Productive Disequilibrium©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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We have been studying brokenness this month of March here in worship, in our religious education classes and chalice circles. But as Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky point out, the idea of a broken system is an illusion. “The reality is that any social system (including an organization or a country or a family) is the way it is because the people in that system (at least those with the most leverage) want it that way.” I think about our country at this moment in time, and my only response is “ouch.” This college bribery scandal that broke this week is just one example of how the rich and powerful bend systems to their advantage, regardless of impact on others.

We can debate whether or not to call our system broken or whether brokenness is an illusion, but as a part of nature, we must adapt - as all species adapt - to changing circumstances and environments. We adapt or die. Philosopher and Jesuit Priest, Pierre Teihard de Chardin, wrote:

“Blessed be you, harsh matter, you who yield only to violence; You who force us to work if we would eat. Blessed be you, violent sea; You who unless we fetter you will devour us Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever new-born; You who, by constantly shattering our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further in our pursuit of the truth.”

Adaptive change is that change which in order to happen, requires us to change. We’re far more comfortable with technical problems which we can fix — identify the problem, bring in the expert-, and fix it.

It’s the adaptive challenges which are harder for us. They’re harder, first of all, because our current paradigm and expertise does not work on them, so we don’t know what to do, and struggle to even figure out what the challenge is. (If we knew what it was, that would mean we had a working paradigm that could guide us) Instead, with adaptive challenges, we often don’t know how to name the challenge, we don’t know what to do, and we don’t have an expert who can guide us. The expertise we do have, worked in previous situations, but not now.

Perhaps the greatest adaptive challenge we face as a species at this time, is how to change our consumer habits in order to save the planet which gives us life.... it’s not been done before, we don’t really know how to do it, and though there are a lot of things we know to do, we have to change our habits in order to do them. And though there are a lot of things we know to do, we don’t know if those things will be enough, or what else there is to learn and do.

In order to continue to work on adaptive challenges – such as climate change – we have to maintain a certain urgency about it and sustain the discomfort of not knowing. We have to try a lot of experiments, and we have to learn from the failures of those experiments, until we find some things that work.

This zone of discomfort, you may have guessed by my title, can be called productive disequilibrium.

But productive disequilibrium can exist within our bodies, within our families, our congregations, our nation, our world – and learning to manage that disequilibrium is one of the greatest tasks of being human. It is through that zone of productive disequilibrium, for example, that children acquire language – there has to be urgency, not knowing, experimentation, and failures along the way.
I’m going to show you a slide here, which I have found helpful to understand the concept better, and I’m going to try to put it into words, for those who can’t see the slide very well. What we have here is a graph.

The horizontal access is one of time – left to right – less to more. The vertical access describes the balance – the bottom of the line is comfortable and balanced and the top of the line is chaos – an imbalance so great we generally can’t tolerate it for long.

But what I want to talk about this morning is about a third of the way down – this zone of “productive disequilibrium” – where it is uncomfortable, but tolerable – like balancing on top of a ball – very hard to do, and we feel like we’ll fall over any second, but with practice – possible; nevertheless uncomfortable. Productive distress, it is labeled in red.

Then on this graph with a horizontal axis of time and vertical axis from balance to chaos, there are some graphing lines. There is a thin line that starts at the bottom near equilibrium that goes upward into the zone of complete imbalance and chaos, and goes pretty rapidly down to the bottom of the chart of equilibrium. This is what happens when we are faced with a technical problem.

For example, the last couple of Sundays the microphone here has been malfunctioning – creating a spontaneous popping sound, not related to anything the speaker did or didn’t do. Peter Greenfield, our dedicated sound technician, did some troubleshooting, repaired it, found it didn’t work right yesterday and has returned the old microphone until we find a more permanent solution. Though the first solution didn’t work, it is still a technical problem which, eventually, he will solve. And for that, we are grateful, Peter!

That same thin line that starts at the bottom of the chart – where everything is fine and dandy, feels good and in balance – that line, describing an adaptive challenge – shoots up the chart quickly getting into the zone of disequilibrium and making us all uncomfortable. This would be like the awareness Al Gore’s film, An Inconvenient Truth, brought to the issue of climate change and global warming in 2006, at least for some in this country. It immediately made folks uncomfortable and the result was that folks wanted to restore the balance by rebutting his facts, killing the messenger, or declaring a quick fix solution. That path is depicted by the thin line labeled in purple, work avoidance. It doesn’t help us with the adaptive challenge, but it does restore our sense of calm and balance.

In order to make progress on the uncomfortable issue of climate change, we have to stay in that zone of discomfort quite a long time in order to maintain a sense of urgency while not knowing what to do next, and experimenting a lot, learning from our failures along the way.

I’ve found this chart helpful on so many levels. In dealing with my own anxiety when I don’t know what to do next because I’m faced with an adaptive challenge. Rather than blaming myself for my inadequacies, or the world for its failures, I’m able to tolerate the discomfort long enough to make some progress on whatever adaptive challenge I’m facing – whether it be changing my personal habits – things like too little exercise and too much work, or, at work, tolerating the inevitable criticism that comes my way as the most public representative of an imperfect human institution. Knowing that the discomfort is a part of making progress toward healing brokenness, is one strategy for tolerating it longer.

My purpose this morning is to help us focus on how to mobilize and sustain ourselves through the period of risk that comes with adaptive change. I believe our survival as a species depends on our ability to do this, our survival as individuals depends on our ability to do this, and our survival as an institution depends on our ability to do this.
The church is always in the process of facing adaptive challenges – some of which we are aware, and others which remain hidden to us. So I’m going to talk about the church some this morning – both as the subject but also as an example. Because this theory, as I’ve mentioned, applies on multiple levels in our lives and as a species.

The first thing I want to acknowledge this morning is that this system, this congregation, has been undergoing a great deal of change in the last several years. Not only did you lose your long-time minister of 22 years, but you had two different interim ministers before calling me. Those interim ministers intentionally introduce change to a system to help you get ready for someone new, and then the new person – me – just introduces change by being me in a role which touches all parts of the congregation. Some changes I introduced intentionally, others unintentionally. Some I knew would cause some upset, and others – like adding hymns to worship – I had no idea would upset some people so much.

One change that I’ve introduced intentionally is that of creating the Council for Collaboration and Communication – a way for different parts of the church system to come together to collaborate, so that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing. It’s not an original idea, nor is it original to this system, though called other things in the past, but for some reason it didn’t last, and it’s important. This is a congregation, not unlike other UU congregations, that has honored the individual effort over the collective effort – with some resulting damage. You can read more about this challenge posed by the devotion to individualism in the current UU World by president of the UUA Susan Frederick-Gray.

There’s another article in that same issue of the UU World which has caused quite a backlash – understandably – the one called After L, G, and B, written from a cisgender perspective on the topic of trans and nonbinary people. The UUA has issued an apology and I made copies and put in the foyer at least one helpful response for you to read if you’re not following all this discussion online. You can read the UU World online, so if you’re not yet a member and not receiving the magazine at home, check it out at www.uuworld.org.

And here is the challenge of the adaptive space we are in as a movement – wanting to make progress on anti-racism and multiculturalism, transgender and gender nonbinary inclusion (not to mention neurodiversity and ability issues) – there is not a roadmap or known route to inclusion the way we dream of it, and so we screw up, not knowing what we don’t know, and forgetting, as the editor of the UU World acknowledged, to center the experience of those we seek to include. Rather than continuing to center the white cisgender able-bodied experience that still makes up the majority of our congregations, and our ministers and leaders, such as myself, and author of the unfortunate article in the UU World. As some lay leaders explored last Sunday, we are fish in the water, not even knowing about the water it is in.

I preach about this topic this morning, as we explore brokenness this month of March, not because this is a broken system – we are perfectly aligned to achieve the results we get – but because change is constant. Healing is possible, as Quinn attested to this morning, painful and possible. We either embrace it and work with it, or resist it and lose all choice in the matter. He could have chosen to avoid the pain by carefully, gingerly peeling the final layer of gauze from the wound, but in the end, it would have caused greater damage. Quinn chose the more painful and effective method. May we do the same.

And change is what this is about. It is what will allow us to survive as individuals, as species, and as an institution. This institution has undergone considerable change over the years. You were undergoing change long before I arrived and will be changing long after I’m gone. And some of it’s quite uncomfortable.
We’re still in a state of disequilibrium over several issues, I hope its productive – including this adherence to individualism, the reticence to submit our ideas to the collective wisdom, this desire for increasing inclusivity without actually changing. If we ease the tension too soon, find a temporary place of comfort, we may fail to make the long term healing necessary to solve and adapt to a new world.

The nature of adaptive challenges is that we don’t really understand the scope of the challenge. So, if I could really clearly name the challenges we face, that would be a sign that they are fixable and technical. So, if you only think I’m only hinting at difficulties here, you’re right. We don’t really understand the scope of the challenge.

Because we don’t, we have to change ourselves and our thinking, we have to try some experiments and fail, we have to keep on task, and not let ourselves get distracted by the tasks that are easier to figure out but don’t matter very much.

It’s too great a burden to think we are broken and that we have to fix it. It’s a burden to expect perfection and rely on expertise. The truth is much harder than that, we are all broken and we are all healing, and nobody knows what’s next. May this state of disequilibrium be productive, as we lay down that burden. “Lay down all that you have carried, the weight of the world that has rounded your back leaving you aching and exhausted. (words of Rev. Joan Javier-Duval) “here is where healing begins, where burdens are set down and alongside one another’s, their magnitude does not seem as great”

Our closing song is a spiritual from the time of slavery, the tune named Sojourner after Sojourner Truth, the name she gave herself when told by God to speak the truth about slavery. Singing songs of liberation in the midst of adaptive challenges as great as human bondage, singing songs of joy during productive stress and disequilibrium is something we can learn from our ancestors, our neighbors, our larger collective human identity. Will you please rise in body or in voice and join with me in song?

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.