

On the Shoulders of Giants
a talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

Introduction

The greatest grace bestowed on humanity is the treasure of the human past. Sure, humanity has a lot of darkness in our past. But think about how wonderful it is that each generation doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. I know that's a cliché, but think about it a moment—what if each generation DID have to reinvent the wheel . . .

This has happened in human history. The Romans invaded and occupied Britain for nearly four hundred years (43-410 CE). During this time Roman know-how also occupied Britain—excellent roads; Roman baths with running hot water; stone and brick houses with mosaic floors and flush toilets. Coinage. All the gods worshiped by the very inclusive Romans. Fabric arts. Scrolls and complex writing. Masonry. Metallurgy. The Roman legions stayed so long that they simply stopped going home and positions in the Roman army were passed from father to son and on for generations.

Then, the Roman Empire began to collapse as Northern European peoples migrated west. This did not happen in a single rush. It occurred over generations. The Roman legions left Britain because of invasions much farther south. The legions in Britain merely packed up and left everything they had build. Some stayed and married into the Celtic population, but all connection with the Empire was lost.

The invading Germanic peoples didn't have paved roads; or stone and brick houses; they didn't weave fine fabrics; they used writing only for sacred purposes such as spells; their metallurgy was primitive. In the forests of Britain they found marvelous but

abandoned roads and bathhouses and coliseums and temples and incredible houses, all things they had no idea how to produce or construct. In their language they called it the “eld enterwork of giants” — “the ancient work of giants.”

Early fantasy fiction—written by such people as J. R. R. Tolkien—was based on Old English writings from this invasion and early occupation period. And so the trope of amazing ancient civilizations was born.

But those artifacts were *not* the “the ancient work of giants.” They were the products of a human civilization that had been disrupted and that did not pass on to the next inhabitants the knowledge it possessed.

What if each human generation had to reinvent the wheel? Or metallurgy. Or medical practices. Or construction techniques. What if each generation discovered only the “eld enterwork of giants”?

That’s what we’re celebrating today: the amazing grace of inheriting the ancient work of giants, all the swag we get simply because people have dedicated their lives to ideals in the past. Take this building as an example. Take the history of Unitarian Humanism. Take this congregation itself . . . an amazing amorphous congeries of liberal, like-minded, learners and doers.

One

Stanley Feldman, a political science professor, has been working for some time now on a theory of authoritarianism. When I hear “authoritarian,” my mind jumps immediately to “conservative,” but that’s politics. Feldman is convinced that an inclination toward authoritarianism is a personality type. So, when Feldman wants to know a person’s politics or religious attitudes, instead of asking people about social policy or religion, Feldman asks people four questions about childhood:

1. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: independence or respect for elders?
2. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: obedience or self-reliance?
3. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: to be considerate or to be well-behaved?
4. Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: curiosity or good manners? (<http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>)

“Independent, self-reliant, considerate, curious.” Sounds like the outcomes we would list for our K-12 religious education program, doesn’t it? Sounds like what our youth sound like when they speak here on Sunday mornings.

It isn’t that liberals disrespect good manners or that we denigrate respect. “Well-behaved” doesn’t sound half bad. “Obedient”? Hmmmm.

I know I’m making an assumption here. But my suspicion is that a large majority of you here this morning would be labeled “liberal” if you took Dr. Feldman’s test. Politically, probably. Religiously, for sure.

And the story goes beyond that. If we could set Mr. Peabody’s WABAC Machine to 1952 this morning and travel back to this very room on a Sunday morning in that year and asked Dr. Feldman’s questions, I’d say we would get almost exactly the same results.

And if we reset the WABAC Machine to 1881 and visited the folks who started this congregation . . . I suspect we would find the same

There is a DNA in a congregation, and here, “considerate” has always and will always sound better than “well-behaved,” and we will always value curiosity more than good manners.

And let’s say that one of Mr. Peabody’s puppies creates a WAY4WARD Machine. And let’s set that dial of 2081, the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding of First Unitarian Society. And let’s say that someone could set down right here on a Sunday morning. And, OK, the hairstyles are going to look a bit odd. And the modes of transportation people use to get here may seem totally strange. But, you know what? Let’s say that person from the past goes downstairs for Social Hour, for the David Luessler Memorial Mini-Meal. And over a good vegetarian lunch, that person asks some random future person, “Please tell me which you think is more important for a child: obedience or self-reliance?”

And you know what, that person will say, “Self-reliance, duh! Why do you ask?” And that person perhaps will never have heard of Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote a whole essay titled “Self-Reliance” way back in 1841. And chances are that person in 2081 won’t have heard of you or me. But you know what? That person will be just like you and me, and chances are they will still agree with Emerson’s old essay, when he said, “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind.”

You go WABAC to 1952 and 1882 . . . you go WA4WARD to 2081, they are all people who care about living right, promoting justice, and saving the planet.

Authoritarianism just never makes sense to some people, and the Unitarians and humanists of this congregation will never value order above compassion. As the British Humanist Association puts it, “we value people more than ideas.” That’s what makes us anti-authoritarian.

The people here will always value independence above respect for elders, and they will always agree with Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance:" "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

Two

A congregation is at once remarkably disjunctive and remarkably cohesive. For example, the fact that this congregation began as a reading group, focusing on the writings of Darwin, explains a lot about why the congregation became humanist and remains so today. The UU congregation in Fridley, Michael Servitus, is a spin-off of FUS . . . by way of a group of FUS members who lived in the northwestern suburbs and started meeting there . . . as a reading group. The beat goes on . . .

I would venture to guess that most people in this room today have no idea who Carl Storm was, even though we have a Carl Storm Library with an oil portrait and a bronze bust of the man. Few of us ever heard him speak. He was minister here from 1947 through 1965. Yet, the fact that Rev. Storm wrote his masters thesis on Karl Marx and refused to talk about money still lives as part of our culture in this congregation . . . We don't like to talk about money around here. And we have a wider economic demographic than the usual UU congregation.

We're going to be hearing more from Carl Storm as we look at the archives this year.

This year, 2016, is the one-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of John Dietrich and the centenary of this congregation becoming explicitly humanist. We are going to be celebrating that fact in the fall. We will be talking about Dietrich as a giant, but all the while we must remind ourselves that it was the FUS Board and the FUS members who have Dietrich his voice. Who paid to publish his pamphlets and books. It's those practical details that get glossed over when we talk about giants.

This congregation was built and has been handed down generation to generation by the hard work of volunteers.

Three

So much goes on here, night and day, all through the week. We struggle every week to get the word out about all the things going on. The only person who really knows everything that happens is Tim Roehl, our Director of Facilities, because he books all the rooms.

Last week you heard all about our Capital Campaign and the plans to bring this building into the 21st century. When this building opened in 1951, it had cost \$310,000. That's roughly 3.2 million dollars today. And it was a good investment: the building is still standing and still usable—more or less—for sixty five years. Besides which, the property and building have more than doubled in value. This neighborhood is upscale now, but it went through some tough times. Now, however, we are a neighbor to one of the premier contemporary art museums in the world, who happens to be doing a \$27 million dollar upgrade right outside our back door.

Those giants who built this building, and the giants who have stuck with it and maintained it all these years, have left us with a gem. That's grace—to inherit all the work of all those people, many of whom aren't even named in our archives.

There's been a lot of enthusiasm about the capital campaign so far. Most of the people we have asked have given us more money than we asked for. That tells me that you are grateful to those giants of our past, and that you believe in this institution.

We may just make it to four million dollars WITHOUT a long-term mortgage. And this IS NOT a fundraiser's trick—FUS volunteers have been working hard to be sure the

figures the architects have given us are as close to reality as possible. With the contractor we have a “Guaranteed Maximum Price.”

I know a lot of you are chomping at the bit to give your gift. Be patient. We only have a few canvassers, and they are contacting each of you personally.

They are more giants among us . . .

Conclusion

As Jim pointed out at the Capital Campaign assembly last week, when this building went up, it was a fortress for a minority of people who held dangerous ideas: a socialist minister; a desegregated congregation; people who opposed nuclear armament and war; people who supported a woman’s right to choose; people who believed in gay rights; people who were atheists and agnostics; anti-authoritarians: people who believed in being “independent, self-reliant, considerate, and curious.”

But as Jim said, many—if not most—people in the Twin Cities believe many of the things we have fought for for so long. It’s time to stop being a fortress and become a beacon— sharing dangerous ideas until they become mainstream; bridging the religious and secular worlds, and celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every person in our congregation, our community, and our world.

Yes, we stand on the shoulders of giants, but we are giants too—it’s giants all the way up and all the way down . . .

SOURCE

<http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>