

“The Lesson of Silence (or: Don’t Kick the Dog) “  
a talk giving by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
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## Introduction

*Assassin’s Creed* is a video-game. You may know it, since over a hundred-million copies have been sold. There’s a movie based on the video-game coming out this month.

The premise is that a small, beleaguered group, called the Assassins, are fighting a mighty group, the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar are all about law and control. The Assassins believe in freedom and free will.

I don’t know the game that well—I don’t have any manual dexterity with all those buttons—but I know the story because it was hot in the 1300s, and I was a Medievalist in an earlier life. To get this straight: the movie is based on a video-game, which is based on a legend, which is based on historical fact.

The historical fact is that a man named Rashid ad-Din Sinan led a small breakaway sect of Islam in Syria. The group was able to survive because they used a network of spies and assassinated neighboring leaders who tried to oppose them.

This was during a politically fragmented time when the European Christian Crusaders were attacking Palestine—a time with now-legendary figures such as Richard the Lionhearted and Saladin. The Assassins really did exist, as did their nemesis, the Knights Templar. But it’s the stuff of legend.

Are you with me so far?

Marco Polo was a traveler, that much is true, but he made a lot of stuff up, and he often reported legends as fact. One of the legends he reported is that of The Old Man of the Mountain. This figure is based on Rashid ad-Din Sinan. The Old Man of the Mountain in legend led an unbeatable band of warriors called . . . the Hashsassins because the source of their mysterious power was smoking hashish. That doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, but it somehow appealed to Europeans as a legend and eventually The Old Man of the Mountain was credited as a person who had plumbed the depths of human knowledge and emotion and had become the wisest man on the planet.

Now, the Assassin’s Creed referred to in the video-game is not exactly the Assassin’s Creed taught by The Old Man of the Mountain, though, as I’ll get back to, the game developers did know the original legend and did some interesting thinking based on it.

The story common in the 1300s said that, as The Old Man of the Mountain was dying, his Assassins gathered around and heard the core of his wisdom. Which is (wait for it!): *Nothing is true; everything is permitted.*

You can see how this creed was quite scandalous in Christian Europe, where there was one and only one truth allowable.

And you can see how this circles back to the free will the video-game Assassins insist upon in the face of the decidedly Fascistic Knights Templar (at least in this version of the story). "*Nothing is true; everything is permitted*" is a call for people to realize our free will and to see that truth does not lie in scripture or law but in a thorough and deep examination of our moral consciousness.

One

The reason I've been pondering this old story that's a movie, based on a video-game, based on historical fact, interpreted through legend . . . is that I've been thinking that the core teaching of The Old Man of the Mountain, "nothing is true; everything is permitted," may be our best anecdote to the culture we are now living in, which I would describe as "*everything is true, and my truth is as good as yours.*"

I mentioned a few weeks ago that we now live in a culture that accepts "post-truth politics," which is a place where loud equals sincere.

When The Old Man of the Mountain gathered his Assassins around him and said "nothing is true; everything is permitted," he had the good grace to die—the rest was silence, and his disciples had to figure out their own personal creed based on the truth he had communicated.

In our noisy culture we're told that everything is of equal value—what skeptical people have begun to call "false equivalencies." In this place where everything is equally true, we are left with only noise and a catch-as-catch-can, ersatz and elastic morality. "*Everything is true, and my truth is as good as yours.*"

But I want to back up from that for a few minutes and first examine the power of inner-silence in such a noisy time.

A couple of weeks ago for a Forum I talked about Mengzi (also known as Mencius), who was a Confucian philosopher living in the 300s BCE. (A thousand years before the Crusades.) To illustrate a point, Mengzi used this anecdote:

You are out for a walk in the country. You see a child who is standing on some rotten planks covering an abandoned well.

What will you do? Mengzi claimed there are several responses:

Some people don't think about it: they run to save the child. (We call these people "heroes.")

Some people freak out and go to pieces. (We call these people "political commentators.")

Some people stop and consider the situation: if they run toward the child, perhaps the child will be startled and fall into the well . . . What to do? (We call these people . . . Unitarians.)

Mengzi didn't judge between these three reactions. He merely pointed out that people react to such a situation in different ways. BUT, Mengzi said, there's one constant: nearly everyone *feels* compassion for the child. Nearly everyone wants to help the child to avoid falling into the well.

(Mengzi didn't know about our contemporary ideas concerning sociopaths, but he did understand natural and unnatural reactions. It would be UN-natural to turn away.)

For Mengzi, this natural and automatic compassionate reaction demonstrates the basis of human ethics. Like The Old Man of the Mountain, Mengzi was skeptical that religions or laws do much good in keeping people honest and compassionate. Mengzi insisted that human beings naturally know what is right and wrong and that, generally speaking, we try to do the right and compassionate thing.

Mengzi was a humanist. And he sounds a lot like The Old Man of the Mountain.

Two

Mengzi looks at the basis for our compassion. But what about our anger and violence? Those occur naturally as well, don't they?

Following Mengzi's lead, I think there's a couple of extremes we can default to when we're angry: we can kick the dog; or we can pet the dog. That's really about as complicated as it gets. We can kick the dog; or we can pet the dog. Or the cat. Or the parakeet. Or our partners. Or kids. Or co-workers. Or our fellow human beings.

Because, as the popular Christian writer and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr points out, anger and anxiety will be either *transmitted* or *transformed*. *Transmitted* or *transformed*.

We *transmit* emotion in negative ways: externally in ways such as aggression or just plain surliness; internally in ways such as depression, anxiety, self-loathing, sleep loss, appetite loss, inability to focus, and the list goes on.

We *transform* negative emotion only when we stop and think about it. It's not natural to transform negative emotion into something positive. We naturally see our negative emotions as a big concrete block wall. Nothing to be fixed there. And in a world where "everything is true, and my truth is as good as yours," why not stay angry? Indulge yourself. Enjoy your hatred.

You can't find your keys. You're running late—that brings anger. Kick the dog.

But if we find our stillness, our moral conscience tells us that's not right; tells us that there's another answer: You can pet the dog even if you're angry.

You can yell at the next person you see. Or you can smile and speak a kind word. It's up to you. Transmit or transform.

That's the moral stance Mengzi and The Old Man of the Mountain suggest. Let me see how your religion or philosophy transmits or transforms suffering. Stop the talking and start the deeds . . . Act out your truth and let the silence take care of things.

Don't tell me; show me. (Which is what I'm going to try to talk about next week: finding a good time to shut up.)

One of the complications of being a Humanist is that we don't have any scripture—or rather, we have *all* the scriptures, so it's difficult to choose one. But perhaps a well-written backstory for a video-game is as good as most places.

Humanists don't have any way to off-load our personal hurt or bad actions onto scriptures or gods—there's no scripture telling us that it's OK to kick the dog or hate a particular group of people. There's none of that "eye for an eye" business.

No—we Humanists have to face up to our actions—"nothing is true, everything is permitted." So, what do we do?—are we going to transmit anger and anxiety or are we going to transform it?

As I mentioned earlier, the game developers of *Assassin's Creed* do know the legend of The Old Man of the Mountain and his dying words, "*Nothing* is true; *everything* is permitted." In the game, that statement is followed by: "Our Creed does not command us to be free. It commands us to be wise." And then we get three tenants:

Never harm the innocent;  
never be seen;  
create peace in yourself and in the world.

Let's throw that "never be seen" out up front. Of course, when you're creating a secret group, one rule always has to be "The first rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club." Let's not do that: The first rule of being a Humanist is to shut up and do something—be an example.

But the other two tenants aren't bad as guidelines:

Never harm the innocent;  
create peace in yourself and in the world.

That's what I'm trying to get at today: in a post-truth world where *everything* is *true*, and my truth is as good as yours, we have to find a way to pet the dog rather than kicking the dog. And one way to get there, I think, is to stop listening to the talking heads of punditry and begin listening to the silence of The Old Man of the Mountain: *Nothing* is true; *everything* is permitted—which leads me to the conclusion that I've got to look into myself and discover, as Mengzi did, that I do have core moral commitments.

One of those is that I want to save that child from falling into the well. Another is that I want to be peace and create peace: I want to transform my anger and anxiety into kindness rather than violence.

Into silence and peace rather than more noise.

Three

Father Richard Rohr says, "If your religion is not showing you how to transform your pain, it is junk religion." I'd expand on that and say that if your philosophy or your politics are not showing you how to transform your pain, they are junk philosophy and junk politics.

We transform pain by pausing a beat, embracing the silence, and looking at our core commitments: We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We believe in compassion. We *know* that the dog doesn't *want* to be kicked. As we Humanists put it, all things are ends in themselves, not means to *my* ends. When you kick the dog, you've made the dog the means to your ends—to relieve your anger.

Not cool. That's selfish. That's seeing the kid about to fall in the well and turning and walking the other way.

Conclusion

Perhaps a video-game is as good a place as any to find some truth in our post-truth nation. "Protect the innocent" sounds like a darn good thing to do. But let's not act out our values like an assassin; rather, let's show up big when we are living our values; and, most of all, let's live up to rule number three: "create peace in yourself and in the world." Create that stillness and silence in your mind and in your life.

The Old Man of the Mountain may or may not have been correct when he said “nothing is true; everything is permitted.” But his wisdom is certainly better policy for good actions in this world than to think that every lie and false equivalence and fake news story that floats by on the airwaves or as some meme is true. A *truth*-free world is a world of choice where it’s up to us to make good, moral choices. A fact-free world contains no freedom at all, only competing agendas and conflict.

As the game designers said of the proposition that nothing is true and everything is permitted: “Our Creed does not command us to be free. It commands us to be wise.”

That’s about choice.

So, let’s go ahead and save that kid about to fall into the well, whether that kid be a neighbor or Indians, or oppressed people fighting for their civil rights.

Let’s get over ourselves enough to transform anger and anxiety into wisdom. Let’s fight the impulse to turn the other way or to freak out. Let’s achieve the silence of the wise.

When that’s what’s needed, let’s rush in; and when it’s wise, let’s join together and make some plans. The very nature of being human requires this wisdom of us.