bigger, broader through the centuries, as a result of cultural evolution – and despite the efforts of small-minded who persistently want to keep religion reactionary, “God” as small as they are, and as narrow. Wright, in an earlier book whose title I’ve borrowed today, *Nonzero*, argues that the evidence from both biological evolution and cultural history is that both are shaped and pulled forward first and foremost by adaptations in the direction of more “non-zero sum” solutions.

Natural selection seems to produce and to reward complexity, and adaptations to complexity. Evolution, and especially human cultural evolution, rewards the ability to see others in the environment not simply as competitors – though in part they are that as well -- but also as fellow stakeholders in a larger system. As we Unitarian Universalists put it in the seventh principle that our congregations have agreed to affirm and promote, long-term surviving and thriving depends upon “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Some religious people get this; others do not. Sometimes tribal religion is part of the problem. But as Wright shows at length, in cultural evolution what religion evolved to do was to extend the range of imaginative compassion; to remind us of the possibility of developing more and more creative, and wider, non-zero sum solutions.

Sometimes this involves defying expectations. I'm reminded of the late Rev. Will Campbell, God bless him! A white Tennessee Baptist minister, Will in the civil rights era was employed by the largely white, northern National Council of Churches to head their Southern "field work." Will decided that the black leadership on civil rights didn't need his help, so he declared that his ministry would be directed toward those who needed it most: members of the Ku Klux Klan! They were the ones who needed to be converted to more authentic Christianity. No surprisingly, Will was not understood. He was soon fired by his liberal bosses for taking the gospel to people they had written off as beyond redemption. But like Gandhi, and King, Will stayed faithful to non-zero sum solutions. After all, as they both said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and soon we shall all be eyeless and toothless.

Wright goes so far as to suggest that this is the very logic of human destiny. That either we are pulled forward by a wider, deeper, more shared sense of purpose, or any human group or society that sticks to under-evolved, uncreative zero-sum thinking, may well win in the short run, but will end up eventually among the dinosaurs of human history. I both suspect that he is correct, and that the struggle will be an ongoing one, not only in politics, and in religion, but in each of our own lives. Meaningful human lives, I think, aren't so much purpose-*driven*, as though God had a pre-determined plan for each of us, but pulled, persuaded together toward serving the common good. Wright quotes my own teacher in theology, Harvard's Gordon Kaufman: "The partner in the dialogue with the Divine is not the individual but the human species as a whole."

And yet "I believe that each of us as individuals must not only struggle to make this a better world," as the late Senator Ted Kennedy put it, "but to make ourselves better, too." So as we gather here at the beginning of a new year of spiritual growth, I ask you to empty yourselves as much as possible of old pre-conceptions about God and/or no God, of how church should work, of how spiritual growth happens. Start with what real Buddhists call "beginners mind."

A brilliant professor once realized that his life was distracted, unfocussed and meaningless, and went to Japan to study Zen with a famous teacher. The teacher welcomed him without words,

only the traditional tea ceremony. But when he poured tea for his learned student, he kept on pouring until the cup was overflowing. “Stop! Stop!” the professor said to his host and teacher. “My cup is too full!” “So too is your mind,” said the teacher. “Full of questions, opinions, ideas, prejudices. Empty your mind, approach each moment and other being without prejudice, with full attention, and you will be ready to learn a wider compassion and a deeper meaning to life.”

Breathe in awareness. Breathe out compassion. Breathe in gratitude. Breathe out happiness. As Jesus is reported to have told his disciples, “Empty yourselves, and be filled.” Let us give ourselves to the intuition that very direction of history is biased in favor of non-zero solutions. All that is needed is for us to open ourselves to the opportunity to become servants of the same. Welcome back to this house of hope, the place of openness and spiritual growth. May the year ahead be one of blessing for each of us, for our families and friends, and for the world we share! Amen.

*Hymn 128

For All That Is Our Life

Findlow/Rickey

For you who come here seeking the blessing of the Holy, may God go with you.
For you who come here seeking to embrace life more fully,
 May life return your affection and grant you life yet more abundant.
For you who come here seeking a truer path, may that way be found,
 and the courage to take it, step by step. Amen.