

On the One Hand . . . (Ambivalence, Ambiguity, and Ambidexterity)

Rev. Mark Hayes

January 3, 2010

There was a farmer. He had a horse, and one day it ran away. All the neighbors said: "Isn't it awful that your horse ran away?"

The farmer said: "Maybe yes, maybe no."

The next day the horse returned, with a filly in tow. All the neighbors said: "Aren't you lucky that your horse came back and now you have a filly too?"

The farmer said: "Maybe yes, maybe no."

The next day the farmer's son was trying to break the filly, and it threw him, and he broke his leg. All the neighbors said: "Isn't it awful that your son broke his leg? Now he can't help you on the farm until it heals. That's just terrible!"

The farmer said: "Maybe yes, maybe no."

The next day the Emperor came through, conscripting all the young men for his latest war. But because the farmer's son's leg was broken, he was passed over. The neighbors said: "Aren't you lucky that your son's leg was broken after all, so that he was spared from the war?"

The farmer said: "Maybe yes, maybe no..."

The neighbors are quick to attach a judgment to events—both positive and negative—before they can possibly know the full outcome. They assume they know enough to jump to those kinds of conclusions—when they don't. They take a black-and-white approach to a world filled with shades of gray. They seek clear-cut answers in the face of ambivalence and ambiguity. Just like many of us.

On the one hand, absence makes the heart grow fonder. On the other hand, out of sight, out of mind.

On the one hand, look before you leap. On the other hand, he who hesitates is lost.

On the one hand, many hands make light work. On the other hand, too many cooks spoil the broth.

On the one hand, the pen is mightier than the sword. On the other hand, actions speak louder than words.

I could go on and on, but you get the idea. On the one hand, each of those common sayings captures a piece of the Truth. On the other hand, they are mutually contradictory. Aristotle's law of the excluded middle asserts that in the case of two contradictory propositions, one must be true, the other false. While that may be so in the limited, sterile world of symbolic logic, real life is more complicated and messy. Life is often ambiguous and ambivalent. Context and subjective judgment come into play, and certainty eludes us.

So what happens is that we selectively invoke those partially-true sayings to bolster our personal opinions in particular situations. It's sort of like the common practice of proof-texting, where people cite quotations from the Bible, often taken out of context, to support their personal theological or political convictions. And of course you can find support, in that way, for nearly any propositions, including those which are contradictory and mutually exclusive.

I came across a story that illustrates the danger of taking such a simplistic, literal approach to using the Bible. A man dissatisfied with his life decided to consult the Bible for guidance. Closing his eyes, he flipped the book open and pointed to a random spot on the page. Opening his eyes, he read the verse under his finger. Matthew 27:5 said "Then Judas went away and hanged himself." Closing his eyes again, the man randomly selected another verse. This

one, Luke 10:37, read, "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" An extreme case, yes, but it makes the point. Scripture, like life, must be taken in its fuller context, and there are no simple answers.

The two-handed experience of life doesn't happen only in over-generalized proverbs or biblical proof-texting either. We encounter it in many specific, real-life situations as well. On the one hand, smokers should have the right to smoke if they want to, but on the other hand, non-smokers should have the right to breathe smoke-free air. On the one hand, I loved the freedom of being single, but on the other hand, being married and having a family are very fulfilling.

On the one hand, having the freedom to make choices is empowering. On the other hand, when a situation is ambiguous, or our feelings are ambivalent – that is, when a situation can be interpreted in more than one way, or we have feelings on both sides of an issue – having to make a choice can be difficult and frustrating. Harry S Truman once said, "Give me a one-handed economist! All my economists say, 'On the one hand . . . on the other hand'."

One approach to the "problems" of ambiguity and ambivalence is to refuse to play the game by insisting on clear, simple answers. By choosing certainty as an act of will. On the one hand, this approach simplifies life and removes the discomfort of always being torn by multiple possibilities. You decide once and for all how things are and how they should be – like the bumper sticker that was popular some years ago: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." No more wishy-washy indecisiveness.

On the other hand, this approach can have some negative consequences. Psychotherapist Don Fenn, in an article on the positive aspects of ambivalence ("Ambivalence – The Supernova of Psychic Evolution"), points out that one of the principle outcomes of a misguided single-mindedness is violence. "In order for one side of the argument to be absolutely true, [he writes,] the other side must be erased by all means possible – usually in the name of God as a holy cause! Human history is overwhelmingly dominated by such primitive violent behavior."

Fenn argues that living with ambivalence – being able to feel contradictory emotions about things and to discover additional options – is an evolutionary capability that may save us from ourselves. He says this "is the most fundamental skill required for handling conflict, [both internal and interpersonal]. Indeed it's the essential skill that will eventually vault us into the wisdom of a peaceful world community; without which we will continue to wander cynically on the premise that it can never be accomplished."

That brings me to the third term in my title this morning: ambidexterity. The simple, straightforward definition of ambidexterity is the ability to use either hand with equal facility, whether writing, or eating, or throwing or hitting a ball, or whatever. The term may be understood in a wider sense to apply to the ability to use both "right-brain" and "left-brain" skills in a balanced and effective way. By combining the right-brain qualities of imagination, creativity, and intuition with the left-brain skills of logic, rationality, and analysis, we are able to work to our full potential. We can foster that kind of ambidextrous mindset by consciously working to incorporate both left and right brain activities in our daily life, and as a result use our whole brain to its best potential.

I propose that we expand the idea of ambidexterity a bit further, to include the ability to use both hands equally skillfully in those "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" situations. I can actually hold several balls in one hand. Or in the other hand. But it takes both hands to juggle the balls, keeping them all in the air, in motion. To keep all the possibilities in play in a dynamic pattern of motion.

Of course even in ambiguous situations, in which we have ambivalent feelings, there comes a time when we need to decide, to take a stand. But in order to be honest with ourselves

and the situation - to maintain our integrity in our choices - we need to acknowledge and consider all relevant factors. Not just those that point toward one particular solution. We need to weigh everything and then make a choice. And even then, we need to take responsibility for all of the consequences, both positive and negative.

It's a matter of facing life honestly, in all of its complexity. Letting go of the comfort of simplicity and certainty. Embracing the responsibility and the danger inherent in facing the world in its fullness. And being willing to recognize our mistakes and correct them when we can. Sometimes our left hand may have to step in to clean up the mess made by our right hand.

Writer Kathleen Norris addresses these issues in an explicitly spiritual context in her book, *Amazing Grace*. One chapter is titled "Belief, Doubt, and Sacred Ambiguity." I like that last term: "*sacred* ambiguity." That suggests that ambiguity is not something to be feared, avoided, or denied, but rather a gift, worthy of reverence and respect – sacred.

In that chapter, Norris cites Anglican monk Martin Smith, 'who wrote in an issue of . . . his monastery's newsletter that ambivalence is a sacred emotion.' He went on to write that he finds

a widespread need in contemporary spirituality to find ways of praying and engaging with God, our selves, and one another that have room for simultaneous contradictions, the experience of opposite emotions. We need to find the sacredness in living the tensions and to admit how unsacred, how disconnecting and profane, are the attempts at praying and living while suppressing half of the stuff that fascinates or plagues us. . .

Again, it takes both hands – both arms – to embrace the whole world. Consider for a moment, in this context, what might be a possible response to the famous Zen koan, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Of course it is in the nature of Zen koans that there is no *one* answer. The answer is not the point. The point is a shift in perception, an opening of the mind to remove barriers to enlightenment. And one step toward that shift may be the ability to hold multiple answers, multiple interpretations, in the mind at one time, in creative tension.

One common – and growing - approach to the problems of ambiguity, ambivalence, and complexity is to cultivate an attitude of embracing "both/and" rather than of "either/or" thinking. One example of this approach is the BothAnd Project, which is a joint initiative of the Mainstream Media Project and the Harvard Global Negotiation Project. According to its website:

The objective of BothAnd is to shift the national conversation from destructive debate to creative problem-solving by demonstrating new forms of constructive interaction in the broadcast media as a catalyst to a broader transformation of our civic culture.

Our goal is to replace *either/or* with *BothAnd* thinking as a more productive approach to divisive public issues.

Instead of assuming that *either* one side *or* the other is correct, *BothAnd* maintains that *both* one side *and* the other (or others) hold pieces of the answer and that only by combining the best of each can we invent the hybrid solutions that enable us to attain our highest rather than lowest common denominator.

That word “and” is the key. It is magical. Just a couple of days ago I was looking at a book on mysticism (*The Naked Now*, by Richard Rohr). It had nothing to do with this sermon, but I discovered at the very end of the book a little section titled “The Shining Word ‘And’”, in which he illustrates some of that word’s magic. And so I’d like to share a portion of that with you as I wrap up my remarks this morning.

“And” teaches us to say yes.

“And” is willing to wait for insight and integration.

“And” keeps us from dualistic thinking.

“And” keeps us inclusive and compassionate toward everything.

“And” heals our racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism.

“And” allows us to critique both sides of things.

“And” allows us to enjoy both sides of things.

“And” is the mystery of paradox in all things.

“And” does not trust love if it is not also justice.

“And” does not trust justice if it is not also love.

“And” is far beyond my religion versus your religion.

“And” allows us to be both distinct and yet united.

As we go on about our living, may we bring to it both our hands – the one and the other. And using both hands, may we embrace life and each other with mercy, compassion, openness, and love.

May it be so.