

## Creativity and Nightmares

A talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
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at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

Reading: Frederick Nietzsche, from *The Gay Science*, “Aphorism 125.”

### Introduction

Dystopian visions sell. Take for instance the Hunger Games franchise, which toted up 1.5 billion—billion with a B—in domestic US box office receipts alone.

(But who wouldn't pay to watch teenagers brutally murdering each other and Stanley Tucci in a wig!)

*The Hunger Games* is a new sort of dystopian.

The Star Wars saga represents the older, classic model: evil has taken over the levers of power, but rebels escape to the woods—or another galaxy—and fight back. It's an old pattern with historical precedents—the American colonists took to the woods and fought the British; the French Resistance took to the woods and fought the Nazis; Fidel Castro . . . the list goes on.

My middle name is “Marion.” Not a common name except among hillbillies who have long admired Francis Marion—known as the Swamp Fox—who was a Revolutionary War commander who fought the British in South Carolina. Colonial Marion is credited with having invented the concept of guerrilla warfare.

That's the classic pattern of rebellion: take to the woods, run for the hills, avoid superior power, and slowly win a war of attrition.

The pattern has changed somewhat in the recent Star Wars universe as well: in the most recent movie, we discover that the architect of the Death Star—that ultimate weapon of mass destruction—actually did the work under coercion. And he left a weak spot!

The Hunger Games represents the more contemporary dystopian vision writ large: in that dystopian world, running to the woods is pointless. There is no “outside” to run to. When we eventually learn about a group that has run and resisted—in this case quite literally underground—we see that their “model,” if you will, is pointless.

In the Hunger Games world, power is absolute, and the only hope of resistance is through cooperation with the system.

As a skeptical observer of American popular culture, I have to ask: What's up with that?

And what's up with the "Trump Bump" in dystopian novel sales? There have been huge increases in the sale of books such as George Orwell's *1984*—the source of the terms "Big Brother," "Thought Police," and "Orwellian." Sinclair Lewis's book *It Can't Happen Here* about the fascist takeover of the US. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in which the population lives as slaves while getting stoned and watching TV. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* about book burning.

The list goes on.

"There's something happenin' here," as Buffalo Springfield sang long ago. Fear. Angst. Anxiety. A collective bad dream . . .

ONE

Stories are how we keep tabs on our very existence. We tell ourselves stories. We consume stories. The challenge is *seeing* the stories we are telling ourselves and the stories we are listening to.

Last week I mentioned how ideas get into a culture and separate from their context, becoming part of the story a culture tells itself. Nowadays we call these free-floating ideas "memes," a term coined by Richard Dawkins. "Meme" rhymes with "gene," and in inventing the term Dawkins was pointing out that ideas in a culture, like genes in a population, replicate, mutate, and adapt.

Dystopian visions are important memes just now, because that's how many people are viewing our collective reality, our social imaginary.

Perhaps you've seen the posters up around the building: On Saturday, May 27th, we're going to ask a group of people of color, a group all of whom identify as Humanists, to address the narrative of fear.

We are going to be examining the question of Humanism's role in helping people see the story we are telling ourselves, recognize the fear as fear, realize that in truth that fear is anxiety, and that anxiety is a story we tell ourselves . . .

In other words, we are going to look at our contemporary US . . . creatively . . .

I believe that Humanists are uniquely qualified to handle times like these. After all, that list of writers—Orwell, Sinclair Lewis, Huxley, Bradbury . . . not a traditionally religious

person among them. They were up for questioning the narratives. They created nightmarish scenarios in order to wake us up.

Here's a question I've been asking myself: What does creativity look like when we have a government that "makes up" reality? Fact is as fact has always been. Fiction is as fiction has always been. Memes continue to replicate, mutate, and adapt, as they always have. Yet dystopian visions are proliferating.

"Alternative facts" have long been out there. For example, in Russia, in the early twentieth century, a tract called "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" was published. This was a fake document purporting to reveal the plans for a Jewish take-over of the world. Fake news.

In the United States, automobile magnate Henry Ford paid to have half a million copies of that tract printed and distributed in English. (Ford was anti-Semitic.)

Fake news is nothing new. Sometime you need a good laugh, do a web search on "anti-Communist propaganda in the US."

The Scot Towel Company's "Is Your Washroom Breeding Bolsheviks?" is just the beginning. There's the 1965 pamphlet by David A. Noebel called "Communism, Hypnotism, and the Beatles: An Analysis of the Communist Use of Music." He followed that classic up with "Rhythm, Riots, and Revolution: An Analysis of the Communist Use of Music," and followed that up with "The Marxist Minstrels: A Handbook on Communist Subversion of Music." If you still haven't had enough, you can go on amazon.com right now and buy his book, *How To Think Like a Christian*.

Here's the thing: the ignorant and the loony-toons are always with us. The National Science Foundation surveyed the US population and found that one in four Americans believe that the sun rotates around the earth. Think about that: at least a quarter of Americans have a medieval world-view. And what do you want to bet that those same voters also believe that their own hard work is the only reason they have wealth . . .

As I said last week, all of us live in a social imaginary—a set of assumptions that create our understanding of the world and the way we experience the world. It has never been easy to be a thinking person in the US or anywhere in the world, for that matter.

But sometimes it's more difficult than other times.

TWO

Nightmares. Fear. Anxiety. Stories.

Let's go back a bit in time: When our evolutionary forebears crawled out of the warm, salty sea and set out to make a go of it on dry land, they had a well-developed brain stem. They depended upon the fear-response native to that brain stem to save their little tails.

The reason part came a bit more slowly. We're still working on that . . .

Last week, I considered the Mayflower Compact—an important document in the American story—as inherently flawed. Flawed because of its hidden assumptions—racism, sexism, and so on.

One question I want to ask is this: can a document flawed at its very inception ever become an “unflawed” document, if you will? Because this is what we citizens of the US have tried to do: the founders created a nation where straight white Protestant land-owning male lives mattered more than other lives. From the Mayflower Compact to the Constitution, all the documents reflect those prejudices.

Then, slowly, those straight white guys have “let” —allowed—others in. Black men. Catholics. Women. Gay people. Over long years, more and more sorts of people have been “allowed” into that original covenant—“oh, all right then, if you're going to keep marching about and protesting, here's your bloody rights!”

But “letting” people in is not enough . . . . the very *nature* of the club—what I've called before White Club—is flawed in the first place.

Many Americans feel like they have been dropped into a dystopian reality that they can't escape from—they can't fight it by running to the woods. I think that's why *The Hunger Games* appeals. It's why zombies are popular. Cooperation with oppression appears to be the only option—there's no escape. “If you're female, you're going to make fifteen cents less an hour than a male. Take it or leave it. The Empire doesn't care.”

Take our brand new Supreme Court justice as a good example of a creator of dystopia—he's an “originalist.” If it's not in the Constitution, explicitly, then it's not law. Originalists don't think the courts have the right to change the Constitution by considering changing mores or changing times.

A new PEW survey says that fifty-percent of Americans agree with this point of view.

Those of us old enough to remember the struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution know that there's a big, gaping hole—women have never been “given” full rights as citizens in the Constitution. Never allowed into the club.

Why are we as a nation working from flawed documents? Well, it's complicated, but it's about those founding assumptions. How do we go about dismantling systems of oppression when the entire system is the oppression?

### THREE

In the reading from Nietzsche, the madman lights a lantern, even though it is already day, and runs into the marketplace yelling, "I seek God! I seek God!"

The people in the marketplace—average enough sorts of citizens—laugh at the madman. The people in the marketplace don't believe in god. In other words, the non-existence of god is not news to these people in the marketplace. The madman asks, "Where is God gone?" . . . "I mean to tell you! We have killed him,—you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it?"

The question Nietzsche is considering is not the non-existence of god but the "murder" of god. A different thing, apparently. The madman continues:

Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? Shall we not have to light lanterns in the morning? Do we not hear the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell the divine putrefaction? —for even Gods putrefy! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knife . . .

Quite a nightmare.

Reading the passage closely, we begin to see that the problem is not the non-existence of god but the murder of the god concept. The question that Nietzsche is asking is, What does it mean to have destroyed a meme?

I think that Nietzsche is saying that god is non-existent, but god isn't necessarily dead, unless you want to murder god. It's a choice, and a choice each of us needs to think through carefully.

For me, god is dead, and for me, it's "peace out, dude." I'm not going to be lighting a lantern and going out looking for god.

For you, perhaps that's not the case. The point is that god is non-existent, but god doesn't have to be dead and buried. If the meme has value to you, use the meme.

Now, in Texas, one of the classic defenses for murder is "needed shootin'." As in, "He *needed* shootin', your honor."

Last week I talked about the god that underwrote the Mayflower Compact. A god who valued the lives of straight, white, Protestant men more than any other lives. As far as I'm concerned, that god "needed shootin'."

Because Humanists know this: to universalize is to tyrannize. Concepts of the gods are all well and good, as long as we don't expect or require others to accept our god-concepts, and as long as the gods aren't used to create laws that oppress people.

Humanists are often accused of having dethroned god and put the human in god's place. This gets it backwards.

Humanists are people who have realized that it is *human beings* who first *enthroned* the gods, projecting upon the various gods various ideals, various prejudices, and various fears. Far from being an act of egotism, dethroning the gods is a step on the road toward human responsibility, toward the freedom to act in ways that are best for humanity, living things, and the planet.

*Enthroning* a god removes responsibility from our shoulders; dethroning a god puts human problems squarely in human hands. As Nietzsche saw, some gods "needed shootin'," but that's only the first step. Next, each of us must decide what we're going to do about the murder.

God is non-existent, but that doesn't mean that *your* god is dead. Or even "needs shootin'."

The Big Bang was as it was; the expanding universe will be as it will be; but our carbon footprint is a human problem with human solutions—unless the gods of the ignorant get involved.

## CONCLUSION

In your order of service this morning is a very simple little sentence from another dystopian vision, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood: "Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it."

That's the essence of the question: who can do what to whom, and who gets to do the forgiving? Is it the victim who is allowed to do the forgiving, or is it White Club that does the forgiving? We, here, are committed to the freedom, worth, and autonomy of each person—we must insist that it is the victim who does the forgiving. That it is the oppressed who does the talking.

Ever since we crawled out of those salty seas, we've been trying to give our reality some thought. We're said to ourselves, maybe there's a god; maybe we've killed god; maybe there never was a god to begin with;

maybe there's a way we mammals can live together, each respecting and guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of the other.

If the human dream is to be a dream rather than a nightmare, this is the sweet spot we have to find . . . together.