

Sabbath to End Homelessness or: Getting All Meta, Metta  
a talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
5 November 2017.

The reading is from the book *Why Buddhism is True: the Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* by Robert Wright.

## INTRODUCTION

The organization Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness has requested member congregations to sponsor a Sabbath to End Homelessness. So, welcome to our Sabbath to End Homelessness.

Rev. Kelli Clement is our representative on the board of Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness—better known as DCEH. Other congregations include Temple Israel, The Basilica, Westminster Presbyterian, Plymouth Congregational, Central Lutheran, Hennepin Avenue United Methodist, All God's Children Metropolitan Community Church, and First Covenant Church.

The vision of DCEH goes right along with our values:

- Every person has inherent dignity
- Housing is a Human Right
- Our commitment to the common good requires us to take action to end homelessness
- Interfaith collaboration

DCEH sponsors Homeless Day on the Hill each year, which several of you have attended. It's a great event during which people make connections and get energized and educated about what's going on in the Minnesota to end homelessness. Then, we go over to the capital and lobby our representatives to help end homelessness. You can join in!

Another initiative of Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness this year was called "Super Bowl of Hope" until we met with a couple of NFL folks who explained that the name is copyrighted and a no, no. For now, the initiative is nameless, but as you know, Minneapolis is hosting the Super Bowl soon. We are planning to use that

event to raise \$100,000 specifically to *prevent* homelessness by helping those who are on the edge of homelessness. The kickoff (if you will) will be the Downtown Congregations Annual Thanksgiving Celebration this year to be held at the Basilica.

The Humanist position on homelessness is clear: human beings must solve human problems. Homelessness is a human-created problem. Our call is to “live a shared life in a shared world.”

## ONE

The reading this morning is from Robert Wright’s new book *Why Buddhism is True: the Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*. Wright wanted to provoke with his title: provoke both those who believe in the truth of *other* religions and provoke those who believe in the truths of *no* religions. A quick spoiler alert: Wright quickly dismisses the truth or untruth of Buddhism’s traditions and focuses on the psychological truths of Buddhism from the standpoint of natural selection and contemporary science.

It’s been some years since psychologist Lee D. Ross discovered a phenomenon he called the “fundamental attribution error.” The name has gone through various changes (“attribution effect;” “correspondence bias”) but the thinking that the term describes has been experimentally proven time and again.

Here’s how it goes: for those people we don’t know, we tend to attribute their bad actions to *disposition* and ignore the *situation*; for those we know well, we generally attribute *good* actions to disposition and *bad* actions to situation.

For example, let’s say you are stuck in traffic. You hear a car horn and then see a guy jump out of his car, grab a baseball bat, and smash the windshield of the car honking at him. Clearly, that is one bad guy! He was born bad to the bone! Bad disposition.

Now let’s say you’re driving your niece home from baseball practice one afternoon. You’re stuck in traffic and some jerk is laying on the horn; your niece grabs her baseball bat, jumps out of the car, and smashes the windshield of the person honking.

Now, clearly, *your* niece—your darling sibling’s darling child—is not a bad person. It’s just that she is really tense right now—she’s been sick; things are tough at school for her; she was rushing home in order to get cleaned up and go to church.

This goes deeper: When you pull up to your niece’s apartment building, she hops out and smashes *your* windshield. For no reason! After all, you had every right to scold her for breaking that guy’s windshield!

Yes, we are more likely to consider that niece as being bad to the bone than we are to consider *ourselves* bad to the bone (there was always something a bit off with that sibling, wasn’t there?). Fundamentally, we all have a mantra: “I am not a bad person. Situations sometimes make me do bad things.”

And another mantra: “All those people . . . they’re just bad.”

Given this fundamental human propensity, those so inclined can often manipulate us. Nations. Races. Genders. Religions. Neighborhoods. Political dispositions. Membership in groups or clubs. You name it, and we can see a difference between us and them, and our first, gut, response is “those are bad people. They were born bad.”

But we don’t have to go with what our gut tells us. We can stop and say, “Darn. I just committed the fundamental attribution error.” We can. It’s possible. But it’s not a “natural” reaction.

## TWO

I titled my talk this morning “Getting All Meta, Metta.” No, that’s not a typo. There are two spellings for “meta”—m-e-t-a, which means “self-referential,” or “one step back.” The other spelling is m-e-t-T-a, a Buddhist term usually translated into English as “loving-kindness.”

As I’ve pointed out often, “reason” is a much misunderstood term. Reason is a human emotion. The definition of “emotion” is a mind-state—psychological place we enter based on various immediate circumstances. The emotion of reason entails getting a little “meta”—m-e-t-a: taking one step back; or one deep breath; and thinking about your thinking. “Meta,” m-e-t-a, can help you get to a place of “metta”—m-e-t-T-a, loving-kindness.

There are Buddhists meditation practices specifically designed to help you get “metta.”

As I've said before, your gut reactions will never get you to a place of loving-kindness toward people who you have a gut reaction *against*. Only your reason, only a little m-e-t-a can get you to shut your "no, no, no" gut voice down so that you can listen to your voice of reason telling you that perhaps you're falling for a trick of the mind such as the fundamental attribution error.

M-E-T-A is also an acronym for "most effective tactic available." And the most effective tactic available to you if you want to get to a place of loving-kindness, a place of compassion of all people—and I do mean *all* people—is your reason.

### THREE

One more concept from Buddhism: the Pali word *sunyata*. *S-u-n-y-a-t-a*. *Sunyata* is usually translated into English as either "emptiness" or "void," as in "the void," a popular but often misunderstood Buddhist concept.

In his book *Why Buddhism is True* Robert Wright considers *sunyata*, emptiness, as "empty of essence." Now, stay with me here. It's a bit complicated, but this is an important thought, I think: remember that in the fundamental attribution error, we attribute some of the actions of others to disposition, and some to situation.

Disposition—how one is wired or how one is born—is about essence. Etymologically, the word *essence* is derived from the Latin word *esse*, "to be." The "to be" verb in Latin. When we assume an essence—when we essentialize, we are quite literally determining in our own minds the very being of someone.

The Buddhist concept of essence and non-essence is like most theological and philosophical concepts. It can be endlessly debated—the number of angels on the head of a pin sort of thing. But in this case the concept is very useful in calling into question our basic mental propensity to fall for the fundamental attribution error.

"Essentializing" is the process of attributing certain characteristics—certain in-born dispositions—to everyone in a group. "All women do this . . ." "All poor people do that . . ." "Everybody knows the Chinese . . . do this or that . . ." "All homeless people do this or that."

Essentializing is the most fundamental form of prejudice—essentializing comes down to attributing an essence to a group of people. Buddhism teaches that nothing has an essence.

An example: “Homeless people have made bad decisions.” Well, think about this example. I worked with one homeless man who had been a truck driver all his life. He enjoyed the freedom of driving a truck. Then, he had a stroke. His right arm was paralyzed. So, he couldn’t drive a truck any more. He went on Social Security disability and made a bit over \$800.00 a month.

He checked about going into subsidized housing. But they were going to take almost all of this money. He couldn’t have afforded food. He couldn’t help his kids out. So, he decided to be homeless—to work the system Minneapolis has set up for the homeless—so that he could keep his Social Security money and spend it as he wished.

Poor choice? Not for him. He had thought it through and made a rational decision that works for him.

(I don’t think that I would make that decision, but I can see why someone would. It’s a situational decision.)

Situation not disposition. That man’s essence is not “homeless.”

Perhaps you’ve seen *Night of the Hunter*, a 1955 film starring Robert Mitchum. Even if you haven’t seen the film, you’ve seen its effects. Robert Mitchum plays a serial killer who comes to town pretending to be a preacher. On his left hand is tattooed the word “hate.” On his right hand is tattooed the word “love.”

I bring up that movie because it perfectly exemplifies the point made by psychologist Lee D. Ross in his formulation of “the fundamental attribution error.” Ross claimed that the difference between clergy and criminals is largely situational—clergy and criminals find themselves in different sorts of situations. And, as the movie *Night of the Hunter* points out, a criminal can pass himself off as clergy.

(Actually, the movie is based on a novel based on the actual life of a man named Harry Powers, a serial killer hanged in West Virginia in 1932.)

It’s fairly clear from the evidence that very few people are born bad. For the most part, clergy and criminals are identical, except for situation, circumstance.

"Criminal." "Clergy." "Homeless." These describe situations. Not essences.

When I lived in Chicago, I worked with a group on the South Side. (Where most of the shootings happen.) The leader of our group had a saying: "Everyone is three meals away from a felony." Everyone is three meals away from a felony. That's a statement about essence. About disposition and situation. It's the situation that creates a felony. When we get down to that last three meals, we begin to get desperate. When we don't know where our next meal is coming from, expect bad behavior.

Now, reflect on how far away from your last three meals you are. Plenty of food at home. (Also meaning you've got a home.) Cash in your pocket. Room on your credit cards. Family. Friends. You know where the food banks are and you can get to them. You know where the soup kitchens are and the days they serve food.

You may be a long way from your last three meals; a long way from not knowing where the next meal is coming from. If so, chances are, you're a long way from committing a felony. Situation. Situation, not disposition. Clergy and criminals are merely in different situations.

The housed and the homeless are merely in different situations.

FOUR

Getting all meta, *metta*.

In your order of service this morning is a quote from the contemporary French philosopher of community Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy says of compassion, "Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness." The "disturbance of violent relatedness." We can hand some change out the window to someone with a "please help!" sign by the roadside. That can be altruism. It can be identification—"there but by the grace of chance go I." But are we violently disturbed by our relatedness? All of us are enmeshed in a human-created problem . . .

We aspire to respect "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Bottom line: I don't think it's possible to respect the inherent worth and dignity of a person as long as we are essentializing—grouping and assuming the essence. As long as we are assuming disposition rather than situation.

I know that's asking a lot. Maybe asking too much of ourselves. Of course we can't be without judgment. We evolved to make snap judgments: this person is safe; that person is dangerous. My people, good; those people, not to be trusted. Natural selection has programmed us that way.

Robert Wright calls Buddhist practice a "war against natural selection." I'd say that most compassionate thought is a "war against natural selection."

That means we try to overcome our gut reactions. It means that we use our reason to shut down our gut.

Let's face it—"selfless act" is a thing because it happens only rarely. It's not "natural" to be self-less. "Selfless" doesn't mean "less than self." It means way outside and above self! It means you've won the war against natural selection!

## CONCLUSION

Many of you have heard my definition of Humanism: "a way of life based in the best of human thought and dedicated to the well being of all humanity, living things, and the planet."

The "best of human thought" at the present moment tells us that natural selection has wired us to be mistrustful of strangers, of "others." The best of human thought at the present moment tells us that we are prone to the fundamental attribution error.

Having learned about these traits, these propensities, we can shape our thoughts toward greater compassion.

Yes, it can be done. Not without effort. Not every time. But it can be done. And compassion calls us to do that.