

“Cusps, Tipping Points, and Critical Masses”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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Our theme this month at First Unitarian Society is thresholds and portals. We picked this theme a while back, and at the time, I don't think we fully imagined what kind of shape our country would be in right now, this close to the election. The current state of affairs has certainly felt like a threshold, or maybe a precipice, as if the foundations of our democracy may be about to slide across some terrible line. According to the American Psychological Association, more than half of Americans are currently experiencing significant stress brought on by the election. If that same percentage applies to this congregation, those of us on the Caring Team have a couple of hundred pastoral visits to make.

I have in fact talked to some of you about this very real kind of stress and the impact it's having, and I've been grateful for those conversations, because I've been feeling the stress, too. Making connections like that is one of the many ways people of this place help each other feel less alone in a troubled world. It's one of the foundational reasons we exist as a community. Whether you were an atheist in 1916 or are a fully informed citizen in 2016, the important message is the same: “You are not alone.”

The election is just one of the things that is approaching a tipping point. There are quite a number of tipping points, positive and negative, that we are experiencing right now, or perhaps it's a mix of tipping points and thresholds and critical masses. Whichever they may be, this morning I want to talk about a number of these transitions and the role we have to play.

One that has sprung up in just the last couple of weeks is around the idea of what it means to live as a woman in this country. The infamous audio recording that featured bragging about sexually assaulting women was at a minimum extremely disturbing for anyone who believes in the full humanity of women. For some men, it was a wake-up call; for some women, it brought up traumas, from long ago in their lives, or much more recently. For many women, this sudden national conversation provided an opening, an opportunity, an imperative to talk about what has happened to them, and how it affects the way they live in this world. There is in the air a new willingness to hear and believe such stories.

As some of you know, just this past week, our own Rev. Kelli Clement became a hero in one of these stories. On Tuesday evening, Kelli had spent an hour with a small group of ministers right here in this hall, where we sat in candlelight as we reflected on the idea of what it means to be enough, to have enough to offer, and to do enough for the world. Not long after, while Kelli was driving home, she saw a young woman surrounded by three men at a bus stop. As Kelli describes it: “I roll down my window to ask if she's OK. She says ‘no, they're harassing me.’ ‘Get in,’ says I, and we drive away. We both had to make split-second decisions to trust each other.” Kelli wound up driving all the way to the young woman's home, making sure she got safely inside. Kelli in that moment was enough.

Kelli posted this story on Facebook, where more than 700 people liked it on her page alone, and it was shared nearly 60 times and received hundred more likes and comments. People of all genders were ready to hear, and believe, and witness this story, perhaps in ways they wouldn't have been ready just a few weeks ago. We may not be at a tipping point, but certainly at a turning point, a point that compels more and more of us to see the world as it really is.

There is still much work to be done, of course, but it starts with individuals and small groups of people taking action on a variety of issues.

I don't know whether we are at a threshold, or a critical mass with the idea that Black Lives Matter, but every day, the concept moves a little more into the mainstream. It seems like every week, there is a new video that makes it a little more difficult for doubters and disbelievers to say that black and brown people, whether driving or walking down the street, face risks that are no different from the white majority. In many situations, I am of course a strong proponent of doubt and disbelief and skepticism. But I have long believed the stories of the African-Americans I have gotten to know. Like Dr. Anthony Pinn, who was here last week telling us about how, when he buys a new car, he tries to pick something that'll be less likely to get pulled over.

And I have long believed the stories I've heard from the women who have shaped my life, stories like that of the young woman who got into Kelli's car. Audio recordings of crude braggings and video recordings of police encounters are filling in a gap that humans have in trusting the stories of all people. It is my deepest hope that we are at a threshold of greater human understanding.

There is another kind of tipping point going on that affects not only the life of our nation but every human life in every nation, and that is climate change. I have to tell you that one of the things I get evaluated on every year as a minister is how well I do self-care. And I must admit that one of the areas in which I am very poor at self-care is that I sometimes read the latest news about climate change right before going bed. This is a terrible idea. It must be so much easier to be a climate-change denier and sleep the deep sleep of the clueless.

But just this past week in the latest New Yorker magazine, I read an article by Elizabeth Kolbert, the excellent science journalist. Over this past summer, Kolbert visited Greenland and spent time on top of glaciers with a group of scientists, scientists who are finding themselves continually alarmed by just how much more quickly the cubic miles of ice are melting than even the smartest among them had expected. A certain kind of tipping point seems to have already been reached.

Even as dire as things seem to be, however, there is in fact hope to be found. Humanity cannot reverse what has already been set in motion, but we can still take actions to keep things from getting even worse. There is hope that, after November 8th, there will be greater numbers of elected officials in Washington who accept the facts about human-caused climate change, that

a critical mass of leaders will understand the urgency of doing whatever can be done now to slow down the heating of the planet.

I'd like to mention one more threshold from the broader world that we live in, and it's one that David has talked about. It's the fact that, for the first time in American history, the largest "religious" group in the country is people who unaffiliated with any religion. In the latest poll by the Public Religion Research Institute, one-quarter of Americans now describe themselves as unaffiliated. There are now more unaffiliated Americans than there are Catholic Americans, and among adults under 30, four out of ten people are unaffiliated. The most common reason cited for leaving a religion is not that the church was too church-y or that it met in a "sanctuary"; rather, most common reason, cited by 60 percent of the unaffiliated, is the very simple idea that the individual "stopped believing in the religion's teachings." Traditional religion in America is melting like the glaciers, with cycles that reinforce the decline – unaffiliated adults raise unaffiliated children, while other people who were raised religiously leave religion behind on their own, and the numbers flow together in an unprecedented, ever-rising stream. Religion is another landscape that will never look the same.

So, there's a lot going on – thresholds and tipping points everywhere you look. It is not your imagination that we are in a time of change. There's a lot that's in flux, a lot that's churning, some for the worse and some for the better. It's a lot to carry, intellectually and emotionally. You can see why we scheduled a workshop today called "Finding Inner Peace in a Turbulent World." The good news is that none of us has to hold it all, or fix it all, alone. That's one of the big reasons we come here, It's why this place exists, why people have been coming to FUS for more than 100 years.

And that's what I'd like to focus on for the second part of my talk: why this place exists, how it will continue to exist, and how it has important roles to play in the major issues of the day. What is the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis for? And at what kind of threshold do we find ourselves?

I've been thinking of this more than usual lately because we are at an exciting and critical time in our plans to update and upgrade our home, our building, which is beautiful and beloved, and showing more than a little wear. Sixty-five years is a long time to have the same furnace, most of the same windows, and most of the same flooring. It's a long time to limp through ever-warmer summers without air conditioning.

And it's not just the physical systems that are out of date. Some of the values systems represented by our spaces are out of date as well. Sixty-five years ago, it was assumed that everyone who would show up here could use the stairs to get to a restroom, or to get from the top floor to the bottom floor, or that everyone would be comfortable using restrooms labeled for men or women. It's an exciting time to think that we're going to be able to move ourselves into the 21st century on these matters. And it's exciting that we've already raised more money than anyone thought possible just a year ago.

And so we here at FUS are at that critical time, a time when we are adding up what has been pledged, and looking at the total of what we hope to have pledged, and weighing decisions about what work we're going to be able to accomplish. This is challenging stuff, affecting what this building will be like a year from now, as well as how people we will never know will use this building 50 years from now. It's a really big threshold we're about to cross, together.

And, as I was warned in seminary and had reinforced during my ministerial internship, capital campaigns stress out even the most well-adjusted and reason-based congregations. Anyone who has done a remodeling project knows that there are anxieties that bubble up over the cost and the disruption and the long-term changes. And in a congregation, where there are 500 adults weighing in instead of the more typical one or two at home, these anxieties come out in all sorts of ways. You find out pretty quickly which wall or sculpture or appliance or storage closet or light fixture is sacred to somebody, even in a place where we don't use the word sacred. This is a totally natural thing to have happen, to have discussions focus on details and reactions rather than on the benefits and on the 50-year view. And these anxieties do tend to work themselves out among people of good will. Sometimes when I hear such anxieties, I'm reminded that FUS went through some dark decades of decline, when pet projects and personal preferences dominated how this place was run.

But I trust that such times are firmly in the past, because we are now less of an "I" congregation and more of a "we." And today's leaders are a positive, forward-looking bunch, as I was reminded just yesterday at the board retreat. I don't know what you know about our elected trustees, but they have that deep sense of love and care and vision for FUS, and we had more than three hours of thoughtful, insightful discussion. We are so fortunate to have such people who understand shared leadership and clear lines of governance and a focus on the big picture and the long view.

Another get-together that reminded me of our great potential was last weekend's "future of humanism" conference. Where else in the world could such a thing have taken place but here? Who else could and would convene such speakers? This building is the largest humanist institution that we know of, anywhere. And how many other pulpits in the world would invite an atheist such as Anthony Pinn to speak at a Sunday morning service? We have such an important role to play in the big picture of humanism in the years and decades to come.

So it is my hope, as we head into the home stretch of this campaign between now and the end of the year, that we can give the future a fully equipped FUS. The truth of the situation right now is that a few of our core items came in at a higher cost than our architects estimated. Our team is working hard to get the numbers on spending down, while other folks are working hard to get the donation numbers up. (They don't have my donation in there yet; my partner and I are planning to contribute, not because we have loved every fabric swatch, but because we both believe strongly in this place.)

As amazing as the total amount that FUS has raised so far is, the sobering reality is that, on a per-member basis, our capital campaign giving is quite low relative to other Unitarian

Universalist congregations. I've been looking around and doing the math, and if we reach our base goal, we will be lower on a per-member basis than basically every congregation I looked up. Denver, Iowa City, Unity in St. Paul, the UU Church of Minnetonka – they've all raised more, in some cases substantially more, than we are thinking we can raise per member. The demographics and giving capacity of those congregations are similar to ours. So I've really been scratching my head about this. Have David and I and the other leaders failed to convey all that would be possible if we had a fully functioning, much more welcoming building that is not a burden on current or future generations? Is FUS still living in the shadow of a past culture of scarcity when abundance is so close within reach? Do people here not love FUS as much as other people love their congregations? I spend my days surrounded by the passionate, generous people here, so I am genuinely perplexed.

But here's what I hope the answers are: that we can move fully beyond scarcity and siloed thinking. That the people in this room today do love this place as much or more as others love their own congregations, and that they express that love with solid financial support as we are able to manage. And that FUS can head into the future with a well-funded, cutting-edge facility to match our cutting-edge humanism.

I say this not only because I want us to have more comfortable, more accessible, year-round spaces for us to be together as a community, as important as that is. I say this also because I think this place and the plans for its future embody the world we want to live in, the world our humanist beliefs compel us to help bring about.

We want to live in a world where women and their bodies are fully respected. This is something that FUS teaches through the Our Whole Lives comprehensive sexuality education programs. This is something that our social justice program brings to the world, in terms of reproductive justice and advancing opportunities for women and girls.

We want to live in a world where climate change is taken seriously acted upon. This means weatherizing this incredibly drafty building and taking a 65-year-leap forward in energy efficiency. Getting our own house in order will allow us to focus more of our attention outward, on climate justice, alternative energy, direct action, and desperately needed policy change.

We want to live in a world where black and brown and immigrant lives truly matter as much as all other lives. This means offering space for organizers of color and hosting events that support such movements. And the better funded the capital campaign, the more money we'll have over the long term for the social justice and other programming that is so dear to our hearts.

And we want to live in a world where FUS stands as a beacon. A beacon for that quarter of the population who are unaffiliated, who have left traditional religion behind or never experienced it. As we heard at the humanist conference last week, when people fall out of religion, they are looking for a soft place to land. We want to welcome people with a better, more fully functional building, one that says "come on in" to people of all backgrounds, ages, and abilities. And after all that we have learned about America this election cycle, we also want FUS to stand as a

beacon to promote critical thinking, reason, science, and humanist values, and to do everything we can to counter ignorance and xenophobia.

So, in this time of great churn and transition, the world is calling on us, calling us to be both cutting-edge and a soft place to land – for our own minds and bodies, and for bodies of all kinds and abilities. May we remember that generosity of spirit is the highest human practice. May we take risks and open our doors to friends and strangers in need. May we fully be the place and the people we dream of being, and take our rightful place in the world. May it be so.