

"Together Separately, Together Together"
a talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION

"Whataboutism." You know about whataboutism. It's when you agree with someone, then say, "Yes. But what about . . ."

"Sure it's fine for NFL players to express political opinions, but what about . . ."

"Sure, I know about the Second Amendment, but what about . . ."

"Of course people need to earn a livable wage, but what about . . ."

You see the pattern:

"Sure it's bad that _____ happens. But what about . . .?"

Whataboutism and its barfly bro "yeahbut" is hunky-dory among close friends, BUT here's the thing about that word "but:" It erases everything that comes before it . . .

"I love you, but . . ."

Whataboutism's most virulent form is, "I agree with you, but let me play devil's advocate."

Advocatus Diaboli. At one time, this was an official position at the Vatican. The Advocatus Diaboli investigated why a candidate for sainthood should not be sainted. (It is telling that the Advocatus Diaboli no longer exists.)

Yes, I happen to believe that both deep understanding and deep compassion spring from considering as many sides of an issue as possible. That's not the question. The question is when "whataboutism" and devil's advocacy and "but" are appropriate in conversation with others and when they are not.

When do they move from attempts at deeper consideration or deeper compassion into the realm of mansplaining or whitesplaining or just being a jerk?

Today I want to think for a while about what cooperation means. Especially here, at First Unitarian Society, where cooperating and listening are central to our reason for existing.

But before we get there, let's go back a few centuries for some context . . .

ONE

Saint Bertha of Kent is not a household name, even in Kent, England. Bertha was born in 565 of the Common Era. She was a Frankish princess; her grandfather was the King of Paris.

Why she is important in the history of religion is that she converted to Christianity as a young girl. Again, we're talking the five-hundreds here.

Aethelbert, the Anglo Saxon King of Kent, was what we nowadays call a pagan. Most people in the British Isles were pagan. Christianity had appeared in the British Isles briefly during the Roman occupation, but when the Roman legions retreated back to the continent, so did Christianity for the most part. The old ways had returned.

King Aethelbert the pagan asked for Princess Bertha's hand in marriage. She agreed, on the condition that she be allowed to practice her religion after the marriage. This set the stage for Christian missionaries to enter England.

Also, for reasons lost to history, King Aethelbert converted to Christianity. King Aethelbert's seat of government was in Canterbury, nowadays site of one of the world's great cathedrals.

This story is old news, not fake news. And I mention this history because King Aethelbert and Queen Bertha followed a very common pattern in the Christianization of Europe: they themselves converted, then they declared their lands and their subjects Christian. The people had no choice in the matter, and often, after the fact, the people had little or no contact with Christianity.

The Christianization of Europe was a top-down affair. The term "pagan" is Latin for "villager." And "heathen" is based on the word "heath," an open, uncultivated area, where such things as "heather" grow. Pagans and heathens are, in other words, folks

who live in the outback. People far from the aristocratic courts that had declared the whole place Christian.

I mention all this to underline something that many people have never really thought about—the fact that in so-called Christian Europe, Christianity was broad but not deep. In the days before leaders could Tweet and churches could broadcast on TV, much of the population who lived in what came to be known as “Christendom” only vaguely knew what Christianity was all about.

Scholars argue that this is one reason that, later, the Protestant Reformation spread like wildfire through Europe. Roman Catholicism had never really made sense to many people, and the Church had failed to win European hearts and minds because the structure focused on the courts of power and the cities, where most people did not live.

Protestantism, on the other hand, was a local, grass-roots phenomenon. Protestantism appealed to the bakers and the candlestick makers and the farmer’s wives. Plus, Protestantism offered a way of escaping the very burdensome financial requirements of keeping a top-down hierarchical structure such as Roman Catholicism operating.

In Medieval Catholic Europe, it didn’t matter what you believed. Everybody was Catholic. If you didn’t rock the boat, nobody noticed. In a land with a state church, you are the religion that the state says you are unless you blatantly declare you aren’t. For example, to this day, everyone born in England is C of E, Church of England, unless they’re blatantly not. No one asks if you believe it. And as it happens, almost no one in England *does* believe it.

Yet the more radical forms of Protestantism introduced a very new concept to the European mind—Protestants preached and thought that it matters what you believe. It matters what is actually in your head.

Which, let’s be honest, most of us believe to this day. We are all children of Queen Bertha . . . and Martin Luther.

Queen Bertha’s religion didn’t stick all that long in the United Kingdom, but many of the most adamant Protestants left the British Isles and moved to America.

ONE

The rise of Protestantism created the idea that people could (and should) gather where they actually belong—in places where they actually believe in what is being said.

This focus on belief is a peculiarity of European culture that was spread by European colonialism. In theology, this is called orthodoxy—right thinking—and is contrasted with orthopraxis—right doing. Notice that the word “orthodoxy” is a common English word. “Orthopraxis” isn’t. That’s telling. We are taught to value what people *think* first, and what they *do* secondarily.

When the early Protestants introduced the idea that belief—true belief—is essential for faith, they by default created the conditions that would spawn Humanism. Because belief is something that can’t be forced. We can *pretend* to believe. We can *wish* we believed. But if true and deep and actual belief is essential . . . some of us are never going to get there.

No one can force belief.

Last week I talked about the mutual incomprehension that different cultures—even cultures within the United States—experience. I mentioned that Unitarian Universalist culture is based on New England Puritanism. Over time, this has become a secular Puritanism, if you will. UUs don’t much care what anyone thinks about religion, but we can get quite worked-up and rigid when it comes to social issues, for example.

One might even say that the secular Puritanism of Unitarian Universalism is fundamentalist—we insist that ours is exactly the only one right way to think about social issues.

Here’s one oddity of American culture: as I mentioned last week, it is New England Puritan assumptions and expectations that have built the institution of Unitarian Universalism. And also the institutions of the United States. But . . . the dominant religious movements in the US tend to be built on an Appalachian model. Anarchic. Separatist. Personal. This is the religion of flea markets and gun shows: your own personal Jesus actively spurning organized religion . . . and taxes.

Not long after kids turn one year old, they begin a phase in which they engage in parallel play. That is, even if there are other kids in the room, a child will play alone. The next stage in development is called associative play, that is when kids play with

the same toys and may even be doing the same things, but they don't talk with each other or develop any plans for the play. As you might suspect, the most sophisticated form of play is cooperative play in which kids work together.

Now, I have to ask: how much like church *is* that? If we see FUS as a large playroom, we have some of us doing parallel play, some associative play, and some of us . . . perhaps not enough of us . . . in cooperative play.

Sure, if you want, you can walk in here at 10:29 and walk out the front door at 11:31. You don't even have to smile at the person sitting next to you in the pew. That's a good old-fashioned church tradition: come in; get whatever you do get out of a service; and then peace-out and get on with your day.

If that's your style, that's fine.

Here, we attempt to encourage more interaction, however. We have things before Assembly—both lecture style (so-called “sit-n’git”) and we have discussions and experiential things such as meditation practice. After Assembly, we have a light meal during which there's a great deal of hustle-bustle, and to be frank, that can be a bit of a nightmare for introverts.

But what the mini-meal accomplishes is twofold: one, people have the opportunity to sit down and talk over food; secondly, after a light repast, we can make sandwiches for homeless students and have FUS-University and book discussion groups or talk about the talk or have meetings of our various committees and groups. We provide lots of chances to interact.

Despite all our efforts, FUS can be your place for parallel play—you can do whatever you like and not interact with anyone. Or, you can attend everything here and still be doing it as associative play—you're in the same group or on the same committee, but you're still just doing it the way you think best.

Or you can take advantage of the opportunities offered by a congregation and get your cooperation on.

You may have to curb your “whataboutism.” Others in the group may not want to do it just the way you would if you were parallel playing.

But think about the advantages of cooperation . . .

TWO

Last week I mentioned the Unitarian tradition of freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew. Preachers in the Unitarian tradition have the right and responsibility to “call ‘em as they sees ‘em.” But our tradition also says that everyone here has the right and responsibility to say, “get some glasses, ump!”

That’s why we lean on the concept of covenant: in covenant we agree to disagree in matters of belief, but agree to agree on matters of action. “Deeds not creeds.” Each week, we repeat our congregational covenant:

*Love is the spirit of this place, and service its law.
This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace;
to seek the truth in love; and to help one another.*
(Adapted from Rev. James Vila Blake)

Love and service to humanity. Gathering together in peace. Seeking the truth—which can be a very divisive activity—“seeking the truth in love. And helping one another: that’s intellectual and spiritual help; and that’s very real physical help.

Our covenant recognizes the fact that we have options. We can be together separately or we can be together together.

Now, let’s be real here.

American politics are not subtle. The lines are drawn. The arguments quickly become routine cliches. The aggregate mass removes all subtlety.

Human minds are not like that. We each live in a subjective world in which our social backgrounds; gender identity; health; age; personal emotional history . . . it all adds up. The contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum says that every emotion has a history. Every emotion has a history. Nussbaum writes,

To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the human condition of the ethical life:

that it is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from its fragility.

Last week I mentioned the work of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy who says, "I is not prior to 'we.'"

We all arrive here from a set of social circumstances. We each have become an "I" from experiences with a particular set of "we."

Here, ideally, we create yet another "we." In order to cooperate, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Being with others is about becoming more like a plant than a jewel. A congregation's strength lies in a "particular beauty," as Nussbaum phrases it, that "is inseparable from its fragility."

To build the sort of social structure that we aspire to, we must each embrace the assumption that "I am because we are."

CONCLUSION

The Third Principle of Unitarian Universalism is "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations."

It's easy for liberals to accept. It's not so easy for liberals to encourage.

"Why doesn't everybody just see that my way is the right way?" That's not very encouraging, is it?

Parallel play is easy. Being together separately is easy. But what about . . . a better, more human, and humane way: Together together.