



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Teetering without tottering

Clay Nelson © 27 March 2022

When I was a child I liked playing on the teeter-totter at the playground. Apparently, you call it a see-saw here. What I found challenging was finding the balance point with my partner at the other end. I was not a philosophy prodigy at the age of seven, so I had not the words to describe what I knew intuitively: balance is a positive outcome in a precarious world. I did know it was not easily achieved. As likely as not, one end would crash down with prostate-jarring intensity while the other end would fly up threatening to launch the occupant into the stratosphere. Giggling with glee at our failure, we would eagerly try again to teeter without tottering.

As we get older we learn that life is mostly tottering. On the playground, about the only time we teetered in balance was that flash-in-the-pan moment as we went from one extreme to another.

You might wonder what inspired this musing? Last Wednesday was the autumn equinox in the southern hemisphere and the spring equinox in the northern. It is a day when both hemispheres have approximately equal amounts of daylight and night depending on their latitude. Since there are equinoxes twice a year and each is about 12 hours long, 24 hours of a year's 8760 hours are in balance. That pretty much sums up my life as well, but I keep trying.

For those too old to teeter totter I have learned rock balancing is a thing. On walks in the bush or along a stream I have occasionally come across a stack of rocks. I've always wondered what they were about. Apparently, some find building them a meditative act, an exercise in the power of visualising a positive outcome in a precarious world. The work requires strength, dexterity, and patience, but the real challenge is simply mustering and maintaining the belief that it is possible.

They might look a little like this:



Or this:



My favourite is this one:



They have clearly mastered teetering.

Just seeing these improbable positive outcomes in a precarious world is today's

musings. "Preach the Gospel always," so said Francis of Assisi, "and, if necessary, use words."

In Buddhism, the lotus flower which is born in mud at the bottom of the pond rises and blooms at the surface, symbolising enlightenment.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the rainbow represents God's covenant with humankind.

Orthodox Christian devotion contemplates the holy mystery of the cross.

Unimpressed by the preaching from the pulpit, Waldo Emerson in his pew in Concord was transfixed by what he saw through the clear glass windows of that sanctuary, such as the changing colours of the leaves. He realised that, unmediated by words and books and institutions, one can have an original experience of the divine. (Which is why our Transylvanian friends say they build the walls of their sanctuaries high, so your mind won't drift from the palaver of the preacher!)

Experiences of the natural give us glimpses of the miraculous.

And so, yes, just by seeing these rocks, you've had your sermon for today. The rest is commentary.

Today's commentary is obviously on spiritual teeter tottering, an occupation to find balance.

Thanks to the Internet and Kindle, I searched for every reference to balance I could find.

One book entitled, "Balance: In Search of the Lost Sense" by Scott McCredie ... claims that in addition to our five senses, we possess a sixth innate sense of balance, operating autonomically, below the level of consciousness. It orchestrates our nerve impulses and allows us to dance with gravity.

That book tells a story about Karl Wallenda of the Flying Wallendas. Karl probably had the most perfectly honed sense of balance of any human in the 20th century. At the age of 67 he walked a wire across the field at Philadelphia Stadium, entertaining Phillies baseball fans. A few years later he walked 750 feet above Tallulah Falls in Georgia, despite a vicious wind. He even did two

headstands in midspan. At age 70, Karl said, *“I get so damn lonely on the ground. Life is being on the wire; everything else is just waiting.”*

Most seminarians have heard the story of Rabbi Hillel who was asked by a student to teach the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel, gladly cooperated, stood on one foot and said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do unto another.” Then Hillel said, *“This is the whole Torah. The rest is merely commentary...now go study.”*

Here’s also a Buddhist story about balance:

There was once an acrobat and his student who had mastered amazing tricks together. One called for the student to climb a bamboo pole and then stand on the acrobat’s shoulders. The student did as he was bid and the master acrobat advised him “Now, lad, you watch out for me and I’ll watch out for you.

What this master said just made good sense. We do need to work together and watch out for each other. There can be some pretty nasty falls in life and it’s good to know that someone is there to catch us if we lose our balance. Such altruism is a noble thing.

But the student didn’t like this idea. “No, master, that plan will not work. Rather, you look after yourself – keep your own balance, and I’ll look after myself – keeping my balance, and I think that will be our best strategy for avoiding a mishap. By keeping my own balance, I will, in effect, be protecting you. And by keeping your balance, you will, in effect, be protecting me. Because if you fall, I fall. If I fall, you fall.”

The Buddha agreed with the student. If we are mindful in the way we live our own lives, striving to maintain a balanced attitude, staying focused on the present moment with an attitude of patience and forbearance, loving kindness and compassion, we will be also protecting others because we are maintaining our own spiritual balance, and this will create a situation in which both you and others are protected.

From my reading, clearly balance is not learned from books. If it were, I would not be increasingly inclined to totter as I age. Balance is practised while living in a precarious world. The second anniversary of the pandemic was also this week. It blind-sided us, endangered us, isolated us, angered us, brought us

together and then tore us a part. We are left wondering if it will ever end. In all my 73 years, I've never known the world to be more precarious. The only positive outcome I can see in all this will come from trusting our sixth sense to find balance. It may come and go quickly like the equinox, but we know it will be back. Revel in it when you experience it. Walk the high wire. Be patient. While you are waiting, practise mustering and maintaining the belief that the impossible is possible. If necessary stack rocks or go to the playground or read Shakespeare to visualise it.

In *As You Like It*, he wrote,

*Sweet are the uses of adversity
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.*

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

What have you done to find balance in the precarious times?