

**Religion and Government: It's All in the Imagination**  
**a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden**  
**for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis**  
**January 10, 2021**

**Blurb:** Religions and governments are the product of human creativity. Judaism is a long poem. Christianity is a somewhat shorter poem. Democracy is a poem. All are works of art, works of human imagination. Over time, individuals interact with these large poetic narratives--by being born into them; by living in their purview; by adapting to them or leaving them. Yes, religions and governments are monoliths, but they are also leaves of grass.

**INTRODUCTION: Glorious Victories**

Last week, I talked about consciousness itself and how consciousness appears to arise out of combinations and re-combinations of sense impressions and words, images, and symbols. My claim last week was that transformation occurs--personally and socially--when we realize that we ourselves are capable of re-arranging our consciousness through the conscious manipulation of words, images, and symbols.

What I didn't know last week is that we would be presented with a graphic example of how words, images, and symbols can create reality. On Wednesday of last week, we watched as the US Capital building was attacked and overrun by people whose imaginations have run wild. They have not comprehended that quote I mentioned last week from the Spanish philosopher George Santayana: "People become superstitious, not because they have too much imagination, but because they are not aware that they have any."

#Words. Images. Symbols. You use them; or they use you. (I'm not talking about the power of positive thinking or some sort of manifesting what you wish were true: People who don't believe in COVID die of it anyway. And we've been watching the very negative consequences of the power of positive thinking playing out since the November election.)

I'm talking about understanding the power of words and images and symbols and using those in positive ways. Ways that help the greatest number of people flourish.

The matrix of symbols on display during the assault on the capital were very much about two civil wars: the American Revolution, which was British subjects killing British subjects, and the American Civil War, US citizens killing US citizens.

It's easy to forget in our often rosy and rose-colored visions of history that in actual fact, the American revolutionaries were violent extremists. The British soldiers killed at the Battle of Concord were real people, young men whose lives were ended violently over the clash of a set of words and images and symbols. Battles portrayed as glorious victories ignore the reality of taking lives.

We do well to remember that the Americanism "lynching" originates with the Revolutionary War officer Charles Lynch of Virginia who made the practice a popular way of dealing with loyalists to the crown. (The number murdered by Colonial Lynch and lynching in general is unknown.)

How many of the insurrectionists this past week realized that they were creating destruction and suffering due to their understanding of certain words and images and symbols?

The flag "Don't Tread on Me" is popular among right-wing extremists today. It's properly called the Gadsden Flag, designed by Christopher Gadsden for the Continental Marines in 1775. Gadsden used the rattlesnake on the flag because it's a poisonous native creature in what is now the United States.

Gadsden's Continental Marines were sharpshooters on naval ships charged with killing the commissioned officers on enemy ships.

Other symbols included Auschwitz, the Texas Revolution battle flag—"Come and Take It"—and of course the ubiquitous Confederate battle flag.

Symbols. All of them about violence. All of them about creating puppets on strings. And we do well to remember that #when "terrorists" win, they become "patriots."

That's how words work . . . for those who do not think about how words work.

Last week, I used some of the ideas of the psychologist Carl Jung. He had this to say about words:

There are hellish webs of words, only words, but what are words? Be tentative with words, value them well, take safe words, words without catches, do not spin them with one another (in order that) so that no webs arise, for you are the first who is ensnared in them.

#Words matter because they create our thoughts which create the reality we act within . . . often a delusional "reality."

### **ONE: Mom and Apple Pie**

Here's an example:

We've all heard the phrase "mom and apple pie." That's innocuous enough.

The phrase originated in the Second World War period. When journalists would ask American young people what they were fighting for, the answer became stock: "mom and apple pie."

"Mom and apple pie" are considerably more concrete answers than "democracy" or "the American Way of life." It's an answer that encompasses images of peace and domesticity and plenty.

It's an attractive vision, and the returning veterans pursued that vision of domestic plenty . . . with a vengeance.

As it happened, the simple vision of "mom and apple pie" created a situation in which "mom" had severely restricted economic and social freedoms and "apple pie" became a mass-produced commodity full of chemicals with unpronounceable names.

And the vision has yet to transform.

Turns out all the warring nations were fighting for some vision of mom and apple pie.

But what if, rather than "mom and apple pie," the answer about what they were fighting for had been "the family that can't live in my neighborhood" or "the kid next door who can't get an education?"

#The images and symbols we have in our consciousness create the reality we act within.

While we're on the subject of moms and how the human imagination works, consider for a moment that day we call "Mother's Day." Mother's Day exists in various countries on various calendar dates. In the US, Mother's Day began as one sort of commemoration: woman against war; and is now another sort of commemoration: a celebration of motherhood itself. (Often of a very sentimental type in the "mom and apple pie" category.)

Mother's Day is a human imaginary construction. It exists *when* it does and how it does according to a set of words and images and symbols. Yet, it has real effects: travel goes up; chocolate sales and phone call volume goes up. And very real people are made glad and sad by what happens on "Mother's Day."

#We have agreed that "Mother's Day" is a thing, and thereby we have made it a thing. But, if a sufficient number of people cease to celebrate it, it would go away. Disappear. It's imaginary.

If you still don't believe me when I say it's all about words and symbols, reflect for a moment on the role of Twitter in US government for the past four years. Twitter is a platform that communicates words and images and symbols. And an entire alternate reality has been created. An alternate reality that oppresses and kills people.

"Webs of words arose," as Carl Jung would have phrased it . . . and many people were "ensnared in them."

#Puppets on strings—people acting out of delusion and fear—is exactly opposite the Humanist ideal . . .

## **TWO: Leaves of Grass**

#Religion, philosophy, government—Humanism teaches that they all have one thing in common—all are products of the human mind. They are examples of human creativity. Works of art and artifice.

Judaism is a long poem—lots of people have written parts of that poem; lots of people have revised parts of that poem.

Christianity is a poem. Capitalism is a poem. Democracy is a poem.

All are works of art, works of human imagination. No gods are pulling those strings. #Over time, individuals interact with these large poetic narratives—by being born into them; by living in their purview; by adapting to them or leaving them. Because they were here when we arrived in the world, it is easy to miss the fact that they are all works of art that morph and change with the passage of time.

#Yes, religions and philosophies and governments are monoliths in one sense, but they are also leaves of grass—touchable. Manipulable. Organic. Fragile.

Like Mother's Day, they exist only because a certain number of people believe in them and protect them.

Governments, religions, the stories of history that we tell ourselves: All those monoliths have brought the human species to the place we are today. Those symbols of rebellion and revolution and mass murder that we saw on Wednesday create the place where Americans live today: an unjust social system; a focus on the self that not only creates extremes in wealth and narcissism but also anxiety and stress and desperation.

"Mom"—real moms—in her many hues battles for the right for her own body; gets paid less than "dad;" can't afford health care . . . and can't feed her children—that apple pie is \$4.99 in the frozen section, available if you can afford it . . . and if you have a place to go to cook it.

As we saw graphically last week with events at the nation's capital, images and symbols and words create concrete actions of both cowardice and bravery. #“Democracy”—despite all its armies and buildings—is as “made up” as Mother's Day—it's a story we tell ourselves.

There are lot's of ways to tell that story.

But Humanism insists that we must tell the story in a way that leads to human flourishing . . . or the valuable fiction disappears.

**THREE: My Kingdom for a . . .**

The futurist Buckminster Fuller during his lectures would teach people how to tie a square knot. He would stand up and go carefully through the motions, having the audience follow his lead.

Later in the lecture, he would ask people if they remembered how to tie a square knot. Many did. Then Fuller would ask the audience if he had used rope for his demonstration on how to tie a knot. Many people remembered that he had indeed used a rope. He had not.

His point was that we human beings have amazing imaginations—we can clearly picture a rope when it was never actually there. We can learn to tie a particular knot without ever touching a rope.

#The human imagination is powerful. But in that very power lies our greatest danger. To ourselves. And to those in our society.

One of the reasons that William Shakespeare's work still matters in the world is that Shakespeare's Renaissance-inspired imagination understood—comprehended—the fact that human beings create our collective reality. Shakespeare's kings use their words to create their kingdoms in the minds of others. Sometimes for good; sometimes for ill.

Shakespeare shows England's Henry V conquering northern France and creating an empire through his ability to use words to inspire his army and frighten the French.

On the other hand, the pathetic Richard II loses his kingdom and his life because he is so narcissistic that he can't use his words to cast a positive vision for his subjects. And so they rebel.

Yes, that's a very Renaissance idea; Shakespeare was a person of his time. But Shakespeare's assessment of human agency and human nature is baked into the humanism that flowered in the European Renaissance period. Shakespeare's vision is a way of understanding the malleability and fragility of human institutions. It's also a way toward understanding each generation's awesome responsibility to *take responsibility*.

#The great German poet Goethe said, "Few people have the imagination for reality." That's only partially true. We all imagine a reality. Not so many of us can imagine how much of "reality" is imaginary.

#A religion can drive people to the extremity of murder. But stop believing in that religion, and its power is gone. Like magic.

Democracy is like that. It's a "thing" only so long as we believe in it. And it's a positive force in the world only so long as we imagine a story in which democracy contributes to positive freedom.

Some people called Jim Crow laws "freedom." Some called "separate but equal" freedom. Some call the attack on the Capitol "freedom." The gate at Auschwitz said "Work makes you free."

We must use words carefully. And we must insist upon what they *mean* lest we fall into that ensnaring web that Carl Jung warned about.

## **CONCLUSION: Broken Record**

Maya Angelou once wrote,

What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain.

#I know I sound like a broken record, but the mantra of Humanism is that human beings can fix human problems. That truth—believing in that truth—has implications and consequences and responsibilities. For one thing, it also means that human beings *create* many of the human problems that we have to solve.

Most of us didn't much like the "Make America Great Again" slogan. We insisted that America has never been great for enough of her citizens and potential citizens.

I hope we will all keep in mind in the next weeks that America isn't great again just because there's a new administration of the opposite political persuasion.

Yes, we kept working these past few years, doing what we could to make the American story in reality live up to the fiction.

#Our Humanist definition of "great" has to do with equality and equity and striving always to help make everyone free—free to be themselves; free from fear; free from for the chains of poverty and necessity.

#Let's use our words. Let's insist upon a communal, social truth. Let's insist upon a freedom and a democracy in which all are free and all have choice and a voice.

Will we succeed? Of course not.

That's the beauty and the hope in understanding that words matter and that definitions can be changed.

#May we use our words responsibly. And prophetically. And may we cast a vision that calls in rather than calls out. May we cast a vision that *imagines* a democracy that means peace and justice for all.

## **SOURCES**

Carl Jung, *Liber Novus*, p. 300.