

“Patriarchy Is Not Going to Smash Itself”
a short talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
13 May 2018 (Mother’s Day)
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

I am a privileged Euro-American male, so perhaps it is no surprise that I was very surprised to learn recently about the “incel” movement. “Incel” is short for “involuntarily celibate,” and apparently the young man responsible for a terrorist attack in Canada that left ten dead was active in this online group.

I’m surprised not at the rage and misogyny that the group exhibits—that’s part and parcel of adolescent male culture, unfortunately—but I am surprised by the fact that such a group exists in the form that it exists. Murderers have often been called loners. Now it appears those loners will be part of online groups.

Social movements have gone micro. And overt.

The twentieth Century social scientist Erich Fromm would not be as surprised as I was. Having watched large parts of Europe descend into fascism during the 1930s, and having escaped Nazism, Fromm closely studied why such a turn had occurred. His answer is a book titled *Escape from Freedom*.

The thesis of Fromm’s book is (excuse the sexist language):

that modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless.

How to deal with this freedom? Fromm goes on:

This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man.

Listen to that again: “The alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon . . . uniqueness and individuality . . .”

“New dependencies and submission.” Large numbers of Europeans in the 1920s and ‘30s ran toward fascism. In 2018, many in Europe and its former colonies such as the United States are embracing right-wing populism both in its political forms and in online “dependencies and submission” such as incel.

Erich Fromm mapped that journey. He understood that “finding yourself” offers the danger that you won’t find anything there. Into that perceived vacuity steps “dependencies and submission.” And the easiest to trigger and most damaging of human emotions—hatred, violence, and even murder.

The answer? Fromm thought it is “to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon . . . uniqueness and individuality . . .”

That’s a tall order when pre-fab identities—like “incel” and any number of other labels—float everywhere around us.

It’s a tall order because fear and and resentment and dependency are easier than introspection and self-awareness. Yet, just as in Fromm’s time, true “uniqueness and individuality” are the positive—and peaceful—alternatives.

Julia Ward Howe had intuited the insights that Eric Fromm outlined a century before he did.

Howe had been born into the social location in which women were expected to be social butterflies and the ornaments of powerful husbands. Instead, she chose a life of social activism. (I should mention that she also had six children and a domineering, philandering husband.)

Julia was raised in a strict Calvinist Episcopalian church. She wrote, “I studied my way out of all the mental agonies which Calvinism can engender and became a Unitarian.”

She was not just a run of the mill Unitarian, however. She attended the services of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who preached at his scandalously informal church

held in the Boston Music Hall. Rev. (Parker was so unpopular among his Unitarian ministerial colleagues—both for his liberal religious views and his fiery denunciation of slavery—that he was forced to preach his own installation sermon at the congregation.)

Both Parker and Howe knew this well: Religion is not the snooze button on life's alarm clock. Religious thinking is not about saying, "oh, man, I am lovin' my sleep!"

Religion and philosophy are *the alarm* on life's alarm clock. You wake up, or you don't. You get introspective and find freedom, or you choose the many submissions that our society offers.

To live a compassionate life, a life of care for human beings, all living things, and our planet, is to find meaning and purpose but also to be in a state of constant discomfort. Constant vigilance. To live the *opposite* of complacently.

While slavery existed, Julia Ward Howe believed that the sword was necessary. After slavery had been abolished, Howe believed that it was time to turn to peace and the righting of the wrongs created by white patriarchy. Her proclamation of a mother's day of peace activism was the result.

Howe said that a woman should be, "a free agent, fully sharing with man every human right and every human responsibility." (Sounds like Eric Fromm.)

In 1893 at the now famous Parliament of World Religions at the Chicago World's Fair, Howe gave a speech titled "What is Religion?"

She said, "religion is not magic" and went on to condemn religious leaders who treat religion as if it is some kind of magic. She said,

I think nothing is religion which puts one individual absolutely above others, and surely nothing is religion which puts one sex above another.

. . . any religion which will sacrifice a certain set of human beings for the enjoyment or aggrandizement or advantage of another is no religion. It is a thing which may be allowed, but it is against true religion. Any religion which sacrifices women to the brutality of men is no religion.

Julia Ward Howe may have been a bit naive when she wrote the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" at age 43 with its images of "grapes of wrath," "fateful lightening" and a

“terrible swift sword,” but by age 74 when she spoke at the Parliament of Religions, she had been through the wringer of American politics.

It was Rev. Parker who first used the phrase the “arc of the universe,” speculating that it “bends toward justice,” But Parker was dead before the Civil War even started. It was Julia Ward Howe who saw that the abolition of slavery did not bring equal rights or equal opportunities to former slaves.

Howe saw African American men being disenfranchised in large parts of the United States even as white women got closer to voting rights.

In Howe’s day, the immorality of racialized slavery was stopped in the United States. But the genocide of the native population went on. And patriarchy went on. And African Americans slowly lost the freedoms that they had gained.

Perhaps Howe finally realized that thinking that we will ever get to a promised land called A Just Society is to live in a fool’s paradise. But that can’t stop us from trying.

I think Howe saw just how complicated a proposition gaining and living into freedom really is.

She gained her fame from writing a song that glorified violence, but she lived to see how little had been changed by that violence.

She died before women won the right to vote.

Her lesson to us across the years is not only that patriarchy will never smash itself, but that our values are the alarm, not the snooze button, on life’s clock.

SOURCES

http://www.sojust.net/speeches/ward_howe_religion.html

A good source for information on Julia Ward Howe: <http://uudb.org/articles/juliawardhowe.html>

For more on the life of Rev. Theodore Parker, see: <http://uudb.org/articles/theodreparker.html>

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