

"Do You Get the Picture?"

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

given at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

20 May 2018

Reading from the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars" by Tracy K. Smith, from *Life on Mars*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55519/my-god-its-full-of-stars>

ONE

On our Annual Meeting Sunday, I want to stay focused on a straightforward question: Why is First Unitarian Society here?

One answer is the news from Gaza this past week, which has underlined an old fact: bad theology kills.

As a Humanist, how do I define bad theology? A theology that harms people, other living things, and our planet.

Sure, that's a simple-minded and circular way to look at things, but as a rule-of-thumb I think it works. As I've mentioned before, the Humanist credo is: "People matter more than ideas." People matter more than theology, too.

A few weeks ago I mentioned Friedrich Nietzsche's paradoxical assertion that believing in something enough to kill for it removes human agency. Killing for freedom just isn't an act of free will, Nietzsche claimed.

That's a radical notion, but worth thinking about. Nietzsche was no doubt a flawed human being, but he was looking presciently toward the world we now inhabit—he had "the vision thing" going on.

As I understand him, Nietzsche's preoccupation was how to take and have personal responsibility—how to claim ownership of your actions. True personal responsibility. This, too, is a Humanist concern.

Nietzsche's inquiry concerns how we construct our lives in such a way as to take and have personal responsibility—not blaming our actions on government or law or circumstances or god. How do we live and act in the world without weaseling out?

Another of his ideas worth pondering in our time is his concept of truth. He wrote: (and, by the way, "metonymy," in case you've forgotten eighth grade English class, is figure of speech such as "the White House says.")

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, (metonymies) anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which, poetically and rhetorically intensified, became transposed and adorned, and which after long usage by a people seem fixed, canonical and binding on them. Truths are illusions which one has forgotten are illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the sense. (From "[On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense](#)")

"Truths are illusions which one has forgotten are illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the sense."

Nietzsche might have added that we people and the societies we invent also become powerless before these worn-out metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms. As a matter of fact, these calcified thoughts become our gods, our systems of oppressions, and our justification for law, order, and murder.

Particular gods giving particular bits of real estate to particular people? A pluralistic nation of hundreds of millions motivated to political action by loopy fundamentalist readings of old poetic texts?

Seriously?

The “right to bear arms” when the arms borne demonstrably lead—over and over—to mass murder?

Seriously?

It all adds up to real bullets ripping real flesh. Real lives lost over worn-out metaphors. The work of people dedicated to thinking outside of the boxes and prisons of the imagination is to see clearly the illusions and the worn-out metaphors, imagining “truth” anew.

It’s a tall order. But some people on our planet must do it. And those people are us . . .

And *that* is a central reason that First Unitarian Society is here.

TWO

The reading this morning and the quote in your order of service are by the contemporary African American poet Tracy K. Smith. In the poem, she is doing nothing less than imagining a new way of perceiving reality. A way outside of the metaphors and systems of oppression that have grown out of them. She is using her imagination . . .

“Imagination.” The etymology is straightforward out of Latin: *Imago* became the English word “image.” The Latin verb for “to picture to oneself” is *imaginatio*. It’s basic human brain wiring. The Romans did it. The earliest humans did it. Many animals apparently do it. It’s how most people navigate the world.

But we mean more by the word than merely making mental pictures. After all, we can, as last week’s lay speaker, Perrin Klumpp pointed out, picture a red flower in a pot. No problem. The question is what we *do* with the image we create.

Can we imagine the ten dimensions posited by String Theory? How about the expanse of cosmic time? How about a world in which people take responsibility for their own actions? Those are examples of taking picture-making to a higher level.

Then there's "the vision thing." We must "envision" where we're going before we can get there. "Visu-a-lize."

As I mentioned a few Sundays back, wrapping up my fifth year here at The Society, we realize that we've fairly well completed the tasks set out by the last strategic plan, drawn up just before I came. We have made our imaginings real.

Now, one problem with dreams is that once you've achieved them, they aren't exactly as you *imagined* them.

I have always been better at "the vision thing" than at the practical steps for getting there. That's one reason we need Rev. Jim around! He understands the "how." But my midwestern farmer heritage makes me always ask, "What for?"

What is this congregation for? What's it supposed to be doing in the world? My conviction is that it has something to do with thinking outside of the old, dead metaphors.

After Assembly today we will be holding the 137th Annual Meeting of First Unitarian Society. The articles of incorporation written back in 1881 remind us why we are here:

to form an Association where people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

Uniting for the purpose of "mutual helpfulness"

in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

The term “social justice” wasn’t a thing back in 1881. If I were writing that today, I’d say,

to form an Association where people of whatever theological or philosophical position may unite for mutual support in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and to . . . smash all systems of oppression.

But that’s a quibble.

As I’ve said several times in many ways from this podium over the past five years, rationality is assumed. We stand for reason. But we must move beyond that rather sterile stand to one of an embodied Humanism—the love that Jim talked about a few moments ago.

Here’s what I want to be happening here on a Sunday morning: I want us to get out of all the lists and details of life and into a space where we are actually *here*. Together. What should we be doing here? We should be clarifying our values—our deepest moral commitments—by sharing and considering the many sides of any issue worth being called an issue.

We should be reimagining the metaphors.

Then, having considered our grounding and our meaning and our purpose from many angles, we need to leave here, refreshed, driven by our values and our purpose to save the world.

That’s my formula for a good Assembly.

What stands in our way? Let me list a couple of “easys” for you:

It’s easy to sit around and admire our problems. “Oh, that there . . . that’s one big problem. We sure do have a big problem.” That easy.

How about admiring instead—with gratitude—what a hundred and thirty-seven years worth of showing up has done for this congregation and this community.

Another “easy”: it’s not hard to be the smartest person in the room. That’s easy: All you’ve gotta do is be able to pick your room.

What if we challenge ourselves to be the most compassionate person in the room? The best listener in the room? The person who is going to learn the most from others in the room?

Now that’s hard. And that’s what First Unitarian Society is FOR. Its purpose: “mutual helpfulness.”

Young; old; in-between. Single; partnered; it’s complicated.

FUS is here for “mutual helpfulness” . . . and to smash all systems of oppression.

## SOURCES

Friedrich Nietzsche “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_Truth\\_and\\_Lies\\_in\\_a\\_Nonmoral\\_Sense](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Truth_and_Lies_in_a_Nonmoral_Sense)

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