

Know Thyself

The Inner Wisdom of the Outer Game of Life

October 10, 2021

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Thought is the sculptor who can create who you want to be.

—a journal entry of Henry David Thoreau, 1841

Wake up! You are life on earth!!!

—Joanna Macy in *Climate Crisis as Spiritual Path*,
an Old Dog Documentary film, John Ankele and Anne Maksoud

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, so bold or so bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the darkness and the light. Open up mine arms of spirit to the open and to the broken ones, to blissfully imperfect who are just like you and just like me, blessed and beloved, caring and compassionate, held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together.”

So much is possible on earth and in heaven, don't you think? ...even in this continuing time of strain and crisis. So very much is possible but it isn't limitless, right? Life is not starkly black and white. Constraints have certain freedoms and freedom, itself, has limitations. Both are true. There is a push and there is a pull to life. We give and we take. We win and we lose. Does that sound familiar? It that accurate?

Now, I believe that the creative soul within us can do just about anything—the wise, old sage within us, the learning child, the poet, the artist... But do you think, let's say, that artists are capable of sculpting the gentle petals of a sunflower? ...out of stone? ...or wood? ...or bone? ...or clay? ...or late-October pumpkins? Do you believe that artists are capable of sculpting the wild complexities of the human heart? Maybe only life, itself, is so capable an artist.

Do you play volleyball? Or do you ski? Do you play hockey or table tennis? Or would you prefer to describe yourself as “non-competitive”? I ask because there are moments in sport that bring us to peak experience. I want to know myself at peak experience. I feel

like that would help me make better sense of the days when I just don't feel like getting out of bed.

I want us know one another at our best...but maybe that's just me. Not everyone appreciates the greatness of life in the same way, I know. And the same things don't always work for any one person all of the time but sports are different to me...because opposites coincides. It holds the great extremes. That's powerful...theological, even. The coincidence of opposites is a theological term. It has physical application—opposite hands held together in prayer. It has metaphysical and religious applications too and I'm drawn to that. I like things that invite me, that move me, that push and pressure me to get beyond myself...and sports can help me do that from time to time—sports and poetry. It is an odd combination but it works for me.

Now, I'm not out about all of this. I'm still in the closet. I'm not yet public. Although I share it with you freely this morning, I haven't told my family. Until I do, let's keep it quiet, ok? But very soon, I know, one day, when we can all be our truest and peaceful selves, you will see me standing in the bleachers of Fenway Park at the height of the baseball season with a bullhorn in one hand and my old, dog-eared copy of the Norton Anthology of Poetry in my right and I'll be "yawping" line of poetry between the pitches.

The die-hard baseball fans might describe this gesture as redundant...might say that the professionals in the commentator's booth are doing this already, offering free-verse poems in perfect time and rhythm. Such poetry isn't accessible to everyone, only to the most deeply committed. It sounds like chatter to everyone else. For the most deeply committed, it's epic poetry...

The third baseman...is way off the line. The pitch...hit hard toward the right field corner...hooking toward the pole it is__ a fair ball. [Played off the wall. The runner] is coming around to the plate. Here's the relay. He is SAFE [at the plate. He made it home safely!] There's a fly ball right-center field. [The outfielder] is there and calling. He makes the catch and the Red Sox move on [advancing to the] Division Series...and they are mobbing each other at the pitcher's mound.

Of course, in baseball, it's only poetry if your team wins the game. I wouldn't have quoted this particular poem if the Red Sox had lost.

Of course, poetry is still poetry, win or lose. It's we who change. The game, itself, is where the opposites are joined. *Coincidencia oppositorum*, as they say (as they say in Latin anyway). Although Alan

Watts was not a baseball fan, he was a theologian and he talked a lot about *coincidentia oppositorum*. He talked about the coincidence of opposites.

Watts was raised as a Christian but later, became a Buddhist. In his estimation, the Buddhism does a better job of dreaming about the afterlife. According to Watts, “The Christian version of heaven is as abominable as the Christian version of hell [because] nobody wants to be in church forever,” he says. Continuing...

Nobody wants to be in church forever. Children are absolutely horrified when they hear these hymns which say, “Prostrate before thy throne to lie and gaze and gaze on Thee.” They can’t imagine what this imagery means.

To lie prostrate on the ground is to lie facing downward and yet, to “gaze at Thee” implies the reverse. Are we facing down or looking up? Is this confusing poetry or a paradox? It’s hard to say. Watts says,

In a very subtle theological way, I could wangle that statement around to make [this] profound. To be prostrate at once and to gaze [upward] on the other hand is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a coincidence of opposites which is very deep. But to a child it is a crick in the neck.

Young children (and the wisest ones) are bigger-souled than we are. We usually choose a side. We pick a team or we don’t care because things like baseball don’t really matter. For young children (and for the wisest ones), things like baseball matter exquisitely...not because we win and lose because we play.

A wise man named ‘John Keating’ said something important for us to consider. ‘John Keating’ was truly wise but he was not real. He was fictional. He was a character in a film called *Dead Poets’ Society*. He drew a distinction between common sports fans and those who hear the poetry, those who know the wisdom of the game. ‘Keating’ said,

Now, devotees may argue that one sport or game is inherently better than another. For me, sport is actually a chance for us to have other human beings push us to excel.

When we play the game well, this is what happens...not for the winners but for all of us.

When I was a kid, I used to listen to poet/sports commentator by the name of Jim McKay. I grew up in the age of Howard Cosell, Phil Rizzuto and Jimmy the Greek. Jim McKay was my favorite. He was the host of the show on ABC called “The Wide World of Sports.” I loved that show. It was all about heroism. Yeah, yeah... Of course, it was about

games—auto racing, swim meets, tennis matches, ski jump competitions, track and field... The list of possibilities went on and on. The show began that same way every time:

Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sport...the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat...the human drama of athletic competition...!!!

The trumpeting horns were blaring in the background. The tympani were drumming up the excitement. It was all so thrilling...and it was brought to us by Lincoln/Mercury, the car dealership; by Goodyear, the makers of the steel-guard radial tire; and by State Farm Mutual, “Like a good neighbor, State Farm” was there. Even the commercial advertisements were god-natured and heroic...bringing us the coincidence of opposites—the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.

There’s such division these days. Embattled pundits on TV shows like *Shot in the Dark* and *Crossfire* shouting at each other as loudly as cable network news shows confirming their biases. And it’s not even worth talking about talk radio. Like Anne mentioned earlier, so many things are vying for our attention. It’s so hard finding peace on anxious seas. And now, the Facebook controversy...

I have to say, though, I’m impressed with the insider, the whistleblower who came forward—Francis Haugen. Against the odds and against the grain, she stepped to do what’s right. Hero. She found balance enough to speak out from heart and mind. She said,

My name is Frances Haugen. I used to work at Facebook. ...I think Facebook has the potential to bring out the best in us. But I’m here today because I believe Facebook’s products harm children, stoke division and weaken our democracy.

Opposites coincide in Francis Haugen. She sees in Facebook both the good things and the bad—the chance for distant friends to reconnect and stay in touch and the tendency to deepen divides, weaken democracy and tear us apart. It’s counterintuitive. It’s strange to imagine to us that a social media platform can be a source of isolation and loneliness...but it can be...and Francis Haugen knows that. She knows that life is full of contradictions.

As she argued before Congress just last week, Facebook wants us to believe in false dichotomies and in false choices,

[...that we] must choose between...divisive content [and] free speech; that [we] must choose between public oversight [and] personal privacy; that to

be able to share fun photos of [our loved ones] with old friends, [we] must...be inundated with anger-driven virality.

“I am here today to tell you,” Francis said, “that’s not true. These problems are solvable,” but we need to find and keep our balance. And how do we do that in times as crazy as these? All we need to do is grow our souls...but who knows how to do that.

The young at heart like Jenny Odell and wisest elders like Joanna Macy...they are bigger-souled than we are now. We choose side and pick teams. They don’t. They live more deeply than we do but, of course, they do not live more deeply than we can. All can share in the wisdom of the game.

It’s paradoxical...to hold two things at once...to win and lose at the very same time. How we do this is not new. It is as least as old as the arts of war and peace. The arts of war are thousands of years old. The arts of peace are new each and every day. A Chinese military strategist named Sun Tzu wrote *The Art of War* in the 5th century BCE, more than two millennia ago. Even though it is so old. *The Art of War* is still considered to be...

...the most influential strategy text in East Asian warfare and has influenced both Eastern and Western military thinking, business tactics, legal strategy, lifestyles and beyond.

In this 2,500 year old text, Sun Tzu shares deep wisdom. He reflects on the life and death conflicts that are conjoined on the battlefield and he reflects on the joy-based and sorrow-based conflicts that are conjoined within our hearts. Sun Tzu makes his insights plainly. He is perfectly clear, even through Thomas Cleary’s modern English translation from the ancient Chinese. Sun Tzu writes,

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

The outward battle begins within. The key is obvious. Sun Tzu would have said it thus: “Rènshí ní zìjǐ” [high-mid low mid-low]. Please forgive my attempt at Chinese. I’ve not learned to speak it. In Latin, it’s “*Temet Nosce*” and in English, “*Know Thyself*.” It is the necessary, the hardest and the most fundamental step on the hero’s journey of becoming oneself, self-actualization.

Twenty-two years ago now, on the Saturday before Easter Sunday, a movie called *The Matrix* made its debut. It featured a cast of characters with such great names—Trinity, Cypher and Morpheus; the two good-looking brothers, Tank and Dozer; Switch and Apoch and Mouse; the savoir that they called Neo and Neo’s nemesis, Agent Smith...the enemy with a thousand faces. In Neo’s journey of becoming himself, he went to see a sage woman called The Oracle. It was her sole purpose—and her soul’s purpose—to lead young Neo into crash-course world of disillusionment...to walk young Neo through the paces of monumental self-discovery.

Neo was the Jesus character. In the movie, he comes back from the dead (remember, *The Matrix* debuted one day before Easter Sunday). When Neo is taking his crash-course in disillusionment, when he is on his hero’s journey of monumental self-discovery, he is coached by The Oracle, herself. She’s baking cookies in the kitchen. “I know that you are Neo,” she says without ever laying eyes on him. The Oracle has magical powers. She can see into the future. She bakes great cookies. She does things like that. She knows the Neo is the object of Trinity’s love and affection, even though Trinity hasn’t yet confessed this to herself. The Oracle says, “You’re cuter than I thought. I can see why she likes you.”

Neo looked at The Oracle. He was confused by what she had said. He stumbled over his coolness. He was fumbling through his thoughts. He asked a simple on-word question, “Who?” He wasn’t aware he was being admired.

The Oracle smiled her know smile and said, “Not too bright, though.” Neo was cuter than expected but not as wise as she had hoped. Then, the Oracle got down to business and ask Neo if he was ready to become his highest and truest self. She asked, “Do you think that you are the one [who has come here to save us all]?” Neo wants to be the hero but he doesn’t know if he sees it in himself just yet. Pointing to a sign above the passageway into the kitchen, she asks, “Do you know what that means?” The sign reads, “*Temet Nosce.*” He says, “It’s Latin. It means, ‘Know Thyself.’ I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Being the one is just like being in love. No one can tell you that you are in love. You just know it through and through.” What I hear in these words is this:

Knowing oneself is just like being in love. No one can tell you that you know yourself. You just know it through and through.

Jenny Odell is going through this process. Slowly by slowly, she is coming to know herself. That's how it usually happens. I'm sure there are exceptions but this is almost always the case. Jenny Odell is being honest and is being fierce about her process. She's being quite heroic and so can we. She's being heroic because she is finding ways of making peace—slowly, quietly, by way of the art of doing nothing.

I find her journey fascinating. I learn a lot from Jenny Odell. She talked about studying the migratory patterns of a beautiful songbird called the Western Tanager. It travels the Pacific coastlines of Central and North America, finding homes from the shores of Mexico to the shores of British Columbia—two static homes if measured by human, earthbound sensibilities...one flowing home if measured by atmospheric qualities. It depends on your point of view which way you see it but both ways are true. When we are young enough at heart or wise enough in spirit, we can see that both are true at the same time.

As Odell tells us, in 2018, there was a rainstorm that resulted from an atmospheric river, from an airborne rush of water that was coming from the Philippines. Odell has roots in the Philippines but she's never been there herself. So, she feels both connected to it and distant from it at the same time. She said,

As someone who is both Asian and white, I am an anomaly... The atmospheric river [the airborne rush of water from the Philippines] gives me an image of how to be from two places at once.

When we are young enough and wise, this seems so natural...and obvious. When we are healed and whole and healthy, we don't find contradiction here...because it is common. It's normal. It's just life, really, in all of its complexity. It's just life is the kind of miraculous experience that is too magical to pigeonhole, too wild to box and encapsulate, too strange to categorize or quantify, too precious to reduce and measure, too holy to constrain or confine, too important to imprison, to chain, to tie down, to subdue or to tame. Even life's quiet and uneventful, little miracles escape our grasp with ease when we grasp and try to hold them down.

All of our lives have changed. We don't know how exactly...not fully. But life is different than it was. Life has greatly changed and changed too quickly. We want it back. We want things to return to the way they were, so we invent all of these strategies. We pigeonhole, box and encapsulate, we chain and constrain and confine and tie down what

we. It feels safer when we do. And we should do this sometimes, so we are not always at wit's end...so we can enjoy the wealth and luxury of laughter everyday, filling us...even against the challenges that we face...filling us with the great and gentle touch of grace. We can find this all around us in this world...in the balances of life...of sun and moon, of joy and sorrow, of thrill and agony, of youth and wisdom. We can find these things in the coincidence of opposites.

Now, I'm romantic. That's obvious, right? That aspect of my personality is plainly visible. My practical sides are much harder to see. This is true for many of us. Parts of us are obvious and other parts are harder to see. When we harden—with fear, in pain or when faced with anxiety and doubt—it is common that we only see the obvious. We sometimes pigeonhole ourselves. Sometimes, we box and constrain one another. And we fight—often, for meager gains and at great consequence—because it's painful and scary when we feel uprooted and out of place. So, we fight—not knowing ourselves and not knowing one another—when other kinds of connection are possible. “It's the sense of touch,” a Los Angeles-based artist writes. You see, the artist writes,

In any real city, you walk. You brush past people. People bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something.

Well, we all live in L.A. now—at least, in this aspect of our lives. Of course, L.A. is a driving city. Most people get around town by car—always behind all of that metal and glass, always longing for touch, longing for contact and connection...so that we can more truly come to know ourselves and one another.

In this time of COVID (this time that, God-willing, is moving toward change), we've been isolated and encapsulated. We've been boxed and tied down and confined. But know thyself and ask inwardly, “In what ways have we been freed?” We can crash into one another if we want to...or we can find connection in better ways. In the book called The Art of War, Sun Tzu wrote,

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

Sun Tzu said, “Know thyself,” in other words.

Morihei Ueshiba said the same thing in a different time. Born in 1883 and passing away in 1969, Morihei Ueshiba was a fascinating man and lived a fascinating life. He was known as,

...history's greatest martial artist. Even as an old man of eighty, Morihei could disarm any foe, down any number of attackers, and pin an opponent with a single finger. Although invincible as a warrior, Morihei was above all a man of peace who detested fighting, war and any kind of violence.

The martial art of his deepest practice was the art of Aikido. Aikido translates as "the art of peace." In the book called *The Art of Peace*, Ueshiba writes,

The Art of Peace begins with you. Work on yourself and your appointed task in the Art of Peace. Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner, a suitable path to follow. You are here for no other purpose than to realize your inner divinity and manifest your innate enlightenment. Foster peace in your own life and then apply the Art to all you encounter.

I love both of these texts—*The Art of War* and *The Art of Peace*. It's wonderful, miraculous, when opposites coincide.

On the cover of your orders of service, there is a picture that was taken by a friend of mine from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The picture is of a sunflower that was grown in my garden at home. I gave my friend that flower at the end of our time together. She took it home and took a picture of it as the moon rose over the ocean. The sun had set but was still reflected over the shoulders of the sunflower and into the camera by the rising moon.

We can find these balances all around us in this world...balances of sun and moon, balances of joy and sorrow, balances of thrill and agony, balances of youth and wisdom. May they lead us as we journey together on the good way forward.

May it be so. Blessed be. Ashe and amen.