

“Love in the Time of Creepy Clowns”  
a talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
6 November 2016  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

## READING

from "Harmony" by Aaron Fagan

. . . and if it  
Wasn't a map, you might think  
It was the history of history  
Or parts of a nude in repose,  
Patient with death and belonging.

## INTRODUCTION

Here we are, ready to vote again. In all the hubbub, you may have missed the fact that Ronald Macdonald has been benched, to underline the fact that he is not—repeat—NOT one of those creepy clowns that have been running amok across the planet.

To say the least, it has been an anxious time. After all, polling shows that forty-two percent of Americans are afraid of clowns, while only thirty-two percent are frightened by global climate change. It's an anxious time.

## ONE

I grew up among those poor, disaffected people who tend to vote against their own best interests. Some of my forebears arrived on these shores when the poor houses of England were cleaned out and the people got dumped here—“root, hog or die!”

There’s a lot of people like me. We came to this country poor and unskilled, and for the most part, that’s how we remain. We cling to our traditions, which happen to center around guns and violence and fundamentalist religion and hating everybody else, especially those immigrant groups that have come to this country more recently and have done better. And when you’ve been here for 250 years, that’s a fairly long list of people to hate!

And talk about elections! We’re the same people who voted for President Andrew Jackson, the first populist demagogue to be elected president. Jackson was a duel-fightin’, British-whuppin’, bigamistic, slaveholdin’ Indian-killer. When I was a kid, my family would visit Jackson’s plantation in Nashville, Tennessee—The Hermitage.

The story of Jackson was clear to me as a kid—no matter how poor you were born—if you intimidate enough people and steal enough stuff, you too can be president! The duel-fightin’, British-whuppin’, bigamistic, slaveholdin’ Indian-killer became those words painted in gold leaf on the wall of the Hermitage: “old soldier, patriot, and Christian.”

Good “ol’ Old Hickory” Jackson remains a secular saint. His violence lives on in the myth of redemptive violence still held very tightly here in the United States. His belief that private property matters more than public good is our belief in private property. His symbol, the jackass, is still the symbol of the Democratic Party.

But I’m here to say . . . you don’t have to live down to your upbringing.

## TWO

In the early twentieth century the activist Rosa Luxemburg wrote, “The most revolutionary act is a clear view of the world as it really is.”

As a Humanist, this is the idea I hold most dear. I don’t want placebos or half-truths, even if they feel warm and fuzzy.

Nope. I want the truth. Even if it's harsh, dark, and cold.

Fact is, everyone has a worldview. It might be like Mulligan Stew—made up of whatever happens by; or it may be considered and developed. Fortunately, each of us is capable of examining and changing worldviews. In your order of service this morning is an old Zen Buddhist axiom that says, “don't seek the truth, merely drop your opinions.”

It's difficult to see one's own opinions as opinions. I picked up my first worldview from the adults around me, and what I learned was a sense of powerlessness and victimhood—the system was rigged. That worldview meant fear and resentment, not things I chose to feel. So I set out to change my opinion.

For me—a farm kid—there were two ways to think my way out of my birth worldview—radical politics or radical religion. I chose radical politics. I started reading Karl Marx.

But the thing I didn't understand when I was young is that Karl Marx wasn't an economist. Rather, he was another in that long line of Jewish prophets who have taught that justice—*tzedek* in Hebrew—springs from an equal distribution of wealth and property. The anarchist Emma Goldman and the communist Rosa Luxemburg are on that list too. That Jesus guy. And Bernie Sanders is a . . . calmer, shall we say . . . member of that tradition.

The underlying assumption in that tradition is that an economic system should be ethical.

Let's be real: that's a debatable point. Perhaps economics is only about the production and distribution of stuff. In which case, HOW the stuff gets produced and distributed—at what cost to the planet and its people and living things—is, as it were, immaterial.

That's an important element of a worldview: should economic systems take ethics into consideration . . . or not. Each of us must decide.

Then there's that difference between economies and governments. Economic systems don't necessarily take ethics into consideration, but governments always at least *claim* to be fair to their citizens. That may be a complete sham, but governments always pretend to be just.

Thus another question for the worldview: Should governments protect their citizens from economic systems that are unjust? Yes. No. Maybe . . .

And then there's the question of what injustice in an economy even looks like.

I'm an idealist when it comes to ethics. As far as I'm concerned, the question of what is right to do and the question of what is practical to do are not always the same, but we should strive toward what's right and ideal.

For example, the United States is 45th in the world in terms of income disparity between men and women. I don't want to know *why* that is. I only want to know *what* the nation intends to do to make that go away. Because it's wrong.

I'm an idealist. After all, there's a reason I'm in the religion business and not the politics business. I understand about the art of the possible. But there's also an art to thinking the *impossible*.

Another thing Rosa Luxemburg said was, "Those who do not move do not notice their chains."

That's another reason I'm a Humanist. The early Humanists said, No! There isn't an "invisible hand" guiding the markets, nor is there a god that blesses some people with wealth and condemns others to poverty. *People* build economic systems; *people* maintain economic systems; and *people* are responsible for making economic systems just and equitable for everyone.

That's a worldview I can get behind.

If you take an Ayn Rand approach, that nobody is responsible for anybody else, step up and say it. It's a worldview. I happen to think it's a reprehensible world view, but that's merely my opinion, one that I'm not willing to drop.

If you believe as Humanists believe that we are communal animals and that we are therefore responsible for each other's well-being, step up. That's a worldview. And it has practical implications.

For example, I believe in a negative income tax—you fill out your tax return, and if your income is below the threshold of a living wage, you get a check from the government. The conservative economist Milton Friedman believed in a negative income tax.

I believe in single-payer healthcare. The fact is that some people cost the insurance companies more than other people. That's a reality of communal human life that needs to be addressed as a collective. Because everyone has inherent worth and dignity, no matter how much they cost . . . Humanism is a communal worldview; it about sharing.

We believe that everyone deserves the bounty of this planet, and we believe that the planet and its living things matter. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Sure, that means you don't make superficial judgments based on appearances. Sure. What you *are* is more important than what you *do* or what you *have*.

But this also means that all people—merely *because* they are human—deserve to feel worthy and dignified. And sometimes that costs money.

However you get to it, your worldview matters. It may sound abstract or esoteric. But it's not. It's what you do. And it's how you vote.

### THREE

Religions are often about navel gazing. They're often about me-me-me and my issues and my problems. Such religions can claim that they are not at all involved in politics. Except for the fact that they *are*: they are maintaining the *status quo*. Good for some people. Not good for most people.

Unitarian Universalism and Humanism are *necessarily* public theologies because we agree up front to take our commitments to each other more seriously than commitments to the supernatural. That's what a covenant is about. We agree to disagree about personal theologies so that we can get down to the nitty-gritty of public theology. We do that because we understand that humans are social animals, and that we need to practice certain behaviors in order to be together.

If you went to Sunday school as a child, you remember the story of the enemies of Jesus trying to trick him into saying something political so that they could turn him in to the Roman occupiers. The famous retort is, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.” Humanism leaves half of that equation up to the individual and asks only part of the question: What do we do about Caesar?

As a kid going up, I was taught to be very cynical about Caesar. But my childhood Pentecostalism is very inner-directed and other-worldly—you’ve got to get right with God and save your eternal soul from hell; that’s your main business on the planet. Caesar is of this world, and this world is controlled by Satan. Very clear worldview.

Humanism shifts the perspective. Caesar is human. Caesar’s government is a human creation. As a matter of fact, we Humanists value the words of a Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, who said,

Some people, when they have done something for another, see it as a favor. Others don’t go so far as this, but still see the person they have helped as a debtor who knows of the debt. The third sort of people don’t even know they have done something. Rather, they are like vines that have produced grapes and look for nothing more than having done a proper thing. Like a horse after a run; like a dog after a hunt; like a bee that has made honey, so are these people who have done a good act. They don’t call for others to see, but rather go on to do another good act, just as the vine goes back to producing grapes in season.

Seriously, must we be like that vine, doing good without kudos? Yes! This is exactly what is required because this is what social animals *do*. A social animal must work in a social manner. (Meditations V. 6)

That’s Humanism.

## CONCLUSION

In the reading this morning, the poet Aaron Fagan imagines the Greek god Sisyphus, who has been condemned by Zeus to eternally roll a stone up a mountain every day, only to have it roll back down again that night. The poet imagines Sisyphus’ fate to be much like our daily human lives—we get up, we toil, the results are mixed, we relax in the evening, (we vote again), planning how to get up and try again tomorrow.

The poem has Sisyphus in a bar drawing plans on a napkin. The plans fall within the wet ring made by his whiskey glass. A circle. And the poem ends,

and if it  
Wasn't a map, you might think  
It was the history of history  
Or parts of a nude in repose,  
Patient with death and belonging.

That's the human condition—from the history of history to the contours of the human body—both are maps of “death and belonging.”

Yes, the human condition is to roll the same rock up the same hill every day only to watch it roll back down in the evening. All the history of history can be drawn on a bar napkin, because human history circles and circles. All of the human condition can be drawn as a nude in repose, because our sufferings and our victories and our stories are always only in our own minds in in our own stories about this particular species of primate—us.

Sometimes it all seems *overwhelming*; sometimes it all seems *underwhelming*. But the story is never anything more than the story of how we humans act . . . together.

In this election season, let's think through our worldviews. Let's remember that anger sits on fear. Let's look at those creepy clowns and see what they're actually up to. Let's remember that if you lose the fear, the anger goes away. Then, let's get to work on the *actual* problems because . . . well, at least we Humanists believe . . . human problems have a human solution.

It's a worldview.

You're welcome to it.