



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Welcome to Limbo. Please leave your certainties at the door

Clay Nelson © 5 December 2021

Buddha told a parable: A man was travelling across a field when he encountered a tiger. He began to run, and the tiger chased after him. Coming to a precipice, he slipped and was able to catch hold of the root of a wild strawberry bush, hanging in the air. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down only to find that another tiger was waiting to eat him. He thought the bush could sustain him for a while, until he saw two mice gnawing away the vine. A tiger above, a tiger below. The man saw a ripe strawberry near him. Grabbing the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other, and ate it. How sweet and delicious.

This is how the Enlightened One welcomes us to Limbo and invites us to enjoy the moment. For as Shunryu Suzuki Roshi puts it: "Life is like stepping into a boat that is about to sail out to sea and sink."

Limbo is a place we are called to live without the comfort of certainties, other than those of death and taxes. You don't have to be Siddhartha Gautama, AKA the Buddha, or a Unitarian minister to know that we find Limbo stressful. As human beings we share a tendency to scramble for certainty whenever we realise that everything around us is in flux. In difficult times the stress of trying to find solid ground — something predictable and safe to stand on — seems to intensify. But in truth, the very nature of our existence is forever in flux.

This isn't exactly headline news. All of us have lived in times of uncertainty, individually, as a family, in a city, and in a country. But rarely have we lived in a time of global uncertainty. Perhaps World War II, 9/11 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 come close. But the present pandemic is by far the worst of them all. No country has been spared since the first case was recorded. The 5.2 million who have died and 264 million who have become ill are hard to wrap our minds around. The economic consequences have been horrific. The psychological toll is counted in broken relationships, domestic violence, and suicides. We have been through Alpha and Delta and now we are threatened by Omicron, which we know little about. All we know is that there are a lot more Greek letters to name future Covid variants until we reach the last letter,

Omega, but for the moment we have come out of lockdown. We can savour a flat white or pot of tea at our favourite café.

What exactly is the attraction of certainty anyway. It turns out the brain likes it and finds uncertainty painful. Certainty is the confidence we have in our beliefs, including the sense that something just “feels right.”

Jonah Lehrer coined a phrase called “ Information Craving”. The idea is that we crave information for the sake of it. Often that information doesn’t make us more effective or adaptive, it just reduces a sense of uncertainty. It’s part of the reason that mind games like solitaire, Sudoku and crosswords are enjoyable. They give us a little rush from creating more certainty in the world, in a safe way.

Scientific American Mind magazine goes so far as to call this an “information addiction”. It’s all about the burst of dopamine we get when a circuit is completed. It feels good — but that doesn’t mean it’s good for us all the time.

Knowing that we automatically avoid uncertainty explains why any kind of change can be hard — it’s inherently uncertain. It explains why we prefer things we know over things that might be more fun, or better for us, but are new and therefore uncertain. It explains why we prefer the certainty of focusing on problems and finding answers in data from the past, rather than risking the uncertainty of new, creative solutions. It is why some religions prefer a theology of certainty. This is why Christians drawn to this view have supported slavery, support homophobia, stand against other faith traditions and cultures, speak against care of the earth, advocate an economics of neoliberal capitalism, and stay closed to any possibility of question and of change in their approach and faith. While it is good to have a foundation of faith to stand upon, a theology of certainty that takes such an unbending approach has caused much harm. And, tragically, it is a theology that is practised by many.

A characteristic of uncertainty is impermanence. It is hard to feel grounded when there might be an earthquake tomorrow. One of the virtues of Buddhism is that it does not shy away from uncertainty or impermanence. This is the fundamental anxiety of being human. Anxiety or queasiness in the face of impermanence isn’t something that afflicts just a few of us; it’s an all-pervasive state that human beings share. But rather than being disheartened by the ambiguity, the uncertainty of life, what if we accepted it and relaxed

into it? What if we said, “Yes, this is the way it is; this is what it means to be human.” Once, someone asked a well-known meditation master, “In this world where everything changes, where nothing remains the same, where loss and grief are inherent in our very coming into existence, how can there be any happiness? How can we find security when we see that we can’t count on anything being the way we want it to be?”

The teacher, looking compassionately at this fellow, held up a drinking glass and said, “You see this goblet? For me this glass is already broken. I enjoy it. I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns.

“If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on a shelf and the wind knocks it over, or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course’.

“When I understand that this glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious. Every moment is just as it is, and nothing needs to be otherwise.”

To achieve what the meditation master experienced we need to overcome our addiction. We must stop craving information to keep uncertainty at bay.

The Buddha offers a simple spiritual path, but not one easy to live out: Bird’s Nest Roshi was a teacher who lived in and did meditation in a tree. The governor of his province heard about Bird’s Nest Roshi and went to see him. He found the master sitting in his tree, doing meditation. He called to him, saying, “Oh, Bird’s Nest, you look very insecure to me up there.” Bird’s Nest Roshi looked down at the governor and replied, “Oh Governor, you look very insecure to me down there.” All things are under the law of change and political position is the most ephemeral of all. The governor knew very well what Bird’s Nest Roshi was talking about. So he took a different tack. “Tell me,” he said, “What is it that all the Buddhas taught?” Bird’s Nest replied: “Never do evil; Always do good; Keep your mind pure; Thus all the Buddhas taught.” The governor responded, “Always do good; never do evil; keep your mind pure—I knew that when I was three years old.” “Yes,” said Bird’s Nest Roshi, “A three-year-old child may know it, but even an eighty-year-old politician cannot put it into practice.”

To begin this practice, Pema Chödrön, an American Buddhist nun, shares a dream about her ex-husband:

“I was just settling down for a quiet evening at home when he arrived with six unknown guests and then disappeared, leaving me to take care of them. I was furious. When I woke up, I thought ruefully, ‘So much for being finished with anger.’ Then I started thinking about an incident that had occurred the previous day, and I began to get furious all over again. This completely stopped me in my tracks, and I realised that waking or sleeping, it’s just the same. It isn’t the content of our movie that needs our attention, it’s the projector. It isn’t the current story line that’s the root of our pain; it’s our propensity to be bothered in the first place. The propensity to feel sorry for ourselves, the propensity to be jealous, the propensity to get angry — our habitual, all-too-familiar emotional responses are like seeds that we just keep watering and nurturing. But every time we pause and stay present with the underlying energy, we stop reinforcing these propensities and begin to open ourselves to refreshingly new possibilities. As you respond differently to an old habit, you may start to notice changes. In the past when you got angry, it might have taken you three days to cool down, but if you keep interrupting the angry thoughts, you may get to the point at which it takes only a day to drop the anger. Eventually, only hours or even one and a half minutes. You’re starting to be liberated from suffering.

“Then you can begin practising to live the three vows: Do no harm. Take care of one another and embrace the world as it is. Do not begin this practice thinking the vows can be achieved. There will be no dopamine high reward. No test to pass. So how will you know you have experienced some level of enlightenment? One indication is you experience chaos as good news. Limbo doesn’t scare you, in fact, you begin to see its beauty. You step into groundlessness and find it relaxing. You feel fully present with an open heart to the world as it is, while not longing for a world that isn’t.”

Not there yet? Me neither. Buddhists often refer to these vows as commitments, which suggests this is a process not to be achieved but lived. I can sign up for that, since resisting the uncertainty and impermanence of inescapable Limbo isn’t doing it for me.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

How do you respond to chaos?