

“Getting *Into* the Congregation”  
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
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at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

*“The time is now come for the Unbelievers, Infidels, or Liberals (or whatever name soever we may call ourselves by) to stand forth.”*  
Infidel Convention, 1857

### A Story for All Ages: Two Big Worlds

The story goes that Shiva—one of the chief manifestations of divinity in Hinduism—and his wife Parvati had two sons: One was Ganesha, perhaps the most recognizable of the Hindu gods because he has the head of an elephant. Ganesha is the remover of obstacles and the god of creativity in the arts and sciences. His brother, Kartikeya, is the god of war—he’s recognizable because he always rides a huge peacock.

The parents—as parents usually do—loved both of their children equally.

It so happened that one day Shiva and Parvati came into possession of a divine piece of fruit, and its special property was that whoever should eat it would have absolute and supreme knowledge.

Now, when Ganesha and Kartikeya heard about this piece of fruit, both of them wanted it. And they took to arguing about who should have it.

Lord Shiva tired of this wrangling pretty quickly and decided on a contest: whichever of his boys could circle the whole world three times the fastest would get the fruit.

Well, Kartikeya didn’t need time to think—he immediately hopped on his huge peacock, and off he flew.

Now Ganesha knew that there was no point in him trying to best his brother in speed. Elephant-headed gods are not exactly light on their feet. Besides, instead of riding a mighty peacock, like his brother, Ganesha always rode around on a mouse—not the sort of ride to get you around the earth three times quickly.

Whoosh! went Kartikeya and his peacock the first time around the earth.

What was Ganesha to do? Well, he went to his bedroom and washed up and put on his best clothes.

About this time Whoosh! goes Kartikeya and his peacock on their second time around the earth.

Ganesha went back to his parents. Then he ran in a tiny little circle. Then another. Then another.

Whoosh! Kartikeya and his peacock come in for their landing. "I've done it!" Kartikeya yelled.

"But I was first!" said Ganesha.

Ganesha's mother Parvati said, "What makes you think you were first? All you did was run around the living room three times!"

"Because," said Ganesha, "THIS is my world."

Parvati and Shiva saw the sense in Ganesha's argument, and handed him the fruit of supreme knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

The reading this morning is from a new book by religious studies professor Leigh Eric Schmidt called *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*. The book examines late-nineteenth century freethought.

Labels are difficult, perhaps especially for freethinkers who don't want to be labeled—atheist, agnostic, deist, theist, now “apatheist” and “none” and “spiritual but not religious” and on and on.

The book stops short of John Dietrich's adoptions of the word “humanist” in 1916, the word that finally caught on to describe people who think outside the orthodox religious box. (Though, of course, freethinkers still object to that word and just about any other label.)

An FUS membership pamphlet from 1938 called *Humanism for Today* says this:

All people in the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis are expected to do their own thinking on religion. It does not ask or expect or even wish its members to assent to any certain beliefs; it imposes not the slenderest creedal obligations, either expressed or implied. Just as a university needs no creed and yet arms students with knowledge and convictions and creative faith, so does this creedless congregation strive to incite its people to think out their life philosophy, to achieve convictions, to become animated with faith, ideals, vision.

The great bulk of people of this congregation, however, accept the humanistic interpretation of religion; and the pulpits address the great questions of life from the viewpoint of Humanism. This does not mean that Minneapolis Unitarians think alike on all matters of religion. Within the range of Humanism are found many varying beliefs and interpretations of experience.

## ONE

One of our speakers at our October 15 event will be Dr. Sonita Sarker, a feminist scholar at Macalister College. The reason her voice is important in the conversation about the *next* hundred years of Humanism is her understanding of intersectional oppression—when oppressions stack up. Dr. Sarker argues that identity comes in two forms: the identity *forced* upon us by culture; and the identity we *choose* for ourselves.

Dr. Sarker bases her work on the thought of Antonio Gramsci, who was an early twentieth-century neo-Marxist who died in the 1930s as a result of imprisonment by the Italian Fascists. Gramsci described the inner-working of social systems as “the war of positions.”

The war of positions . . .

To simplify a bit, Gramsci thought that labels—cultural norms—create the positions oppressed groups must inhabit. These are the structures that keep certain groups in power and other groups out. Just as those whom the gods wish to destroy, first they make mad, those whom the ruling classes wish to oppress, first they label.

The labels given by the dominant culture, Gramsci thought, are internalized by the oppressed groups themselves, and then—too often—people live down to the label, if you will. That’s “the war of positions”—the powerful create labels and expectations and the oppressed internalize those labels and expectations, thus taking away their own power. What individuals *do* with those labels and expectations will turn into their personal oppression . . . but labels also offer a chance at liberation. That’s where the “war” comes in.

Do you *consent* to your oppression? (The oppression is even more problematic if there’s a god involved, one who—you are told—hates the label you’ve been given.) Do you consent to the expectations of the powerful?

We get a label or a set of labels when we are born and as we age. That’s inevitable. We internalize expectations: good Americans are happy; good Americans have goals and look . . . just like these glossy pictures! Here’s a television program—just look at all the happy people and all the things they have! If you just had THAT stuff, you’d be beautiful too! Oh, and by the way, here’s your brand new credit card in the mail . . . Because what makes people poor isn’t what they don’t have—money—lots of people live fine without money . . . What makes you poor is what you DO have—debt.

Some individuals get more labels than others. The writer James Baldwin is a perfect example—he was born poor AND black AND gay. How do you work through all those labels?

Or what about: born poor AND brown AND gay AND a woman AND transgender AND atheist? Where do you start?

What about immigrants, who arrive in a new culture having internalized old labels from the cultures they have left, but then they must scramble to understand what the new cultural labels mean . . .

When you have a whole list of oppressive labels to work through, where do you start? Race. Gender. Class. Sexuality. Nationality . . . all those produce culturally imposed labels. Dr. Sarker writes,

‘identity’ can be more closely described as identity-making, that is . . . process . . . Members of the organizations (that she mentions) negotiate between ethnicized, gendered, and class-based essentialisms/reductiveness and constructedness to claim grounds for action within the sociocultural and political (ultimately, existential) discontinuities and deferrals of representation.

Dr. Sarker’s point is an important one: we human beings can gather together into groups that give us collective identity and collective social and political power to battle back against labeling, at the same time providing personal empowerment. Those places become communities of resistance.

My question: Can Unitarian Universalism and/or Humanism create those sorts of communities?

## TWO

When John Dietrich sorted through all those labels and decided upon “humanism” to label his so-called “religion without God” he was following the lead of Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Gautama Buddha (c. 563?-483? BCE). All three took the approach that the Buddha best explained:

Say you are walking one day. And, out of nowhere, an arrow comes flying and hits you in the shoulder. People rush to help and someone says, “Get a doctor!” Are you going to say, “No! Wait! I’ve got to know who shot that arrow—was it on purpose or an accident? Where did the arrow come from? I’ve got to know who made that arrow and where it was made!”

No, said the Buddha, you don’t do that. You allow the doctor to be called because you know that if he doesn’t help, you are in for a lot of pain and suffering and perhaps even death.

The Buddha said, “That’s exactly where we all are. Why talk of gods or an afterlife? We’ve got enough to deal with right here, right now.”

Confucius asked, “If you cannot serve human beings, how do you expect to serve spirits?”

John Dietrich put it this way: “to shift the emphasis of thought from the traditional to the scientific, from the theological to the historical, from the irrational to the rational, from the supernatural to the natural.”

None of the three *rejected* the supernatural; they merely hit the “pause” button on *speculation concerning the supernatural* so that they could focus on real human problems right now.

This is what all three of them taught. And it’s what Humanism is all about.

By hitting the pause button on considerations of the supernatural, Humanists are not being dismissive or glib about the mysteries that have enthralled humanity and have even at times helped people cope. We merely realize that everyone has been struck by an arrow called the human condition. We’ve realized that the house is on fire and only human brains and human hands can put out the fire.

That’s the difference between signing on the dotted line and becoming a member of this congregation—signing up is easy. Dedicating your life to living up to the aspirations of our congregation, however, ain’t easy!

### THREE

Back to that Story for All Ages.

At first it may appear that Ganesha was merely buttering his parents up—telling them that home is where his heart is. On a deeper level, however, the story points out that there are always two worlds that we live in. There is the measurable, common-property world that Kartikeya and his peacock flew around three times. It’s the shared reality that can be measured. The earth is 24,901 miles around. The one that slaps labels on human beings to keep us all in our places.

The other world is the subjective world each of us lives in all by ourselves. It’s a world that’s unique and circumscribed—for every person. It’s where we *accept* the labels slapped on us by social norms . . . or not.

That’s the world where grief can make everything else dark; where worry can make the things that once brought us joy suddenly dull and meaningless. Where being label can mar your life forever.

If you let it.

It’s the world where that nagging voice tells us that we’re not good enough; or haven’t done enough; or never will do anything right or we don’t have enough stuff. . . . That’s why Ganesha is the remover of obstacles—because the obstacles are usually in our brains . . . in the stories you are telling yourself—“I’m poor.” “I’m not smart enough.” “I

already peaked and I'm goin' downhill. I love the wrong people; I'm the wrong color."  
*Et cetera. Et cetera.*

Stories. Obstacles.

That's one of the reasons FUS is here. Sure, FUS lives out in Kartikeya's world and rides the big peacock named Unitarian Universalism and Humanism and social justice.

But we also exist as a place for each of you to bring those things that live in Ganeshe's world.

The parts work together. Sometimes philosophy and science and ideas and meaning and purpose and the meaning of life and the future are just what we want to think and talk about.

Sometimes the pain won't go away. Memories and images won't stop. Hope vanishes. A job disappears . . . *Et cetera. Et cetera.*

That's why Shiva and Parvati are the high gods—both the objective world and the subjective world live in their house at the same time and all the time . . .

## CONCLUSION

For me, Humanism is the ultimate human philosophy because Humanism is explicit: I don't care who your god is or isn't. If you SHOW that you are about US and not "me," "me," me," you're humanist. Because Humanism is first and foremost and always COMMUNAL. Is always us and there is no "me" or "them."

You wanna get INTO this congregation? Get over yourself. Get over your vague subjective theories. And take a real, *long* look at the world we live in. There's no big warm fuzzy . . . anything . . . that's going to save us. There is no ultimate peace and justice, and there NEVER WILL BE.

There's only . . . us. There's only what we do to each other, with each other, and for each other.

Too often, that is NOT pretty.

You can "find yourself" all you want. But you know what? There's a kid starving down the street. And there's a kid who's going to get shot tonight. Kids can't eat thoughts OR prayers.

And you did your best or you didn't. Go light your candles while this world burns. *Or* face the facts: there's no Red Sea parting. There's no Jericho walls tumbling down. There's only what we do TO or FOR each other.

I invite you to get *into* this congregation. We, here, are people who see reality for WHAT IT IS. There's no warm fuzzies that are going to come swooping in and save us. It's just us. Step up. Step up. Step up!