

## **Balance of Virtue**

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We are now at the fall equinox, which is a time to think about balance, because it is the time of the year when the day and night come into balance. Of course it is a transitory moment, for the nights have been lengthening and the days have been shrinking since June and will continue to do so until December. But at this moment they are in equipoise; it is the hinge time of the year. Or perhaps the fulcrum time, for the year is posed like a seesaw between light and dark, and it is a good time to reflect on the role of balance in our lives.

I have a personal reason for associating balance with the equinox. I have always been fascinated by the suggestion that at the time of the equinoxes, and only at those times, you can balance an egg on its end. Now the scientifically minded of you will probably pooh pooh this idea and many of you may yawn, but I somehow come back to trying to balance eggs every time the sun is crossing the equator. Here is a photo of my kitchen table in Staten Island last September, when I got five eggs standing out of a dozen. Here is a photo from spring of 2007 when I had eight. And two nights ago in my kitchen I could only get one egg standing out of a dozen.

We are now about 24 hours before the equinox, and this is the egg that was standing in that photo. Will it stand here? Let's see.

But there is of course another reason for talking about balance just now: in the last few days it has seemed that our world is completely out of balance. The balance between forces in the market has gone, and the balance between the public and the private sector is shifting radically. Just as certain politicians seemed to be making headway against the politics of fear which has gripped this country since the attacks of 9-11, we now face the prospect of, in Franklin Roosevelt's words, "fear itself," fear of a recession, fear of the radical impoverishment of all of us. The balance between hope and fear may be shifting in the direction of fear.

Our little bit of paradise here at the beginning of the ocean does not seem to be exempt. In fact, we may be more vulnerable than other parts of the country, for a serious downturn in the economy generally will first affect tourist areas, and the hospitality industry is our biggest employer.

I think the present crisis has one good effect: from one end of the political spectrum to the other, we are all praying for the steps taken by the government to work. No one has any stake in failure.

But we cling to this idea of balance, on a personal level as well. Many of us feel our diets, our sleep, our weight, our finances are all out of balance, and we yearn to achieve some kind of balance in those areas.

What has struck me recently is how so often what life presents us is not a choice between good and bad but between one good and another good. The conflict between Israel and Palestine, for instance, has often been described as a clash of right and right. It is right that the Jews should have a homeland after two millennia of persecution in the Christian west up to and including the Holocaust, and it is also right that the native arab population of Palestine should have a right to exist peacefully and live their lives. Two competing good things, and yet it has led to so much bloodshed and anguish.

The Gospels present the story of Jesus's ministry as a battle between good and evil, between God and Satan, for reasons which I will get into at another time, but this has led to a

very basic mind set in the Christian west where every good has to be paired against a bad. In this mind set, the choice is always good versus evil, but in real life, the choice is often between a good and another competing good.

μηδὲν ἄγαν, “Nothing in excess” was inscribed in the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, one of ancient Greece’s holiest sights. The Greeks in general and Aristotle in particular promoted the idea of the Golden Mean, a value that was not balanced too far in one direction or the other. Pythagoras sought harmonies between earth and heaven.

Pythagoras thought that earth was surrounded by seven spheres, each representing a heavenly body – earth, moon, stars and the visible planets, and each had its own balance, its own deity and its own characteristic pitch. Pythagoras taught his students to listen for this music of the spheres.

Balance, nothing in excess. In Buddhism as well we find moderation extolled. Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who we now call the Buddha, was born a prince in a palace and his father tried to shield him from the seamy side of life, so he never saw old, sick or dying people. But once on a walk outside the palace he had come upon a dying person and he realized that what he had been exposed to was only a small slice of life. So he left the palace, and his wife and infant child, to go find enlightenment. At first he tried the life of an ascetic. The ascetics of his time tried to find the path to nirvana by denying themselves all earthly pleasures. They ate and drank only the minimum necessary to sustain life, they lived without a home and with a minimum of clothing. Siddhartha tried this life for several years, but he eventually gave it up in favor of what he called the Middle Way. Thereafter he would practice not the self-indulgence of his life in the palace or the self-mortification of the ascetics, but a path between them of eating and physical comforts sufficient to sustain him. And it was while pursuing this Middle Way that Siddhartha achieved enlightenment, which is why we now refer to him as the Enlightened One, or the Buddha.

Now it is interesting to note a comparison here. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus contrasts himself to the ascetic John the Baptist, who wore the skins of animals and drank only water: “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; 34 the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” Luke 7:33.

Another school of thought which advocates the middle way is Confucianism. Here is a passage from the Analects of Confucius:

Confucius said: “When the Chun-Tzu, [the virtuous person] eats, he does not stuff himself; he does not seek perfect comfort in his dwelling place; he works with diligence and is careful in his speech. ... [He} enjoys pleasure without being immoral and expresses grief without excess” (Analects 1.14 and 3.20)

So balance, the middle way, the path of moderation, has a longstanding legacy in religious and philosophical thought. Moderation has been called “the silken strong running through the pearl chain of all virtues.”<sup>1</sup> At the foundation of this teaching is the idea that something that is good in itself when taken in small quantities becomes destructive when taken in large quantities.

But I think that is not all of it. The idea of nothing in excess is conventional wisdom but it depends on the vice and the virtue being two ends of the scale. I wonder if there aren’t time when the vice is actually hidden within the virtue, or another virtue in vice’s clothing.

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Hall, *Christian Moderation* from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Quotations

There is a school of philosophy called virtue ethics. The basic idea is that we shouldn't try to make people do good by giving them lots of rules, but by teaching them to be virtuous. This is a very ancient idea. The Greek, Roman and Chinese civilizations all tried to inculcate virtues in children as they grew up. Virtues like honor, integrity, honesty, generosity, wisdom, and reverence.

This approach to ethics resonates with classic Unitarianism, which had an idea called salvation by character. You got to heaven by cultivating a good character, and anyone could do it. It was not a matter of faith or obeying the rules; salvation was by the stuff inside you. For Nineteenth Century Unitarians, Jesus was not the son of God or a miraculous savior of the world, but the best example of a good character, someone to emulate.

And the Universalists went one better – if you really are guided by the stuff inside you, you don't worry about heaven or hell and besides that, there is no hell because God loves everyone too much to send anyone there. The reason to do right is because virtue is its own reward.

OK, so we have virtue as the standard for behavior, fitting with both sides of our theological heritage. But what happens when you have a clash of virtues?

Let's say you want to cultivate the virtue of generosity. So you give away all the money that comes into your possession. Then you are constantly in want, and you have to go begging to your friends and relations to bail you out. So you are impinging on the virtues of independence or autonomy. You become a parasite. Practicing one virtue has made it difficult for you to practice the other. The solution: you need to balance your virtues.

Or you want to practice the virtue of organization so you plan everything to a T, and then you can't practice the virtue of being spontaneous. Or you're so wrapped up in the problems of others you don't take any effort at self-care. You see it isn't a contest between vice and virtue, but between competing virtues, and the middle way, the preferred way, is the balance of virtues.

Now on a congregational level, this principle is also at work. One of the things we cherish about a church this size is intimacy. We all like coming in and knowing the people who are here and being known by them. We wouldn't feel nearly so happy if we walked in and there were a lot of strangers.

But while we practice the virtue of intimacy, we will be proclaiming the necessity to grow and trying to practice the virtue of welcoming the newcomer. We sometimes don't realize how our habits of intimacy present an unwelcoming aspect to the newcomer.

A great example of this is nametags. Nametags, let's face it, are a hassle. We wear them at conventions and other cold, impersonal places, but we don't like to wear them at church because, hey, it's my church and everybody knows me here.

And if nobody wears their nametags, the visitor is totally clueless and decides this church isn't really interested in getting to know me and goes down the street to the Methodists. Intimacy is a fine virtue, but in order to grow, we will have to balance it with the virtue of hospitality.

Another virtue we practice here is the virtue of frugality. We try to make do with less and make each dollar stretch further. Our principal community outreach is called the thrift shop, and we present a face to the world of solid Yankee virtue, so tidy and white and not a penny wasted.

But there is a complementary virtue called liberality. With all the interesting people and their fascinating lives and the wealth of talent within these walls, we yearn to have an active social action program, and an adult education program with offerings every hour of the week. I'm going to conjecture that it's because of that very virtue of frugality. Maybe I'm wrong

about this, but I would suspect that this church has adopted the ingrained habit that as soon as an idea rears its head, the automatic response is “we can’t afford it.” So it never gets articulated, it dies before it’s out of the mouth.

In this transitional season, I want to put it to you that we can balance these virtues. As the day balances the night, as the water and land are in balance, as the male and female balance, so our generosity should balance our frugality, so our welcome to the stranger should balance our intimate embrace for the long-term member, our frugality should be balanced by liberality.

Now comes the caveat. I have been talking about static balances. A static balance is not always a desirable thing. Scientists have a fancy word for balance, homeostasis. Homeostasis is a quality of a system where by it maintains a certain status and when a new factor is introduced, it adjusts and gets to a new equilibrium. A thermostat is a simple example; when the temperature in the room goes down, it turns on the heat until the temperature is restored. When the room gets too hot, it turns off the heat until the room cools off.

You can easily change this system – just adjust the thermostat, and you will require a new homeostasis.

I think churches have homeostasis. I have experienced many small churches who talk about growing for years, but do not grow at all. Some of the factors contributing to maintaining this equilibrium may be known, but others may be unconscious. But sometimes these equilibrium churches will reach a point and something just happens and they start either growing or declining rapidly. For years my home church, the Unitarian Church in Charleston, hovered around 100 members; then after I left there to go to divinity school, it started a steady growth spurt which is still going on fifteen years later, and it is now at 266 members.

From what I know of the history of this church, it seemed that the fellowship was at some equilibrium point, some homeostasis, when the rumor circulated that the Christian Science church was for sale, and that was an external factor which was enough to motivate the late Sandy Ellis, whom we memorialized yesterday, and the rest of you to raise the money to buy it in a very short time. This factor created a glorious imbalance which lasted for two years during which time you saw rapid growth in membership. Then equilibrium reasserted itself through the balance of Ed Hardy’s ministry, and then you were out of balance again.

So here we are at the Autumnal Equinox near the beginning of my ministry here, and the question is to we want to be in balance or out of balance? Are we looking to achieve the homeostasis we had during Ed Hardy’s years, or something different, and if so, what? There may be an answer of sorts in the egg. It is difficult to balance an egg, even at the equinox, when it is unmoving. But if you give the egg a little spin, it balances nicely and adjusts to changing surfaces. A dynamic balance, not a static one. What lessons this may hold for this church I leave to you. Amen.