

“Wilhelm’s Scream and a Little Focus”
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION

Reflective people are aware that we dwell in contradictions, that we swim in contradictions. Contradiction is the human condition, and the list of contradictions we live with goes on and on.

We believe in worker rights but buy clothing made in sweatshops.
We believe in animal rights but buy the most economical meat.
The list goes on and on. Too often we make the easy choice or the economical choice, or the necessary choice rather than the ethical choice.

I think I can safely say that if you don’t know that you’re living in contradictions, you’re not thinking.

What I’d like for you to think today is the *most* contradictory thing in your life. What are you doing that is *fundamentally* against your principles?

(Don’t worry—you’re not boxed up in a confessional booth. You don’t have to say it out loud. I’m merely inviting you to think about that. And keep it in mind—What have you compartmentalized?

Because here’s the thing: I’m convinced that self-confidence is nice; but self-*coherence* is absolutely required for a meaningful life. Self-*coherence*. “Cohere”—it means “to stick together.” It means “whole,” “integrity.” We need to feel like the pieces of our lives hold together.

ONE

Dr. Lauren Berlant is a philosopher at the University of Chicago. Recently she has been exploring what she calls “cruel optimism.” By “cruel optimism” Dr. Berlant means something that we seek that *prevents us from finding what we want*. Dr. Berlant’s thesis is that people living in Capitalist societies such as ours are prone to internalize and long for what she terms “clusters of promises” that add up to a cruel optimism that locks us into endless cycles of striving, disappointment, and despair.

This involves what is sometimes called “shoulding” on yourself:

I *should* find a more fulfilling job.

I *should* spend more time with my family.

I *should* be exercising more; saving more . . . It’s that compartmentalizing thing.

But for Dr. Berlant it goes beyond mere “shoulding” to a more abstract matrix of societal expectations: “I *should* be rich and good-looking *because* I’m an American” and that sort of thing.

Cruel optimism is a matrix of desires that function to prevent us from flourishing and enjoying our lives.

Dr. Berlant founded a group she calls Feel Tank Chicago. She says there are plenty of “think tanks” out there. It’s time to have a “feel tank.” She says that this situation of cruel optimism is increasing as the promise of the American Dream recedes for most Americans. The good life promised in the glossy magazines and HD TV is an impossible dream—upward mobility; job security; healthy relationships; a just society . . . “shoulds” that aren’t happening for most of us. As Berlant puts it,

I define “cruel optimism” as a kind of relation in which one depends on objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place.

All attachment is optimistic. But what makes it cruel is different than what makes something merely disappointing. When your pen breaks, you don’t think, “This is the end of writing.” But if a relation in which you’ve invested fantasies of your own coherence and potential breaks down, the world itself feels endangered.

“Fantasies of your own coherence.”

When the American Dream has become a cruel optimism, what do we do?

One answer is to give Capitalism ever-freer rein: “Let’s let those job-creators do their work, and everything will be fine.” That’s been the clarion call of American politics since

the 1980s. A cruel optimism that has led to an endless cycle of deregulation in everything from trade policy to the way we think about reality.

Self-confidence without self-coherence.

TWO

I'm supposing that everyone has come to terms with resolutions for the new year. List makers have listed them; the sloppy among us have made some mental notes; the cynical have said, "Never again!"

Yes, resolutions for the new year are a cliché, and gym attendance is already noticeably dropping, but determining to do things differently—taking ourselves off autopilot and living more consciously, more coherently—is anything but a tired cliché.

This year, I've built my (sloppy mental) list of resolutions around avoiding what the twentieth century philosopher Martin Heidegger enumerated as the three diseases of the soul:

1. We have forgotten to notice we are alive.
2. We have forgotten that everything is connected.
3. We have forgotten we are free.

I don't have to agree with Heidegger's solutions to these problems in order to agree that these are *the* mistakes that keep many of us locked in our cages of irresolute habit and cruel optimism.

In his third point, "we have forgotten we are free," Heidegger is underlining that not only do we live in cages of habit, but we also reject our own freedom by falling into culturally induced prejudices and provincial assumptions. We forget to think outside of the boxes we unconsciously hop into every day.

For me, noticing that I am alive involves a daily routine of getting up, making some coffee, and writing before the distractions of the day begin. And—dang it—it involves exercise, which I find less attractive than writing.

For me, remembering that everything is connected involves finding wonder, reverence, awe, and humility through meditation, a practice that I have followed—sometimes assiduously and sometimes not so much—for decades.

I forget that I am free when I forget that I live in a comfortable, privileged bubble. When I forget that living without fear and want are privileges not enjoyed by most of the human beings living in our nation or on our shared planet.

We all live in the real world, but our subjective world—the one we personally expect and experience—can create those diseases of the soul Heidegger talks about and that add up to cruel optimism.

All three of these “forgettings” are about worldview.

Worldviews are funny things—we have one whether we know it or not, and if we haven't examined our worldview, the default, autopilot worldview keeps us from being authentically alive, connected, and—as Heidegger put it, free.

Worldview matters. It affects how we act in the world. If we aren't careful, we begin to miss all the contradictions.

Fortunately, a worldview can be changed with a little . . . resolution.

This year I resolve to remember that I'm alive—though the time is short—; that I'm connected with everything else in the cosmos—which is pretty awesome; and that my vision is very, very limited.

I think the case of the Wilhelm scream is a perfect example of how we *don't* notice until we *do* notice. (After you notice, you can't un-hear the Wilhelm scream.)

The Wilhelm scream was first used in a movie in 1951 and has now been used in over three hundred films and television programs. Falls; explosions; stabbings—character

after character has died in front of our eyes and ears with the same sound effect, yet I for one never noticed until one of my movie-buff kids pointed it out.

(For you trivia buffs and Easter Egg hunters, the recent Star Wars franchise film *Rogue One* has two Wilhelm screams—one of them a classic fall of a Stormtrooper from a height, and the other one elegantly cut in half with another sound effect spliced in.)

Isn't it ironic that this cry of ultimate pain and despair is *canned and as old as this building . . .*

And we don't really know who originally screamed the Wilhelm scream, though it was probably a character actor named Sheb Wooley, who died a lot in B movies in the 1940s and '50s. (Further trivia, Sheb Wooley wrote and recorded a song called "Purple People Eater." Another trivia tidbit: the people eater isn't purple, it' eats purple people.)

It's hard to notice what you're *not* noticing. That's why so many wisdom traditions tell us to stop; and think; and get into the present moment; and notice what we're not noticing. Then act in a way different than we reacted last time.

Look. See the "cruel optimism" that is driving you; see the inherent contradictions you are living out. See that you aren't living into your freedom.

Remember that question I asked earlier: What's the *most* contradictory thing in your life. What are you doing that is *fundamentally* against your principles . . .

What bill of goods have you bought, lock, stock, and barrel while you're not even noticing what you're not noticing?

How many Wilhelm screams are going on in your life?

THREE

Listen to the words of the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius:

If you want tranquility, focus. Isn't it best to focus on what it takes to be a decent social animal? Such actions bring not only the tranquility that comes

from doing well, but also the satisfaction that comes from focusing on doing only a few important things. Face it—most of what we say and do is not necessary. Stop doing those unnecessary things and have more calm and more time. Keep asking yourself: Is this really necessary? Do away with not only unnecessary actions, but also unnecessary thoughts. Be done with the unnecessary.

What is necessary?

Stick to it. Focus. Everybody knows that we all need focus. The word comes from Latin, meaning “hearth” or “fireplace” a nice, warm, homey kind of focus. Remember Marcus Aurelius: “If you want tranquility, focus.”

The answer for all of us is some mixture of the list of four basic needs:
survival,
intimate relationship,
community, and
sharing.

You’re on your own on the first two, but an institution such as First Unitarian Society is here to help you with the last two: community and sharing.

When times get tough, the tough get into community.

Community provides a place of belonging, accountability, resilience, and resistance—resilience for individuals; resistance amplified by its collective nature.

Here at First Unitarian Society we have long been explicitly Humanist, and therefore necessarily considerably left of center because we believe in a shared life in a shared world. A world free from want and fear for everyone.

Facing up to and living with the “atheist” and “heretic” labels for a hundred years has built resistance into the DNA of this congregation. Times have changed—now we’re accused of arrogance rather than heresy—but the scars of loyalty oaths and explicit calls for atheists to be barred from legal protections and citizenship remain.

After all, the Boy Scouts still require a loyalty oath, an affirmation of a belief in not just any god but the European colonial white god. Trump’s calls for denial of citizenship to

atheists have not been as explicit as those of Ronald Reagan, but I expect that those calls are coming.

And of course there's the sad fact that the US has never stopped being a *de facto* theocracy with Christian privilege.

Humanists pledge allegiance to all of humanity, and Humanists are citizens of the world.

The theology of Humanism centers on Franklin Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" — freedom of expression;
freedom of (and from) religion;
freedom from want;
and freedom from fear.

These are non-negotiable, and the methods toward achieving them for everyone tend to be fairly straightforward, since those nations that have approached achievement of them have followed a clear path of secular and communal behaviors.

That's where we stand.

Resilience and resistance. Resilience is about bouncing back from fear and despair and sustaining resistance for the long-haul. The FUS community—if we are to have any relevance—must be the place where truths continue to be told. We did it in the McCarthy era, when these door opened; we did it in the Reagan era; and we will continue.

CONCLUSION

A couple of thousand years ago Plutarch remarked that there is seldom perfect agreement between the ethics that human beings espouse and our conduct. Human beings have always been walking contradictions.

Self-coherence requires self-reflection. Self-coherence requires us to reflect on what values we most treasure. The United States has always encouraged "cruel optimism." And with the rise of authoritarian populism, the optimism will get crueler.

What do you believe in?

What contradictions are you unwilling to live with?

Do you believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, despite the false values of race or gender or national origin or ethnicity?

I challenge you to join me in remembering we are alive;
in remembering everything is connected;
and in remembering . . . we are free.