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Contrasts That Define Each Other

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*When we meet
In the heart of the Creator,
Our wounds
Become a Warrior's footprint,
Out trials and tribulation
Become a healing balm,
Our dark night,
A passage into day.*

- Robert D. Waterman

It is impossible to know a thing without awareness of how it differs from others things. This is true for all of our experiences. Some of the simplest and clearest contrasts are in our sensory perceptions. For instance, visual light has a spectrum of colors – from white, which is the combination of all colors – through the spectrum of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet and indigo. Each color has its distinctiveness in the spectrum of all colors, and we know each through its contrast with the others.

Such contrasts are legion in our lives:

Masculine and Feminine – These are not just physical gender designations. While there are separate sets of hard-wired neurophysiological characteristics for each gender, there are learned personal, family and cultural behaviors that are acquired through social interactions and learning. Members of each gender contrast with and highlight the characteristics of their opposite members.

Yin and Yang – The Oriental concepts of *Yin* and *yang* are polar opposites that must be balanced in order for life to proceed in harmony. The term *yin* denotes the shady side of the slope, and may be associated with qualities of femininity, openness, passivity, receptivity, introversion, diminution, repose, weakness, and coolness. *Yang* is the sunny side of the slope, and may be associated with the sun, masculinity, strength, brightness, assertiveness, movement, extroversion, growth and excitation.

In the body, the front is yin relative to the back; the upper portions of the body are yang relative to the lower parts; the inner organs are more yin than the outer aspects such as hair and skin. Yang disorders are characterized by fever, hyperactivity, heat and strong movements; yin illnesses include weakness, slowing down, feeling cold and lethargy.

Yin and yang complement each other. If yang is excessive, then yin will be too weak, and conversely.

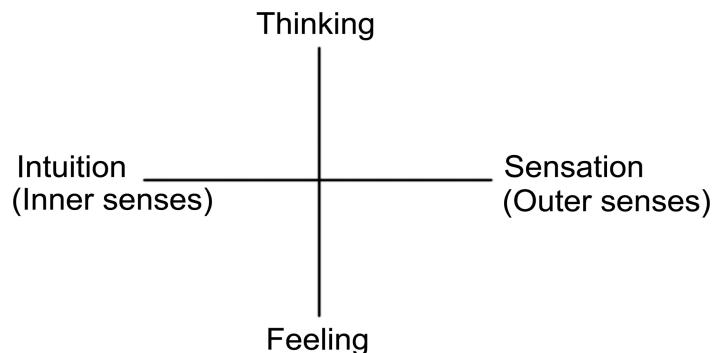
In Chinese cosmology, causality is unimportant. It is the *pattern* of relationships which defines reality, and all reality is relative to the context which is under consideration. (Benor, 2004, p. 196)

The philosopher Zou Yen...describes this idea this way: "Heaven is high, the earth is low, and thus [Heaven and Earth] are fixed. As the high and low are thus made clear, the honorable and humble have their place accordingly. As activity and tranquility have their constancy, the strong and the weak are thus differentiated... Cold and hot season take their turn... [Heaven] knows the great beginning, and [Earth] acts to bring things to completion... [Heaven] is Yang and [Earth] is Yin."

Any Yin or Yang aspect can be further divided into Yin and Yang...
– Ted Kaptchuck, 1984 (p. 9)

Personality contrasts - Jung pointed out that everyone has a personality type that is dominant in the area of one or two of four parameters, which are paired in polar opposites. These are the polarities of *thinking*....*feeling*, and *intuition* (inner senses)....*sensation* (outer senses). He also noted that there are introverted and extraverted styles of relating to the world. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Jungian polarities



Thinking type people organize their perceptions of the world and their responses to it through logical analysis and planning. They usually do not pay much attention to their feelings, and may even denigrate feelings as *illogical*, *unreasonable*, and *unreliable*. A scheduled, predictable world is most comfortable for the thinking types.

Feeling types are defined by Jung in terms of *values*, but my own view is that these types may also be described in terms of *emotionality*. The feeling types experience life as a montage of emotions and values. Experiences that are emotionally charged feel real and alive, interesting and exciting, and are highly valued. Thoughts alone are colorless, plans are acted upon if one is in the right mood, and communication is engaged through the tones and nuances of interaction more than through their content. The feeling types respond most to activities and experiences that excite and stimulate, be it with attraction or withdrawal.

The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of.
– Blaise Pascal

Intuitive types grasp information in patterns and gestalts. They intuit their way through situations, often without even thinking or verbalizing to themselves the process by which they make their decisions. Perceptions come in wholes – and any individual part that they might analyze represents less than the truth. They instinctively know the right thing to do in familiar situations. Faced with new challenges, the intuitive may guess rather than deduce solutions, using specific details and logical reasoning. Many intuitives suffer in school, as they come up with correct answers but are unable to explain how they arrived at them.

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

– Albert Einstein (*attributed*)

Sensation types notice every detail in the world around them – form, color, and sound are the threads with which they weave the fabric of their reality. Everything has its place. Shaping, organizing and moving bodies and objects around is important and satisfying. Every incident has its cause and effect, and if these are not apparent in the present, it is merely because insufficient efforts have been applied to fitting things into their proper order.

Nothing is more indisputable than the existence of our senses.

– Jean Le Rond d'Alembert

While thinking is often viewed as a limiting approach to transcendent awareness, it can also be a stepladder into the spiritual. The goal is to achieve inner balance.

Discipline and letting go, the two paths as one, guide me always.

Work and trust, another way of saying it.

Knowing takes us to its limit, its edge. We go beyond.

We learn, come to understanding, let go of our understanding and pass into the unknowable, the highest knowledge.

Without discipline we increase our ignorance.

Without letting go we build a prison of information.

The two paths merge as one, breathing in, breathing out.

– John MacEnulty (8/ 29/ 2003)

Each of these polarities may be expressed through an *introverted* (inner directed) or *extroverted* (outer directed) style of relating to the world.

Introversion and Extroversion - Introverted people are guided by inner awareness, heeding their feelings and intentions to direct their actions and responses to the world around them. The expectations and demands of the outer environment will not influence them as strongly as their inner worlds of thought and emotions. Such people will appear thoughtful, introspective and quiet, if they are of a moderately introverted disposition. They are their own worst critics, setting their inner barometers for behavior and response according to their own opinion of themselves, and not readily influenced by external pressures. Extremes of introversion are seen as deviant from psychological and social norms, and may include excessive shyness, social isolation, disregard for expectations of friends and family, and the like.

In contrast, extroverts are outgoing and highly responsive to social situations. They seek interactions with others, care about others' expectations, and want to conform in order to be accepted. At the extremes of the scale, extroverts are unhappy unless others join them in their exuberance. Some may seem to have no opinions of their own, structuring their world around others' views and norms. Another pattern of extroversion may be seen in hypomanic or manic personalities, who force their views upon others and experience their emotions through the reactions of others, having great difficulty in perceiving their own roles in creating the responses set up by their own behaviors.

Within each of these polarities there are degrees of insightfulness and wide ranges of behavior, so the basic polarities explain some but not all aspects of people's various ways of being in the world.

Extroverts focus on objects/ people external to themselves, and experience the world as a series of interactions with these *outside* objects. *Introverts* are focused on their inner awarenesses, living their conscious lives under the influence of whichever of the four polarities are dominant in them, without becoming too tightly bound to the outer world.

While each person may readily acknowledge their own primary traits, they may not be aware that their polar opposites are also alive and active in the *shadow* aspects of their being – those parts of themselves that exist outside of their conscious awareness. Until recently we have been encouraged to maintain cultural stereotypes of men as thinking/ sensation primaries, and women as feeling/ intuitive primaries. Women's liberation has been a transforming force in helping us to acknowledge our neglected polar opposites, giving women permission and encouragement to develop their *thinking* and *sensation* aspects, and encouraging men to acknowledge their *feeling* and *intuitive* sides.

Optimism and Pessimism – Holding a hopeful attitude promotes positive initiatives and is less stressful, but may lead to problems associated with over-confidence. Holding a skeptical attitude may prevent errors and disappointments but may lead to missed opportunities. We learn to play the game of life by exploring this spectrum of risk-taking, and come to appreciate the opposite polarity on this spectrum as we observe the results of our decisions.

Good and Evil – These are palpable qualities that are present to greater or lesser degrees in every aspect of our lives. To some extent the predominance of one or the other is a personal judgment. My personal yardstick for assessing where I peg anything within this spectrum is whether the highest benefits are considered for all who are involved. As with Yin and Yang, in many situations the same issues may be both good and evil, depending on the scope of one's focus.

Examples:

- Cheap fast foods make life easier for millions of people but contain products that are unhealthy.
- Cutting public services reduces government expenses but short-changes those people who are least able to cope on their own without supports such as libraries, public transportation and healthcare.
- Using antibiotics cures infections and reduces fatalities but leads to mutations of bacteria into 'super-infective' strains for which there are limited cures.

We often use the metaphors of contrasting light with darkness to indicate positivity and negativity in our lives. We have assessments and judgments about our world; emotionally pleasant and unpleasant reactions; enjoyable and distasteful relationships. Here, too, we would not appreciate either our positivity or our negativity nearly as much if we did not have the respective unpleasant and pleasant experiences against which to contrast them.

Life experiences and choices

In the spectrum of life and relationships we have countless examples of such contrasts and opposites. Each point on the spectrum is known from its comparison with and distinctness from the others. For example, pleasant and unpleasant feelings exist along a continuum from ecstasy, bliss, excitement, joy, happiness, pleasure, neutrality, boredom, unhappiness, sadness, depression, and despair.

Our natural tendency is to do our best to avoid the unpleasant portions of the spectrum of experiences and to maximize the positives. Many would totally avoid the negative side of the spectrum if they possibly could do so. This may in many cases be a poor choice in the long run. When we have little familiarity with the negative, then our appreciation of the positive suffers from a lack of contrast and depth. In other words, our enjoyments, achievements and happiness are not as sweet when we lack the contrasts of disappointments, failures and sadness.

Furthermore, while adversity may be painful, there may be helpful lessons or consequences as the result of our apparently negative experiences. Here is a classical story to illustrate this:

A poor farmer in China, a Zen practitioner, had a single horse. This horse was essential to his work. It pulled his plow, brought his produce to market, and provided transportation for his family.

One day, the farmer woke to find the gate open and the horse gone. His neighbors came around to commiserate with him over his loss. He responded only with, "We'll see."

Two days later, his stallion returned with a herd of 20 wild mares. His neighbors came around to congratulate him on his wonderful good fortune. Again, he responded only with, "We'll see."

The next day, his only son was struggling to ride one of the wild mares and broke his leg. His neighbors came around again to commiserate with him over his bad luck. Again, he responded only with, "We'll see."

A week later, the local warlord came to their village, conscripting every able-bodied young male. Naturally, he was unable to take the farmer's son. His neighbors came around again to congratulate him on his wonderful good fortune. Yet again, he responded only with, "We'll see..."

I have often had similar experiences myself. Here are a few examples:

I once bashed my elbow on a banister post while carrying boxes down a staircase of a friend's new home. The pain was severe enough to make it impossible for me to continue moving the boxes. 'Susan,' was a novice in her personal explorations of bioenergy healing. I asked her to

do a healing on my elbow. I felt strong heat from her hands, but the pain continued without diminution.

Susan then connected with the image of a childhood trauma to my elbow. She saw me at the age of about 3 years old, being pulled roughly by the elbow by an adult who saw me stepping off a curb on a busy street – helping me avoid getting hit by a car, but scaring me in that moment when I was not expecting to be pulled roughly backwards in that way. Using WHEE (Benor, 2009), I cleared my emotions from that trauma – although I had no actual memory of it myself. The pain abated within two minutes, and my elbow remained pain-free after that. I was able to resume moving boxes immediately, with no discomfort or limitation of motion thereafter.

I naturally viewed my elbow injury initially as an unfortunate experience. Very quickly, however, it was transformed into a positive experience for Susan, who had an unexpected lesson in developing her healing gifts, and to me – both in coming to appreciate and validate Susan's gifts and in clearing a previously unidentified childhood trauma.

The 'Chinese Farmer pendulum' may swing in much more profound ways in a person's life.

I often wondered what I had done to deserve the difficult relationships I had with my parents in this lifetime. For different reasons and in very different ways, each of them was unavailable to me – leaving me feeling abandoned, neglected and (especially with my mother) betrayed. As my spiritual awareness developed, I have come through a series of awarenesses. At first, I speculated that I must have behaved in negative ways towards my parents in previous lives, and that my current life experiences were a redressing of that karmic history.

As my intuitive and spiritual awarenesses deepened, I came to realize that I had invited this relationship into my life because of a much earlier life trauma. I had been orphaned and felt abandoned, neglected and betrayed. I had had no one to help me deal with these feelings, and had buried them in order to avoid feeling these emotional pains. In this lifetime I sought out parents who would wound me in the same ways – thereby awakening my awarenesses of these feelings, which ultimately led me to clear out the old, long-buried hurts as well. Self-healing with WHEE was profoundly helpful, as was a therapeutic relationship.

It is very common to come into these sorts of awarenesses as we open into our spiritual consciousness. Having ways to deal with painful memories and emotions will also facilitate such spiritual awakenings and clearings of old hurts.

*A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity;
an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.*
- Winston Churchill

Our understanding of reality in any given moment is based on limited awareness of the larger picture. In the fullness of time, we often come to appreciate that what we comprehended about a situation may have been partly or totally erroneous, based on the facts we had available for our consideration at the time. In hindsight, we might begin to appreciate that an apparent misfortune or even a tragedy turns out to have life-transforming benefits for us.

Even when there are no obvious benefits surrounding negative experiences, we may still benefit from them. The positives derived may be in the process rather than content that the universe choreographs into our lives. That is, we may have lessons in *how we respond to negativity*.

Many people do not realize that we all have choices in how we elect to react to whatever we experience in life. Adversity may be suffered by some as a tragedy, or as heavenly retribution for past sins; and by others as growth-promoting life lessons.

Thomas Edison was asked whether he didn't find himself discouraged when he had over a hundred failures in searching for a filament when he developed the light bulb. He replied with a smile, "No, not at all! I learned a hundred things that didn't work!"

We also have choices in whether we remain rooted or even stuck in our original patterns of responses to life challenges, or whether we seek out, explore and develop new strategies for dealing with our life circumstances. Choosing a positive response to apparent adversity may open into a more spiritual attitude towards life.

Guidelines for healing ourselves:

- *Always look for the gift in adversity*
- *Never indulge in self pity*
- *Never blame anyone else for your problems*
- *Cultivate an attitude of gratitude*
- *Do not judge your condition or that of others*
- *Avoid sentimentality*
- *Recognize that disease is not a punishment*
- *Seek opportunities to serve*
- *Learn to regard death as a healing*

-Robin Norwood

Some might suggest that this sort of attitude is unrealistic, perhaps even belonging in the category of unhealthy denial of sadness, hurt, anger, grief or other emotions that we would rather avoid. Some might even label this as a 'spiritual bypass,' a running away into spiritual beliefs to avoid dealing with our inner conflicts, our shadow issues. This would be yet another aspect of contrasts that define each other. Such contrasts may lie hidden within the same issues or behaviors, rather than being manifested as differing, polar opposites that are more easily apparent.

*Something we were withholding made us weak
until we found it was ourselves.*

-Robert Frost

In Summary

The interplays of polarities in our life experiences often bless us with lessons. Keeping our minds open to these possibilities can markedly enhance our awareness and relationships – on all levels of our being.

(Portions of this article are drawn from Volume II of Healing Research (Benor, 2004) and from several Modules of the Wholistic Transformational Therapy course I teach at Langara College, in Vancouver, BC.)

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