

"Tension is the Great Integrity"
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Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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It is so good to be here with you today, to be in this sanctuary, to have the privilege and pleasure to hear the choir and the singing in the congregation, to see the worship life of the church back in its proper home.

Happy Halloween, All Soul's Day, Dia de los Muertos—This is one of my favorite holiday times, this time of year when the veils between the world of the living and the world of the mystery that happens after we die are stretched thin and we can be in closer contact with our departed ancestors. This time of year I especially think about my own place as one link in that unbroken chain of life, able to see only the last few links behind me and to faintly imagine the links that I hope will come after me, but knowing that chain stretches back billions of years, and that it may yet reach as far forward. This time offers opportunities for us to draw strength and support from those who have gone before us, to remember our roots with special clarity, and to evaluate and if necessary redirect our lives towards our greater integrity.

Also a funny and coincidental time to be preaching in the Bay Area about tension, and to have an image of bridge cables on the front of the OOS! Sometimes the release of tension (as with the repairs on the Bay Bridge that buckled under the combined vibrations of both traffic and wind) can create more hassles and headaches, but there are always new possibilities opening, new energy released. The trick is how to channel that energy.

An idea that I've heard many times around this church in the time I've been here is the importance of Both/And thinking, and this is precisely the energetic tension that I'm talking about, the willingness to do the hard work of acknowledging the world as a more complicated place than a world of either/ors. There is huge energy in that both/and place, and it is one of the cornerstones of my faith and my hope.

I want to make clear that I am talking about tension, not stress—if you're like me, just hearing either of those words might make your neck muscles get tighter. Take a second, let your shoulders descend, take a deep breath. As we were reminded by our chalice lighting, this is a time that we can set the stress of our lives down for a moment as we come together. As for the distinction between stress and tension, I see stress as more of a blockage of energy, and tension as the drawing it out. Here's a joke that might help make that distinction a little clearer: A woman looks out her office window and sees another women walking down the sidewalk, with a long piece of rope dragging behind her. She walks out and says, "Excuse me, I saw you walking, and I have to ask: why are you pulling that rope through town?" The other woman pauses, looks the first woman up and down with a critical eye and asks her, "Have you ever tried pushing a piece of rope through town?"

When I imagine trying to push a piece of rope, I notice almost immediate changes in my body: the muscles in my belly, neck, and shoulders tighten up, my breathing feels

shallower, and I feel frustrated at setting myself to an impossible task. Imagining pulling the rope, on the other hand, requires barely any thought—it is a task in line with the integrity of the rope.

My purpose today is not to talk you into being more stressed out by imagining pushing rope, but rather to encourage you to pay attention to the tensions that we all live within. Those tensions can limit us and push us down, but if we notice them and at least make their acquaintance (if not befriend) those tensions we can access some of the immense power that is bound up there, and learn to use it to enrich or even transform our own lives and the world around us. We can learn to harness our integrity and to let it pull us along.

How can we locate our own integrity out of tension? What are some places where we find ourselves in these balances?

Bridge cables and flying buttresses both draw strength from the tension they are under. The image of the Brooklyn Bridge, with its incredibly delicate web of cables anchored to the fixed points of those massive support towers, shows this. Frank Lloyd Wright's workshop in Oak Park, Illinois, is a good illustration of this: chains are strung between the beams and pillars of the large open central room, anchoring the integrity of the room by holding the pillars beams in tension against the weight of the roof—many thanks to John and Aiko, who I ran into on BART last Sunday, for sending me that photo and information.

Alexander of Macedonia and the Gordian knot: a legend in the Phrygian city of Gordium said that whoever untied the knot ceremonially binding the cart that, according to another legend, had belonged to the founder of the city, would be the rightful ruler of the city and region. Alexander, unable to find a free end to the knot to try to untie it, cut it clean in half with his sword. Sometimes our lives get knotted up like that cart, and lateral thinking of the kind that Alexander used (we'll give him credit for that, even though it might just have been simple frustration and temper) can set all the energy bound up in that tension free to other purposes.

Tension in our gender--pull between received instructions from society (which often conflict and diverge) and who we truly are and what we truly want to do. In all areas of life--professional, leisure, sexual--and where the possibilities for growth and learning are rich and the stakes truly life-or-death--transgender day of remembrance was just held for the hundreds of trans people murdered last year for the apparently unforgivable crime of being themselves, and out of fear of the burning courage that it takes to be trans.

Tension between what we want and need. What I want is to watch tv and eat Kentucky Fried Chicken all day. And then do it again the next day! And the next... you get the idea. Some people have the opposite problem, where they work work work, and the inner voice that drives them to work doesn't leave any room for the crucial role of play in a healthy and happy personhood. Living in a constant tension

between my sometimes overactive play impulse and my drive to do right by other people (since I can't be truly free unless everyone is truly free) helps me to be creative, and active, and vital. Tension in how we learn from our demons--what our demons say about what is truly important to us, demons the expression of something deep and true about ourselves, but blown out of proportion/relationship. I am learning that one of my demons is self-indulgence/gluttony. This doesn't tell me that at the deepest level I'm lazy and selfish, but that the pleasure in living is deeply important to me, on a fundamental level I am about appreciating and reverencing the creative and joyful possibilities of being alive.

Learning to find the balance between feeling totally worthless and grandiose, living in the tense place of self-honesty, fully acknowledging one's growing edges and seeking help and support with them and living out one's gifts to the fullest. --This takes a great deal of courage, and probably a lifetime of practice
Happy doesn't come from self-indulgence, happy comes from a healthy creative tension between our wants and shoulds, from knowing that we're doing good work in the world, but also within ourselves. Live on the top of the bell curve. On one side is the slack of not enough tension, where the cable lies in a limp and disorganized pool. On the other side is the slack of too much tension, where the cable has snapped and its frayed ends lie scattered.

Taking up the slack: tightening up our selves and our examinations of ourselves, looking at how we operate. Where do we have a lot of slack: where do we just go along with what we are told by society, and where do we have a lot of integrity? Where are we most ourselves and where are we mostly what we are told to be? Where we are most ourselves are the places that we have the most creative tension, where we study and ask and question and talk with others to find out where we impact them.

Tensegrity and the soul: The quote from which I've taken the title of the service is from R. Buckminster Fuller, a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, the grandson of Unitarian minister Arthur Buckminster Fuller, and grandnephew of Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller (whom we revere in part because of her creative resistance to the ways in which her society conceived of the limitations of her gender). Here it is in its fuller context:

“The word 'tensegrity' is an invention: a contraction of 'tensional integrity.' [Tensegrity](#) describes a structural-relationship principle in which structural shape is guaranteed by the finitely closed, comprehensively continuous, tensional behaviors of the system and not by the discontinuous and exclusively local compressional member behaviors. *Tensegrity provides the ability to yield increasingly without ultimately breaking or coming asunder.*” The great structural systems of Universe are accomplished by islanded compression and omnicontinuous tension. Tension is the great integrity. Truth is a tendency. Note that tension, tendon, and

tendency all stem from the Latin *tendere* meaning to stretch (as does tent and tenuous, surprisingly).

This is how Fuller characterized structures like the geodesic dome, which grows structurally stronger as it is built larger. While the concept doesn't map out precisely—our lives are not finitely closed systems, for example—it is one useful way to think about our individual lives, and for me a synthesis of our first and seventh principles. Our worth and dignity, our integrity, is a function of the decisions we make regarding the connections in our lives, the systems that we participate in, that we benefit from and are oppressed by, the people that whose lives we touch and who touch ours in return.

And like a geodesic dome, our lives grow stronger the larger we live them, the more we challenge that which is oppressive and the more bless each others' lives. My hope for each of us is that we be able to live more and more into our lives, and that our lives resonate in harmony to a music that is so big it can't be heard or felt, only lived. As Dr. Barnwell says about her song "We Are," there is power in that tension of living as the sum total of all that has preceded us and as totally unique individuals.