

“Creativity and the Art of Living”
a talk by Rev Dr. David Breeden
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In your order of service this morning is a quote from the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius: “The art of living is more like the art of the wrestler than the art of the dancer. Be ready, stand firm, and expect to be hit.”

That little quote pretty well sums up Stoic philosophy. Stoicism was a practical philosophy, a philosophy whose point was not to argue abstruse concepts but to help get you through the day.

As many of you know, I spend a lot of time reading and translating Stoic philosophy. My fascination concerning Stoic philosophy flows from my contention that the Western World—immediately before the take-over of the Roman Empire by Christianity—had come very close to the level of emotional and psychological sophistication that had developed in China in the form of Daoism and Confucianism and in India in the form of Buddhism.

It is tantalizing to think that the Mediterranean and European worlds might have reached the complexity of thought that developed in India and China had not Christianity destroyed the tradition.

We will never know what might have been, but what we can do is look back at the pre-Christian documents that have survived and look at what was happening before Christianity stopped the process.

This is the third in a three-part series on creativity—The first two were Creativity and Dreams and Creativity and Nightmares. What I have been considering is how the Humanist life-stance creates a space for reimagining the nature of community and a space for reimagining social relationships and our social contract, which at present leaves so many people out.

My topic today is creativity and the good life. By that I mean living in an *attitude* of creativity, if you will. In the past weeks I’ve considered how living consciously with a naturalistic worldview and a creative skepticism in everything from the meaning of government to the meaning of god can help us see our contemporary challenges in a new way.

Today I want to consider the creativity of the Humanist life-stance when applied to ourselves as individuals surviving life’s hard knocks from day to day.

ONE

A reading of Christian scriptures leads to a mistaken view of how Christianity developed. The popular view is that Jesus died and his disciples, becoming apostles, took up the banner and spread the word to a population hungry for the word.

This is not what happened. Palestine at the time of Jesus was an occupied backwater. After the death of Jesus, Palestine remained an occupied backwater, until Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 of the Common Era.

The Christian movement in Palestine virtually disappeared at that time. The Christianity that had existed there had retained its Jewish cultural and philosophical assumptions. This was not the Christianity that spread into the Roman Empire.

Rather, the Christianity that took root in the Empire was created by a Jew from outside Palestine named Paul, of sainted memory. Paul—who was a Roman citizen, unlike the Jews in Palestine—consciously set about creating a Christianity for non-Jews.

He was successful for two reasons. First, again unlike the popular imagination of events, in actuality, most Jews had already left Palestine and were living all around the Mediterranean basin. These Jews, again unlike the Jews who remained in Palestine, were largely well-educated and cosmopolitan. Like Paul, they knew Greek and Roman literature and philosophy, and they were interested in knowing about the Christian movement, merely because they were interested in knowing about religion in general. They hosted the house-parties that spread Christianity.

The second reason that Paul was successful is that non-Jews in the Roman Empire were very interested in Judaism. In the ancient world, there was a great respect for ideas that had a pedigree, and many people considered Judaism one of the oldest religions, and therefore they thought that it had important things to say. However, then as now, Judaism was both religious and ethnic, and that fact, combined with such practices as restrictive dietary laws and . . . circumcision . . . kept the numbers converting to Judaism very low.

In this situation, Paul said, “hey-presto, Judaism for the Roman masses.” No dietary laws; no circumcision—people could be spiritual but not religious, if you will.

And people were interested because the Roman Empire was religiously pluralistic to its core.

In addition to these advantages, Paul also knew a good deal about Greek and Roman philosophy, and an important thing that Paul got from Greek and Roman philosophies is the idea of building a community of mutual support for both physical and spiritual needs.

So, that's a long way around Robin Hood's barn to say that Christianity began in a social imaginarius that saw philosophy not as an academic exercise but as a way of life. A way of life bolstered by a community of like-minded people who supported its members both physically and spiritually.

That's important to remember, I think.

TWO

There was an important question that the Greek and Roman philosophies asked that stopped being asked in the Christian tradition. That question is this: Is the search for god and the search for truth the same thing?

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Various philosophies answered the question in various ways. For Christianity, the answer is, "but of course!" But the Stoics had a more naturalistic answer to the question: "only if god (or the gods) equate to nature." In other words, observable nature is definitely the truth, and seeking truth by observing nature is fruitful. But pursuing the truth of the gods outside of observable nature is foolhardy.

In this way, Stoicism maps onto Chinese philosophical Daoism which evolved directly out of more ancient shamanic practice. In Daoism, nature is the great teacher of human ethics, and the greatest teacher is water. In the seventy-eighth chapter of the *Daodejing* we read this:

Nothing is as soft and supple as water,
yet nothing hard stands up to it
because it never stops.

Anyone can see how
the soft overcomes the hard,
the weak the strong, yet
who puts this into practice?

Those free of themselves—the egoless—
have said, "Take a thankless job
and rule the world."

Truth is paradoxical.

And the eighth chapter says,

Learn from water.
It benefits all as it finds
the lowest places
without expectations.

For a house, the question
is location. For the mind,
the question is depth.

When it comes to giving,
nature is the model;

when it comes to speaking,
it is care with words.

Governing, is about order;
in business, it's about
how to use time.

The wise do not wrangle,
nor do they judge.

For both Daoism and Stoicism ego and expectations are the enemy. In these practices, we open ourselves up to the creativity inherent in the moment.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus says,

4.

At the start, think:
what is the nature
of what I'm doing?

Taking a bath?
Think: hot water
(I hope); steam;
dropping the soap.

Think, and so go
about the action . . .
aware. Think: I
will bathe and stay
in harmony with nature.

And if a pipe breaks?
Tell yourself: It's not
only a bath that I want

but also harmony with nature.
If I don't see the humor,
I won't be in harmony.

Now, that doesn't sound like philosophy, to our ears, does it? Philosophy is supposed to be about the meaning of life and the meaning of meaning and heady stuff like that. But Daoism and Stoicism are not about finding god; but they about how to make it through taking a bath without losing it.

Here's some advice, again from Marcus Aurelius:

When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: the people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly.

They are like this because they can't tell good from bad. But I have seen the beauty of the good, and the ugliness of the bad, and I have realized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own . . .

None of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my fellow human being, nor hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on someone: these are unnatural.

You see, we don't think of philosophy as practical any more in the Western World because Christianity intervened and answered the question, "Is the search for god and the search for truth the same thing?" with an emphatic "yes!" That has led to a very over-heated and misleading understanding of philosophical thought. Philosophy as conceived by the Chinese and the Greeks was about making it through life as a moral, calm, creative, and centered person.

THREE

Creating a beautiful life. Nowadays, we expect the sort of thinking that the Daoists and Stoics were doing to be in the self-help section of the bookstore. But we *have* a self-help section in the bookstore exactly because Christian thinking intervened and told us that the pursuit of truth is the pursuit of god and you can find god through Jesus Christ, and then you're fixed for life. Everything is A-OK.

Whereas, the older traditions were telling us that we've got to get up every morning and get to work conforming to the dictates of nature itself: water runs downhill. Time passes and goes only one direction. We ourselves and everyone around us ages, gets sick, and dies.

What is a good life? Conforming to the nature of reality as closely as we can conform. Watching nature and learning the reality that we are part of.

Marcus Aurelius wrote,

A lifetime is a dot; it is flux, and our perceptions are dim and our bodies rotting. Our spirits are in whirl; we don't know what will happen next; and what people think of us is almost arbitrary. In sum, our bodies are a stream and our spirits are dreams and vapors. Life is a battle; a wayfarer's journey. Our fame is oblivion.

Marcus continues:

What can get us through? The love of wisdom. But this requires we keep our minds free from violence and attack. This requires us to be judicious in pain *and* pleasure; requires us to be above lies and hypocrisy, independent of what others do or think. It requires that we accept what happens and what we have or don't have as coming from *wherever* it comes from—the same place we come from.

Finally, it takes waiting for death cheerfully, considering death nothing more than the dissolution of the elements that all living things are made of. Because, if the elements are never damaged in changing from one thing to another, why should we human beings fear dissolving and changing? It's just what nature does, and there's nothing bad about what's natural. (II.17)

And he offered this advice:

Do not waste the time you have left in life thinking about what others are thinking when you could be thinking about something useful. You are losing the chance to think about something besides “what is so-and-so doing? and why? What is so-and-so saying? What is so-and-so thinking? What is so-and-so plotting?”

All this takes us away from observing our own minds.

We must observe our thoughts, noticing useless thoughts, especially malignant thoughts and over-thinking. We must strive to think in such a way that, should we stop and ask, “What am I thinking right now?” we can always answer immediately, “this,” “that,” and every thought is simple and benevolent—not indulgences or back-biting or envy or suspicion or anything else that would make us blush—but the kind of thought that befits a *social* animal.

For those who seek to be among the best of humanity, those accessing the deep good within, strive to be uncontaminated by indulgence and untouched by insult, feeling no wrongs. Those few are fighters in the noblest fight; they are those who cannot be overcome by passions. Those are deep-dyed in justice, accepting what happens and not worried about the opinions of others. Then it is only our actions that concern us and we are content where we are, for where we are is where we are coming from.

These remember that all living things are our family and that caring for all is our nature and that we should worry only about the opinions of those who live according to the natural way of things.

But as for those who do not live according to nature, we keep in mind what they are and what they do, and we do not worry about the opinions of those who do not value themselves. (III. 4.)

CONCLUSION

In the Western world, tragically, the trajectory of ancient thought was blocked. The pursuit of truth became only the pursuit of one particular god. We lost the thread of practical philosophy, a philosophy that considered every day an act of art and creativity.

In this face of this tragedy, the Humanist life-stance opens the way to living a creative life. A life in which we are not bound by society's well-worn prejudices. A life in which we can take a good look at our world, both the social and the natural worlds. A creative life in which we can develop our ethics according to what we see as the right actions of a decent social animal.

Whether or not the pursuit of truth is the pursuit of god, the better question—the more creative question—is: How can I be and what can I do to create the most loving, compassionate world possible?

Then, we can follow the wisdom of the poet Miguel De Unamuno:

for life does not move in the same way as a group of clouds;
from your work you will be able one day to gather yourself.