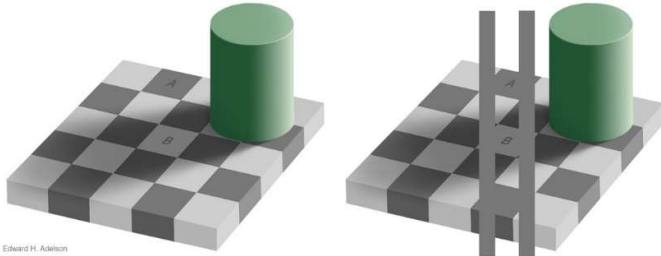


# *Simultaneous Brightness*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda  
*Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel*  
 28 May, 2023



Edward H. Adelson

Checker Box Illusion © 1995 Edward H. Adelson

Used under GNU General Public License:

"These checkershadow images may be reproduced and distributed freely".

Growing up, I remember being fascinated by magic tricks – or, properly called, illusions. Seeing that people could do seemingly-impossible things was awe-inspiring and exciting.

Eventually, my mom got me a few magic kits, and I started

peeking behind the curtain. This, of course, brought me to the paradox of losing the magic of the illusion – literal disillusionment – while gaining the excitement of possibility for creating that sense of wonder in others.

But the thrill of these kits can be surpassed by what I found in optical illusions. Optical illusions were like magic – but real! Whenever I found them, they were usually presented without pretense – it was literally advertised that they were illusions, and they still worked! Even after you learned “the secret” behind them, they would often still successfully fool they eyes... or, more precisely, the parts of the brain that processed the visual inputs.

I eventually found that there are also such things as auditory illusions, tactile illusions, olfactory illusions, and gustatory (taste) illusions.

There’s something both amazing and... unsettling about optical illusions, as well as the other sensory illusions there are out there. The optical kind are like portable magic on paper – set down plainly to prove that we can’t always believe our eyes, or our senses... or ourselves. They open up the doors of our perception to the wonder that there may be more to what we think we know... and also a reminder that we really don’t always know what is out there!

MIT Professor Edward H. Adelson offers an illustration of what is known as the *checker shadow illusion*, also known as *simultaneous brightness contrast*. It shows how two identical grey spots can seem to have different brightnesses, depending on how they contrast with their surroundings.

Exploring this particular illusion, we can go a bit further, as it exposes how these distortions of reality may well serve a vital purpose – literally. Michael Stevens, from the channel *Vsauce*, remarks that, as our brain artificially amplifies the contrast of the same shade of grey (in essence, lying to us), it is also making us more acutely aware of a different kind of truth: the differences in our environment that can bring life-changing stories – including potential threats.

The story of our collective brains' evolution, through natural selection is often like that, distorting some of our perception – on purpose – so that we may be better aware of things that our survival might depend on. Quite exciting, if unsettling, when you think about it.

The story of mythology is also often like that. Sometimes, the word *myth* is used as a synonym for “lie” or “untruth”. But the truth is more complicated than that. Storytellers, elders, theologians, sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and other groups that use mythology on a regular basis, understand that myths are an integral part of our life as a species and as a society. They may not be factual records of past events, but that's not the point, in their ostensibly fictional accounts, they expose deeper truths about ourselves, of where we come from, who we are, who we want to be, and where we want to go.

To be able to receive these mythologies can be a matter of survival, by guiding us in a way that we may understand ourselves, our histories, our personal goals, our common goals, and our search for meaning, in a way that plain facts never could.

For instance, the novel *The Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel is what might be called a mythology about mythology. It was released in 2001, so I apologise if you haven't gotten around to reading it yet – minor spoilers here. All I'll say, is that it includes the story of a boy who survived by the grace of a mythology that he constructed in the midst of intense hardship.

Let's take a look at some of our own stories, such as our own Unitarian Universalist tradition. That mouthful of a name tells a whole set of stories, which are... not always entirely true in how we live those names these days, but which also expose who we have been, and how we have become who we are now – and where we want to go from there.

The original Unitarian heresy, as a reaction to the trinitarian conception of the divine, is not something we spend a lot of time on in many of our congregations today (certainly not in our particular church). Whether your conception of the sacred involves a triune deity or a unitary God, or no specific divinity at all, is not usually our most pressing concern. Some of you may even espouse a trinitarian theology – and we have space for that here (as it happens, the Unitarian Church of Montreal made a conscious decision to allow trinitarians in their midst over a hundred years ago).

But the freethinking approach to embrace a notion that revelation is not sealed and that the search for truth requires continuous work and struggle, has remained a true living foundation of our tradition.

Likewise, our Universalist roots, which our church of Olinda was founded upon, have shifted in a way that its truth holds multiple simultaneous values. The joyful heresy of universal salvation, as a rejection to a story of eternal damnation, holds some truth in our community – even if many among us may not be particularly invested in the concept of an afterlife. And the heritage of radical inclusion continues to be a true foundation and aspiration of our spiritual community.

And that brings us to the wider conception of *faith*. There are many ways to define it, but there's one definition that I find particularly inspiring – and challenging. Faith is sometimes described as hope despite evidence to the contrary. And this can be a tricky approach, as it can seem like a call toward blind faith in unfounded leadership or practices. If, however, we look back at our collective history, we see the amazing deeds that have been achieved by people collaborating on making seemingly-impossible feats become reality.

When prophetic people fought against slavery in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, abolition might have at times seemed like a hopeless dream – but despite the immediate evidence against it, they kept faith that it was a sacred task worth taking on.

So has been the fight for gender equality and equity, as prophetic women, men, and people of all genders took on difficult and risky work to make an impossible reality real – with some of their goals unachieved within their lifetimes – or ours.

The dream of marriage equality, in which our tradition was an integral participant, had seemed impossible at times, and yet we have lived that reality now... going on decades.

The gradual shifts in government policies that go from policing drug use toward treating addictions – and prioritizing people – have seemed like slow, agonizing battles, and yet we see evidence that it is happening.

My friends, all of these are ongoing enterprises, the struggle continues, and a faith that holds despite what we might immediately see, is vital to the survival of these holy tasks.

My friends, there is plenty of reason for despair – we know the reasons, I don't need to list them here – but with a faith that struggles through

the factual present, toward a transforming, emerging reality, we may well continue to fulfill a prophetic future.

My friends, may we be in that faith,

So may we be,

In the spirit of simultaneous wonder, despair, and hope

Amen

Copyright © 2023 Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

### *Suggested Hymns:*

#### **Opening Hymn #42 Morning, So Fair to See**

Words: Vincent B. Silliman, 1894-1979, recast 1991 © Vincent Silliman Estate

Music: A. H. Hoffmann von Fallersleben's *Schlesische Volkslieder*, 1842, harmony by T. Tertius Noble, 1867-1953

SCHÖNSTER HERR JESU

#### **Hymn #83 Winds Be Still**

~)-| Words: Richard S Kimball, 1934- , © 1986 Tirik Productions

Music: Samuel Sebastian Wesley, 1819-1876

LEAD ME LORD

#### **Closing #331 Life Is the Greatest Gift of All**

Words: From William E. Oliver,

~)-| adapt. by Waldemar Hille, 1908-1996, used by perm. Of Hodgkin Press

Music: James Leith McBeth Bain, c. 1840-1925,

~)-| arr. by David Dawson, 1939-

BROTHER JAMES' AIR