



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Living with contradictions

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I confess to being cursed. In case you haven't noticed, I'm definitely not swimming in the mainstream. It may explain why I've ended up a Unitarian, where atheists go to church. Contradictions, which lead me to paradoxes, mesmerise me. What could be more exciting than when two opposing, irreconcilable truths seek to occupy the same space? What could possibly go wrong when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object? While sometimes a clear right or wrong answer to life's immutable questions would be comforting, they smell to me like a bottle of snake oil to cure all my ills that has passed its use by date. The rising hair on the back of my neck warns me that life is just not that simple.

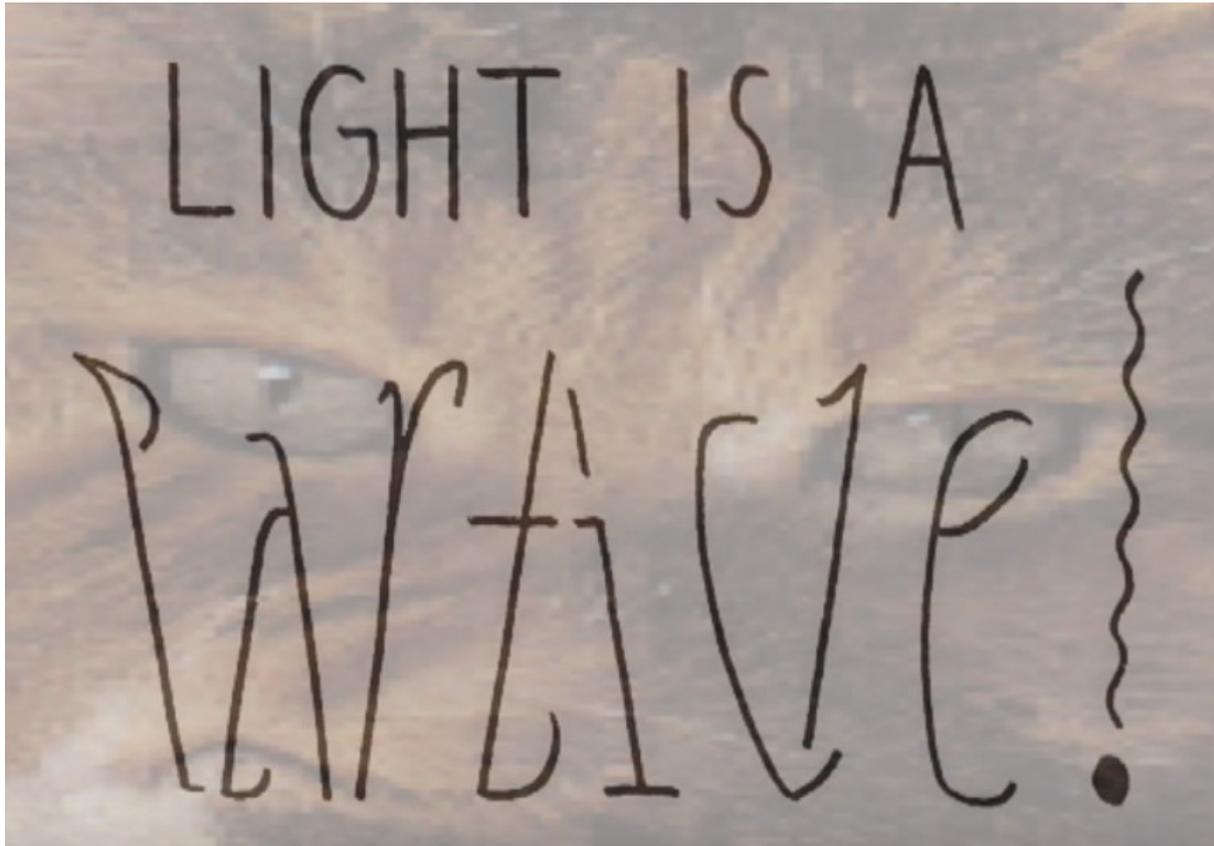
I blame this in part to bad parenting. While my dad prepared dinner I would frequently help him. Being a teenager, certain of my view of the world knowing ever so much more at 16 than I do at 70, I would make some pronouncement about a world event, a person, a belief — it didn't really matter what, but the game was on. Dad would then ask me a series of questions. By the time I answered them, my position had often shifted 180 degrees. That would've been fine if the game was over leaving me in the certainty of my new position. Oh no. He would then start questioning my new position leading me back to my original premise or sometimes to a new one altogether. It was exasperating. Why couldn't he just leave me in a safe black and white, right or wrong world? A life without contradictions would be so much easier to navigate. That would be especially true if so many of those contradictions didn't reside within me. Just one of many examples: I believe in free speech and I believe hate speech has no place in civil discourse and should be prohibited.

So how do we live in such a world? Dr Warren Weaver, a scientist, mathematician, and educator offered a way out in his book *The Religion of a Scientist*.

Weaver's approach to religion was influenced by a principle from physics called "the principle of complementarity." This principle by Danish physicist Niels Bohr originally described the nature of the elementary units of light, electrons and photons.

Under some experimental conditions these elementary units behaved as though they were discreet particles, but under other experimental conditions they behaved as though they were flowing waves.

So, which was correct? Were they particles or were they waves? To the conventional physicist, they could not be both; they had to be either one or the other. But Niels Bohr said they were both. He said that the observer and the circumstances of the observer make a difference. What you need to understand the nature of light, he said, is a "principle of complementarity" — under some observational circumstances the units of light must be considered as particles, and under other circumstances they must be considered as waves. Both sets of information, he said, even though they contradict each other, must be accepted as *equally* valid.



Niels Bohr said that by accepting the two contradictory descriptions and viewpoints you have a more complete picture of light than you do with either one alone. In other words, the two viewpoints *both* contradict *and* complement each other. And one must learn, he said, to live with the contradictory viewpoints and to see them as complementing each other, even though at first it may strain and pain the rational mind to do so.

Then Weaver took this principle from physics and he applied it to religion, saying that in religion, too, if I ask a question from one point of view, I will have one answer; but, sometimes, if I ask the same question from another and quite different point of view, I may very well have a second answer. The second answer may be inconsistent with the first, but it can be viewed as complementing the first, even though it is contradictory.

So, for example, Weaver said that when he asks himself about the nature of God or ultimate reality from two different points of view, he receives two very different answers. When he asks the question within an impersonal, intellectual framework, then he finds it satisfying to say that “God” represents the impersonal law, order, and design of things, which run on their own — a kind of deistic concept of God.

On the other hand, said Dr Weaver, when he is frightened, or when he is concerned about the safety of his loved ones, or when he is wrestling with personal problems, or when he is emotionally moved by a well remembered hymn; then his view of God is paradoxically different. “God,” then, is no longer impersonal design and law; but, rather, “God” is personal being, the ever-dependable friend, the loving and protecting parent.

Weaver says that these two concepts seem inconsistent and contradictory, but they arise under mutually exclusive circumstances and can be viewed as complementary. We don't

have to choose one to the exclusion of the other. And that, he says, provides him with a richer, more complete, and more deeply satisfying approach to life — an approach that both liberates and sustains him.

Our famous Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson has a passage in his essay, “Self-Reliance,” that echoes Weaver’s position. Emerson writes: “In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity: yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and colour. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

The principle of complementarity requires a willingness to let seemingly opposing and contradictory positions dangle in my mind, and not feel compelled to try to reconcile them into one overall, consistent system or to decide for one over the other, but instead to try to hold up and maintain the values of each position.

And, now, let me expand on this principle by making four comments about it ... beginning with the difference between truth and consistency; namely, the notion that truth is not necessarily to be logically consistent, and to be logically consistent is not necessarily to discern truth.

Of course, the logical, rational part of our being and brain would like to bring everything into its orbit and under its control. The rational mind would like to believe that reality could be understood in a completely logical and consistent way. It would seem, however, that reality is not susceptible of being captured by the rational part of our selves in this way, and that attempts to do this can be personally frustrating and, beyond that, even damaging and disastrous in the larger world.

English author G. K. Chesterton argues that sanity consists in not worrying overmuch about consistency. He says that ordinary persons tend to stay sane because they care more for truth than they do for consistency.

Ordinary persons, Chesterton says, if they see two truths that seem to contradict each other, take the truths and the contradiction with them, rather than throwing out one of the truths. Their vision, he says, is stereoscopic, binocular. They see two different pictures at once, but they don’t block out one of those pictures; they keep both of them somehow in view, and they are healthier and larger for it.

On the other hand, Chesterton points out that the extreme in consistency can be found among those suffering from certain mental illnesses. He says that if you argue with certain disturbed minds, you may well get the worst of it ... for, sometimes, one of the characteristics of the disturbed mind may be an extreme consistency and a tremendous ability to connect one thing with another in an elaborate maze with which it is impossible to keep up.

The same is true of certain religions and philosophies that seem to have all the answers to all the questions of life. Given their point of view and premises, they may be ever so consistent and able without hesitation to respond to every question that life throws our way. Now, you may feel that there’s some error in a given system; it may feel way off to you, but try to pinpoint the error in logic and you may be hard pressed to do so, for, again, the problem is not one of consistency but of size. The system is too small, and the point of view too

narrow. The system has reduced itself in size to achieve consistency; it has chosen consistency over reality and certitude over doubt. It has chosen to be air-tight and, thus, suffers from a lack of air.

And if, on occasion, you find yourself suffocating and struggling for air, or find yourself becoming defensive and rigid, or even a little paranoid; perhaps, it's because in your mental outlook you are trying to be too consistent. Perhaps, your system needs to breathe a little; perhaps, it needs a little more air, a little less concern about consistency, and a lot more concern about reality. Reality is larger than any system that attempts to make sense of it, larger than our notion of consistency, larger than our rational, logical faculty, larger than our intellect.

The second comment has to do with the role of the intellect in our life, simply this: that the intellect is to be a servant, not a master. This is not to say that the intellect, our rational faculty, is unimportant, or that we are free to be sloppy in our thinking. The intellect is our distinguishing human attribute, our great human gift, and we must strive to use it well. Its function, role, and value are to be a tool or instrument to help us find our way through life, and, perhaps, beyond that, to be a servant of life itself.

The ideas and concepts that the intellect comes up with and works with are also tools. And, like tools, they need to be sharpened when they have become dull, or replaced when they have been worn out.

Just think how many ideas, concepts, and beliefs your rational brain has come up with and has worn out over the course of your lifetime! Think how many beliefs you have believed, how many opinions you have held, and how many positions you have defended! They may be ideas and beliefs that once served you well, beliefs that were important to you. But how they change! How they shift! How they wear out! How they lose their importance! How they may need to be let go of as one makes one's journey through life.

Take, for example, your childhood idea of Santa Claus. For so many children, Santa Claus is a very important and valuable figure. Children everywhere love Santa Claus, and he serves them so well. But then there comes the time in a youngster's life when Santa Claus needs to be let go of and taken in a new and different way — in a way that would seem to contradict and be inconsistent with the former idea and image.

This new understanding of Santa — now as a mythological figure — can be viewed as complementary to one's first literal understanding. It's not necessary to call the former idea false, or to belittle it from a present superior position. It was true to that age, and to the experiences, needs, and circumstances of that time.

My point is that our ideas, concepts, and beliefs are tools for us conceived by the intellect to help us make our way through life. And we need a whole lot of concepts and beliefs to make it through a whole lifetime. Who knows what beliefs, ideas, and concepts you may yet come to find helpful for you.

These are tools for finding our way. As we build and build, idea complements idea, thought builds upon thought. Sometimes we need to remodel. Sometimes we need to retool. And there's no need to be embarrassed by our past or to beat up on ourselves for what we may now regard as worn-out or childish ideas.

A third thing the complementary approach can do is to open us to the value of what is rejected by one idea. The intellect tends to work by setting one thing against another, perhaps necessarily so. The intellect says “yes” to one proposition and “no” to another. It conquers by dividing:

Do we have free will, or are we determined? Are we products of nature, or are we products of nurture? Is the universe purposeful or is it purposeless? In pursuing one of these pairs of opposites, the truth of the other side tends to get rejected and neglected.

But what about that which is rejected?

We have little sayings that try to correct this one-sidedness, such as: “For every truth there is an opposite, which is also true.” Or, Niels Bohr puts it this way: “The opposite of a fact is a falsehood, but the opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth.” F. Scott Fitzgerald comments, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

One of my favourite plays and movies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. And one of my favourite scenes from it is one in which Tevye, after listening to one person’s argument on a subject, says to his companions, “You know, he’s right.” Then a second person, directly contradicting the first, says, “But that’s nonsense, it’s like this.” And, again, Tevye says, “Yes, that’s right.” Then, a third person interjects saying, “He’s right, and he’s right, too. They can’t both be right.” To which Tevye sheepishly replies, “You know, you also are right.”

This is the complementary approach, the both/and approach. If something comes along that makes sense, which has some truth in it for you, don’t get too concerned, even if it seems to contradict previous beliefs and positions. Don’t reject it just because it doesn’t fit well into the already existing compartments of your rational mind. Simply add a new compartment, or add a new belief, or add a new category, or a new perspective.

Fit the beliefs to the evidence, rather than discarding the evidence simply because it doesn’t fit the beliefs. Ralph Waldo Emerson would approve.

Normally, we don’t notice that we have two very different types of brains within our skull because the two hemispheres are connected through the corpus callosum – 250-300 million or more fibres connecting the two brain hemispheres. And so we don’t usually experience them as contradictory or inconsistent, but as one functioning brain. So, the physical brain is structured in a complementary or stereoscopic way; it creates a larger unity out of two different and often opposing processes.

However, when one of the sides of our brain is injured, or the connecting fibres are severed, some very interesting effects take place.

The left hemisphere of the brain is the centre of our personal identity, the “ego centre,” which knows time, past and future, and which makes distinctions, passes judgments, and so forth. But when a blood vessel in this part of her brain haemorrhages and starts to close down we begin to experience the loss of personal identity. When the left brain goes off-line, we experience more fully how the right-brain functions. The right-brain is timeless, dwells in the

present only, and is oceanic and fluid in its feel. The right-brain experiences itself as one with all that is; it experiences itself in the endless flow of infinite being.

Philosophically, this raises the question: Are we an individual identity, or are we one with all that is? Our brain apparently has different approaches to this question. So, for example, when people say, “When you’re dead, you’re dead,” they are speaking from the perspective of the left hemisphere of the brain.

The right hemisphere, however, has a very different story to tell, namely, that you are one with everything that is and there is no such thing as death. My left brain thinks of me as a fragile individual capable of losing my life. My right brain realises that the essence of my being has eternal life. The principle of complementarity says that you don’t have to choose one over the other. They may seem inconsistent, but actually they are complementary. We are simultaneously capable of being at one with the universe, while having an individual identity.

The principle of complementarity, when I practise it, tends to keep me looser, more open, more humble. When I’m prone to think that my current way of seeing and believing is the only way there is, this principle of complementarity suggests that I step back from my tightly-wound ideas and rigidly-wrapped self to see if there might be a way to view things as complementary rather than contradictory.

Robert Johnson summarises how to live with contradiction succinctly: “If you are willing and able to suffer the collision of opposites — differing ideas, differing opinions — and not close your ears or your mind, or silence the opponent, or flee in terror; then new revelation is possible. To stay loyal to paradox is to earn the right to unity. Conflict to paradox to revelation: that is the divine progression.”