

What We Have Done and What We Have Left Undone

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

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(note: the text of the reading is here: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3367659/>)

## INTRO

In the Anglican / Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, published first in 1549, the Prayer of Confession goes,

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

That about covers all the bases, doesn't it? Thought. Word. Deed. Both what we do and what we don't do. "What we have left undone" is known in Christian theology as the "sin of omission"—something you deliberately decide not to do that you should have done.

Here's what fascinates me about the concept of sin of omission: there's an implicit assumption built in that each of us actually has time to do moral reasoning before we act. That we have the time to think about something and deliberately decide *not* to do it.

Here's my question: how many times in our busy lives do we actually have the time to think through an action?

I'm going to hang that thought up and keep it hanging there until I get back to what is nowadays being called the "default mode network" of the brain.

## ONE

But first, consider the Temple at Delphi, which was an institution that existed for more than eleven hundred years.

The ancient Greeks thought that the temple of the Greek god Apollo at Delphi sat on the *omphalos*, the center, the bellybutton, of the planet.

Not only was the temple situated on the bellybutton of the planet, but it was also on a slope of Mount Parnassus, where the muses were thought to dwell.

The priestess at the temple has come to be known as the Oracle of Delphi. The priestess would be filled with *enthusiasmos*—where we get the English word “enthusiasm”—she would be filled with “theos” and she would issue cryptic prophecies to her clients.

Some argue that the temple was built over fault lines that emitted hallucinogenic gas; others argue that the priestess ritualistically took hallucinogens. Whatever the cause, that temple was one mind-blowing place for more than a thousand years.

Inscribed over the entrance of the temple were the words *gnōthi seauton*, “know thyself.”

Know thyself.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus took his shot at the message of Delphi when he said “character is fate.” Heraclitus (died 475 BCE) was dismissing such influences as the will of the gods and the effects of astrology. Knowing yourself means making your own fate by being who you are and doing what you do.

But what’s that?

What Heraclitus ignored is that fate is not only character but also . . . as Martin Luther King pointed out . . . the color of your skin. And your gender, your sexuality, your social class, your religion . . . . Part of knowing yourself is also knowing what labels society heaps upon you and why.

Any markers, any labels that we human beings can create, we will, in what the British anthropologist Ernest Crawley called the “narcissism of minor differences.”

Freud built on this idea as he tried to explain why people so similar so often hate each other. Freud attributed this human tendency to the narcissism of minor differences and what he called the “taboo of personal isolation.”

Taboo. It’s those things that we humans have long considered the things you can’t talk about it. You shouldn’t even think about.

Freud intuited that knowing thyself—or shall we say knowing the self created out of the matrix of personal and social labels—somehow creates a self so wrapped up in ego that the smallest difference from another person will create an excuse for mayhem and murder.

“Thyself” is a bit of a jerk, it appears. The taboo of personal isolation ratchets up an individual’s egotism. For example, notice that the individuals who take AR-15s and murder people are nearly always isolated individuals getting their “community” online.

Isolation. Individuality. Egotism. Blowing little differences out of all proportion.

But, as Freud knew, that’s all the product of a story that is both forced upon us and that we tell ourselves, especially when we are isolated, individualistic, egotistic . . .

But I think perhaps Freud got it backwards: it is not the *id*—our unconscious desires— that hates and murders; it's the "me, me, mine" of egotism.

## TWO

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, metaphors matter. If the cosmos and humanity has been created by an awe-inspiring, all-powerful god, then we human beings are not going to break the planet. That's one way of seeing things. Kind of comforting, really. We see ourselves as "the crown of creation."

But I think the poet Alison Hawthorne Deming is closer to the truth: we did not spring "from an idea out in space." Rather, we emerged organically,

from the sequenced larval mess of creation  
that binds us with the others,  
all playing the endgame of a beautiful planet

The "others" are people; and trees; and amoebas and bacteria. We call it the "web of all existence of which we are a part" in the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles.

"Know thyself."

"Thyself" is—if the best of current human thinking is correct—"the sequenced larval mess of creation." And that's a whole other way of seeing the self.

The Buddhists knew this truth a long time ago. The Buddha's great insight was that this heavy burden we carry around, this thing we call a "self" is an illusion. But it's difficult to turn your mind from being the crown of creation to being "the sequenced larval mess of creation / that binds us with the others."

It is, however, liberating.

I mentioned Michael Pollan's new book a few Sundays ago, titled *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*.

*Spoiler alert:* Pollan's conclusion to that book is that we get it wrong when we contrast "spirituality" with "materiality." The opposite of spirituality, Pollan claims, is egotism.

I think he's right. Because the opposite of a naturalistic, materialistic worldview is *also* egotism.

That's why a science-based religious naturalism works out to the same conclusions as many religions. After you realize that we are part of "the sequenced larval mess of creation" it's difficult to be all that egotistical.

To my mind, the health of an outlook—a worldview—is its ability to get us thinking and acting both compassionately and self-critically.

Even if a god did create the earth in seven days and give humanity dominion over it, that's still a bad way to run a planet. It's going to get living things killed.

Assuming another metaphor, a metaphor of the earth being an organic whole of which we are a part, that's a healthier vision of how this planet might operate and sustain itself.

THREE

"Know thyself."

It was a challenge when it was carved over the entrance to the temple of Apollo. But the dominant answers in the Western world have driven us in the wrong direction.

Knowing yourself is still the challenge now. But we have better tools to work with than Heraclitus did.

Who and what the heck *are* you?

Who are you even to *ask* such a question? So far as we know, cats don't ask that question. Dogs and squirrels don't ask that question.

What is it "to know"?

What is a "self"? It has been the central question for a long time. But we have answered the question badly.

However, neuroscientists are slowly closing in on the system that appears to create our sense of self.

As I understand it from an amateur's viewpoint, one of the hottest topics in brain research is what has come to be called the "default mode network" (DMN), which appears to be the source of what we each experience as the self. The DMN is what we know when we "know thyself."

Yes, the ancient Buddhists got closer to it than did Western thinkers: Fundamentally, there isn't a "self."

So back to that concept I put on a hook a few minutes ago:

The self is an illusion created by the default mode network as it produces your memories and your anticipation of the future and the story you tell yourself about yourself: your autobiography.

The default mode network is what you use when thinking about your emotions; thinking about how others feel (empathy), and "theory of mind," what you think others are thinking. The default mode network is what creates moral and ethical reasoning, and it is what we use to understand stories. It produces memories of past events, and it is what imagines the future.

As the Buddhists also understood, all those things happen best when the mind is at rest and when the mind wanders.

It appears that scientists have found how to isolate a single memory, which exists in specific neurons—those little cells that transmit nerve impulses. For example, a visual memory begins in the part of the brain that processes visual stimuli. Then . . . well, it's complicated: we haven't figured that out yet. Estimates of how many brain pathways a single thought goes through range from a dozen to thirty or more.

But it's pretty clear now that "the self" that we "know" is produced by a mind at rest. Yet, as the emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote:

A lifetime is a dot; it is flux, and our perceptions are dim and our bodies rotting. Our spirits are in whirl; we don't know what will happen next . . .

Yes. It's difficult to find that restful, mind-wandering spot where we can in a very real sense "collect" our "selves."

#### FOUR

The theme for the month of November is "Memory: The practice of honest remembrance & honoring the shoulders on which we stand."

If I got elected Pope of the World tomorrow, the religion that I would offer is the one that appears to be the oldest of human religions: veneration of the dead.

When the first human stopped and took time to respect the body of a dead loved one, both religion and philosophy were born. And, by the way, that person was thinking of someone besides themselves. They were getting outside their own heads.

"Ancestor worship" is a pejorative term. Those who venerate the dead do not "worship" ancestors in any Christian sense of that term, but rather *remember* them. Look at the *offrendas* of *Día de los Muertos: siempre te recordaremos*. "We will always remember you."

In a very real sense the remembered dead have a continuing existence. Our DNA passed through them. Our personal histories intertwine with theirs. Their deeds, for good and ill, live in everything about us. Remembering *that* creates a sense of awe and connection. Perhaps even humbleness. You understand that it's not all about *you*. But at the same time, you can see part of how you are constructing your "self."

*Remembering*. From the Latin word *memor*, "to be mindful." When we are mindful of those who have gone before, history becomes instructive, and the present moment becomes malleable. Changeable. Full of possibility. Just look at all we've been through! And we made it!

Respect for the past. Respect for the location of the bones of our ancestors. Respect in remembering the hard work and sacrifice and shortcomings of those who have gone before. Learning from their shortcomings and prejudices. Keeping alive the tradition of overcoming.

I run it through my "ought" test for a religion. Veneration of the dead does it all—it's logical; there's nothing to "believe," it's awe inspiring. It's gratitude inspiring. It makes you stop and think for a moment. It helps you remember what you have done and left undone. And it's good for you!

Veneration of the dead gets my vote for Best Religion Ever.

But I'm not going to get elected Pope of the World. So, I'll offer it as a . . . friendly suggestion.

## CONCLUSION

"Secular."

The original use of the term *secular* meant "generation" or "age." In Christian usage, the term came to represent this world of time and death, as opposed to the other world, eternity. The distinction is good to remember.

When many of us say we are "secular," one thing we are saying is that we believe that our existence is within time. And many of us go on to believe that existence can only take place within time. That we are "all playing the endgame of a beautiful planet."

I suspect that eternity doesn't exist and can't exist, because it is merely a term based on time not existing. But "time" is merely another word for where we are in terms of the Big Bang. (Or whatever it was that happened.)

When time doesn't exist, nothing exists. (I suspect.) Time isn't magic; it's merely the measure of what has happened since the Big Bang and that "sequenced larval mess of creation."

What have we done and what we have left undone? What we have left undone as a species is the work of getting over our feelings of isolation and separateness, our "narcissism of minor differences."

Too often we still act, as the poet Alison Hawthorne Deming phrases it "as if we'd sprung / from an idea out in space, rather than emerging

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## SOURCES and Further Reading

Text of poem: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3367659/>

"Portrait of a Memory" <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/portrait-of-a-memory/>

Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity" (1917).

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