

## Getting to No

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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Let us consider the word “yes.” Yes is a wonderful word! It is so full of possibilities. Lots of wonderful things begin with the word “yes.” Yes, I will marry you. Yes, I would be happy to accept that job. Yes, I do want to stop in Paris on the way to Istanbul. “Yes” opens the way. “Yes” includes you in the group. “Yes” both expands and connects. Who doesn’t love what can begin with a “yes?”

Five years ago, you asked me to be your minister, and I have not regretted what we began with that “yes” for a single moment. I hope there will be plenty more years of yeses here! I began this year with a sermon asking you to say “yes” to being a part of this congregation in new and deeper ways and you responded.

- The Worship and Music Committee is reorganized and poised to present a great summer of services.
- New Pastoral Care Associates have stepped forward and covenanted to offer their care to our congregation.
- The bomb crater that covered the geothermal wells has been tamed into a lovely space with exciting things planned for it.
- We have a new staff position as Katie Mayberry joined us to provide childcare.
- The Leadership Development effort is off and running.

There are so many things going on I couldn’t possibly name all the ways you’ve said “yes” in this year.

So the irony is not lost on me that as we approach the end of our annual worship cycle I am standing here telling you to say, “no.” But the full title of the sermon is “Getting to No,” and the “getting to” part is not insignificant. “Yes” is a great place to start, but sometimes we just need to get to “no.”

The sermon title is, of course, a play on that famous business management book of the 80s, *Getting to Yes*, which offered us all the necessary strategies to reach agreement, how to move groups, clients, potential purchasers, spouses to affirmation without giving up what *we* need. That book really launched the career of William Ury, its co-author, who continues to write about negotiation techniques. Another great “yes” that began a successful career. But it is interesting to note that a decade after that book’s debut Ury’s titles had softened to *Getting Past No* and nearly three decades later have become *The Power of a Positive No*. Lots of us, it seems, eventually get to “no.”

This no, the positive no Ury describes, is not the unconsidered-just-because-I-can-say-the-word-heels-dug-in no of a two-year-old who doesn’t want to go to bed. This is a no filled with creative possibility that acknowledges that we cannot do everything so saying “yes” to the most important

things, the things about which we are most passionate, requires saying “no” to the things that distract us and sap our energy.

In art this is known as negative space, the areas in between that allow the main objects to come into focus. In music it is the rest, the silence, in between the notes that lend emphasis and the ability to breathe. In theology it is known as apophatic theology, the *via negativa*. It is about reaching toward ultimate truths by eliminating that which does not fit, about saying “no, not this” in order for the “yes, this is it” to emerge. It is a framework familiar to Unitarian Universalists who frequently find that we have set aside something else of religious beliefs or traditions we have known to come into new creative possibilities.

In the *via negativa* the “no” is not one that stops possibility, but just the opposite. It opens space for the “yes.” Saying “no” is useless unless we are willing to listen for the “yes” behind it. Indeed, it is worse than useless; it is harmful and cuts off life to embrace “no” just for no’s sake. There has to be another possibility waiting to come forth from the “no.” As Rebecca Parker put it, “Underneath the no is the hidden yes that compels the no.”

But getting to no isn’t an easy or particularly popular thing in our culture. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *An Altar in the World*, “it is difficult to find many advocates for the spiritual practice of saying no. “No, I want to stay home tonight.” “No, I have enough work for now.” “No, I have all the possessions I can take care of.” Depending on your temperament, your cultural conditioning, and your circle of friends, negations like these can sound like death wishes. If there is nothing more you want to do or have, then why go on living? If you are going to say no to perfectly good opportunities for adding more to your life, then what is the point?”

Sabbath, this almost obsolete custom of taking a day out of the week to be in the presence of the holy, is also a way of saying no to what Taylor calls “culture’s killing rhythms of drivenness and depletion, compulsion and collapse.” You would think that seminary perhaps more than any place would stress the need for Sabbath. Not really so much, in my experience, but there was this one time I decided to take a full day out of theological training to do nothing, absolutely nothing. I did breathe and eat, but other than that precious little. And I did nearly bore myself to death. This day of rest did not make me happy or rested, only bored and with that kind of logy exhaustion you get from utter sloth.

The problem was that there was no creative possibility in my day of rest. I was not still in order to see what emerged in terms of needs or thoughts or new understandings. I was not still in order to be surrounded by sacredness. I was just still in order to be still. There was no yes waiting to emerge from behind my no. It was just no, and that is not at all life giving. The idea of Sabbath, time out from the regular schedule of duties and busyness is not just about sitting still. Sabbath is about taking time out to pay attention to those things that get crowded out by the regular schedule of duties and busyness, to allow time for the sacred to emerge, to allow time to be with the holy. Sabbath is not about being nothing, but about being different.

But we often make our “noes,” and our Sabbaths carry a lot of baggage. In a *New York Times* article entitled “Bring Back the Sabbath,” Judith Shulevitz wrote about a disciple of Sigmund Freud named Sandor Ferenczi. Ferenczi identified a disorder he called “Sunday neurosis.” It was

characterized by the sudden onset of headaches, stomachaches and depression that appeared each Sunday. Ruling out the rich Sunday diet of his patients in Budapest, Ferenczi attributed Sunday neurosis to the “eternal inner murmur of self-reproach” that was held at bay by weekday routines but unleashed on days of rest. Afraid of their own unchecked impulses, Sunday neurotics invented aches and pains that protected them from running amok when freed from the strictures of weekday routine.

We might not struggle with days of rest in quite the same way that Sandor Ferenczi’s patients did, but in a society where we measure worth by possessions and production we still have our struggles with stepping outside the expectations of doing, doing, doing. If you’re not stuck in the office working then you can be attending to chores, shuttling children to sporting events and lessons, attending concerts, plays, movies, eating out, going to parties – all enjoyable to be sure, but all still doing. To say “no” can make you feel like you are missing out on something, like you aren’t fun enough or lively enough or, simply, enough. As the quote at the top of your order of service says, “there is no payoff for sitting on the porch. A field full of weeds will not earn anyone’s respect. If you want to succeed in this life (whatever your “field” of endeavor), you must spray, you must plow, you must fertilize, you must plant. You must never turn your back.”

Saying “no,” observing a Sabbath, taking time out from planting and weeding is not about doing nothing. But it can look a lot like it from the outside. It can look like we’re falling down on our responsibilities to be productive members of society when we step aside for even a moment. When we choose time to *be* rather than to *do* we can look like slackers, not only to others but to ourselves. Just ask the PCAs we installed this morning if it is easier to do or to be. We are a society trained on doing. So what is our worth to others or to ourselves if we are simply going to be?

UU minister Richard Gilbert raised just this question in an address to his colleagues a few years ago. Upon attaining 50 years in ordained ministry, Dick reflected on retirement by posing the question, “What are we worth when motionless?” He said:

*What would I be worth if my preaching voice were stilled? If my hands could no longer maneuver around a computer keyboard? If my legs could no longer carry me to meetings? What would I be worth if motionless?... We have been doing and accomplishing so much, we have not taken time to be. And so, what are we worth when motionless?*

To answer that question, it might help to come at it from a very different angle. What is it worth to *know* someone who can be motionless?” Since being motionless is one of the things we considered in our pastoral care training sessions, let me offer the words with which I opened that class. These words come from the UU congregation of Richmond, VA:

***What if...*** you could explain everything to someone who wants to hear the whole thing all the way through, the entire range of your experience, and you could finish your thoughts without interruption?

*What if...* you didn't have to hear about how so and so handled it such and such a way, or get any other well intentioned but sometimes irrelevant advice? You had compassionate support and the time to talk completely through the issue? Would that help you sort it all out?

The companion referred to in this passage is not a doer, but they are person of great worth. We can be that companion for each other by allowing ourselves to enter into the stillness of a Sabbath open to creative possibility. We can be that companion for ourselves by learning the creative power of a no that makes way for our deepest yes.

Sadly, our Unitarian Universalist faith doesn't frequently nudge us in the direction of being those kinds of naysayers. In that 50 year address, Dick Gilbert also said this:

*Unitarian Universalists are by-and-large an active, if not hyper-active, people. We resonate to the biblical Book of James that "faith without works is dead." We have been believers in "salvation by works" rather than "salvation by faith." Many of us would agree with science fiction writer Isaac Asimov: "If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn't brood. I'd type a little faster."*

It is a natural human impulse to want to do *something*, to be in the world and a part of the world, to take care of what needs care and fix what needs fixing. Our faith certainly calls us to that. But not every problem is our problem to solve. Not every task is our task to accomplish. And we can only solve those problems that truly *are* ours and accomplish those tasks that *are* ours if we first say no to being overwhelmed by the work and need of the world. When we forget that saying "no" is connected to a larger "yes," we get stuck.

It is not always easy to say "no" nicely. Our "culture pushes us to do more, to never say "no." But we have a choice. It is a choice of Sabbath that does not come easily or automatically. It can take some practice, this Sabbath thing. Like Sandor Ferenczi's patients, we may be visited by our fears when we stop to listen. Here is how the poet Wendell Berry describes his quest to let Sabbath bring forth his deepest yes.

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.

What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing,  
the day turns, the trees move.

So what is your own yes, the one waiting there behind all the noes you will have to speak to  
make it manifest? When it sings, what will help you hear its song?

Namaste.  
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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