

There is a method used in improve theatre that I want to introduce you to. My sermon title actually explains it quite well. Here is an example. The leader starts a story with a phrase such as “Today, I went to the store.” Everyone in the circle must then continue the story starting their line with “**Yes, and.**” So this example continued, “**Yes, and** I bought an apple. **Yes, and** it had a worm in it. **Yes, and** this made me angry. **Yes, and** I will not shop there anymore. **Yes and** it is better to get apples from the farmer’s market instead.” And so on.

This is a proven way to help actors learn that they are only responsible for one part; that they do not have to be more or less clever than their fellow actors to participate. Further it is a method that demonstrates that the construction and performance of a scene is a collaborative effort.

Sometimes the leader will start the exercise by using “Yes, but” to highlight the contrast between “Yes and” and “Yes, but.” The point is that “yes but,” which often acts surprisingly like a “No,” prohibits creativity, and stops people from making valuable contributions. When using “yes, but,” it is unlikely that the story would make it around the circle because so much disagreement about details will occur. On the other hand, “**yes, and**” serves to accept what the other person has offered and allows you build on it, instead of judging it. “Yes and” is about co-creation – and it is about keeping the story alive and moving forward.

Here is another example. “Today, I went to the store. **Yes, but** all you bought was a wormy apple. And the story is dead before it even gets started. Now, this does not mean you cannot disagree or have some conflict in the story. But, it makes a difference how you present the conflict and more importantly how you regard or disregard the offering to the story of other story-tellers.

I first used this technique in the context of family therapy as a social worker. I was working with folks affected by HIV and AIDS – mostly gay men, their partners and caregivers, and family members, family members who were more often than not estranged from the ill person prior to the diagnosis.

Sadly, back then, the early 1990s, HIV and AIDS was still a death sentence and so much of my work was helping plan funerals and attempt to reconcile families who had been torn apart due to ignorance and prejudice.

Here is how “Yes And, Yes But” worked for me. I would get everyone willing to participate together in a room and ask them to indulge me for a few minutes by letting me hear the story of their relationship with the ill person. We always started with the identified patient beginning the story with “When I was 30 or 25 or 19 or whatever age was true I realized I was gay.” Then we would go around the circle and everyone had to start the next sentence with “yes and.”

One particularly successful scenario went like this. “I realized I was gay when I was 27 years old. **Yes and** when I met you at your 30th birthday party it was the happiest day of my life. **Yes and** if I had known you were gay, I would not have introduced you to all my girlfriends when we were both teenagers. **Yes and** you broke my heart when you came out.

Yes and your mother and I both knew your life would end like this. **Yes and** I still think living this lifestyle is selfish of you. **Yes and** I am sorry that I hurt all of you but this is who I am. **Yes and**, I wish you had been able to enjoy the last 11 years of your son and brother's life the same way I have."

That was just the first time around the circle. It went several more times and ended with tears and hugs and new-found love and respect for one another and for the variety of perspectives and feelings in the room.

This group consisted of a gay man in his early 40's, his partner of 11 years, his twin sister, a younger sister and his parents. They agreed to meet with me because their son asked them to participate in the planning of his funeral after he was diagnosed with AIDS related pneumonia for the third time in 6 months. They originally responded to the request by saying that they would either plan it themselves or not attend but did not want all his friends "in their church because so many of the relatives did not know he was gay."

The results were quite amazing. By sticking to the rules each person seemed to be able to let go of any defensiveness and really hear and respect the statements of the rest of the group. They were not without their anger or hurt but they were without conversation-stopping judgement. What happened was that this technique helped everyone feel affirmed and heard and that all contributions had value. It served to move the conversation along in a positive fashion and eventually they were able to talk about funeral plans as a family.

Now, I do not want you to think that "**No**" or "**yes, but**," may not be called for on occasion, but only on occasion. I fear there are people whose response to anyone else's point of view or idea is always at least an implicit "**No, but**," and often an explicit one. I know some people whose negative response is so immediate that you cannot believe they have given the idea in question any chance of survival.

This idea of "yes and" has many applications and many effects on Unitarian Universalist congregations – even this one at this time in our history.

First though a brief look at Unitarian history through the lens of "**yes and**." For Unitarianism and ultimate Unitarian Universalism probably would not exist if "Yes but" or "No" was the prevailing sentiment of its time.

When the Unitarian Controversy split the Congregation Standing Order in Massachusetts in the 1820s, many Massachusetts congregations were on the liberal side of the debate. But liberal at that time meant "liberal, Bible-believing Christian," a stance that was soon challenged by the Transcendentalists, who said religious truth was knowable through the Bible, **yes, and** also in nature and by intuition. It took, however, a generation for Unitarians to say of their faith, we are liberal Christians, **yes, and** Transcendentalists, too.

Then came the question, "did a person have to be Christian to be religious and be part of a community of faith?" By the end of the nineteenth century the answer was clearly no. However, for Unitarians both nationally and locally, the answer was, again, we are liberal Christians, **yes, and** Transcendentalist, **yes, and** non-Christians, too.

We move another generation ahead and now the challenge came from humanists who say that to be religious, to be part of this faith community, one need not believe in God at all.

As with the question about Christianity, the majority at the time had a less liberal outlook than the Humanists and some resistance was raised but again by the mid-century the answer was again, **yes, and** humanists, too.

Our more recent history has found us identifying six sources of religious wisdom and practice. We now collectively said, **yes, and** earth-centered or pagan spirituality, **yes, and** other religious traditions can enrich us and by now, we have long been home to many Jewish UUs and Buddhist UUs and spiritual but not religious UUs to name a few..

Yes, but. I did say that there was a need for sincerely felt resistance, and I think at every stage of our development as Unitarian Universalists the correct question was asked and answered while the expansion was occurring. That question is, “Don’t we want to keep on being what we have always been?” And the answer each time has been “yes, but, not exactly,” and that is a good thing.

We are now more than we were, greater than the sum of our parts, more open to different ideas and outlooks that add substance and flavor to the mix, without rejecting the best parts of what we were before. We are a stronger, more relevant, a more widely heard important voice for liberal religion built on the back of a “yes and” spirit.

Yes, and even as we grew and changed we maintained a fundamental commitment to freedom, community, compassion, social action and all the other values we lift up whatever words we use, and whatever songs we sing.

Yes, and with the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in the early 1960’s, we inherit memories of more economically diverse congregations than most of the early Unitarian congregations. **Yes, and** Universalism added to our theology the most inclusionary answer to the question that has been haunting after-life believing religious people for a long time, “Who gets to go to heaven,” with the answer, everyone. Me? **Yes, and** everyone.

Yes, and brings inherently into the conversation the spirit of moving forward. **Yes, and** that is true here at UUCSW. Call it hospitality or a warm friendliness, it is the spirit that welcomes visitors and new members, new friendships, new ways of doing things, new music into worship, changes to the order of service, and new challenges.

It says, I know I sit in the same pew every week and am already friendly with everyone who sits near me, **yes and** I’m going to seek out a person at coffee hour who always sits way over there that I don’t know yet.

It says, **Yes**, I sing in the choir most weeks **and** I’ll join a committee too. It says, **yes**, I hate to miss any of Bev’s sermons **and** I’ll just have to read the teacher’s copy some weeks in order to teach Religious Education.

I knew from the moment I thought about this theme for the service today that I’d have to eventually reach the point of asking many of you to do even more than you are already doing. I am acutely aware that your lives are very busy, so crowded with important activities that the thought of adding one more thing, attending one more meeting, responding authentically to one more idea may send some of you diving under the pew.

Yes and, as much as I love it when you say, yes I'll join the committee, yes I'll take on that task, yes, I'll organize and/or attend that event it is good if your "**yes and**" spirit is bounded by good sense. **Yes, and** there are practical limitations I must pay attention to.

Over the past few years many of you have participated in visioning exercises, workshops and conversations of one sort or another. Out of all of that came many ideas and wishes and possibly recommendations including how to grow, what you hoped your future would look like, what improvements to make to this building and so on.

That type of work, whenever you embark on it is a "**yes and**" sort of endeavor. If you sincerely want to grow, want to deepen your spiritual grounding, want to widen the reach of your socially active, socially responsible values, the "**yes and**" spirit must persist.

We have an excellent religious education program, **yes and** part of our responsibility is to participate in large and small ways by teaching, by being an adult leader on a special Sunday, by helping our children learn that they are important members of this congregation and that sometimes they can stay in the sanctuary for the whole hour and they do not have to be perfect or silent or not move a muscle, they just have to try their best.

We have a beautiful historic building, **yes and** there are limitations due to the size of rooms, the lack of parking, the use of space that generates income. **Yes, and** to maintain our building properly as well as to have it better reflect our values we need to pay attention to things such as are the restrooms accessible, do we all know how to use the lift in case a visitor needs it and does the building both inside and outside reflect that we take stewardship of our history seriously? **Yes, and** to accomplish all we want to are we all pledging a fair amount for our personal circumstances to the annual stewardship drive which funds the operating budget of this congregation? **Yes and**, can we stretch a little further for special projects and to increase our endowment to benefit generations to come?

We have many beloved traditions in our worship services and in our congregational life, **yes and** could we do better soliciting and embracing the ideas of those among us who do not share this particular congregation's history or the theology of the majority.

We have become a Welcoming Congregation, pledging our commitment to explicitly welcome and include everyone regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation into the life of this congregation, **yes and** wouldn't it be wonderful if we could now extend that same welcome to other minority and oppressed groups?

So, there you have. As we move forward into the summer and towards my second year as your minister, I hope we can do it with a mostly "**yes anddedness**" spirit of generosity, compassion and commitment. It can be as simple as inviting a friend to come to worship with you some Sunday. It can be as short term as working with a fellow parishioner on one summer service. It can be as concrete as helping me re-envision the Chapel this August or as intellectual as offering to co-lead an adult education course next fall or winter.

Proponents of "**yes and**" as a teaching method say, "in improvisation, it is co-creation that keeps the story alive and moving along." **Yes, and** that is true of us as well. Let's keep the story of UUCSW alive and moving forward. - Amen, **Yes and** May it be so.