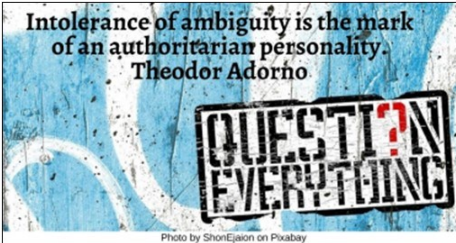




EXPLORATION

Ambiguity / Paradox

Readings



1. *Being a People of Paradox and Ambiguity*

by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

...In this time of uncertainty, the idea of paradox can be helpful. A paradox is when a seemingly contradictory idea, when more deeply explored, is found to be true. ...I am a firm believer that our lives are always more uncertain, ambiguous, and informed by paradox than we like to think. Therefore, these moments when the uncertainty is so present and clear, we have opportunities to grow and develop in how we welcome and live in the midst of the unknown.

...The definition being used in the UU White Supremacy Teach-Ins ...is “the set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color.” It is my hope that as a larger faith community, walking into very difficult conversations in order to guide profound and deep change—that we can foster a greater openness, a willingness to hear the truths we each hold, to hold room for multiple perspectives and yet through listening and a willingness to be changed by our listening, create new ways of sharing, living and practicing our faith.

In “Brave Space,” African-American ...Micky ScottBey Jones ...writes: “Together we will create brave space Because there is no such thing as a “safe space”

We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.

There is paradox in these words, particularly in the line that we all carry scars and all have caused wounds. ...We live amidst paradox and change, ambiguity and uncertainty, yet this is not an excuse not to act, nor to wait, nor to avoid challenge.

Source: <https://www.phoenixuu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Paradox-Ambiguity-June-2017.pdf>

2. *Living with Uncertainty*

by Christine Carter

Living with so much uncertainty is hard. Human beings crave information about the future in the same way we crave food, sex, and other primary rewards. Our brains perceive ambiguity as a threat, and they try to protect us by diminishing our ability to focus on anything other than creating certainty.

Research shows that job uncertainty, for example, tends to take a more significant toll on our health than actually losing our job. Similarly, research participants who were told that they had a 50% chance of receiving a painful electric shock felt far more anxious and agitated than participants who believed they were definitely going to receive the shock.

It is no surprise, then, that there are entire industries devoted to filling in the blanks of our futures. See, for example, the popularity of astrology apps, or the prestige of management consultancies dedicated to strategic planning. Fundamentalist religions counter anxiety by providing us with unambiguous rules and absolute truths. Conspiracy theories provide us with simple explanations for complex phenomena.

But sometimes—maybe always—it’s more effective not to attempt to create certainty. Though evolution might have rigged our brains to resist uncertainty, we can never really know what the fu-

ture will bring. And in improbable situations like the pandemic, which has massively disrupted our routines and utterly destroyed our best-laid plans, we need to learn to live with ambiguity.

“Uncertainty is the only certainty there is,” wrote mathematician John Allen Paulos. “Knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security.”

Source: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/seven_ways_to_cope_with_uncertainty

3. *The Ambiguity of History*

by Maria Popova

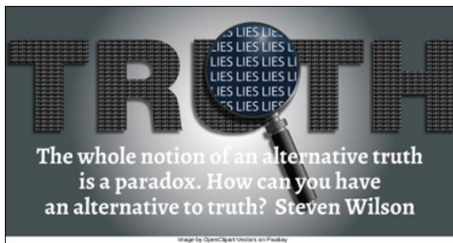
...Most of our suffering seems to reside in the middle of the spectrum — in our understanding of and orientation toward the selective collective memory we call history.

...History is not what happened, but what survives the shipwrecks of judgment and chance. Whose judgment? one inevitably asks, and how much room for choice in a universe governed by chance—by randomness and chaos? What, then, do we make of history, and what does it make of us?

... [Susan] Sontag ...insisted that we must know our history in order to rewrite its broken stories, that “you need to know the patterns to see how people are fitting the jumble of facts into what they already have: selecting, misreading, distorting, excluding, embroidering, distributing empathy here but not there, remembering this echo or forgetting that precedent.”

It strikes me that, today, we see ourselves just as falsely separate from history as we feel ourselves falsely separate from nature. We have artificially islanded ourselves both in the river of time and in the river of being, perhaps because we would rather have illusory stability than bob about helplessly with the unbearable ambiguity and uncertainty that froth the rapids of existence.

Source: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2019/01/16/susan-sontag-cioran-history/>



4. *The Ambiguity of Willpower* by James Baldwin

For I am—or I was—one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself. People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all—a real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named—but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not. This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago..., came to. I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well—by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion.

Source: *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin

5. *Confronting the Paradoxes of Life* by Joan Chittister

...We spend our lives in the centrifuge of paradox. What seems certainly true on the one hand seems just as false on the other. Life is made up of incongruities: Life ends in death; what brings us joy will surely bring us an equal and equivalent amount of sorrow; perfection is a very imperfect concept; fidelities of every ilk promise support but also often end.

How can we account for these things? ...How can we find as much comfort in them as there is confusion? These are the queries that will not go away... There is a point in life when its paradoxes must be not only considered but laid to rest.

...This single-minded concentration on the essence and purpose of life,

along with a focus on inner quietude and composure, makes for a life lived in white light and deep heat at the very core of the soul. Centering on the spirits within us, rather than being obsessed with the vicissitudes and petty imperfections of life gives the soul its stability, whatever the kinds ...of turbulence to be dealt with...

...It is the paradoxes of our own times that skulk within us, that confuse us, sap our energy, and, in the end, tax our strength for the dailiness of life. They call us to the depth of ourselves. They require us to see Life behind life. Confronting the paradoxes of life around us and in us, contemplating the meaning of them for ourselves, eventually and finally, leads to our giving place to the work of the Spirit in our own lives.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2314>

6. *Practically Preposterous* by Pavithra Mehta

...Practically Preposterous.... Just realized right there that that's a Paradox. Practically Preposterous. (And I think I've learned somewhere along the way to pay attention to paradoxes. They put the truth before the explanation and it's up to us to get from one to the other. And the journey that starts in perplexity usually ends in some form of wisdom).

Practically Preposterous ... that's kind of like Mission Impossible. A Mission being something you set out to Do. Impossible being something that just Can't be Done.

Practically Preposterous ... and that's actually a double paradox. Because the word Preposterous comes straight from the Latin word "praeposterus"—a curious conjunction of "prae" meaning "before" and "posterus", meaning "coming after." So put them together and you've got the before coming after. And that could mean doing things backwards—or it could just mean starting from where you want to get to. It could just mean Living the Dream instead of Dreaming a Life. And maybe that's what he meant by Being the Change.

He was—if you think about it—a pretty preposterous man. Gandhiji. Because everyone knew you exchanged

blows to fight a battle to win your peace until he came along and placed peace before the battle and the battle before the blows (and the whole point was that you never got that far). Doing things backwards. Practically Preposterous!

...Maybe part of the problem is we don't prompt ourselves enough towards faith in the preposterous.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=742>

7. *The Inner Work of Holding Paradox* by Parker Palmer

If I didn't have the idea of "holding paradox" to help me understand myself and the world around me, I'd be more lost than I am! For me, holding paradox means thinking about some (but not all) things as "both-and's" instead of "either-ors."

So many of our troubles, personal and political, come from either-or thinking. For example, when I'm talking with a person who holds religious or political beliefs that differ from my own, either-or thinking can create a combative situation: "I'm right, so he/she is wrong. Therefore, my job is to win this argument by any means possible." How rarely such encounters bear fruit!

But both-and thinking can lead to something much more creative: "Maybe I don't have everything right, and maybe he/she doesn't have everything wrong. Maybe both of us see part of the truth. If I speak and listen in that spirit, we both might learn something that will expand our understanding. We might even be able to keep this relationship and conversation going."

Think of how much more civil and creative our conversations across lines of difference would be if we thought that way more often! We'd be working to create a container to hold our differences hospitably instead of trying to win an argument.

Of course, like everything human, this issue begins inside of us, in how we hold our own internal paradoxes. If we can't hold our inner complexities as both-and instead of either-or, we can't possibly extend that kind of hospitality to another person.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/reflections-on-the-inner-work-of-holding-paradox/>



Snippets

“As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We don’t deserve resolution; we deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.” *Pema Chödrön*

Wisdom Story

Maybe by Maria Popova

Alan Watts wrote, “The whole process of nature is an integrated process of immense complexity, and it’s really impossible to tell whether anything that happens in it is good or bad — because you never know what will be the consequence of the misfortune; or, you never know what will be the consequences of good fortune. ...The parable [he shared] makes the same point....

“Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbors came around to commiserate. They said, ‘We are so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate.’ The farmer said, ‘Maybe.’ The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and, in the evening, everybody came back and said, ‘Oh, isn’t that lucky. What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!’ The farmer again said, ‘Maybe.’ The following day his son tried to break one of the horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbors then said, ‘Oh dear, that’s too bad,’ and the farmer responded, ‘Maybe.’ The next day the conscription officers came around to conscript people into the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. Again, all the neighbors came around and said, ‘Isn’t that great!’ Again, he said, ‘Maybe.’”

The farmer steadfastly refrained from thinking of things in terms of gain or loss, advantage or disadvantage, because one never knows.... In fact, we never really know whether an event is fortune or misfortune, we only know our ever-changing reactions to ever-changing events. Source: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/11/06/alan-watts-swimming-headless/>

mind to one property that apparently subsumes all the rest (‘gay,’ ‘black,’ ‘Muslim,’ whatever) is to be the victim of a piece of extraordinary intellectual vulgarity.” *Philip Pullman*

“Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody. Not a few men who cherish lofty and noble ideals hide them under a bushel for fear of being called different.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

“There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.” *Ursula Le Guin*

“The root of happiness is knowing that everything changes. That’s all there is to happiness. It’s nothing you pursue. It’s living in the constant continual paradox of life. The Vedas say that the yes and the no uttered together produce the silence. We spend so much of our time trying to take the yes and the no and resolve it. Instead of being pushed into wonder and not knowing, we have whole explorations of how we deal with paradox, how we live in paradox, how we resolve paradox. The yes and the no, the complete contrariness of life, is actually only meant to move us into silence.” *Margaret Wheatley*

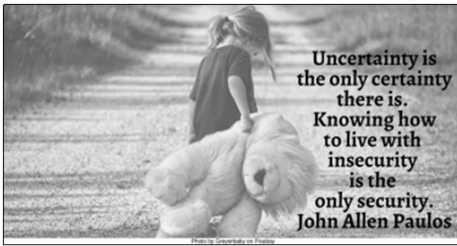
“...Mystics embrace paradox. Their practice makes them intensely aware of life’s paradoxes. They notice that although everything appears to be part of one unity, life contains many opposites. Everything is united, yet life is made up of endless polarities, such as good and

“...The difference between ignorant and educated people is that the latter know more facts. But that has nothing to do with whether they are stupid or intelligent. The difference between stupid and intelligent people—and this is true whether or not they are well-educated—is that intelligent people can handle subtlety. They are not baffled by ambiguous or even contradictory situations—in fact, they expect them and are apt to become suspicious when things seem overly straightforward.”

Neal Stephenson

“Listening is more than being quiet while the other person speaks until you can say what you have to say. I like the language Rachel Naomi Remen uses with young doctors to describe what they should practice: ‘generous listening.’ Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions.” *Krista Tippett*

“I feel with some passion that what we truly are is private, and almost infinitely complex, and ambiguous, and both external and internal, and double- or triple- or multiply natured, and largely mysterious even to ourselves; and furthermore, that what we are is only part of us, because identity, unlike ‘identity,’ must include what we do. And I think that to find oneself and every aspect of this complexity reduced in the public



religion. Here is the great paradox of our faith.” *Rev. Scott Alexander*

Questions

bad, hot and cold, and so on. Mystics sense that things are not immediately what they appear to be and that focusing on the pairs of opposites distracts them from the experience of unity: they understand that reality is larger than the polar opposites that make it up. ... Mystics, as Rumi did through his poetry, advise us to practice seeing beyond what can be seen with the physical eye ... and thereby peacefully embrace and see beyond the paradoxes of life.”

Edward Viljoen

“Speaking of salvation, Jesus and a host of other spiritual luminaries have weighed in on the subject with some counterintuitive and paradoxical wisdom. In a nutshell, it is this: ‘Don’t focus on saving yourself. ... Focus on serving, saving, helping others. For if you try to save yourself, you lose yourself, yet if you seek to save others, you save both the other and yourself.’ ... When we seek to save others—with our love and our compassion we become aware of our connectedness to the larger whole. Or, as Malvina Reynolds puts it in the song *The Magic Penny*: ‘Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away. Love is something if you give it away. You end up having more.’” *Rev. Richard Davis*

“Rev. Charles Magistro ... [writes,] ‘Our way in religion is not the way of ease. We are called to be sailors. For many worlds exist waiting to be discovered. And not the least of them are within ourselves. It takes much persistence, courage and curiosity to look into our own depths, to come to terms with the twin mysteries of being alive and having to die, to see ourselves in new and larger ways without being dishonest about our limitations. We have only begun to discover our potential.’ Unitarian Universalism does not give you freedom from religion; it gives you freedom for

- “Uncertainty is the only certainty there is. Knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- In reading #3, Maria Popova about the challenges that history presents. As “truth” it is ambiguous since history is often written from and to reinforce a particular point of view, though this may be intentional or unintentional. She references Susan Sontag who “...insisted that we must know our history in order to rewrite its broken stories, that ‘you need to know the patterns to see how people are fitting the jumble of facts into what they already have: selecting, misreading, distorting, excluding, embroidering, distributing empathy here but not there, remembering this echo or forgetting that precedent.’” The paradox is that history is often as “true” as it is “false.” How should we approach history to wrestle truth from it? Popova concludes, “we would rather have illusory stability than bob about helplessly with the unbearable ambiguity and uncertainty that froth the rapids of existence.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What would things look like if more people rejected illusory stability in favor of reality?
 - In reading #4, James Baldwin calls willpower into question because it can rely on self-deception. He calls it an ambiguous virtue. An example of this is the person who insists that they pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps despite the fact that the silver spoon in their mouth meant that they got ahead primarily because of privilege. According to Baldwin, admitting the truth about yourself, which is not easy, requires humility. Do you agree? Why or why not? Baldwin writes that self-deception involves “elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not.” What role might this self-deception play related to white supremacy? Or being part of the 1%? Where else does self-deception rear its ugly head?



5. In reading #5, Joan Chittister writes that, “We spend our lives in the centrifuge of paradox. What seems certainly true on the one hand seems just as false on the other.” Do you agree? Why or why not? She states that the centrifuge of paradoxes “call us to the depth of ourselves. They require us to see *Life* behind life.” In this, she is in agreement with the quote by Edward Viljoen below (#15) regarding how mystics seek the unity that lies beyond paradox. For you, what is the *Life* behind life? Is there a paradox in your life that has been especially challenging? What was/is it? How have you engaged that paradox? What has it taught you?
6. In reading #6, Pavithra Mehta unpacks the paradoxical meaning of the phrase, “Practically Preposterous!” He writes, “the word Preposterous comes straight from the Latin word *praeposterus*—a curious conjunction of *prae* meaning ‘before’ and *posterus*, meaning ‘coming after.’ So put them together and you’ve got the before coming after.” Mehta then writes about Gandhi who “placed peace before the battle and the battle before the blows (and the whole point was that you never got that far).” This is the genius of non-violent protest. How is nonviolent protest paradoxical? Can you think of ways that Martin Luther King, Jr. was paradoxical? That Jesus was? That Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine is?
7. In reading #7, Parker Palmer writes about the importance and challenge of “holding paradox.” This “means thinking about some (but not all) things as ‘both-and’s’ instead of ‘either-ors.’” Have you done “both-

and” thinking? What were the circumstances? Was it directed internally or externally? Was it challenging? How? Parker writes, “Think of how much more civil and creative our conversations across lines of difference

would be if we thought that way more often! We’d be working to create a container to hold our differences hospitably instead of trying to win an argument.” Do you agree that this can lead to a more civil society? Our Universalist forebears, in a sense, asked this question: Do you want to be right or good? How would you answer this question? What would your reasoning be?

The following questions are related to the Snippets

8. Pema Chödrön calls into question our belief that we deserve resolution, writing that “we suffer from resolution.” Continuing, she notes that what we deserve is the Buddhist “middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.” Do you tend to seek resolution in order that things and situations may be resolved? If yes, why? If no, why not? How can “an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity” benefit us? How can we cultivate “an open state of mind?”
9. Neal Stephenson suggests that we are separated into two groups, regardless of education, by the ability to “handle subtlety” and by the refusal to be baffled by ambiguous or even contradictory situations.” Do you agree? Why or why not? He then adds that these people “are apt to become suspicious when things seem overly straightforward.” Have you ever encountered a situation where things seemed overly simple or straightforward or too good to be true? Can you offer an example? Did your suspicions prove to be correct? How? Why?
10. Krista Tippett writes (after Rachel Naomi Remen) that generous listen-

ing “involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity.” Why is this kind of listening so important? For her, relationship rather than being right is the goal. (See the reference to Universalists in #7 above.) Tippett adds, “The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions.” Why is this important? What can make this challenging?

11. Philip Pullman calls into question the absurdity of subsuming the complexity of an individual under words like “‘gay,’ ‘black,’ ‘Muslim,’ whatever.” This paradox of reducing human complexity to such a simplicity, he believes, is offensive. Do you agree? Why or why not? He writes “what we truly are is private, and almost infinitely complex, and ambiguous, and both external and internal, and double- or triple- or multiply natured, and largely mysterious even to ourselves....” Are you ambiguous? When? How? Importantly, are you “largely mysterious” even to yourself? If yes, why? How? If no, why not?
12. Martin Luther King, Jr. criticized people who hide behind ambiguity by adopting a view so vague that it will include everything and everybody. Bland pablum for the mind. Can you share examples of this? When this is done by politicians, how does it undermine the common good?
13. Ursula Le Guin wrote about the ambiguous nature of a wall, “of uncut rocks roughly mortared.” It calls to mind Robert Frost who wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall....” Have there been walls you loved? Hated? Why the difference? Le Guin’s wall had impacted people for seven generations. She concludes, “Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.” Have you experienced walls that were confusing, like walls

Since the object
of faith is
an absolute paradox,
faith is an
offense to the mind,
an affront to
our yearning
for intellectual
apprehension.
Niles Elliot Goldstein



Photo by subramanian on Pixabay

that create an in-group and an out-group? What walls do you see in society? What harm can some walls do?

14. Margaret Wheatley suggests that we spend way too much time and energy trying to resolve the paradoxes of life? Do you agree? Why or why not? She writes, “The root of happiness is knowing that everything changes.” Could this be true? How? Why? Why not? Wheatley concludes, “The yes and the no, the complete contrariness of life, is actually only meant to move us into silence.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What is the purpose of the silence? Wonder? Just to be? Something else?
15. Edward Viljoen writes about the way mystics embrace paradox. As he writes, “Mystics sense that things are not immediately what they appear to be and that focusing on the pairs of opposites distracts them from the experience of unity: they understand that reality is larger than the polar opposites that make it up.” Does this logic make sense to you? Why or why not? The technique, Viljoen writes, is “to practice seeing beyond what can be seen with the physical eye ... and thereby peacefully embrace and see beyond the paradoxes of life.” Perhaps an analogy is Emily Dickinson’s advice, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant....” Truth/reality is so overwhelming that we should not approach it head on. Better to tell the truth indirectly. Better to squint to put the yes/no out of focus so you can see beyond it. Have you ever told the truth slant? With what result? Have you been able to see beyond yes/no? With what result? Have you experienced a unity below the seeming contradictions of life? How was that experience?
16. Richard Davis lifts up the “counterintuitive and paradoxical wisdom” of spiritual luminaries like Jesus who taught that when “you seek to save others, you save both the other and yourself.” Have you seen this in action? What are some examples? He concludes with sharing a verse from “Malvina Reynolds’ song *The Magic Penny*: ‘Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away. Love is something if you give it away. You end up having more.’” What is the power of that song? What did you feel when you first heard it?
17. Scott Alexander shares a quote from Charles Magistro who wrote, “Our way in religion is not the way of ease. We are called to be sailors. For many worlds exist waiting to be discovered. And not the least of them are within ourselves.” Do you agree with his description of the way of Unitarian Universalism? Why or why not? To this, Alexander adds, “Unitarian Universalism does not give you freedom **from** religion; it gives you freedom **for** religion. Here is the great paradox of our faith.” Do you agree? What freedoms did Unitarian Universalism give you? What has it demanded of you? Your answer illuminates the paradox.