

Change and the Progressive Mind
A talk presented by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
4 September 2016
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

Are you discontent with the lot the universe has given you?
The universe is change; life is opinion. Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations* IV.3)

INTRODUCTION

On this Labor Day weekend, I reflect back on how hard my parents struggled to survive. My father dropped out of grade school. My mother dropped out of high school. They were both born on the farm and both grew up riding farm wagons pulled by horses into town. So for them, the open highway and a Chevy with a V8 engine was a kind of freedom. And when I was a kid, we moved from place to place all over the South, my dad trying to find work.

I think that's why in some ways, I'm inoculated against the effects of change—change is about all I've known in my life. My dad was in the Boilermakers Union, so he always had to be finding new construction. We had a family farm that was a tether—I still own the farm—but I've never been inclined toward farming. So, I wandered, first as a professor, now as a UU minister.

I have to admit that change has been a friend to me, however, and I've taken full advantage of that “on the road” aspect of reinvention that the American highway offered for so many years.

My mother was born in the same room that her mother had been born in. And my grandmother was both born in and died in that same room. My other set of grandparents never left the county where they were born. That's a kind of rootedness that the V8 engine destroyed,

ONE

My attitude toward change may also be why I've embraced Humanism in my life.

Humanism is a *progressive* philosophy—we believe in change as basic to both human knowledge and social wellbeing. Humanists are skeptics, after all, and the skepticism

that is a foundational part of Humanism provides an important idea: we *must* think outside of the box all the time.

Humanists love to kill and roast sacred cows. Humanists are iconoclasts—we take delight in busting up those icons of the past.

Humanism is the tradition of anti-traditionalism.

After all, tradition is usually what we have right now: the culture and mores of the moment, and progressives never think that the present is good enough.

Tradition idealizes the past. Conservatism springs from an idealization of some past that the tradition created—an America that was once great and that can be made great again by going back to the beliefs of a bygone time. That's classic conservatism. Humanism is antithetical to that way of thinking.

As a kid in the Pentecostal church I sang a song called “Gimme that Old Time Religion:” with lyrics such as, “It was good enough for the Hebrew children, and it's good enough for me!” We were loud and proud about our old-time conservatism, and we believed that Pentecostalism had gone right back to the beginning of what Christianity was all about.

Progressivism, on the other hand, begins not from “how do we get *back* to the past” or “how have we always done it?” but from the question of human flourishing in the here and now: “Here's where we are; we can do better; what do we do now to enhance human wellbeing?”

That's Humanism.

Humanists *are* human, however, and a tradition of anti-traditionalism is still a tradition. We are celebrating a hundred years of Humanism in this congregation. A hundred years. And we are celebrating that century of Humanism in a sixty-five year old building. . .

Falling into the loving arms of the past is seductive. Humanism *was* a forward-thinking idea a century ago. The Humanism hatched here in the Midwest by John Dietrich and Curtis Reese and a few other Unitarian ministers and academics spread across the nation and around the world. It was a modern outlook for a modern world—kind of the exact opposite of Pentecostalism: “gimme that new-fangled un-religion!” That new-fangled Humanism offered freedom from superstition, freedom from traditional social structures, and an ethics built on dealing with real problems in the real world, right now, rather than trying to make out what to do by reading Iron Age scripture.

That early Dietrich period was a heady time for this congregation. And over a thousand people showed up every week to hear the good news of Humanism.

Humanism taught people to be world citizens, and that especially resonated with the next generation, who came of age during the Second World War and found themselves navigating the Cold War—the people who built this building.

That was the second expansion period for Humanism. Humanists were free people in oppressive times, resisting the bigotry of religions; resisting the fear tactics of the Cold Warriors. Resisting the xenophobia of McCarthyism. Resisting the ravages of uncontrolled Capitalism. Resisting racism, sexism, and homophobia during the years of the Culture Wars.

But Humanists must avoid golden-age thinking and traditionalism. What was true a century ago or sixty years ago, only partially reflects our world today. We have to continually remind ourselves that Humanism is the tradition of anti-tradition, a tradition striving for liberation from the superstition and prejudices of the past. Humanist must always be the change agents in the room.

Let's take *the cornerstone* of Humanist thought as a good example—reason.

Reason gave humankind philosophy and mathematics and the scientific method. It created the Upanishads in India—the writings that led to Buddhism. It created mathematics in Persia. It created geometry in Greece. It created medical procedures that work. It led to the Enlightenment in Europe, when thinkers insisted that reason, not tradition and culture, should decide what human freedoms are. Reason created the concept of the individual and the conviction that individuals have *inherent* and inviolable human rights.

But even as thinkers of the Enlightenment exposed tradition as an inadequate guarantor of truth, other oppressions sprang up. The concept of race replaced one set of oppressions with another—as pseudo-science reinforced the prejudices of Europeans and justified slavery and the European colonial project and genocide in the Americas and in Africa.

Reason created the Nazi gas chambers.

And pseudo-science also created strict gender barriers, and pseudo-science “proved” that women’s brains were smaller than men’s, and therefore . . . women weren’t reasoning creatures . . .

The humbling lesson to learn is that putting either tradition *or* science or any other idol of the mind in the driver’s seat without skepticism will lead to oppression. The formula is simple: reason plus prejudice equals oppression . . .

Humanists must remember the lessons of history as much as we do the lessons of science and reason.

It has always been apparent that reason can lead to irrational behaviors: confirmation bias, for example—that we notice what *reinforces* our preexisting beliefs, our prejudices, and forget the facts that argue *against* our prejudices. Motivated reasoning.

And even in the use of the scientific method there are the “ghost theories” that motivate experimenters to look at one thing and not another. The Big Bang may well be creating a ghost theory that leads us to look for effects of the Big Bang rather than evidence that is hiding in plain sight . . . maybe, maybe not . . . but *reasoning isn't always neutral*.

French social scientist Daniel Sperber has invented what he calls the “argumentative theory” to explain why we do irrational things and why we don't change our minds, despite evidence.

According to Sperber, we don't routinely reason in order to improve our thinking but rather to prove our opinions. We want to disprove the arguments of others and prove our arguments. Reason, then—according to argumentative theory—is not about an *individual discovering truth*, but is about a *social animal proving a thesis to others*.

This theory makes evolutionary sense. If I believe everything I hear, I'm easily manipulated. But if I can use reason to convince you of my point of view, I gain power.

TWO

But what is Humanism if we begin to question reason?

I define Humanism this way:

Humanism is a way of life based in the best of human thought and dedicated to the well being of humanity and the planet.

The “best of human thought” tells us to suspect what we ourselves are doing with our reasoning capacity.

The best of human thought tells us to be careful concerning our own motivated reasoning.

The best of human thought tells us that there may be other ways of thought than a “pure” reason that clearly isn't as pure as the driven snow!

When we believe in the best of human thought, we aren't afraid of new ideas. We aren't afraid to change our minds. We aren't protecting our beliefs, but rather we are opening ourselves to new thoughts. It may even be that Humanists need reason a whole lot less than the dogmatically religious do: Knowledge doesn't need motivated reasoning.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said,

There are always two handles by which to grasp something—one is good to grab, the other useless. (*Handbook*, 43)

Humanism is about which handle to choose.

What handle do we grab onto when it comes to understanding the nature of our existence? What handle do we grab in order to understand and encourage human flourishing and the betterment of our planet?

Contra to traditionalism, Humanism embraces continuous revelation and continuous change. Revelations of the heart; revelations of the mind—art, science, and all the words and works of civilization.

Humanism is freedom of mind *and* heart. The dream and opportunity of Humanism is the dream and opportunity for a responsible and purposeful life here and now. A life free of the fears that have haunted the human mind for so long.

Humanism is freedom—the freedom to realize that the old demons of the human mind are mere chimeras. The freedom to live in the world of the real and the possible.

THREE

When John Dietrich arrived here in the autumn of 1916, he had been tried for heresy in a Christian denomination and defrocked. He joined the Unitarians, got a preaching job out in Spokane, Washington, and there began to read up on this thing that had been called Humanism way back at the end of the Middle Ages and more recently by some secular thinkers in England.

“Humanism.” Dietrich began to see it as a way of doing religion without reference to the supernatural. He began calling himself a Humanist. Then in the 1916, First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis called Dietrich as their minister. And thus, by vote of the congregation, FUS became the first explicitly Humanist congregation in the United States.

But what the heck was Humanism? Some of the 1916 congregation may have understood the word “humanist” as it was used in the Renaissance period to describe those radicals who focused their attention on the natural world rather than the supernatural.

But what that had to do with creating a congregation would be anybody’s guess.

That was a big change, becoming Humanist. And this congregation has held onto that spark of creativity and edginess ever since.

And we are still out to change hearts and minds with the saving message of Humanism.

Change is what this congregation creates. And today we *are* the bricks and mortar of Humanism and we are the largest Humanist congregation in the United States (and therefore the world, for that matter).

The people in this congregation have been very careful with resources. This congregation has nursed and cared for this building so carefully for so long. But I believe now is the perfect time for **change** and for sprucing this place up for the next sixty-five years. And the next hundred years.

Everybody fears change, it's human nature—we like the known knowns. And a congregation may be the place people *most* want things to remain the same. It's comforting to have a place that time forgot.

But the time of Humanism is now. After a century of tending the flame, we've got to let 'er rip, as it were. Secularism is exploding. And Humanism is a powerful secular alternative, one that promotes reason, compassion, and justice.

CONCLUSION

I'm inclined to believe Professor Sperber's "argumentative theory" and it's account of reason, that reason is first and foremost a tool of argument rather than a tool for finding truth.

But rather than spelling doom for Humanism, I think it further underlines the need for the Humanist project, because we are poised always on the knife's edge, ready to learn that next new bit of knowledge, and more interested in knowing what is to be known than in proving ourselves right.

On our FUS tee shirts, it says "reason, compassion, justice." We trust all three of those. In our fearful, torn world, more argument isn't useful. But conversation is. Reason won't get us out of our current political woes, but conversation might . . . and a truly *deliberative* democracy.

There have been a lot of plays on Obama's campaign slogan "change you can believe in." My favorite shows Charles Darwin's profile and says, "slow change you can believe in."

SOURCE

https://www.edge.org/conversation/hugo_mercier-the-argumentative-theory