

Breaking Bread and Breaking Through (Stewardship Sunday)  
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
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## Readings

In 1837—a year after arriving back from his fateful journey on HMS Beagle—Charles Darwin wrote in his notebook:

If we choose to let conjecture run wild, then animals, our fellow brethren in pain, diseases, death, suffering and famine—our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements—they may partake our origin in one common ancestor—we may be all netted together.

A reading from Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*:

We can now expose perhaps the most common misunderstanding of Darwinism: the idea that Darwin showed that evolution by natural selection is a procedure for producing Us. Ever since Darwin proposed his theory, people have often misguidedly tried to interpret it as showing that we are the destination, the goal, the point of all that winnowing and competition, and our arrival on the scene was guaranteed by the mere holding of the tournament. This confusion has been fostered by evolution's friends and foes alike, and it is parallel to the confusion of the coin-toss tournament winner who basks in the misconsidered glory of the idea that since the tournament had to have a winner, and since he is the winner, the tournament had to produce him as the winner. Evolution can be an algorithm, and evolution can have produced us by an algorithmic process, without its being true that evolution is an algorithm for producing us.

## INTRODUCTION

Today is Stewardship Sunday. What's that mean? Well, we're going to talk a lot today about how we *take care* of First Unitarian Society.

Some of you know that I really like words. So, anytime I use a word, I like to know what it means. The first way to do that is to look at its etymology, its history. Where it came from.

*Stewardship* is a word that comes to us out of Old English. You see the ending "ship" on several English words—*citizenship, horsemanship, scholarship, workmanship, friendship, kinship, and worship*, to name a few.

*Ship* means a skill at creating something. The "ship" on *friendship* means you know how to do being a friend. The "ship" on *scholarship* means you know how to go about being a scholar. The "ship" on *worship* means you know how to appreciate the worth of things.

The "ship" on *stewardship* means you know how to steward.

But wait! Where does the word *steward* come from?

That word comes from Old English as well. *Ward* can be either a noun—a person or thing; and a verb, doing something. *Ward* means "to take care of." A ward *wards off* bad things and makes good things happen.

OK. But what about the *stew* in "stewardship"? That one is a bit more complicated, but it is Old English as well. It's just that *stew* is *really, really* old Old English.

The parliament in Germany is housed in a building called the . . . Reichstag (for short) —because German words can get really long. The Old German word *stag* was *stig* in Old English and it meant "hall" or building. A stig-ward was someone who took care of a building, and "ship" was knowing how to do that. So, "stewardship" is someone who is skillful at taking care of the hall, or, taking skillful care of a hall.

That's why we call the people who clean and maintain our building here "stewards." And, to top it off, the man who takes care of our building on Sunday mornings is named Antelmo Pastor—*pastor* meaning "shepherd" in Spanish.

And *stewardship* for the people here in our congregation means paying Antelmo fairly for what he does. And also taking care of what we *do* as a congregation.

For us, having a bright, shiny building is only a means to an end—that end being what we do here.

As part of being good stewards, we need to think carefully and often about what it is that we *are* doing here. Which is why at lunch today one of our Board members will be talking about what we call our mission—why First Unitarian Society exists in the world.

So, you see why I like to learn the history of words: the history of a word reveals a lot about what you are thinking when you use the word, even if you didn't know you were thinking it.

ONE

I titled my talk today "Breaking Bread and Breaking Through." What I want to think about today is why we gather here and what we're all about.

Now, take a look at that quote in your order of service this morning from Edward Gorey:

There are so many things we've been brought up to believe that it takes you an awful long time to realize that they aren't you.

You know Edward Gorey's work: he is famous for pen and ink drawings in black and white that are dark and foreboding. He's best known for his opening sequence for *Mystery!* on Public Broadcasting.

Gorey lived in the twentieth century but his art looks as if he had lived a century before. If you happen to have your bio-external extended-mind device, also known as a "smartphone," you can look him up.

Allow me to read what he had to say once again:

There are so many things we've been brought up to believe that it takes you an awful long time to realize that they aren't you.

I think this quote has a lot to do with why we are here at First Unitarian Society. The meaning and purpose of FUS.

Gorey is pointing out that your beliefs aren't *you*. That's a basic teaching of Buddhism. However, it isn't a part of traditional Western religious thinking, and that's too bad.

But it *is* a basic understanding among Humanists. Realizing the difference between socially-imposed belief and what *you yourself* have discovered through free thought—thinking freely—is a difficult but necessary activity.

"Necessary" if you hope to move from mere reactivity in your life to a considered existence.

Socrates was wrong I think when he said that the "unexamined life isn't *worth* living," but I think it's true to say that the unexamined life is kind of boring. The *examined life* is much more fulfilling and *fun* to live.

As Edward Gorey points out, we do well to consider the difference between socially-imposed belief and what *you yourself* have discovered through thinking freely.

The same is true of socially-applied labels.

Labels aren't you.

The same is true of that over-used word "faith." We need to examine what we put our faith in and we need to remember that many of us have grown up being told by family, friends, and our society to put our faith in things that don't *deserve* our faith.

As a matter of fact, the whole reason for the existence of our religious education program—for children, youth and adults—is to step away from those socially imposed ways of thinking and try to look at things from a different angle.

All of this takes time and energy in thinking. And it helps to have others to guide and to accompany.

## TWO

The difficulty involved in thinking through and clarifying values is one of the central reasons that First Unitarian Society exists. We believe in life-long learning. And life-long learning means a lifetime of working on the big questions in life.

It requires a lifetime of *un-learning*, as Edward Gorey understood it:

There are so many things we've been brought up to believe that it takes you an awful long time to realize that they aren't you.

Let's take for example the work of a Harvard philosopher by the name of Josiah Royce. In 1908 Royce published a book titled *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. In that book, Royce argues that actually our highest aspirations are quite knowable and practical, when we examine them in the light of how we actually live our lives.

Meaning that each of us ask ourselves: what do I actually *do* with my spare time?

Meaning that each of us ask ask ourselves: *Why* do I do that?

By tracing the shape of how we actually do our lives, we find where our loyalty is. Family? Friends? Justice? Spirituality? Safety? Art? Beauty? Watching TV?

Most likely, Royce argues, where you put your loyalty – as objectively measured by your concern and your *time* – is where your higher purpose lies.

This is a practical way of clarifying values.

Also, it is a way to enhance community. Because *everyone* has loyalties. Find out what your loyalties are, and you find a way of discussing higher callings – the ultimate ground of your existence, as Paul Tillich called it – with others.

In this way of seeing things, diametrical opposites may not mean irreconcilable differences.

For example, one of my personal loyalties is to the opportunity for self-fulfillment for the poor.

It's not hard to figure out why I have this loyalty: most of my loved ones in my life have struggled under the unbearable weight of necessity rather than finding self-fulfillment, and I consider that unjust. I believe everyone has the right to "pursue happiness."

I also believe that only the power of government can give poor people a chance at self-fulfillment. I believe *that* partly because I see the power of government doing just the opposite, as the guarantor of economic oppression.

In other words, I think that it's possible that the poor – who vastly outnumber the rich – might seize what I see as rightfully theirs except for the power of the police and military.

You see how what might at first appear to be a complex loyalty becomes simple when I think about it a bit. You can label me a Socialist, but what I really want is very simple: I want everyone to have a chance.

Now, Josiah Royce invites me to think about someone with an opposing loyalty.

Sure, I could set up a straw man and say, "Ain't it obvious: the haves *enjoy* oppressing the have-nots. They get a kick out of it."

But you can see how that leads to no understanding or conversation. No ambiguity or nuance.

Why then, I ask myself, might a "have" be loyal to a system that I see as disastrously oppressive?

(Best to talk with someone, but if not, try a little applied-empathy.)

Well, as in my own case, part of it might be personal biography: "I was born a have-not, but through the wealth of opportunities afforded by our system, now I'm a have!" Now, I might not *agree* with that assessment of reality. But I begin to see why someone's loyalty might be different from my own.

What was the greatest obstacle to success that my imaginary opponent had? Perhaps government regulation and taxes. Government interference, as my opposite sees it.

So, suddenly, I realize that the *very thing* that I think can fix the problem of opportunity is exactly what this other person believes is the problem itself. We have competing loyalties but actually the same vision: opportunity for everyone.

In other words, with a bit of digging, I realize that my opposite has the same values that I claim—the same loyalty. It's merely that we are articulating that loyalty in different ways.

In which case, how can I avoid loving—or at least being more tolerant of—my perceived enemies?

Problems solved. If . . . if I don't sit around and "stew in my own juices" as the old saying goes.

Loyalties. Values. But now let's think a bit about our place in the universe . . .

### THREE

As you know, in Unitarian Universalism, we have Seven Principles. The Seventh goes like this:

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

As you heard in the reading from Charles Darwin, the theory of natural selection implies that all living things are connected—"netted together"—as Darwin put it.

Now, back to the history of words for a moment—you have to realize that when Darwin wrote "netted together" in 1837, the word "network" did not exist yet. *Network* was not a word he could use, and the contemporary use of the word "web" was not something that Darwin could use. But in different words Darwin was talking about "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

Darwin's theory of natural selection implies some things about reality: one is that everything is tied together; another is that everything exists as it does by a combination of physical laws and chance.

The reading from Daniel Dennett this morning underlines the point that nearly everyone misses about the theory of natural selection:

This confusion has been fostered by evolution's friends and foes alike, and it is parallel to the confusion of the coin-toss tournament winner who basks in the misconsidered glory of the idea that since the tournament had to have a winner, and since he is the winner, the tournament had to produce him as the winner. Evolution can be an algorithm, and evolution can have produced us by an algorithmic process, without its being true that evolution is an algorithm for producing us.

If we unlearn what our society tells us to think, these realizations from Darwin can lead to deep, deep truth and meaning, which I think of as the three essential points of Humanism:

1. Everything is connected.
2. Everything changes.
3. Therefore, we must care for each other.

But, seriously, how do we un-learn what is aptly called "social programming"? The learnings that are by definition woven into the social fabric of the society in which one lives: we get the messages in school; in the workplace; in media; and from social interactions with others.

Our dominant society insists that we are all individuals doing individual things.  
Our dominant society insists that you can be safe from change if you just do this and buy that.  
Our dominant society insists that you can do *what* you want, *when* you want with animals, natural resources, and other people.  
Our dominant society insists that it's all about me, me, me.

But if we want to save the planet and the living things on it, we have to think differently. We must unlearn.

One way to un-learn is by not taking things all that seriously! As Shel Silverstein put it:

Put Something Silly In The World  
That Ain't Been There Before.

Just now, the cry is "Build a wall! China has a wall and just look at how great their economy is!" Now: someone in this congregation can tell you what kind of fallacy that is.

Creativity helps break us all out of the socially-imposed walls that surround us. Shel Silverstein is saying what Edward Gorey was trying to say:

Listen To The Mustn'ts, Child,  
Listen To The Don'ts  
Listen To The Shouldn'ts  
The Impossibles, The Won'ts  
Listen To The Never Haves  
Then Listen Close To Me—  
Anything Can Happen, Child,  
Anything Can Be.

A materialist, naturalist viewpoint tells us that everything is everything; there isn't anything else. Everything is "netted together."

1. Everything is connected.
2. Everything changes.

And from this we can posit a moral imperative:

3. Therefore, we must care for each other.

## CONCLUSION

In her poem "A Brave and Startling Truth" Maya Angelou sums up the whole point of Humanism:

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend

Out of such chaos, of such contradiction  
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

That's the great mystery of human existence: "Out of such chaos, of such contradiction / We learn that we are neither devils nor divines."

Nope. We're only human. But that's not a bad thing to be, if you're out to do some good.

That's the essence of Humanism. It is a radical thought. It's a radical truth that needs to exist in the world and on the religious landscape.

First Unitarian Society is the keeper, the steward of that truth that so many are afraid to speak. That's why FUS has been here, is here, and needs to remain here for a future.

## SOURCES

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