“Belonging: Being a Citizen of the Cosmos”
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
At First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
27 October 2019

Reading: “Kosmos” by Walt Whitman

INTRODUCTION

The story goes that when Alexander the Great was at the height of his power he travelled to the Greek city of Sinope (in what is now Turkey) to visit the great Cynic philosopher named Diogenes.

It should be said that Alexander knew philosophy. His tutor when he was young was one of the most famous philosophers to ever live, Aristotle. So Alexander knew a thing or two about philosophy, and he greatly admired the ideas of Diogenes, a philosopher who never wrote a word.

Diogenes lived on the street. “Cynic” is the Greek word for “dog-like.” Diogenes lived like one of the stray dogs, wandering naked, eating what scraps of food he could find, and sleeping in empty wine vats. Traditionally, he is pictured with a lantern. He carried it, saying he was looking for one honest person.

When Alexander and his entourage found Diogenes, meditating in an overturned wine vat, Alexander announced, “I am Alexander the Great, ruler of the world. I admire your philosophy. I have come to offer anything that you desire. What do you most desire?”

To which Diogenes replied, “I want you to move. You’re blockin’ my rays, man!”

As they were walking away, one of his generals asked Alexander what he thought of the naked, homeless philosopher. Alexander replied, “If I had not become ruler of the world, I would have become Diogenes.”

Cynic philosophy is fairly simple to summarize:

The purpose of human life is to live virtuously and in accordance with nature.
Virtue and living in accordance with nature requires simple living. All of the social goals of culture: money, power, position, possessions . . . are less than worthless—pursuit of them forces us to act viciously and against the laws of nature.

Cynics had no possessions, no homes, and wandered, begging and preaching. Sound like someone you’ve heard of? Yes:

And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. (Luke 9:58 King James Version)

Or consider the instructions that Jesus gives his disciple before sending them out on their first mission trip:

Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. (Matthew 10: 9-10 New Revised Standard Version)

Meaning the disciples would be begging.

Some scholars of religion think that early Christianity was a Palestinian Jewish version of the philosophy of Cynicism. Which goes a long way toward explaining why Jesus would be reported as saying this:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26 New Revised Standard Version)

This theory also goes a long way toward explaining the extreme ascetic practices of early Christianity which would lead to Christian monasticism and to Europe’s mendicant monks such as St. Francis of Assisi.

The point of all that, and the point of Cynic practice, is to live virtuously and in accordance with nature—or as Christians would phrase it, according to the will of god. All of the social goals of culture: money, power, position, possessions . . . are less than worthless—pursuit of them forces us to act un-virtuously.
Someone once asked Diogenes of Sinope about his citizenship.

Rather than answering that question in the usual Greek way by proudly announcing the city-state he was a citizen of, Diogenes is reported to have answered, “I am a citizen of the world” (kosmopolitês).

For the Greeks, the term κόσμος—“cosmos” meant several different things: all of the people on the planet; all of the planet; and all of the universe.

So far as we know, Diogenes was the first person ever to have claimed such a title for himself. In the ancient world, family, clan, tribe, city, nation, all defined a person’s social location. And here was this homeless guy saying he was a citizen of the world.

It reminds me of a sign I saw a homeless guy holding one time: “You think your house is fancy? My overpass cost 20 million dollars.”

But when Diogenes said it, the universe itself was still considered to be a fairly small and bounded space—for example, in actuality Alexander was not all that great—his empire did not encompass the planet, but only a portion of Eurasia. Now the world feels quite different to many people, as the planet shrinks through media and air travel.

Now we know about things such as relativity and the expanding universe. We have a human-made object—Voyager One—that’s now thirteen billion miles out there. That’s one wide circle!

The question I will consider today is belonging. What does a cosmopolitan and naturalist view of reality call us to do?

Where is it and to what do we belong?

TWO

These are questions that philosophers since Diogenes have considered.
For example, Cynicism is one of the streams that led to the development of Stoicism. The Stoics stressed that each human being dwells in two communities—your local community and the larger community of human thought. A cosmopolitanism of the mind.

The Greek Stoic philosopher Hierocles appears to have been the first person to imagine human relationships as circles. He imagined the human place in the cosmos by drawing concentric circles—first, the self. Then the immediate family. Then the extended family. Then the immediate neighborhood. Then citizenship in some nation-state. Then, according to Heirocles, the circle extends to all of humanity.

Our work as ethical beings, according to Heirocles, is to pull those on the outer circles into the inner circles of our compassion. Our job is to widen our circle of compassion. Embracing those expanding circles, Heirocles claimed, leads to oikeiôsis, a feeling of belonging. For ourselves and others.

In Buddhist tradition, this is called tonglen.

Notice that Heirocles is insisting that each of us must first understand and belong to ourselves in a deep way. (I talked about this three Sundays ago.) We must have a realistic understanding of what’s going on in our own heads before any of the other circles will connect in a healthy way. We must be self-aware in the center of the circle. Then the circles can expand.

And expand they must.

My contention is that what we call Humanism is not about humans anymore. We now know that there are circles and circles more than Heirocles imagined.

Take, for example, the 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the lead-up to and during the Second World War, it became abundantly clear that national borders are a great way to trap, capture, and kill people. If you’ve ever watched the 1942 film Casablanca, the plot centers around obtaining papers to escape the Nazis.

It wasn’t easy.

An American, Garry Davis, who during the Second World War as a B-17 bomber pilot, became obsessed by the dangers of borders. His brother was killed in the war and
Davis himself could not escape guilt for his role in bombing runs over Brandenburg, Germany.

By the beginning of 1945, the Luftwaffe, the German air force, no longer existed in that area, giving US bombers complete freedom of movement.

To give you an idea of what happened, in that area, bomb squads still today disarm 500 tons of unexploded US bombs per year, and the estimate is that at that rate, the job of disarming unexploded World War II bombs will finally be finished . . . in something on the order of 200 years.

Garry Davis was horrified at what he had participated in, and in 1948 declared himself stateless. Nineteen-forty-eight was the year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights appeared.

Davis declared himself a citizen of the world and created the World Passport as a statement of protest based on Article 13 of the UN Declaration:

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

The World Passport has never been recognized by most nations. The US State Department calls the World Passport a “fantasy document.”

Nations don’t cotton to the notion of world citizenship.

THREE

As Captain Garry Davis knew, an ethical citizen of the planet—a cosmopolitan—will draw a circle of compassion around all human beings—whatever nation each is born in—and work toward the goal of enabling all human beings to be citizens of the world. Davis was embracing Hierocles’s circles of compassion and attempting to draw a new and wider circle.
And today many people are working on enlarging the circles of compassion even further than humanity.

As we heard from Mistress Ginger, “the Vegan Diva,” last week, many people on the planet are now drawing the circle of compassion around non-human animals.

Many are drawing the circle around our environment and the earth’s remaining resources. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, in some nations rivers and forests are now considered to have human rights under the law.

A decolonized, cosmopolitan Humanism calls us to widen our circles. Calls us to be compassionate citizens of the world.

It was the freethinker Thomas Paine, back in 1791, who said,

Independence is my happiness, and I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good.

. . . my country is the world, and my religion is to do good.

How do we today live an ethical life of expanding circles of compassion?

That’s the question that contemporary Humanists are working hard to make real, and it sounds like a fairly virtuous purpose, doesn’t it?

We could even call it a Humanist spiritual practice.

CONCLUSION

Hey, Walt Whitman is 200 years old this year! Whitman considered his book-length poem Leaves of Grass a “Bible of the New Religion”—a key to unlocking the “Kosmos.”

Whitman styled himself as a poet-seer and prophet. People during his lifetime and for some time afterward said they were of the “tribe of Walt.”
After his death, some admirers formed a religion around Whitman’s life and writings. There was even a schism between British and American Whitman followers.

That was taking things a bit far, but Whitman is one of the best poets at catching a cosmopolitan, “Kosmic” worldview:

Who has not look’d forth from the windows the eyes for nothing . . .

Who contains believers and disbelievers . . .

Who holds duly his or her triune proportion of realism, spiritualism, and of the aesthetic or intellectual,
Who having consider’d the body finds all its organs and parts good,
Who, out of the theory of the earth and of his or her body understands by subtle analogies all other theories,
The theory of a city, a poem, and of the large politics of these States;
Who believes not only in our globe with its sun and moon, but in other globes with their suns and moons,
Who, constructing the house of himself or herself, not for a day but for all time, sees races, eras, dates, generations,
The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together.

Notice that “his or her.” Whitman was one of the first writers in English to stop saying only “him” all the time. Whitman was drawing a wider circle.

For Whitman, compassion begins in the self, the body: “organs and parts good.” Then, compassion spread, to cities, nation, planet, but remembering all the time that this planet is only one of billions.

And he spreads his circle of compassion to

“races, eras, dates, generations,
The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together.

Mindfully embracing the cosmos. How’s that for a spiritual practice?

SOURCES

Etymology of “cosmopolitan” https://www.etymonline.com/word/cosmopolitan


Garry Davis, world citizen: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garry_Davis

The world passport: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Passport

Exploded bombs: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/seventy-years-world-war-two-thousands-tons-unexploded-bombs-germany-180957680/

David E. Anderson, Poet as Prophet: The Religious Whitman and His Disciples.


“Posses the Origin of All Poems” https://www.leavesofgrass.org

Thomas Paine, Rights of Man, 1791.


http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1448&context=wwqr