

"Origin Stories and Outcomes"  
a talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
5 February 2017  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

## READING

Rev. John Dietrich from a sermon called "Nationalism and Internationalism," delivered January 19, 1919:

(World War I had ended two months previously.)

We are beginning to feel the pull of that beautiful ideal of devotion to humanity, and yet our feet are set firmly upon the foundation of national patriotism. Some one has described patriotism as "Our present resting place on the way to the love of all [people] men," meaning that social evolution has carried us out and above the love of family and tribe to the love of country, but has not yet advanced to that universal love to which nothing that is human can be alien. Thus far we have gone, but no farther, and there are many who tell us that until we have moved beyond this present resting place of the nation with its borders and boundaries and barriers we cannot hope to construct the fabric of that ideal internationalism of which the prophets have dreamed.

...

It is questions of territories and boundaries and open markets and secret treaties and spheres of influence and national interest, and so-called honor, which divide state from state, cause disputes and hard feeling between otherwise friendly peoples and upon occasions result in war.

And yet these things are wholly artificial. Every one of them is a pure illusion in the minds of diplomats. From the standpoint of the basic human interests which make up our life, they have no more reality than a unicorn or a dragon.

Source:

“Nationalism and Internationalism,” *The FUS Archives*, accessed June 20, 2015, <http://www.firstunitarian.org/FUSArchives/items/show/267>.

## INTRODUCTION

The words of John Dietrich this morning came just after the victory of the Western Powers in the First World War and in the early months of the debate considering a League of Nations. Then, as now, war had created an international refugee crisis.

When he spoke those words, John Dietrich had been preaching at First Unitarian Society since 1916. During that three years, Dietrich had revealed himself as having at least two dangerous ideas: pacifism and Humanism.

The congregation stuck with Dietrich through the war despite bad publicity in the local press and despite disagreement among the members themselves concerning the meaning of the war and the morality of pacifism.

John Dietrich was the first Unitarian to call himself a Humanist, and, as the reading reveals, Dietrich took his Humanism to its logical conclusion: human beings matter more than national boundaries—people are real, borders are imaginary. The boundaries imposed by nationalism are artificial at best and, at worst, damaging to humanity.

No “America First” for Dietrich or for the Humanists in this congregation.

The phrase “America First” first appeared in the 1916 election campaign of Woodrow Wilson. Wilson ran on the promise of keeping the US out of the First World War. (Oops.) Wilson was an overt racist, having written a history of the US that explained slavery as a necessary institution and the rise of the KKK as a logical reaction to African American aggression.

“America First” next appeared as the America First Committee just previous to the Second World War. That group was an odd mix of leftists and Nazi sympathizers.

The third incarnation of “America First” was the presidential runs of the so-called paleoconservative Pat Buchanan in the 1990s.

And, now we are seeing it again.

This congregation and its ministers have been through all the iterations of this idea, and our consistent stance is that nationalism leads to moral outrage. Humanists are never “America First.” We are committed to “Life First.”

ONE

I spent last Monday morning in a multi-faith press conference where the subject was the recent immigration ban by the Trump administration. We heard from Muslims, Jews, and Christians. All read scriptures concerning how “the stranger” is to be treated. All agreed that “god” wishes the stranger to fare well.

We all know that any argument will convince the already convinced (that preaching to the choir thing). Convincing the frightened, however, is a very different thing. The frightened ones—the extreme right in all three of those religions—weren’t there.

Among US Christians, opposition to the so-called “Muslim ban” runs 50/50. (Among the largest Christian group, Evangelicals, only twenty-per cent oppose the ban.) On the other hand, among US “nones”—those with no affiliation with organized religion—opposition to the ban runs at seventy-five percent.

One might conclude that organized religion is doing more harm than good.

For me, a Humanist, the multi-faith press conference underlined the fact that the various concepts of god reflect a person’s politics. The people in the room—of whatever religious persuasion—were liberal; those not in the room were not.

This is not to denigrate those who welcome the stranger for religious reasons. The stories are moving and the help is real. Still, the US government, a government made up almost entirely of professing Christians, is not welcoming and not helping, and the US populace, the majority of whom claim to be Christian, is split evenly on the matter. Christianity is not tuning the tide toward welcoming the stranger.

This old Humanist, for one, thinks that only law will turn to tide. We've seen that graphically demonstrated these past few days.

Humanists are internationalists. Just as we believe that religions worship creations of the human mind, we know that national borders are the creation of human minds—there's nothing magical about border. We Humanists don't worship boundaries any more than we worship human ideas.

Remember what Dietrich said in 1919:

these things are wholly artificial. Every one of them is a pure illusion in the minds of diplomats. From the standpoint of the basic human interests which make up our life, they have no more reality than a unicorn or a dragon.

National borders are another illusion that human beings worship. Like religions, they are the stuff of anger, division, and murder.

TWO

Origins. We do well to think about where we've come from.

When I was candidating here back in the spring of 2013, I did two Sunday talks, rather un-creatively called "Humanism 2.0, parts one and two." Back then I talked about demographic trends that are affecting the United States, trends toward secularity and away from traditional religions and institutions. In the time I've been here, those trends have only accelerated.

As I said then, the slow death of the congregational model implies that institutions that wish to survive must find new models. I also said then that mere institutional survival should never be a goal. An institution must have a purpose. And I believe we have a purpose—and we've formulated that purpose this way:

We are the foundation and beacon for congregational humanism.

We are a safe place to share dangerous ideas.

We are building a bridge between the religious and secular worlds.

We go beyond belief to join together in common values.

We work for social justice because we celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every person in our congregation, our community, and our world.

Again, that last point underlines a bedrock claim of Humanism all the way back to the beginning: “We work for social justice because we celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every person in our congregation, our community, and our world.”

People matter more than ideas.

We have also articulated the basic tenets of Humanism in our Aspirations, which we include in our order of service each Sunday. We aspire to:

Live joyfully and ethically, in loving, reverent relationship with humanity and nature.

Pursue wisdom through reason, science, art, and the stories of civilization.

Make the change we need for a more just, compassionate and peaceful world.

Support one another’s journey toward meaning and connection in the here and now.

Living reverentially, ethically, and joyfully; pursuing wisdom; making change; and supporting one another—and doing these things in openness to new ideas and other ways of thinking . . .

At contemporary Humanism’s inception in the early twentieth century, too many Westerners still saw the beginnings of civilization in Jerusalem and Athens—the Hebrew and the Greek. This sadly parochial view led to much murder and mayhem, as well as an infantilization of thought in the Western World.

That the Hebrews and Greeks had somehow between them discovered the answer to how human life can be best lived is laughable—except that it’s not because of how many of those Western assumptions—particularly perhaps the dominant culture here in

the United States—still enslave us. We have yet to decolonize our minds from the blind alleys of Western thinking.

Such thinking wasn't funny in 1916, and it borders on evil today. But, as I've said often, the founders of Humanism did not see themselves as divinely-inspired prophets. We contemporary Humanists have an obligation to create Humanism anew.

Humanism is concerned today with liberation, not labels;

pluralism, not compartmentalization;

integrity, not name-calling;

conversation and connection, not conversion.

Humanism is about human liberation in the face of the scarifying effects of poverty, oppression, superstition, and ignorance. It is *not*, however, up to individuals—locked as we are in our own colonized minds full of cultural assumptions—to impose on or expect others to conform to our expectations, but rather to empower others to find their own opportunities.

The essence of Humanism is realizing that there is no “other” —only us.

### THREE—THE VALUE OF OUR VISION

First Unitarian Society has been working for that revolution of the human mind for a century and more, teaching Humanism as a way of life free from the chains of tradition and superstition.

First Unitarian Society is a morally oriented space where integrity, connection, and justice prevail.

No, I'm not an idealistic fool. I know that we don't live up to our aspirations, but I also know that we continue to try.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has said, “Democracy is a fiction we are trying to realize.” I think that's true of Humanism as well—it's a fiction we are trying to realized.

Charles Taylor argues that the ultimate goal of democracy is inclusion. And that's the ultimate goal of Humanism as well—but on a global scale, and a scale that includes the planet and all its living things.

Love, art, reason, humbleness, individual expression—these are the goals of Humanism.

I'll give you one example of the Humanist DNA here: the largest donors in our Capital Campaign have consistently said, "Don't tell anyone how much we gave." The generosity and humility in this congregation is one of FUS's defining characteristics. That sort of humility and generosity is counter-cultural and un-church-like. It's part of the Humanist tradition.

There is value in our vision. A vision of a world where the only wall is between church and state. Humanism" as I define it is,

a way of life based in the best of human thought and dedicated to the well-being of humanity, living things, and the planet.

We have watched economic inequality rising year after year since the end of the Vietnam War. We have watched the perversion of our government by money. First corporations got the same speech rights as citizens; now it appears likely—based on the Hobby Lobby decision—that businesses will have the right to declare a religion and the freedom to express that religion through discrimination.

We stand against all of that.

Humanism is about equity and equality. We achieve that through decolonization of the human mind. All of us are born colonized: Religion. Nationality. Race. Class. Gender. All human constructs that colonize our minds and lead us toward fearing "the other."

The Beatles put it well:

Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes.  
There beneath the blue suburban skies

Is seeing and hearing differently possible? Well, it's not easy. Decolonizing the mind is most likely an impossible ideal. But insofar as it is impossible, we understand just how dyed into the wool our subjectivities—our prejudices—are. Everyone comes from somewhere, and that somewhere that covers our ears and eyes limits us if we allow it to. It colonizes our minds, makes us nationalists, and makes us afraid of each other.

My Humanism isn't about what I don't believe. Or do believe, for that matter. Humanism to me is about actions and commitments toward a larger whole. It's about central concerns. Humanism is about taking ownership of choices and consequences rather than farming those out to gods and scriptures and nationalism. My Humanism is about understanding that in this web of existence, my choices have wide-ranging consequences.

Decolonizing the mind necessarily leads to the conclusion that national borders and religious differences are as real as unicorns and dragons. As such, they must be resisted. This is the bedrock of my faith in the human spirit.

The Humanist stance is internationalist and borderless—because that's the only way that all of humanity can be free.

The Humanist stance is the deep belief that human beings matter more than ideas. That is part of the origin story of this congregation. It's in our DNA.

Humanism, based as it is in reason and scholarship and science, tells us that we all are one. That the separation into nation states and races and religions is an illusion and an illusion that must not be allowed to damage humanity itself.

That is the Humanist way . . . our perceived differences “have no more reality than a unicorn or a dragon.”

## CONCLUSION

What can you do right now? You can radicalize yourself in love.

You can say that your chance of being killed by a foreign terrorist is .00003%!

You can radicalize yourself in the support of humanity in the face of petty nationalism.



We as an institution will do all we can to combat the notion of America First and petty nationalism, as we always have.

As Humanists, our tribe is all human beings. And all living things. And the planet itself.

That isn't to say that we can't be patriotic. One of the bulwarks during our present Constitutional crises is the resiliency of separation of powers built into the Constitution. We are a nation of laws, and the fate of our nation will most likely be decided in our court system.

It will be not scriptures but the Constitution that stops tyranny.

I'm not a raving idealist. I know that *homo sapiens* as a species is a long way from internationalism or considering human life more important than our various religions and ideologies. The question is whether it should be an aspiration, and I believe it should.

Humanists have long striven for this ideal—it is the human future, if we are to have one . . .

#NoBanNoWall #immigrationban