

## Interdependence and the Challenge of Community

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

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### INTRODUCTION

Last week I talked about the importance of community and communalism –how rampant individualism destroys human relationship and ignores the very wiring that natural selection has given us as animals that evolved as social creatures.

(Remember that podcasts and PDFs of talks are available at <http://firstunitarian.org/category/podcasts/>)

Last Sunday I also took a stab at what I see as the fatal contradiction at the heart of the founding myths of the United States: The rugged individualism and redemptive violence of American myth quickly becomes in reality the loner with an automatic weapon. The myth of a “frontier spirit” ignores the fact that the people of the American frontier paradoxically depended upon a vast structure of manufacture, trade, and technological power—a vast superstructure of steel, iron, and lead.

In addition, in British North America, capitalist ideology encouraged the concept of individual freedom and also encouraged the belief that each individual could succeed economically, given sufficient will and imagination. This led to a persistent suspicion that those who weren’t making it weren’t really trying.

Myths. Stories. Metaphors. All of them too quickly become indisputable truisms.

Take the story of Unitarian Universalism in the United States. We start with Pilgrims and Puritans and talk about their good ideas—ideas of liberty, and individual conscience, and congregational freedom.

We *don't* often mention that they didn't come to this hemisphere to establish religious liberty, but to set up a Christian theocracy. And we don't reflect that their chosen method for setting up this Christian theocracy was genocide. And we don't often look at fact that congregational freedom too often becomes isolationism.

Perhaps we should start our history of Unitarian Universalism with, "Well, it all started with a group of theocratic, isolationist, genocidal maniacs."

Perhaps that's a bit harsh. But to ignore the complicity of our faith tradition in genocide and slavery is to perpetuate a lie. To pretend that our faith tradition has not been smug and self-satisfied is to miss the facts of the matter.

Clearly, I don't think there were ever any "good old days." I don't think that there was ever a time when moral certitude was underwritten by a particular set of philosophies such as . . . oh, say Christian theology. Yes, many did believe in that certitude and clearly many want to live in that place again.

But it was an illusion.

If there's any philosophy at all behind the recent phrase "Make America great again," it is that the founding mythologies of the United States supply moral certitude. The myth of radical individualism, the myth that

violence produces peace, and the myth that radical free-market capitalism creates prosperity.

Oh, and a fourth myth: that every American has the right to believe whatever they want, facts be darned.

Last week I also mentioned that there are philosophers these days, especially in Europe, who, rather than beginning with claims about the rights of the individual, start from assumptions about the social obligations of each of us. For example, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy says:

We do not “have” meaning anymore, because we ourselves are meaning—entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no meaning other than “us.”

Nancy is beginning from a very different assumption than older philosophies and religions. There is no truth or meaning “out there.” Truth is created in community. Truth and meaning are the result of human interactions.

In your order of service this morning, there’s a quote from a contemporary American philosopher, Martha C. Nussbaum, who is working in that same vein of communalism. Nussbaum puts it this way:

Being a human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, “I’ll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won’t be a member of society anymore.” That really means, “I won’t be a human being anymore.”

Like Nancy, Nussbaum believes that we are what we are as a result of being in community. Outside of community, "there be dragons" and monsters with guns.

ONE

Radical individualism plus unfettered capitalism equals . . . what can we call it, except "The United States today."

We do well to face a fact: nowhere was the idea of individualism more important than in the development of Unitarian and Universalist thought in the United States.

This is well summarized in the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom to." Unitarians and Universalists have too often interpreted the freedom *from* religious creed and dogma with the freedom *to* believe whatever the current spirituality fad happens to be. But what if this drive to be unique is exactly the cause of the problem? It is a very short leap from discovering your own spirituality to picking and choosing what is "fake news."

Martha Nussbaum writes,

All our unhappiness and alienation come from the attempt to be an individual above everything else, whereas consolation comes when one relaxes into a sense of something greater than oneself, and that is one's species life and also the whole of history and eternity which that represents. And you do that in conjunction with animals because they already exist in that species life.

Sounds like Humanism, doesn't it?

Nussbaum doesn't take the road of seeing "something greater than oneself" as being some sort of god. No, the thing that is greater than

each of us is our common humanity and the history of what human beings have done on this planet. And the fact that we are *only one species* of animal on the planet.

This is paradoxical but important: we can't be individuals until we give up trying to individualize. We must relax into our common humanity.

But for Nussbaum that common humanity is in no way abstract. As a matter of fact, Nussbaum believes that abstraction is the problem.

You see, the Greek philosopher Plato was taken by a metaphor: the Ladder of Love. On the bottom rung is physical attraction. Lust. At the top is pure love – love of beauty itself. (Yep, that's where the term "Platonic love" comes from.)

This metaphor is sometimes called "Plato's ascent." The ascent from the physical to the spiritual.

Sounds good, doesn't it?

Well, that's the problem. It *sounds* good.

But, like cheese cake, it's not good for you.

Of all the negative ideas that Greek philosophy fed into Christian thought and hence into Western thinking, this has been perhaps the most damaging.

Not only has it encouraged the fetishization of body image (Barbie!) but it has also created categories and boxes that too many people have felt compelled to fit into.

Boxes like "man" and "woman" and . . . oh, Barbie and Ken and "hero" and "beauty" and "successful" . . . Those sorts of boxes.

Martha Nussbaum begs to differ with Plato's kind of love, calling the ladder, instead, "the descent of love."

The Ladder of Love, Nussbaum remarks, "leaves out of account, and therefore out of love, everything about the person that is not good and fine – the flaws and the faults, the neutral idiosyncrasies, the bodily history."

"The flaws and the faults, the neutral idiosyncrasies, the bodily history."

Yes, that about sums up the problem.

If the ideal – the top rung – of love is totally abstract perfection . . . well, that's even beyond air-brushed, isn't it? It's beyond the human capacity to achieve. And there's the problem – let's call it the delusion – of dualistic thinking.

The Western World's belief that there is a spirit – or spiritual – world of perfect forms, stuff starting with capital letters like Beauty and Love and Truth and God and Democracy and on and on – makes us . . . makes us not love the imperfect.

Which is, like, you know . . . everything.

"Everything about the person that is not good and fine – the flaws and the faults, the neutral idiosyncrasies, and bodily history."

Which is . . . everything.

Getting over Plato isn't easy. Who doesn't wish there were a perfect world of Truth and Beauty beyond this one?

But getting out of this way of thinking is the only way out of the chutes and ladders of delusion.

It's all right here.

For better and worse. That's the center of Humanist thought.

TWO

How are we going to go about loving the imperfect?

Loving what our lives have given us rather than what we think we deserve or what the air-brushed commercials tell us we ought to love and deserve?

Let's face some facts:

This is not an ideal world.

This is not an ideal nation.

This is not an ideal city.

This is not an ideal religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism.

Your relationships are not ideal.

Your children or loved ones are not ideal.

Nothing is ideal.

And you know what? Welcome to reality!

Deal with it.

There are no ideal forms.

There is no White Guy in the Sky.

Forget the promises you think you have been promised.

Plato is a lie. The ideal is a lie.

Progress. The future. All lies. Illusions.

But you know what? That's A-OK.

Because . . . that appears to be how it is.

Love the imperfection. Because that's all you're gonna get.

But you know what? That's all anyone has ever gotten. Or ever will get.

And it's enough. Start from there. And reset your expectations.

I don't know if there's a god or not, but here's what I *do* know: if there is a god, god is just like your lover or your spouse or your parents or your kids: if there *is* a god, he, she, it, or they has bad breath. And gas. And probably texts while driving.

Or. Something. And other things. You get the idea . . .

Nothing. Is. Perfect.

Nothing. Is. Perfect in our universe.

Love the imperfection. Because that's all we're going to get. And. It. Is. Enough.

Because it's *all there is*.

THREE

Again, Martha Nussbaum:

Being a human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, "I'll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won't be a member of society anymore." That really means, "I won't be a human being anymore."

This is the terrible illusion that has haunted the Western mind. The Pilgrims. The Puritans. The Unitarians. The Universalist. No, none of us can be individuals. We are what we are, each of us, because—and only because—there is an us.

Authoritarianism wants to convince you that some ideal person will come along and really get government right. But that's a lie.

If we just cut to the chase and stop talking we'll really get things done: that's a lie.

Nationalism wants to convince you that there really is one ideal nation that gets it right. But that's a lie.

Nativist movements want to convince you that only a certain type of person is the ideal citizen. But that's a lie.

Racism wants to convince you that there is an ideal race of human. But that's a lie.

Two ways of being human: man or woman. That's a lie.

Only sex with a person of the opposite gender is true and fine. That's a lie.

But again we get back to the paradox: collectively we must work to allow each person the freedom to define their own lives. That's the part of the Unitarian and Universalist legacies that deserve to live.

As a collective, we must not ask some to shed a part of who they are in order to be among us.

How do we get there? What would it look like to go from diversity to inclusion? The Pilgrims didn't know. The Puritans didn't know. The Unitarians and Universalists down through the years have not known. Be ours the task of figuring that out.

A friend who is a diversity officer for a college puts it this way: "'diversity' is when you get invited to the party; 'inclusion' is when you have *fun* at the party."

Folks, that's our call to action: can we go beyond inviting people to the party, thinking that maybe, just maybe they will be ideal people; can we invite everyone to the party and work to make sure that each and every one has *fun* at the party?

What does that even look like?

What assumptions and illusions and myths and ideologies do each of us have to shed until everyone is in the circle?

Again, Martha Nussbaum:

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Let's say "no" to that impulse. Let's learn to say "yes" to that "something greater than" ourselves . . . our species life.

## SOURCES

<https://theologiansinc.wordpress.com/2014/10/18/scruton-and-nussbaum-on-consolation-individuality-emotion-and-music/>

[FirstUnitarianSociety.org](http://FirstUnitarianSociety.org)