

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor  
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes  
November 12, 2017

*Rooting our No in Yes.*

### *NO-vembering*

The new people next door at the lake changed everything, and not for the better, thought the neighbor. They tore down the original cabin, heart-breaking for her. They toppled beautiful old trees and built a house that towered over hers. They dug up the gentle slope, soft with pine needles, and turned it into a flat, unnaturally bright green yard. On weekends, the dad criss-crossed the lawn with his fertilizer spreader, apparently clueless about chemical run-off. They brought jet skis, too, that roared up and down the lake, the kids screaming and laughing.

She'd always loved going up to the lake, but now found herself unhappy there. If anyone had asked whether to tear down that cabin, home to generations of families, the poet and storyteller in her would have said No. Should they have destroyed the natural landscape and covered it with sod? The environmentalist in her would have said No. And the jet skis? No again. Spiritual seeker, writer and teacher, all her life she'd counted on the peace and quiet of this place. It fed her soul. And so, you might say that she nursed a disappointed, resentful No toward the new family next door.

Sometimes we let No become our mantra. Our political system comes to mind, in which at any point half the country becomes the party of No while the other half calls out their lack of cooperation and good will. When we find ourselves in a place of No, we can believe or want it so much that it's all we think of. And when we nurse a No—we've all been there—it affects our own well-being. Hurts us more than anyone else.

There are also times when we need to say No. We need to say No to a bad habit, an unhelpful pattern of behavior. We need to say No to a relationship or to a well-intentioned but unwanted overture from someone whose feelings we don't want to hurt. Steve Jobs once said, "It's only by saying 'no' that you can concentrate on the things that are really important."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we need to say No to take care of ourselves.

You may remember the book *Getting to Yes*, about negotiating, by Roger Fisher and William Ury. Written in 1981, people of my generation read it in business and law school. One of the authors, Ury, recently wrote a follow-on book called *The Power of a Positive No*. He lifts up the pitfalls and damage that can come of saying a quick reactive No. Rather, he says, take the time to say "a courageous, enlightened No."<sup>2</sup> It's easy to criticize someone or something we dislike or to poke holes in an argument, but Ury suggests that that No needs to come from a solid, positive place: "...start from Yes [he says]. Root your No in a deeper Yes—a Yes to your core interests and to what truly matters."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Steve Jobs, "Steve Jobs: in his own words," *The Telegraph*, 5 October 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/steve-jobs/9589535/Steve-Jobs-in-his-own-words.html>

<sup>2</sup> William Ury, *The Power of a Positive No*. New York: Bantam Books, 2008 (hardcover 2007), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

I recently asked a member of our congregation for help in planning a UUFES Community Evening. The board is committed to reaching out to our neighbors by hosting events like our MLK Jr. celebration or the Robert Shetterly event this summer. Our next Community Evening, early in the new year, will be about the immigrant experience here in New Hampshire. (If you're interested, we're looking for volunteers to work on it.) When I asked for help, the emailed reply might have come straight out of Ury's book. I share it with the congregant's permission:

My interest around this topic [she wrote] is with how to make local immigrants feel welcome. The only folks I know are the folks from India that run the store and the hotel. [We] go out of our way to shop there...but wonder what else we can DO. So yes, there is interest - mostly in ways to act.....

Also [she went on], I have to explain that in our household NOvember is NO month. Meaning, we take a break from doing and hunker down at home with the change of seasons. Which means saying "no" to doing too many things....

What a thoughtful “No, I cannot help right now”! A “Positive No,” rooted in a strong Yes! Yes, she said, we have an interest. Yes, we have an interest “in ways to *act*.” Her subsequent No—we’re taking a break this month from doing too many things—was also rooted in an intentional Yes. Yes to simply being. To “hunkering down at home with the change of seasons.” To making time for what is really important.

If *you* gave yourself permission to say No to doing too much in the next few weeks, what might you do instead with your time? What would hunkering down and taking gentle care of yourself look like? (People gave examples: spend time outdoors, read, cook, sit by the fire, enjoy conversation....) Saying No to overdoing it is rooted in saying Yes to our well-being. Yes to nurturing our relationships. Yes to living fully. Yes to feeding the soul.

The pace—and for some of us, the pressure—will pick up in the next few weeks. Thanksgiving menus are circulating, and cookies and holly are close behind. *You* may strive to simplify, and *you* may go in for the holidays in a big way, but first...what would it be like to start out by saying No? By experimenting with the spiritual practice of slowing down to simply be? It might just be that getting everything done just right is overrated! UU Rev. Richard Gilbert lifts up what he calls our “unfinished business”:

In the midst of the whirling day,  
 In the hectic rush to be doing,  
 In the frantic pace of life,  
 Pause here for a moment.  
 Catch your breath;  
 Relax your body;  
 Loosen your grip on life.  
 Consider that our lives are always unfinished business....  
 Allow yourself to be a work in progress....  
 Do not rush to finish the picture....  
 Let us instead be grateful that the world is still to be created...

For life is always unfinished business.<sup>4</sup>

Imagine saying No to overdoing it this season and rooting that No in intention: “Pause here for a moment./Catch our breath;/Relax our body;/Loosen our grip on life....” Imagine resting in that awareness. An old-fashioned scene by the hearth comes to mind, though it could happen just as well today—a book in our lap, a piece of wood to whittle, some soft handwork. Quiet. Cozy. Enough.

Life in its randomness has a way, though, of upsetting the apple cart, doesn’t it? It happened a week ago when shots fired in a village church sent a chill up the spine of America. No, we all cried! Not here in our country. No! Not again, no! Not in a *faith community*. No! Not in a village like ours.

*Why has this happened?*

[Listen to Cheryl Wheeler’s “If It Were Up to Me” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op7agdIFOGY>]

It will take time to figure out how to respond. How to live fully and freely? How to not contract and let evil win? How to live our values of radical welcome? How to say a positive No, rooted in our strongest core values? Today after the service, those who wish are invited to sit together, listen to each other and see how people are doing.

Visiting with a journalist friend, we wondered how the Texan shooting will impact those of us who stood out on Route 113, empowered and exhilarated, holding signs declaring our values to the world? The journalist thought that day sounded great. It reminded her of San Francisco in the 70s. “In that city,” she said, “there is a protest every day of the week. You can always find a protest to join. I loved that!”

What, I wondered, did she love? “Oh, it was great,” she said. “There you were with all these people, everyone shouting at the top of their lungs, ‘No! N-O spells No!’ ” Those Nos still resonate with her today. Why? Because they were rooted in a deep Yes. Yes for human dignity. Yes (back then) for equal marriage. Yes for ending racism.

We say No to the horror of Sutherland Springs. To the sorrow of Charleston. No to the fear in Knoxville and the shock of Sandy Hook. No to the heartbreak of Las Vegas. No to violence and hate and guns. May our Nos be grounded in Yes.

Inspiration abounds. In wonder, we watch people run toward a bomb explosion. After the Paris attacks, Pope Francis said the doors of Catholic churches would remain open. “Please, no armoured doors in the Church, everything open. There are places in the world where doors should not be locked with a key.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard S. Gilbert, “Life is Unfinished Business,” *In the Holy Quiet*. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2012, p. 10, <https://www.amazon.com/Holy-Quiet-Meditations-Richard-Gilbert/dp/1475906552>.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, “Pope Francis Says Church Doors Must Stay Open Despite Security Fears” by Tara John, *Time*, 18 November 2015, <http://time.com/4118183/pope-francis-terror-fears>

Last June, Prime Minister Theresa May said, “Small-minded, cowardly, evil people should not change our way of life. They won’t make me scared on the streets of London.”<sup>6</sup>

Let us go forward in our way of life, deeply rooted in what matters most. Rooted in love. Rooted in respect and hope for each other. Rooted in the beautiful interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Rooted in radical welcome.

And may our Nos teach us. The woman by the lake, writer Mary Rose O’Reilley, wakes up. She sees how *her* No, her leaning into disappointment and disapproval, has fed her unhappiness:

“...I have spent a Sabbath [she says] blackening my reality and my [partner’s] mind with hostile words about my neighbor; my neighbor, by contrast, has spent a better day: entertaining his children and improving, according to his best guidance, a plot of ground.”<sup>7</sup>

Now she can move on.

Saying *No to doing too much*—and grounding it in the values of peace, home, each other—nurtures the soul. Saying *No, no way*—and grounding it in Yes—helps heal the world. May we seek Yes in our highest aspirations, inspired and free.

So may it be.

---

<sup>6</sup> Theresa May, *USA Today*, 4 June 2017, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2017/06/london-bridge-terror-attack-bbc-news-interview>.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Rose O’Reilley, *The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2000, p.260.