

## Both/And

1 Everything is perfect and there is always room for improvement. **Suzuki Roshi**

2 Life is as complex as we are. Sometimes our vulnerability is our strength, our fear develops our courage, and our woundedness is the road to our integrity. It is not an either/or world.

— **Rachel Naomi Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom**

3 Surely abiding complexity rather than resisting it is a spiritual discipline. **Russ Ramsey**

4 One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradictions were eliminated at once, life would collapse. There are simply no definitive answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.

— **Lama Surya Das, quoted by Barry Lopez, The Big Questions**

5 Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

--**Walt Whitman, from Song of Myself**

6 Community and individuality are not an either/or choice, any more than life and death are. Instead, they are the poles of another great paradox. A culture of isolated individualism produces mass conformity because people who think they must bear life all alone are too fearful to take the risks of selfhood. But people who know that they are embedded in an eternal community are both freed and empowered to become who they were born to be.

— **Parker J. Palmer, The Active Life**

7 The mystery is not the greatness of life, but its littleness. That we, so grandly born, so mightily endowed, should grope with blind eyes and bound limbs in the dust and mire of petty desires and grievances; until we can hardly see the blue of the sky or the glory of the seasons, until we can hardly clasp our neighbor's hand or hear his voice--this is the inexplicable mystery, the blasting unreality that underlies all the dark evils of this world.

--**Harriet Monroe**, 1916, in Poetry magazine from her editorial comment, Truth and The Paradox

8 If I didn't have the idea of "holding paradox" to help me understand myself and the world around me, I'd be more lost than I am! For me, holding paradox means thinking about some (but not all) things as "both-and's" instead of "either-ors."

So many of our troubles, personal and political, come from either-or thinking. For example, when I'm talking with a person who holds religious or political beliefs that differ from my own, either-or thinking can create a combative situation: "I'm right, so he/she is wrong. Therefore, my job is to win this argument by any means possible." How rarely such encounters bear fruit!

But both-and thinking can lead to something much more creative: "Maybe I don't have everything right, and maybe he/she doesn't have everything wrong. Maybe both of us see part of the truth. If I speak and listen in that spirit, we both might learn something that will expand our understanding. We might even be able to keep this relationship and conversation going."

Think of how much more civil and creative our conversations across lines of difference would be if we thought that way more often! We'd be working to create a container to hold our differences hospitably instead of trying to win an argument.

**--Parker J. Palmer, excerpt from Reflections on Holding Paradox, for the On Being blog**

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10 Some things in life truly are either-or, but many are both-and. Ancient wisdom traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism understand and teach the paradoxical nature of reality. They develop a non-dual mind. Here are a few examples from my own life where I was taught to think in a dualistic, either-or mentality, but the truth is much more of a non-dual, both-and nature.

Hard work and rest.

Self-discipline and self-compassion.

Solitude and community.

Mind and body.

You are enough right now and you can get better.

Happiness and sadness.

Strength and flexibility.

In all of these instances, using an either-or lens to view the world is an over-simplification that misses the point (at best) or is harmful (at worst).

**--Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness, from their blog, The Growth Equation**

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

A Did one of these quotes stand out for you? Which one and why was that?

B Do you tend to be troubled by paradox? Are there specific paradoxes or contradictions that cause you difficulty?

C Are there Either/Or choices you are faced with that could benefit from Both/And thinking?

D How does your experience at All Souls help you understand and live with paradox?

----Mary Beth Hatem, for All Souls Church, Unitarian