

Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

December 1, 2019

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The Balance of Giving and Taking

Daoism: Yin and Yang

Before Beth's beautiful music, we heard a verse of the Tao Te Ching in the wonderful translation by Stephen Mitchell. In Taoism I encounter again and again the idea of balance, the yin and yang. for instance, in today's reading we heard:

*Know the male,
yet keep to the female...*

*Know the white,
yet keep to the black...*

*Know the personal,
yet keep to the impersonal...*

*The world is formed from the void,
like utensils from a block of wood.
The Master knows the utensils,
yet keeps to the block:
thus she can use all things.¹*

My understanding, however, is that balance between things does not always have to mean equal parts of each. There is a flow between things that keeps us healthy, and being too much of one thing all the time is unhealthy. If I am more of an artist than a scientist, that means that the artist part of me will be present more often, but for me staying in balance means remembering the scientist part of myself as well.

Today's Message and Three Principles

Today my message is about the balance between giving and taking. I will talk a little bit about this balance in a marriage or close relationship; then about what it looks like in a congregation such as this one.

And for each of the examples I give, there are principles that hold true—in a personal relationship and in a congregation:

1. Balance is not total equality of giving and taking.
2. Imbalance for a week, a season, or a year is expected. Permanent imbalance is unhealthy for the system.
3. Communicate about giving and taking: Ask for what you need. Acknowledge what you're giving or offering. Check in periodically to see how the balance is.

Giving and Taking in a Marriage or Close Relationship

How does this play out in a marriage or close relationship? It may be easiest to see when we look at it alongside the idea of the five love languages, which I learned from a book by Gary Chapman. According to this book, people understand and express love in different ways—called love languages—and the five love languages are:

Words of Affirmation / Acts of Service / Quality Time / Giving Gifts / Physical Touch²

The wisdom of Gary Chapman is that people are different in which love language speaks to them most directly. So in a balanced relationship, one person might consistently give the other more Words of Affirmation, because that's their partner's love language – and the other person might give back more in Giving Gifts, because that's their partner's love language – and the different expressions of love may actually balance one another.

So balance is not total equality of giving and taking—my first principle.

It's also true that imbalance for a week, a season, or a year is expected, but permanent imbalance is unhealthy for the system (my second principle). In a healthy relationship, one person might be taking more than giving for a substantial period of time—because they are physically ill, mentally struggling, grieving, changing careers—and perhaps there is a time when the roles will be reversed. A relationship that features always one person giving and one person taking, however, would not be healthy.

My third principle is to communicate about giving and taking: Ask for what you need. Acknowledge what you're giving or offering. Check in periodically to see how the balance is. In other words, talking about this stuff with one's partner is crucial. It may be that what one person thinks is hard for the other to give is really not so hard, but another thing that they want their partner to give is harder than they realize. So sometimes we shouldn't worry so much about what our partner is giving or being asked to give, but other times we should worry more about what we are asking them to give.

Giving and Taking in This Congregation: emotional giving and taking (joys and sorrows)

When it comes to this congregation, I say that the same dynamics apply. One place that we see a balance of giving and taking is in this room on Sunday mornings when we share Joys and Sorrows.

The unspoken expectation, I think, is that when someone expresses a sorrow, the rest of the people will offer support: "Walking with you is our prayer," we say. And maybe a follow-up would be appreciated, if not expected...a kind word during coffee hour, someone offering to listen further, someone offering a hug. In other words, there is an emotional give and take. And we don't expect perfect balance, that you will offer emotional support in Joys and Sorrows exactly as many times as you will ask for emotional support. No one is keeping score here, and: balance is not total equality of giving and taking.

My second principle applies here too: that imbalance for a week, a season, or a year is expected, but permanent imbalance is unhealthy for the system. Someone who speaks their sorrow every week and asks for support is sustainable for a period of time, but if it is only one-sided for the whole time a person is part of this community, that may put a strain on the community.

And this leads to the other principle of giving and taking that I keep repeating this morning: communicate about giving and taking: Ask for what you need. Acknowledge what you're giving or offering. Check in periodically to see how the balance is. Someone may be able to willingly and joyfully offer support to someone else if they ask for it – and everyone is also encouraged to say, "I'm sorry, I hear that you're going through a rough time right now, but I don't have the emotional energy to support you right now."

This is where it's worth mentioning that this fellowship has a full-time minister, and that the rules of balanced taking and giving don't apply to me. It's my job to give support here; and it's not professionally ethical for me

to seek emotional support from the congregation. In that way, I aim to monitor the balance of the system so that congregants don't have to feel burned out trying to support one another.

Giving and Taking in This Congregation: time and energy giving and taking (committee work and volunteering)

Another realm of give and take in this congregation is committee work and volunteering. In order for the Fellowship to function, you need people on committees dealing with policies, such as safety policies for a fire drill; you need people to do budgets and pay the bills; you need people to set up and clean up, to play the piano, to make coffee. All of these things are done by volunteers in this Fellowship. What would it look like to have a healthy give and take: a balance of those who give their time and energy doing these things, and those who receive the benefit of the committee work and the volunteering?

First, let's remember that balance is not total equality not everyone is going to drink the same amount of coffee as they prepare, or wash exactly as many coffee cups as they use.

Second, let's remember that imbalance for a week, a season, or a year is expected. Permanent imbalance is unhealthy for the system. There may be a period of time when you don't do any committee work or volunteering, and just take from this experience – and that's OK! But a person who is part of a community like this for many years and never contributes their time and energy would be an imbalance. Likewise, a person may give a lot of their time and energy for a period of time (a week, a season, a year) – and that's wonderful. But a person who gives and gives for years, and doesn't receive back from the Fellowship, is also an imbalance.

Because... What's the other key to the balance of giving and taking? Communication. Communicate about giving and taking: Ask for what you need. Acknowledge what you're giving or offering. Check in periodically to see how the balance is. Let's talk about this. – if the same three people are always washing the dishes, maybe someone else should take a turn. If committee positions are not rotating, and the same people are on the committees, the Fellowship needs to talk about that, to see who is giving willingly and who is getting burned out – and who else would like to be asked to give of their time and energy.

The title of today's service is "Take what you need, give all you can." Ask for what you need—maybe it's emotional support. Maybe you need your kids to have a safe and meaningful Sunday school experience while you enjoy some time in this sanctuary. Maybe you need to feel that you are part of this loving community. And give all you can: support others. Volunteer your time and get involved in the business of the Fellowship, as you are willing and able.

Giving and Taking in This Congregation: financial giving and taking (discretionary fund, stewardship campaign)

I've done all this talking about giving and taking so far without even mentioning money, but I will mention it before I end. This Fellowship runs on the donations of its members – the money that goes in the basket, and the money that people pledge every year to contribute.

Some of the same principles I've been talking about all morning apply here as well. Balance in giving is not the same as equality in giving, because some people have a lot more financial capacity to give than others. And communication is important in financial giving in a congregation as well. The leadership of the congregation should ask for what they need – which they do every year through the budget process and the yearly stewardship campaign – and people should be honest about their willingness to give more. We should check in periodically with each other.

There will be more about the financial part of sustaining a healthy congregation that we will talk about at a future service – myself and/or the members of the finance team.

I will end my message this morning with a prayer:

May we all know that both giving and taking are in our nature. In a relationship, in a small group, in a congregation, we need to ask for things at times. May we be willing to ask for what we need with no sense of shame. May we receive gifts that others give with gratitude and appreciation.

And may we give freely and deeply whenever we can. May we each know the joy of giving emotional support to someone who needs it; may we experience the sharing of our gifts and talents and our labor...and may we know the limits of our giving, so that we don't feel resentful or burned out.

Spirit of love and life, may we be wise enough to take graciously and to give generously, and to tend to the balance between the two – in our relationships, in our families, and in this congregation.

May it be so.

¹ Mitchell, Stephen (translation copyright 1988). Tao Te Ching: An Illustrated Journey. London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 1999.

² Chapman, Gary (1992). *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. Northfield Publishing. ISBN 978-1881273158.