

“The Basement Tapes: On Safe Spaces, Conversation, and Murder”

A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

19 June 2016

at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

READING

The good stuff of most religions turns out to be a golden rule that defines a morality which allows humans to flourish in community. We come from a whole lineage of creatures who are robustly social and have communities that work, so you look at how their flourishing communities are set up. Are there parallels between how life works in a structured, non-human primate group, in a human community, and in the moral guidelines religion offers? It's not all that different as far as I can tell—there is hierarchy, strategic reciprocity, nurture and empathy.

Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*

INTRODUCTION

No, it's not nice to call our Lower Assembly Hall a basement. But we do have tapes down here—reel-to-reel tapes from the 1950s and 60s. Cassette tapes from the 70s and 80s. Flash drives with MP3s. We have handwritten notes and typescripts from FUS ministers and board members over the years. The FUS Archives are a real treasure. And they show that a lot of conversation has gone on here over the years.

(For those of you visiting, I should mention that we do “talks” here, not sermons. I'm not up here to mansplain. I'm here hoping to inspire your thinking. And conversation . . .)

I really love the hubbub around here on Sunday mornings. The energy. The laughter. The conversation. That cacophony is my goal for Sunday mornings when people walk into this building; it's my goal for social hour. When we talk about FUS being a safe place for dangerous ideas; when we talk about FUS being a bridge between the religious and secular worlds; when we talk about FUS being a place where people gather not in common beliefs but in common values, all those things are about community and conversation.

Literary critic Terry Eagleton said, “The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have.” I like with that. That is a profoundly humanist statement: “The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have.”

ONE

Imagine for a moment what human conversation has given us.

Imagine the din of conversation under the porches and under the trees in Athens during the time of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

Imagine the din of conversation in Baghdad in the late 700s when an institution called the House of Wisdom opened its doors—an attempt to gather all the wisdom in the world.

Think of the din of conversation in Florence that led to the Renaissance. The din of conversation in Shakespeare’s London. The din of conversation in the Paris of the 1920s. The din in Harlem that created the Harlem Renaissance. The din in Greenwich Village. Or North Beach in San Francisco in the 1950s that gave rise to the Beat Generation.

Think of the din of conversation in Liverpool, England that led to the Beatles. Or the din of conversation in a little recording studio called Sub Pop that led to the Seattle Sound, better known as Grunge. The din of conversation in the Bronx clubs of the 1970s that led to hip hop.

Too often we think of lonely geniuses, but genius is seldom lonely. Shakespeare and his Globe theatre were not the only show in town. Shakespeare’s London had twenty-seven public theatre venues. More than fifty British bands made up the so-called British Invasion. The Beatles weren’t alone.

Looked at from this perspective, from the view of what gets created in the crucible of human sharing, Eagleton’s phrase does not sound quite so bleak. All we have? Why ever would we want *more* than human conversation?

Would we *really* want a voice from on high coming to proclaim the once and final truth? Isn’t the mystery more beautiful; the stabs in the dark of the millions of human beings who have taken part in this great din of conversation?

That’s why I believe in community. A place where people talk with each other. In coffee houses. In bars. In streets and market squares—even some churches—public spaces

and the din of conversation—this is the meaning of meaning. And it is why totalitarian regimes fear the public square and it's why religions ban books.

And it's a tragedy when we fail to converse . . .

The British writer Thomas Hardy wrote what to me is of the the most profound anti-war poems ever:

“Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

“But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

“I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

“He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

“Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is.
Or help to half-a-crown.”

The soldier in Thomas Hardy's poem realizes that the soldier he has killed would, under other circumstances, have made a good beer drinking buddy.

When we aren't in conversation, we forget the humanity of “the other.” As I said a couple of weeks ago: our minds grasp things by seeing differences. The problem is that—after we have figured something out—we forget to put the pieces back together.

TWO

The term “conversation” is based on the Latin word *verto*, “to turn,” and *con*, “with.” *To turn with*. The word originally meant “intimacy with others.” It also meant “sexual intercourse.” Only later did the term take on its present meaning of talking.

Let’s just say there’s something intimate about conversation. You can’t “converse TO” someone—you can only converse WITH someone. It’s harder to hate and kill people you have conversed *with*.

I’m fascinated by all the books coming out just now about what things such as smart phones and social media are doing to our brains and to our relationships. Quite aside from all the studies—which are contradictory—what interests me most about this trend is that there is clearly great *anxiety* about what is happening to our brains and our relationships due to new technologies.

Various people are drawing the conclusion that the polarization in the national conversation has to do with our technology. Whether this is causally linked or not, it is clear that not only won’t our political parties speak to each other, but the parties themselves are dividing. Then we have a tragedy such as the shooting in Orlando, and all the crazies come out from both ends of the political spectrum, arguing about politics and religion rather than looking at the terrible human cost—talking about politics rather than looking at how politics, religion, and social norms created that situation.

But what if the increasing din of human conversation, and perhaps its increasing complexity, is *the hope* of humankind? Because, for all the bad things about all the phones and social media, they are about conversing, aren’t they?

OK, but with all these cool technical toys, who has time to converse? Conversation implies stopping long enough to hear back from someone. Who has time for that?

Well, that’s what a community like FUS is about. We are the porches and groves of Athens. We are the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. We are the library in Alexandria. We are the plazas that are so deeply embedded in the culture of Latin America. FUS is counter-cultural here in the United States because we are a place where people go to stop and listen and share. That’s the space we are.

That’s why I’m not much concerned when someone says that FUS isn’t spiritual enough: spirituality is about the self. You can get spiritual on your own time. I meditate on my own time. I read philosophy on my own time. I write poetry on my own time. I walk in the woods on my own time. My spirituality is my business. We talk about spiritual practices here. We have classes on meditation. A lot of people have spiritual experiences listening to music or hearing poetry. But our focus here is on the most difficult of human activities: talking with others . . . and listening.

But what if it's true, as I was mentioning last week—and studies are showing this to be the case—that personality type and nurture create the character of liberals and conservatives early on, and we only later choose our politics and religion, based not on reason, but on our character type?

If this is the case, we may talk about whether there's a god or not and what sort of god might exist, and we might discuss *how* to fight climate change, but we're already in agreement in broad terms with the people in our group.

How do we have conversations with others? Conservatives? Those with tendencies toward the authoritarian? We have to face that fact that some people are not going to walk into our building because it says "Unitarian" out there.

That's why fostering multifaith relationships is so important. And that's why we have to spend the time to nurture those relationships. Building bridges . . .

THREE

But what about people who hunker down in front of computer screens and seek out reinforcement for their hatred?

The massacre in Orlando didn't happen randomly. The killer sought out a place where people gathered to be free in their conversation.

That's the worst kind of terror—to lose that place where you can converse.

As a Humanist, I take exception to that oft-repeated phrase "the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice." I think that is bad theology and dangerous magical thinking. While the phrase offers hope, it offers false hope, and President Obama, who loves the phrase coined by Theodore Parker and made famous by Martin Luther King, follows up saying by adding, "but we have to bend it." Even this addition of human volition gets the human situation wrong, however.

What if there's nothing out there directing the universe toward the good? If you really look at the big picture of homo sapiens, you see that human history is not an arc but a Sine wave. There are peaks of human freedom in our history, but they turn into troughs again.

The mere existence of an amusement park called Six Flags reminds us that flags and empires come and go. Sometimes a measure of freedom and opportunity exists, then it disappears again. The sixth flag likely won't be the last, unless humanity ceases to exist soon.

The march of progress is an illusion. A self-serving illusion that perpetuates oppression by telling the oppressed “it’s getting better.” Take for example the fact that today 4.3 percent of American households with children have an income of less than \$2 per person per day. Where is the progress for those children?

Where was the progress for the dead in Orlando?

Calling an illusion an illusion isn’t to fall victim to cynicism. It is, rather, the first step to seeing the problem clearly. We must work to liberate those oppressed by the society we find ourselves living in *at the present*. We must look at what needs changing and work to change it, for there is no invisible hand bending that moral arc toward justice. It’s only us, here, and the din of our conversation.

CONCLUSION

The reading this morning was from the biologist Ursula Goodenough, who is a proponent of what she has named “religious naturalism.” I think she sums up the human condition nicely:

The good stuff of most religions turns out to be a golden rule that defines a morality which allows humans to flourish in community. We come from a whole lineage of creatures who are robustly social and have communities that work, so you look at how their flourishing communities are set up. Are there parallels between how life works in a structured, non-human primate group, in a human community, and in the moral guidelines religion offers? It's not all that different as far as I can tell . . .

We are primates, too prone to violence, too prone to use our teeth or AR-15s. Conversation can stop that. Building bridges. Sharing dangerous ideas. Agreeing to stay in conversation not because of our common beliefs but because of our common values.

As the US native activist Leonard Peltier has said,

We need each other. Each of us is responsible for what happens on this earth. We are each absolutely essential, each totally irreplaceable. Each of us is the swing vote in the bitter election battle now being waged between our best and our worst possibilities.

I can say “amen” to that. Let’s get to voting . . . and keep talking.