

“Losing the Hierarchy”

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

1 October 2017

at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

INTRODUCTION

I think it's healthy to step back and take a good hard look at our own assumptions.

For those who identify as male, one thing to look at is our culturally-condoned propensity to talk when we should be listening. Nowadays it's called “mansplaining.” There's also “whitesplaining”—the culturally-condoned propensity of white people to tell people of color what it's all about.

To help us look at these assumptions, let's look at a particularly egregious example that has something to do with how Unitarian Universalists still do church.

ONE

In the autumn of 1636 men from the Massachusetts Bay Colony—people we nowadays call “the Pilgrims”—surrounded a village of Pequot Indians in the area of what is nowadays called New London, Connecticut. In the pre-dawn darkness, the Pilgrims set fire to the village. Many Pequot burned to death. Those who tried to escape the fire were shot or hacked with swords. Babies were thrown into the river and used for target practice. The survivors were sold into Caribbean colonies as slaves.

Now, apart from being the cause of the first Thanksgiving celebration (and the reason Native Americans have some trouble with Thanksgiving), what does this massacre have to do with us here?

The answer is lots.

You see, those Pilgrims joined with the other British group in the Massachusetts area, the Puritans. Those two became what we nowadays call Unitarian Universalists. There are Unitarian Universalists attending the Unitarian Universalist church in Plymouth,

Massachusetts this morning. You see, those Pilgrims and Puritans broke into two religious groups, the Congregationalists and the Unitarians.

The Congregationalists eventually splintered to include what came to be called the United Church of Christ. The Unitarians went on to incorporate another tradition, the Universalists.

The tradition is an unbroken line between those called Pilgrims and the name on this building this morning. Also unbroken in that line is the tradition of mansplaining and whitesplaining.

William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth Colony, wrote of that massacre:

It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire . . . horrible was the stink and scent thereof, but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and [we] gave the prayers thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully . . .

Puritan minister Increase Mather wrote, “. . . (I)t seems very manifest to impartial Judges that the Government in that Colony (Plymouth) is innocent as to any wrongs that have been done to the Heathen . . .” (*A Brief History of the War With the Indians in New England 1676*).

Mansplaining and whitesplaining. What I’m pointing out here is that the line from those ministers who condoned and encouraged “frying” the locals “in the fire” to what I’m doing here today and what Unitarian Universalist ministers are doing across the continent this morning is an unbroken line.

UU ministers this morning, unlike our forebears, are not encouraging the frying of locals. But many of us are still saying what God or the Great Mystery or the Spirit of Love or something of that sort wishes for the world. The above writing should make that suspect.

What I’m saying is that listening to leaders of whatever gender is inherently problematic.

Perhaps you agree with what we are saying totally every time. And that may be exactly the place we all need to be the most concerned. When we reach total agreement is when the zombie hordes can start marching.

And the United States today has enough zombie hordes.

The ancient Chinese book called the *Daodejing* says, "Those who say, don't know; and those who *know* don't say."

That's a benchmark for me. I invite you to think about it.

Now, not many of us in the room this morning are genetic descendants of those Pilgrims and Puritans. They were middle class Brits who had trades and life skills, connections and money.

As for me, I'm descended from the poor Brits who moved to Appalachia. Our arrival had nothing to do with freedom of religion or any other sort of freedom. My genetic material was taken out of the poor houses and prisons of England in an effort to get the human refuse out of the country.

We poor Brits have reciprocated over the years by considering our "betters" to be cheats and thieves. I was raised to believe that every government and every institution is corrupt. That the game is rigged. That whatever I do is justified, because it's them or us. The males in my family had a saying: "Let's take it before somebody steals it."

My wife and I will be driving by some new road construction. My wife will say, "I wonder why they're doing that?" I will respond, "Somebody's brother-in-law needed the money."

Yes, I'm annoying to be around. But that's my first response. It's a gut thing.

My people don't believe in institutions. But Appalachian farmers did not build the institutions of the United States. Those Puritans did.

The book *American Nations* by the historian Colin Woodward describes how various regions of the United States developed very different cultures. For example, during the Revolutionary War cultural peculiarities made a large difference.

George Washington was an aristocratic Southern plantation owner. When he gave an order, he expected it to be obeyed, no questions asked.

When General Washington first met up with Massachusetts soldiers—descendants of those Pilgrims and Puritans—he gave an order, and they said, "Wait. We have to form a committee and talk that over."

General Washington tried to do drills with recruits from Appalachia. They said, "we're not marchin' around in silly outfits and funny hats. Tell us who you want shot, and we'll go shoot 'em. We'll get back to you about it."

This illustrates three ways of getting things done:

Totally top-down.

Forming a committee and getting everyone's opinion (which is the UU way based on the Puritan past).

Or pick an objective and let everybody do their own thing and see what happens.

TWO

How people organize themselves is changing all around us. The Occupy movement. Black Lives Matter. Indivisible. These are movements without leaders. They embody what has come to be known as "emergent strategy." They exist in the ways they do to explicitly avoid hierarchy and mansplaining and whitesplaining.

Here's the question: Can an old, Puritan-built, denomination change its ways, at once better reflecting cultural and generational differences, and also getting more agile and better at dealing with the very real issues that plague our society?

"Maybe" isn't an adequate answer. The answer will be "no" or "yes."

The entrepreneur Seth Godin writes, "A \$30,000 software package is actually \$3,000 worth of software plus \$27,000 worth of meetings."

Since meetings are often the largest expense in development of a product, Godin proposes the idea of a "crisp meeting." He writes:

The crisp meeting is one of a series. It's driven by purpose and intent. It's guided by questions . . .

. . .

If it's not going to be a crisp meeting, the professional is well-advised to not even attend.

It's a disappointing waste of time, resources and talent to spend money to work on a problem that actually should be a conversation first.
("The Crisp Meeting" blogpost, September 2017)

That's not bad as a way to think of meetings: "What problem are we trying to solve?"

The field of evolutionary biology has revolutionized the way we think about the nature of human beings and how we interact.

Back in the 1700's the economic philosopher Adam Smith theorized that "enlightened self-interest" nudges people toward acting according to the Golden Rule. In Smith's model, rational consumers drive an economy that gets ever more efficient and produces ever more human freedom and well-being.

There are two problems with this theory: one, consumers demonstrably don't make rational decisions—as a matter of fact, now there is an entire field of economics devoted to figuring out exactly how and why consumers make irrational decisions; and two, for many consumers, their self-interest is anything *but* enlightened.

Evolutionary biology shows us that we human beings make irrational decisions out of that unmeasurable thing called love. Or out of compassion. Or duty. People clearly make unselfish decisions that lead toward greater social good.

Yet, the American economy and American government are based on Adam Smith's idea of individualism; Unitarian Universalist governance structures are based on individualism. All of these are based on erroneous assumptions about human psychology. "Monadic individualism," as it's formally known, is a fiction. And a damaging fiction at that.

When I define Humanism, I define it this way: Humanism is 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.

That human beings act out of enlightened self-interest is NOT the best in human thought. We need to explore new ways of gathering together. And doing a meeting.

THREE

The concept of individualism grounds the idea of the social within individual subjectivity, with the assumption that subjectivity is based in rational decisions based on enlightened self-interest.

This is wrong as a foundation. Evolutionary biology shows us that human beings have evolved as communal animals and communality is our subjectivity. The individual is a fictional construct; something to sell things to.

The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is the first philosopher that I know of who has reformulated the equation in a way that the Western mind can comprehend. His formulation goes like this: "'I' is not prior to 'we.'

"'I' is not prior to 'we.'"

There is no enlightened self-interested individual! There is rather a communal animal that develops in communal ways. That communal animal can later be *convinced* that it is an autonomous individual. But that belief is an utter fiction. A thing to be marketed to.

"'I' is not prior to 'we.'"

This idea is in a book with the English title *Being Singular Plural*. I don't recommend the book unless you have a very high tolerance for French academic philosophy. But the idea is elegant and rings true to me: all of our "being" is "being with." *We are* because of our relationships. Our "being with" others. "I am because we are."

Everything is about how we "take a meeting."

Community is not about autonomous individuals awash in our subjectivity gathering to bask in our autonomous individuality and subjectivity.

We gather in community to "be with." To co-exist with.

And, to be frank, "being with" involves risk. I don't get to hide behind the strong walls of mansplaining or whitesplaining. I get to be someone who listens.

Moving from a mansplaining, whitesplaining, hierarchical way of congregating and being and running a country isn't easy. It is, however, deeply important to try.

Emergent strategy takes into consideration what we know about evolutionary biology and how we evolved as communal animals.

It's about relationship; it's about recognizing interdependence; it's about adapting to the situation here and now; it's about listening to everyone's experience; it's about holding each other accountable in a culture that teaches us we are individuals who can do and believe whatever we want.

You may have noticed that I keep harping on that "safe place for dangerous ideas" concept. That's part of moving toward a communal understanding of being together. We must be the place for people for whom the traditional avenues of faith and religion no longer work.

That doesn't mean that everyone here is or should become a Humanist. Or anything else that can be easily categorized and pigeon holed.

Long ago, Unitarians developed the concept of freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew. The idea was to let preachers "have their heads," as we say in horse training. (Let go of the reins, in other words.) At the same time, Unitarians developed the concept of freedom of the pew. That is, that people should only listen to preachers when preachers are preaching sense.

That idea turned religion on its head, quite literally. And we need to remember the lesson now more than ever. It's a way out of mansplaining and whitesplaining. It's a path to the future.

CONCLUSION

As anyone on the First Unitarian Society staff will tell you, I cling to my Appalachian management style: no need to march around in funny outfits, just go do your job and get back to me. You can't escape your background.

I should add that we must distinguish between losing the hierarchy and dismissing the practical. Many of us would love to sit around being poets and prophets all the time. As the old saying goes, it's great to stop and smell the roses, but somebody has to apply the fertilizer.

To switch metaphors, the challenge is to teach the old dog of Unitarian Universalism some new tricks. The days when Rev. Mather could stand up and mansplain, whitesplain, and white-wash genocide because "god" says it's A-OK need to be over and done.

Yes, but how do we "make the trains run on time" without a police state?

That's a good question for every organization to ask itself.

As we collectively search for that way, let's listen to people because they are making sense, not because we already agree with them or because of money or degrees or position.

Let's look for ways to be "we" rather than me, me, me.