

“To Make an End is to Make a Beginning”
A talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good.

~Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception

INTRO:

Last week I talked a bit about inclusion and the liberal / progressive aspiration toward the goal of inclusion

For most liberals and progressives, the supposed direction of democracy—and here in the US, the direction of US history—is toward inclusion—that’s the goal of Unitarian Universalism and Humanism and progressive Americans—the goal of progressive causes in politics.

The narrative progressives tell is of a march toward *inclusion*: the abolition of slavery; women’s rights; labor rights; civil rights; immigrant rights; feminism; LGBTQ rights. Onward and upward with that arc of the universe bending toward justice!

Therefore, we are much distressed when we face our hypocrisy: the United States is *not* inclusive; Unitarian Universalism is *not* inclusive. Humanism is *not* inclusive. The assumptions of European colonialism and White Supremacy permeate all these institutions. We ignore the take-over of the continent; we ignore the genocide of native peoples . . . The list goes on.

Democracy and inclusion are stories we tell ourselves. Fictions. *Supreme* fictions, as the poet Wallace Stevens called them: supreme fictions are, according to Wallace Stevens, fictions which *need* to be true, and so we imagine them all the harder,

making them manifest by sheer will. Or at least those supreme fictions form our aspirations . . . dreams of a future.

Then there is the counter-narrative: the conservative narrative of an onward and upward arc in terms of middle class prosperity. Entrepreneurship. Economic opportunity. Low regulation. Individual freedom. The freedom of conservative Christianity to influence politics and social policy. Spreading democracy and free markets here and abroad. Bootstraps for everyone!

And—surprise, surprise—these conservative narratives often run completely counter to progressive narratives.

It can get distressing: not only does it appear that liberal, progressive values are in the minority in the nation, but also there is that fact that our own purported inclusiveness is self-delusion.

What's a poor progressive to do?

ONE

I made one suggestion about what to do last week—use your words. Or, at the least, watch how words are *being used* by you, your family, friends, neighbors, and politicians and media.

Words matter.

Or they don't.

Last week I mentioned the work of the historian Timothy Snyder who published a book called *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the 20th Century*. Lesson number seventeen reads:

Listen for dangerous words. Be alert to the use of the words *extremism* and *terrorism*. Be alive to the fatal notions of *emergency* and *exception*. Be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary.

The “fatal notions of emergency and exception” or “state of exception”

(*Ausnahmezustand* in German) was coined by the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt was a Nazi, survived the Second World War, and never repudiated Nazism. In a “state of exception,” according to Schmitt, leaders are free to suspend laws for the public good.

Now, that sounds fine at first blush; even necessary. But, as Schmitt well knew, the Nazis did what they did by declaring *everything* an exception and every moment an emergency. “Don’t you believe in the rule of law?” “Sure!”

“But right now is an exception! We have an emergency here!

The most blatant example of the “state of exception” in recent US history is the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. On October 26th of that year – 45 days later – Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act into law. Sure, the law violates basic Constitutional freedoms, but *this is an emergency!*

And, as Schmitt well knew, after emergency legislation, the exception never goes away . . .

But *we live in exceptional times, right?* There’s a crisis at our southern border! There’s a crisis in American manufacturing! There’s a crisis on our streets. In our schools. There are dangers everywhere!

Well, yes, there *are* dangers everywhere. The world is burning. But you know what? There always have been and always will be dangers everywhere. The world is always burning.

A burning world is not exceptional. That’s not a reason to stop considering what law and justice mean.

The title of my talk today, “To Make an End is to Make a Beginning” is by the poet T.S. Eliot. Eliot served as a civilian air warden during the London Blitz of 1940-41. For fifty six days German bombs fell on London, killing 40,000 and wounding another 100,000. What did Eliot do as he served as an air warden and watched London burning? Besides his air raid duties, he wrote a poem, one of his most spiritual, *Little Gidding*. The line I quote is from that poem.

I’m going to call that “spiritual chill.”

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben focused on Schmitt's idea in his book *State of Exception*. Agamben wrote the quote that heads up your order of service this morning:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good.

The flames of authoritarianism cannot survive without the oxygen of exception and emergency. It's up to people who believe in reason to deprive the flames oxygen.

We live in a moment that is part of the long struggle between those who thrive on continuous emergencies and exceptions and those who believe not only in the rule of law, but in the rule of *just* laws.

That sort of consideration requires chill.

TWO

You know, our Active Voices group today is very much like the group that formed this congregation back in the nineteenth century, the National Liberal League. Now, yes, it was mostly a men's group, because women weren't allowed to vote anyway! (But the group is part of the DNA of the League of Women Voters.)

The Liberal League formed as a letter-writing, lobbying group to fight the Comstock Laws, laws designed to stop pornography in the US Mail.

Now, what did Mr. Comstock see as "pornography"? Well, sure, "French photographs," but also anything that had to do with sexuality or contraception. Because, *naturellement*, women could not be allowed to take charge of their own bodies.

"Pornography" also included any material that might promote ideas outside of White Protestant Christian orthodoxy. Atheists and agnostics spent real jail time over that. But how could the US government allow women—"those pure and simple creatures, just look at the sweet things"—to think outside the orthodox box? What would that do the the *children*?

The Liberal League lost. The Comstock Laws became the law of land, and their effects on the US Mail continued into the 1960s. And their effects on American society continue today.

Just imagine for a moment: *What if* the Liberal League had won? *What if* the battle over contraception had ended in 1875? *What if* freethought ideas on sexuality, politics, and religion, had gone out to the farms and villages of North America?

What if?

THREE

What am I going to be doing this summer, as the world burns?

Thanks to you, I will soon be beginning an eleven week sabbatical. Rev. Jim will be managing things here. Rev. Kelli will be here as well.

I have a couple of projects to pursue.

For one, I'll be spending time in the archives at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. When the Unitarian Universalist Association moved from its old headquarters to its new one a few years ago, they sent the congregational records of all the churches to Meadville's archives. This archive contains every correspondence between FUS and headquarters since 1881. It should make for some interesting reading, and I look forward to reporting back to you about what I find.

My second project is a book of meditations that I'm titling for now *A Poetics of Freethought*. Although, perhaps I should figure out a way to get "spiritual chill" into the title as well . . .

As you probably know, "freethought" is another word for the Humanist tradition, and in many ways one that I prefer. "Freethought" describes thinking that attempts to avoid dogma, unexamined emotion, and received cultural notions. Freethought attempts to think outside that White Protestant Christian Greek box.

"Freethought" is from a practical standpoint impossible. *Everything* we think and do is culturally conditioned: run through the filters of dogma, emotion, and cultural assumptions. But "freethought" is an attempt to see reality anew, everyday. An

attempt to question the *doxa*—part of that word *orthodox*—meaning common beliefs and popular opinions.

Why am I working on a book like that when the world is burning? For the same reason that T.S. Eliot wrote a poem as he sat under Nazi bombs. The world is always burning. And chances are the world always will be burning, as long as human beings exist on the planet.

We must imagine a future anyway.

Some of us—a few of us—are fortunate enough to have some time to think about time and history and oppression and liberation. I know how fortunate I am. I was born into a working-class world where every moment of every day is taken up with a mad scramble merely to stay alive. That's the situation of most people in our nation and on our planet.

But a few of us are blessed with some time out of time—some breathing room to reflect on the human condition. Some time to chill as the world burns.

So that's what I'm going to be doing on my summer vacation . . .

CONCLUSION

Sure, the times feel exceptional—like an emergency—because none of us here remember 1875 and the Comstock crackdown on freethought; and not many of us remember 1935 when the Roman Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin held huge fascist rallies in Canada and the US openly praising Hitler and Mussolini.

This nation and this world have always been on fire. Everything has always been an emergency. Our job here, today, is to succeed where that old Liberal League failed.

As I have said before, we do ourselves a great disservice thinking human history or US history is moving inevitably toward those liberal goals of freedom and inclusion. Ours is merely one vision of the human future.

Yes, in his last two books, the cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker has made a good statistical case for a general upward movement in human well-being on the planet.

Dr. Pinker would be the first to admit that the incline up is not a straight and solid one. In addition, some nations and some populations do not share in the general movement toward human flourishing.

We have a few options when we face the facts: we can deny them; we can run away screaming; or, we can roll up our sleeves.

Humanism isn't a faith or a belief system but rather a way of thinking and a set of core ethical commitments. One of those commitments is to knowledge, and that includes knowledge of a human history full of emergencies and exceptions—a human history in which, as a matter of fact, that's about all there ever has been.

But you know, the cliché of early humans cowering in caves and superstition is a false one. The artifacts from the human past clearly demonstrate that people have always been engineers and artists. Scientists, mathematicians, ethicists, lawyers, and builders.

Yes, the archeological evidence shows lots of fires, lots of murder and burning things down; but more has always been built.

Humanist commitments are always both individual and communal because human beings can't be fully human in isolation. This is one way liberals differ from conservatives.

As a species, we've come a long way. We've discovered much about ourselves and the cosmos. But, like the ancient Hindu god Shiva, we are both creators and destroyers.

We human beings know how to create a better world than the one we currently inhabit. Those faiths and beliefs that stand in the way of that better world . . . need to be voted out of our cave.

We must not, no matter the emergency, "play with law just as children play with disused objects." That goes for the political left and the political right.

We must "be alive to the fatal notions of *emergency* and *exception*. Be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary."

Winning requires chill.

SOURCES

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