

“Inner Resources, Outer Resilience”
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
on Indigenous People’s weekend, 7 October 2018
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

INTRO

Today, I want to think through the words of the British-Ugandan philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah that are in your order of service: “Our largest cultural identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves.” I think that this Indigenous Peoples’ Weekend is a good time to question our assumptions and think about the individual and collective meanings we create. Or don’t.

What I want to think through is the oddity that the European and Euro-American psyche is at once highly individualistic but extremely spotty concerning how to have a rich and resilient inner life. “Interiority” as it’s often called.

The idea of an autonomous self–individuality–came out of Medieval European Catholicism but did not really come into its own until the Protestant Reformation, when some Christians began to insist that they could read the bible and find god without the help of priests and preachers—all in their own heads, in other words. The traditional experts were out, and in came the amateurs, if you will. Everyone was suddenly free to develop their own worldview and experiment on their own psyche. But they weren’t prepared to do that, because for 1500 years the Church had taught that morality was wrapped up in a neat little package that you didn’t have to think about. Just do it.

It’s as if large numbers of people suddenly decided, “Hey, everybody has access to the internet. All the information is out there, so anybody can do brain surgery!”

(OK, maybe doing your own theology and doing your own brain surgery are somewhat different, but you get the idea.) “DIY” requires watching some YouTube. And the early Protestants weren’t doing that.

I think that part of the problem is that in Western Europe—and nations Europeanized through invasion, such as the United States—we have both an *overdeveloped* sense of individuality and an *underdeveloped* sense of an inner life.

This development went a long way toward convincing Europeans, mostly European men, that they had a personal hotline to The Truth. But it didn't do much in the way of helping those same people develop a complex, wise, and humble inner life.

And it didn't go far at all in terms of developing a cohesive, communal, society. To repeat that quote from Dr. Appiah: "Our largest cultural identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves."

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be in a society? Europeans didn't dwell on those questions as they spread across the planet.

ONE

The name Gianni Vattimo is not well known here in the United States, but Dr. Vattimo is one of the better known philosophers in Europe, and he served two terms on the European Parliament, the governing body of the European Union.

Gianni Vattimo is many things: a postmodern philosopher, a politician, a Christian, a communist, openly gay, loudly atheist . . . and an advisor to Pope Francis.

Why?

Well, Vattimo's philosophy has focused on what he calls "*pensiero debole*." *Pensiero* is where we get the English word "pensive." *Debole* hasn't come into English, but those of you who know Spanish know the word *débiles*, "weak." "*Pensiero debole*." Weak thought.

What's up with that? Everyone is after *strong* thought, right?

Not so fast, says Gianni Vattimo.

Weak thought emphasizes that we human beings are not integrated, unitary, reason machines. Strong thought asserts that reason is disinterested, solitary, and objective. Which leads to what is often called scientism. And colonialism. And sexism. And all-around bad behavior.

Weak thought claims that no answer (or at least not many) is an answer for all time. Everything we think and do as human beings is contingent and time-bound. It all and always depends. There is, in other words, no Big T "truth."

Hmmm. But wouldn't a pope be the last person who would want to hear something of that sort?

What does the pope see in Vattimo's work?

For one thing, it appears that Pope Francis would really like to get the Roman Catholic Church out of the business of gay-bashing and abortion opposition and into the work of alleviating poverty and saving the fragile planet. Yet, Pope Francis gets a lot of pushback from conservatives in the Church who say, "But God says we must do this and that! We *must* stand for Truth (big T)!" (This is the attitude that has made it *de rigor* in this country for conservative Supreme Court nominees to the Roman Catholic.)

But Pope Francis has realized the power of Gianni Vattimo's "*pensiero debole*," (weak thought). (Frankly, I think it translates better into English as "soft thought." But it's telling, isn't it, that English words for tender, weak, soft, *et cetera*, all have negative connotations.)

Anyway, Pope Francis knows that what was "true" in 1318 is not true in 2018.

Many Unitarians began to see this in the mid-nineteenth century. It is taking Roman Catholicism a bit longer to get there. But Dr. Vattimo and Pope Francis have joined we freethinkers in understanding that one generation's "truth" is another generation's belly laugh. Or another generation's social coercion.

Our socially conservative friends don't get that. Never have. Perhaps never will. After all, the human quest has long been to find the solid foundation for meaning and truth. "Weak thought" or "soft thought" throws in the towel. Why would we want to do that?

Don't we all secretly want to join in the conservative chorus: "God said it; I believe it; that settles it." Or "science said it; I believe it; that settles it."

TWO

You may have noticed the posters around the building saying that secular scholar Phil Zuckerman is going to be here on Sunday, October 21. Some of you heard him speak at our Dietrich 100 celebration.

Zuckerman calls the dependance on god and scriptures for your Truth “moral outsourcing.” Moral outsourcing. Perhaps that’s a bit overstated and harsh, but you get the point. Gianni Vattimo, Pope Francis, and you do not say “God said it; I believe it; that settles it.” We are taking the responsibility of saying, “I said it; I believe it; but I might be wrong.”

When you stop outsourcing your moral decisions, you must develop a complex inner life. You must become a “practical philosopher.” That’s a term used by the pre-Christian Stoics to differentiate between abstract, metaphysical philosophy—angels dancing on the head of a pin sort of thing—and what *they* were doing, which was sorting through the mess of being alive and trying to figure out how best to live a moral, ethical life.

The point of practical philosophy is valuing what is valuable, not valuing what is not valuable, and working to ascertain the difference. Practical philosophy—or practical theology if you will—grapples with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s challenge: “Our largest cultural identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves.”

Reflect that the popularity of Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism in Western culture is exactly because those traditions teach methods for inner resilience. Those traditions have long taken human psychology into account. Western Christianity over its two thousand year run hasn’t done that very well. Hence the pope’s problem!

In the European tradition, we have to go back to pre-Christian thinking to find much to do with an inner life.

Now, the most practical of practical philosophers for my money is the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. His book, usually titled *Meditations* is better titled *Exhortations to Himself*. The emperor had no intention of anyone ever seeing his writings on Stoicism. He was working on his own mind. His meditations were his way of getting up in the morning and getting on with the difficult business of living and doing his job.

One of his most famous meditations comes early in the book. He wrote this:

When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can’t tell good from bad. But I have seen the beauty of the good and the ugliness of the bad, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has

a nature related to my own And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relatives, nor hate them. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth. To obstruct each other is unnatural. (Book II, 1.)

Our theme for October is "Sanctuary." The first step in acting in a self-aware moral way is having inner resources. Only then can you have outward resilience. Marcus Aurelius wrote this:

Remember that your reason is invincible when you are in control—that is, doing nothing you choose not to do . . .

The mind free from uncontrolled emotion is a citadel; it is an impregnable sanctuary and we have no more secure place to run to. Those who have not realized this are ignorant, and those who have realized it but do not use their insight are unhappy. (VIII, 48)

That's a long way from saying "a mighty fortress is our god." It is taking personal responsibility for what you think and do.

THREE

In his philosophy Gianni Vattimo is wrestling with a problem that the twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger first formulated. Heidegger pointed out that it appears we have—or at least we *think* we have—two different sorts of thinking modes. (This was long before Daniel Kahneman experimentally distinguished between what he calls "thinking fast" and "thinking slow." But in one way Kahneman is perpetuating an old myth of the Western mind: that we have two distinct ways of thinking. Kahneman suggests an either/or model, while Heidegger and Vattimo challenge us to realize that it's both/and.

Heidegger claimed that we have simply never established a connection between being and truth. (That idea is where Existentialism comes from.) We have never established a connection between being and truth

We know that much of our energy each day is spent merely getting through another day. Putting out fires. Paying bills. Reacting to the latest dumb thing our government is doing. That's the practical. But we *think* we are able to stop being practical and shift

into a mode that is theoretical. Heidegger called this move “the disappearance of praxis.” Into the place of praxis (doing things) we place what is translated into English from German as “just looking around.”

This is the source of Gianni Vattimo’s argument for weak thought. As Heidegger observed, actually, we are never wholly putting out fires or wholly “just looking around.” We are “just looking around” while we put out the fires of everyday existence, and we are putting out fires when we think we are “just looking around.” It is, in other words, completely impossible to separate the objective from the subjective. We are thinking about the meaning of life as we are putting out fires and paying bills; and we are paying bills and putting out fires when we think we are only thinking about the meaning of life.

This not a bug in the system—it’s a feature.

When we admit this to ourselves, we see that the claims of religion and the claims of science are standing on clay feet. It is equally foolish to claim that a religion has the whole truth and that science holds the key to truth. Our minds don’t work that way.

From the very foundation of the Western World, the claim has been that something—religion, philosophy, science—something will wrap truth up in a neat little package and put it on a shelf.

Realizing that that isn’t the case is the beginning of wisdom. This is the central claim in the philosophy of the brilliant contemporary feminist philosopher Judith Butler, the brilliant ethicist Martha Nussbaum, Gianni Vattimo, and, we hope a little bit, Pope Francis.

CONCLUSION

Why did Europeans feel justified in invading the Western Hemisphere and killing and enslaving its peoples? Largely because Europeans invented the concept of “religion,” based in their prejudices, and then felt justified in killing those who did not have their (mistaken) views.

One of the central justifications for racialized slavery was that Europeans were saving Africans from Satan by hauling them to the Western Hemisphere in chains and forcing Christianity upon them.

“Strong thought,” destructive ideas.

Western science was merely the other side of this coin. Scientists “proved” that different races have different abilities in terms of both intelligence and culture. Wasn’t true. Scientists “proved” that women’s brains just weren’t up to the difficult task of thinking like a white man. Wasn’t true.

All convenient, deadly, lies.

The European project went from spreading Christianity to spreading democracy to spreading the free market. But the world’s peoples have not been asked if they want foreign religion, foreign political systems, or foreign economic systems.

Cultural imperialism. No. Inner. Life.

Gianni Vattimo’s “weak thought” is a way to finally exit delusional, murderous power games and walk humbly with our ideas.

Weak thought undercuts the claims of truth and power and invites us to stop proclaiming and to start listening. Weak thought invites us to the realization that none of us is packaging the truth for all time; rather, we are planning and working to make it through the day.

We—the human race—just can’t afford the luxury of baseless and ill-considered conviction in a world that is growing overcrowded and ever-warmer. Again, Dr. Appiah: “Our largest cultural identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves.”

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