

“The Power of Liminal Space”

A talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION

A very common first response to walking into this room is, “Wow! Beautiful sanctuary!” To which, as a minister here, I am duty bound to respond, “We call it our ‘Upper Assembly Hall.’”

By insisting for sixty-five years that this beautiful space is an Assembly Hall, not a sanctuary, we are following the Seventh point of the first Humanist Manifesto:

The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.

The word sanctuary is based on the Latin word sanctus, meaning “holy.” The word sacred is based in the Latin word sacre, meaning “consecrate.”

Holy is based in the Old English word halig, meaning “whole.”

This space is not a “sanctuary” because it is no more holy or sacred than anywhere else. Sure, it’s certainly a storied room. And most importantly its a space where generations of human beings have gotten married, named their children, brought their problems, stood up for truth and social justice, and memorialized our dead.

All those things make this space important for a lot of people, and it will remain so for generations to come. But it’s not a sanctuary, because it’s not sacred. It’s a beautiful space that human beings built, and that human beings have maintained. It’s a human space for human beings.

The human spirit lives here, and that’s more than enough spirits for Humanists.

“But it LOOKS like a sanctuary!”

Well, get yourself some new eyes. All those so-called sanctuaries—from Egyptian temples to Isis to Medieval cathedrals to store-fronts in strip malls—are spaces just like this one—made by human hands and maintained by human hands. Sure, we human beings have a tendency to fetishize things—a pair of grandma’s reading glasses or

great-great-great grandpa's walk stick. But these things are important, they aren't magic.

For sixty-five years in this space we have continued to insist: "The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained . . ."

That doesn't mean spaces can't be important. It's just that Humanists realize how so-called sacred spaces are created and what they contain . . . the products of our own minds.

What we call this space is very deeply about Humanist theology. We are saying that . . . despite what the patriarchy and the kings and the priests and the popes and the senators and the preachers and a long list of oppressors . . . despite what they all claimed—WE KNOW that human beings MAKE the sacred. So, oppressors, just back off and keep your lies about your legitimacy to yourself. Here, we are free people.

That's why we don't have a sanctuary!

ONE

Only one more etymology, I swear: the word *liminal* derives from the Latin word *limen*, meaning "threshold." The word limit also comes from this root.

Liminal space is over the threshold. It's in-between.

We hear the word liminal a lot nowadays in the context of psychology, but it was an anthropologist who brought the term "liminal" into English to express the process of rites of passage in religious ceremonies. Then the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner took the idea and described the liminal experience as, "the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience."

What really brought the word liminal into popular use was the book and movie *Fight Club*. The author, Chuck Palahniuk, said, "So often what I'm doing is dramatizing the writings of Victor Turner."

The central theme of *Fight Club* is the life passage of boys into men, a process that's pretty clearly not about age (You can fill in the blank with lots of names here, I'm sure) and also it a process not ritualized in a suburban American context.

Palahniuk makes a good case that this fact creates a lot of crazy, violent American males. *Fight Club* creates "the sudden foregrounding of agency:—the realization that what we do has consequences. When they realize their agency—their power—the characters experience—often for the first time in their lives—a connection between their thoughts and their experiences. Palahniuk says,

Only after disaster can we be resurrected. It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything. Nothing is static, everything is evolving, everything is falling apart.

Yes, that's a good definition of liminal space. Also, that's a classic articulation of what Alcoholics Anonymous has called "hitting bottom." And hitting bottom certainly has the effect of clarifying what we can and can't do, our agency. But I don't agree with Palahniuk that complete disaster is required.

As a matter of fact, there's all kinds of Fight Clubs. Life's simple natural passage can beat us up pretty badly—the transition from childhood to adulthood can hurt. Or losing a job. Or a relationship. Moving. Getting a divorce. The death or decline of a loved one. A bad medical diagnosis . . . All those things and lots more can throw us into liminal space, the space in-between.

Liminal space is about disorientation. Agitation. Dis-placement.

It's not a comfortable spot. It's existing in the tension of the opposites—two realities staring us in the face, but we're in-between, and too often there's not much we can do about it. We can't find our agency—our power.

But a congregation . . . that ought to be a somewhere spot; a place of comfort and belonging, shouldn't it? In one way, certainly yes. We want to be warm spot for troubled minds.

But, you know what, in terms of theology and philosophy, this congregation long ago decided to live in liminal space . . . all the time. To live in the tension of the opposites: on the one hand embracing a very specific life stance, Humanism; and on the other hand, embracing the very definition of chaos—creedless Unitarianism.

The early Humanists hadn't read or seen Fight Club, but they did know a thing or two about the friction between religion and skepticism.

In his first address to the congregation in November of 1916, John Dietrich told the congregation what "I have in mind for this society during my ministry," the first point being,

to make it a common meeting ground for all people, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, theist and atheist, on the single common basis of religious fellowship;

The first thing to realize about this statement is that it is NOT what early-twentieth-century Unitarian churches were routinely preaching, which was, in Rev. James Freeman Clarke's famous phrase:

the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.

No. The purpose of this Society was,

to make it a common meeting ground for all people, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, theist and atheist, on the single common basis of religious fellowship .

TWO

If you were here last week you may remember that I read from a 1938 FUS membership pamphlet called Humanism for Today which says:

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 . . .

The great bulk of people of this congregation, however, accept the humanistic interpretation of religion; and the pulpit addresses consider 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.

Now, 1938 is an important year in the history of FUS. Dietrich retired that year and his assistant minister, Ray Bragg, became senior minister. Bragg wrote the preamble to the first Humanist Manifesto and he correlated the various drafts to get the manifesto in print. So, Bragg, too, was a dyed-in-the-wool Humanist, but the new membership pamphlet repeated the commitment to total openness in terms of theological and philosophical diversity . . .

Ray Bragg wrote in the preamble the Humanist Manifesto: "The Manifesto is a product of many minds. It was designed to represent a developing point of view, not a new creed.

This congregation is in one sense a very long experiment . . .

As I see it, Dietrich set in motion a very radical project: finding the best method of maintaining a congregation that has NO theological or philosophical barriers to membership and full participation, insisting all the while that we will hold onto one

position—Humanism—as an absolute anchor to our ethical and moral teachings and actions.

And, as I've said before, Humanists of that time well understood that such a commitment is an ONGOING project, because they understood that times change.

So, Dietrich's conception of what a theist was had to do with a European understanding, based in Christianity and Judaism and Deism and Transcendentalism.

Dietrich at that time already had learned about Buddhism and Confucianism, but the Western World in general still had only a tenuous grasp of Hinduism or Islam or Animism or the African and Caribbean incarnations of the Yoruba religion. In addition, the Western World at that point had lost its understanding of its own history of what was called Paganism.

From a Humanist standpoint, all these religions contain artistic stories and interesting ethical and moral stances. They are ALL products of the fruitful human mind. And, as I see it, taking a monotheistic version of deity seriously and at the same time dismissing Animistic conceptions of deity—which considers all material reality animated by spirit—that's just rank Western Colonialism at its finest. Why is it more legitimate to say there's a god in the sky or a god in our minds than to say there's a god in a rock or a tree?

Rank Western Colonialism.

Therefore, we can't do that here, because, again, we are committed to making this place “a common meeting ground for all people, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, theist and atheist, (east-west, north-south) on the single common basis of religious fellowship.

“Common basis.” What's the common basis? Fellowship—community, yes—because even individualists need people. Commitment to common values in terms of treating others well and building a just society, yes. What else?

THREE

In your order of service this morning is a quote from the British philosopher Simon Blackburn, who, incidentally is a Humanist and calls himself an infidel rather than an atheist. Anyway, Blackburn says:

Amazingly, there are no recorded cases of the holy man going up the mountain and finding that it's the others who are right.

It is the nature of religion to confirm prejudices. For good and ill. Liberal and Conservative. Sure, it's preferable when a religion does good for a large number of people rather than harm, but that's a largely coincidental aspect of religion.

Which leads me to a question: What is "regression to the mean" in religion? Well, I think it's that you get mean: you assume you're right and everybody else is wrong.

What is optimal for any religion or philosophy? That it provide some people with a framework for living a meaningful life but assumes others may find other frameworks.

The early Humanists set FUS up to fail by keeping FUS in both the Humanist and Unitarian columns, which assumes that everybody would be optimal all the time. Optimal all the time is a lot to ask of we flawed human beings. But I do think that as a goal and ideal it's pretty darn worthy.

Each of you here is being asked to do something completely unnatural to human nature: We are requiring ourselves to go up that mountain and find that other people's religions and philosophies are just as legitimate as yours.

That's why and how FUS is a bridge between the religious and secular worlds.

CONCLUSION

It's a bridge because our Assemblies are about "we." Not me. Not you. We.

The reading this morning is from the work of Dr. Jesse Prinz, a professor of philosophy and ethics at the City University of New York. Dr. Prinz focuses on awe and wonder. Prinz believes that art, science, and religion all have a common root—awe and wonder. Awe and wonder encourage us to try to understand, and our attempt to understand is the source for religion, art, and science.

In the reading, Prinz said, "Atheist that I am, it took some time for me to realize that I am a spiritual person."

It's just as hard for spiritual people to realize that they're atheists.

We are not locked in a zero-sum, either / or world where atheists can't have mystical experiences or theists can't realize the beauty of a completely material and observable set of physical processes.

As the first Humanist Manifesto pointed out,

Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science,

philosophy, love, friendship, recreation—all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living.

Back to that thing about the Upper Assembly Hall: “The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained . . .”

Everything is religious. Everything is sacred. It’s all human-made out of our awe and wonder.

Every human being experiences awe and wonder. What we human beings have to learn is how to share the experience awe and wonder equally, in science, in art, and in religion. If we could live in that liminal space; in that tension of the opposites, then the awe and wonder of life itself just might be the

common meeting ground for all people, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, theist and atheist, on the single common basis of religious fellowship .