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 Arlington Street Church
 19 October, 2008

The Open Hand

A curse attributed to the Chinese says, *May you live in interesting times.*¹ These are interesting times. These are trying times – “the times that try [our] souls.” Those are the words of founding father and patriot Thomas Paine, used to describe the beginnings of the American Revolution. They were printed in a pamphlet called *The Crisis*, which Thomas Paine produced between 1776 and 1783 to inspire the revolutionary army. It was “so popular that, [based on the] ... percentage of the population, it was read by or read to more people than watch the Super Bowl.”² I like the idea of revolution being more compelling than football, but don’t worry; I’m not going to preach it!

Yes, our souls are tried, but we are not cursed. Challenged, but not cursed. We’re only cursed when we succumb to the bait of despair. *Hope* is a spiritual practice. Hope, and receiving the gift of life with an open hand.

It’s counter-intuitive to open our hands in the face of so much that is fearsome. We startle, and contract; we clench our fists. It’s counter-intuitive to let go when we’re holding on for dear life. But life is poured into an open hand.

How might we, as Unitarian Universalists, live a theology of letting go, the theology of the open hand? When you begin to listen, you’ll hear it in the language of every faith tradition. But in the interest of, on one hand, reflecting on the theology of letting go, and, on the other hand, of not keeping

¹ “Some years ago, in 1936, I had to write to a very dear and honored friend of mine, who has since died, Sir Austen Chamberlain, brother of the present Prime Minister, and I concluded my letter with a rather banal remark, ‘that we were living in an interesting age.’ Evidently he read the whole letter, because by return mail he wrote to me and concluded as follows: ‘Many years ago, I learned from one of our diplomats in China that one of the principal Chinese curses heaped upon an enemy is, “May you live in an interesting age.” ‘Surely’, he said, ‘no age has been more fraught with insecurity than our own present time.’” – Frederic R. Coudert, *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, 1939*

² see <http://www.ushistory.org/PAINE/>

you here all day for a trans-denominational overview, I picked at random, in the order in which they came to me, just three snapshots, three perspectives on letting go. They are Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian.

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The Buddha told a parable about a man who encountered a tiger in the middle of a field. He fled, with the tiger in hot pursuit. Driven to the edge of a cliff, he grabbed the root of a wild vine and swung down over the precipice. The tiger towered above him, sniffing the air. Trembling, holding on for dear life, the man looked down. Far below, another tiger came into view.

Just then he heard a small scuffling sound nearby. Out of reach, two mice, one black and one white, were gnawing away at the vine: a tiger above, a tiger below, and the vine would soon give way. On the side of the cliff, a wild strawberry plant was in full fruit. Letting go with one hand, the man plucked a strawberry with the other, and popped it into his mouth. How sweet it tasted!³

It took me years to begin to understand this story, and I'm still at it. We could spend the morning on its history and symbolism; for now, just this: The tiger is above us, the tiger is below us, and the vine, our lifeline, is fraying. In life, and facing death - in every moment - what is left to do? When we are clinging, when we close our hands, we cannot taste the sweetness of life. *Let go! Eat the strawberry!* Taste the sweetness.

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The yoga sutras give significant consideration to *vairagya*, which means detachment or letting go. From the Hindu tradition, here is one of my favorite passages on this subject:

“In enjoyment, there is fear of disease;
in social position, the fear of falling off;
in wealth, the fear of [hostile] kings;
in honor, the fear of humiliation;
in power, the fear of foes;
in beauty, the fear of old age;
in scriptural erudition, the fear of opponents;
in virtue, the fear of traducers [in other words, those who will disparage you];
in body, the fear of death.

³ Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, editors, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, p. 21

All the things of this world pertaining to human beings are attended with fear;
renunciation alone stands for fearlessness....
Therefore, [let go!] Awake! Awake!!”⁴

In an article entitled *Love and Happiness: Limitless Love is Free of Bondage*, Dr. Meenakshi Bana, author and senior teacher at Mount St. Mary’s School in New Delhi, India, writes, “Detachment is not renunciation.... It is a creative endeavour that involves a shift in consciousness.... Most techniques of self-mastery advise us not to escape from life but to live it intelligently.... We must accept responsibility for our circumstances, and learn from experiences and events, and then rise above the situation. This way, we can go through life unaffected.”

She continues, “Being centred, yet non-attached, is an art.... It is not necessary to be judgmental. It is enough to be objective. Be ... [an] observer, and notice the quality of your experience, but don’t get caught in self-criticism or self-approval. This process of self-study ... leads to detachment....

Meenakshi Bana concludes, “Involution initiates evolution. To cope with the demands of the present, we have to shed the burden of the past, and chase away the demons of the future.... Detachment.... is an attitude of pure love, bereft of emotional bondage.... Just remember the wheel. Its rapidly moving outer rim represents the restlessness of the outer world. The centre of the wheel is [our] internal stability that integrates and controls.... Go through the activities of the day ... aware of the hub and not the rim.”⁵

I love, especially, the line, “detachment is an attitude of pure love.” So Buddhism and Hinduism: Taste the sweetness of the moment, and practice unadulterated love. It doesn’t get better than that!

Finally, let’s stir in Christianity. This is a poem from the Pax Christi community, the national Catholic movement for peace. They write,

In the Gospel story
where the apostles
get trapped
in that sudden and wild storm
on the Sea of Galilee,

⁴ from Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*

⁵ http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Love_and_Happiness/id/218520

we find a lesson
for today's peacemakers.

When the waves first rose
and the boat began to rock,
the apostles
worked hard and with hope
in order to survive
the storm raging around them.
But then they lost heart
and allowed the storm outside
to come inside.
It's easy to imagine
the apostles
as frantic, disconnected, out of control.

In their desperation
they waken
a peaceful Jesus
who questions their faith
and calms the storm
by projecting
 his inner stillness,
 his inner harmony,
 his inner peace.

Sometimes
we peacemakers
are more like the apostles.
We have allowed
the ... terror around us
to become part of us.
Too often
we only worsen the situation
by projecting
our fear and guilt and despair.

What we want to do
is [to] become like Jesus
- to have that still center

that nothing can disturb.
In that way
we are true peacemakers,
persons who project peace
wherever we go.⁶

When we allow the storm to get inside, we lose our center. Note that Pax Christi characterizes the frantic apostles as having “lost heart.” So the spiritual work, again, is not to cling, but to detach from the storm that is raging around us, and to find our heart – take heart. When we cultivate an unshakable core – the work of at least one lifetime! – we can live in peace, and project peace from that deeply still place.

My spiritual companions, may we be at peace. May we *be* peace. To meet the present exactly as it is, unadulterated by past and future, we are called to open our hearts: open, broken, broken-open hearts. Let us let go and taste the sweetness of life – eat the strawberry! Life is poured into an open hand. Let us receive it, and live it, and pass it on, abundantly.

⁶ in Feldman and Kornfield, op cit, pp. 20-21