

# Being a people of Paradox & Ambiguity



## The Positive Sides of Ambiguity & Paradox

All I can think of when I consider what it means to be a people of Ambiguity and Paradox is “Welcome to my world right now!” Individually, as a congregation, and in the larger Unitarian Universalist Association—we are in a time of both ambiguity and paradox.

It’s June and before the month is over, we will know the results of the UUA Presidential election. The results are expected to be announced on Saturday, June 24th at 4:15pm Arizona time. At that time, we will know whether I return as the Lead Minister at UUCP, or if I move to Boston to be UUA President and you will be welcoming a fabulous interim minister.

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. For example, the closer the election gets, I know that no matter the outcome there will be joy, and no matter the outcome there will be grief. As a community, I suspect many of us hold conflicting emotions—excitement about the potential of something new, anticipation for the larger faith, grief at saying goodbye, uncertainty about what the future might hold. 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.

As a larger faith community, we have been invited to deepen our understanding of how white supremacy culture influences our own Unitarian Universalist institutions. The definition being used in the UU White

Supremacy Teach-Ins, organized by three fabulous religious educators of color, Aisha Hauser, Kenny Wiley and Christina Rivera, 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 “creative extremist for love/justice doula,” Micky ScottBey Jones (who rocks by the way!) 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. And yet, we still can create brave space to hold hard conversations, to make space for seismic shifts in our own hearts and understanding, make room to grow ever deeper into the fullness of our humanity, our common creation. 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. It is just an invitation to keep our hearts and spirits open for the work, for greater learning, for growing wisdom and community.

*Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray*

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## Questions to Contemplate

### Definitions:

*Ambiguity*: having more than one possible meaning or interpretation; uncertainty, inexactness.

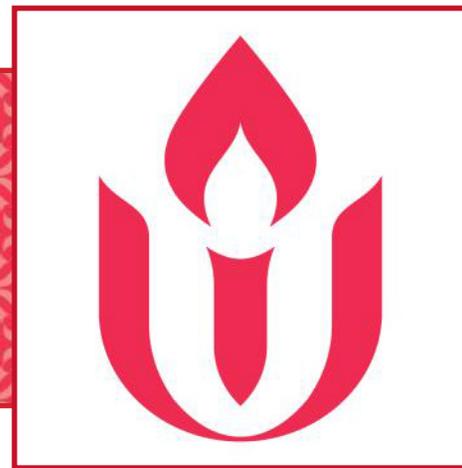
*Paradox*: a situation or statement that seems contradictory or absurd but is actually valid or true; a contradiction. A statement or concept that contradicts itself.

1. When is a time in your life when you felt like you had to live with major uncertainty or ambiguity. What spiritual or personal practices or resources were helpful in navigating that time?
2. How do children deal with ambiguity and paradox? What changes as you grow up?
3. As Unitarian Universalists, we talk about the value and wisdom of many religious traditions. We are people who say we can appreciate multiple truths. When have you struggled to make room for a truth different than your own in a personal relationship or community?
4. How does ambiguity or paradox show up in your own religious beliefs? Are you comfortable with ambiguity in belief? Has this always been the case, or did you notice a time when ambiguity felt more comfortable than certainty.
5. Have you experienced deep personal growth from an adversity that you didn't think would lead to growth?
6. What is your natural communication style - literal and clear, or more abstract and ambiguous?
7. How have you experienced theodicy in your life (when bad things happen to good people)?
8. Do you make room in your life for sacred ambiguity, the idea of moving through the unknown with faith, grace, trust, or awe?
9. How does power and privilege show up in paradoxical ways? (ie: how women have to demonstrate extra competence in their professions while still getting paid less)
10. What terms express paradoxical or ambiguous feelings you've experienced? (consider "bittersweet" or "deafening silence")

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# Being a people of Paradox & Ambiguity

## Quotes and Thoughts on the Theme



Loss is so paradoxical: It is at once enormous and tiny.—Meghan O'Rourke

The true mystic is always both humble and compassionate, for she knows that she does not know.—Richard Rohr

The words of truth are always paradoxical.—Lao Tzu

I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.—Gilda Radner

There are some millionaires  
With money they can't use  
—Maya Angelou from "Alone"

All people are paradoxical. No one is easily reducible, so I like characters who have contradictory impulses or shades of ambiguity. It's fun, and it's fun because it's hard.  
—Edward Norton

It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.

—Leo Buscaglia

I think if a poet wanted to lead, he or she would want the message to be unequivocally clear and free of ambiguity. Whereas poetry is actually the home of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty.

—Billy Collins

**"I will take the  
ring to Mordor  
though I do not  
know the way."**

**—Frodo Baggins in "The  
Fellowship of the Ring"  
by JRR Tolkien**

It is paradoxical, yet true, to say, that the more we know, the more ignorant we become in the absolute sense, for it is only through enlightenment that we become conscious of our limitations. Precisely one of the most gratifying results of intellectual evolution is the continuous opening up of new and greater prospects.—Nikola Tesla

We are faced with the paradoxical fact that education has become one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought.

—Bertrand Russell

One thing that everybody told me about directing was, "Never compromise". And the whole job is a compromise. So it's very paradoxical. How do you not compromise when the whole thing is about compromise?  
—Matt Dillon

The reverse side also has a reverse side  
—Japanese Proverb

Beyond our ideas of right and wrong, there is a field. I'll meet you there.  
—Rumi

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### Paradox Riders

By Tom Owen-Towle  
*UU World*, February 2003

Riding paradoxes is apparently our peculiar niche as liberal religionists. Who really wants existence tidily wrapped up? Who covets convictions set in stone? Plenty of people to be sure, but not Unitarian Universalists.

We seem to pitch our tents between mysticism and humanism, theism and naturalism, belief and doubt, devotion and skepticism. We are a reasonable religion with mystical sensibilities. My colleague Frances West puts it sagely: “The humanist and the theist live in me, each sometimes puzzled by the presence of the other, but willing to keep talking. So may it continue.” Mystical humanism — or as someone has awkwardly put it, “humanisticism” — is perhaps the principal ambiguity Unitarian Universalists must harness, then ride. Some do it sidesaddle, tentatively; others with both hands to the reins, galloping full-bore ahead. Regardless, it provides a spirited jaunt!

### From “Opening a Mountain: Koans of the Zen Masters”

Koans are rhetorical devices that use paradox, word-play, and ambiguity to communicate a message about the maddening quality and inherent limitations of language. The absurdities, contradictions, negations, and double negations, as well as the gestures, demands, and demonstrative behavior that characterize this discourse, point to a direct, unimpeded realization of the true nature of reality liberated from all illusion, pretension, and attachment.

Example koan:  
“What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Or this zen proverb:  
Before I sought enlightenment, the mountains were mountains and the rivers were rivers.  
While I sought enlightenment, the mountains were not mountains and the rivers were not rivers.  
After I attained enlightenment, the mountains were mountains and the rivers were rivers.”

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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

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## UU Writers on the Theme



### Delicious Ambiguity

Rev. Marisol Caballero

How is it that I, a minister and known skeptic, am able to a) not run around screaming that the sky is falling and, b) do my job at all? This question perplexes those belonging to religious traditions that offer comfort in the form of certainty.

For some, answers to life's toughest questions offer reassurance that there is order in this chaotic world and in our sometimes chaotic lives. For others, such as myself, the Great Mystery does not cause panic, but instead eases my mind, reminding me that I don't have to understand or know everything; that we are all just feeling our way through this life together. No one is an expert. Which, for those who expect a minister to be an expert at all things crucial and who look to clergy to get them through the most difficult days of their lives with reassuring certainties, I would definitely not be the one to call on.

As a chaplain, I once had a patient who was dying. Though he was unable to speak, he would communicate by writing on a legal pad. He told me that he was afraid. I asked him what he was afraid of. He wrote, "I've never done it before..."

This patient was deeply Catholic, yet I knew him well enough to understand that his honesty about the unknown was more a request to witness the reality of his anxiety about the unknown, rather than to disabuse him of it. Questions of the hereafter have always struck me as the easiest to enjoy for their ambiguity. It's almost as if I don't want any spoilers on the surprise

adventure that awaits me after I die.

Lately, however, it seems that so much of our living world, the here and now, is more topsy-turvy than usual. It's a human spiritual need to want to make sense out of the events of our lives. We not only want, but need life's unexpected changes to have a deeper meaning. If not a "perfect ending" or poems that rhyme, we would at least appreciate "a clear beginning, middle, and end" every once in a while. It's much harder to treat daily ambiguities as adventures we should face with excitement, especially as big changes seem to have a way of raining down all at once.

The longer I live, the more I am taught the same lesson, over and over, by wildly different circumstances: the more I expect the unexpected; the more I roll with the punches of life's tragedies and revel in life's joys and victories; the more I give in to the reality that I am not as in charge of and cannot plan as much of this life as I would like, the more I can fully experience and even come to enjoy the deliciousness of my journey's ambiguity.

#### *Prayer:*

Giver of Life, help me to approach this moment, this day, this week, month, this year, this life as an adventure whose ending I do not yet know. Allow me to embrace each plot twist without self-blame or despair, but with innocent wonder. May each change be savored and each accompanying emotion be fully felt, that I may fully live.