

"Broken and *Really* Broken"
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRO

Our theme for April is "Wholeness: The practice of repairing what is broken and knowing we are enough."

To be human is to have challenges. Perhaps you've noticed that!

For some of us, it's a foul temper; for some, anxiety; for some low self-esteem. For some it's addiction. Something. Those things are *really* broken. They reduce enjoyment and fulfillment in life. They affect our lives for the worse. They need to be fixed.

Then, there are those things that social pressures *call* "broken" that are not broken at all: Gender identity. Sexual orientation. Body style. Looks. Employment. Economic status. "You always." "You never."

As Marge Piercy wrote in her poem "Barbie Doll":

She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.
Her good nature wore out
like a fan belt.

The girl in the poem wasn't broken, but she broke under the pressures of social expectations. That's one idea I want to consider today.

The other idea I want to consider today is maintenance of the machine of brokenness, if you will: how the apparatus of negative social pressure keeps functioning and how

far many people will go to keep that machine running, which I think explains the world-wide rise of authoritarianism.

ONE

My nomination for greatest book title of all time is the 1864 papal publication titled . . . *Syllabus Errorum*, "Syllabus of Errors."

Now that's a class I want to take!

The book was written by Pope Pius IX. It was a list of 80 "heresies."

In that work, Pope Pius IX put his foot down. After all, the Latin word *heresy* means "choosing for yourself." In the 1860s, more and more people were choosing for themselves. And that would never do, said the pope.

The *Syllabus of Errors* condemned everything from "modernism" to moral relativism to secularity to separation of church and state to liberalism in general. Everything, in other words, that we Humanists treasure.

I suspect that the pope's thinking went something like this: "You let people choose for themselves, and next thing you know, women will be . . . OMG!"

I suspect that the pope thought, "OMG! I'm going to crack down on some errors!"

With his *Syllabus of Errors*, Pope Pius IX added his name to a long list of men in power who have exclaimed, "OMG, this can't go on!"

(Let's call them, "the authoritarians.")

Secularity and individual choice *feel* chaotic to many people, especially those who benefit from hierarchy and patriarchy: "You're telling me I'm going to have to think about moral choices rather than merely depending upon my sacred text and my prejudices? OMG!"

The conservative get frightened, and authoritarians step up to stoke the fear in order to gain power. Authoritarians multiply in the lush environment produced by fear and anger.

Unfortunately, fear and anger have only gotten more ubiquitous since that time. Nowadays, we are constantly bombarded by news, and news is all about what isn't working. What is broken.

Many people are scared. And so they search for quick fixes. Authoritarians offer quick fixes.

What can make America great again?
What can make Europe great again?
What can make Christianity great again?

Authoritarians always have an answer. And all you've got to trade in is some of your freedom.

A quick definition of "freedom," from the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor:

We are free when we can remake the conditions of our own existence, we we can dominate the things that dominate us.

Allow me to read that again:

We are free when we can remake the conditions of our own existence, we we can dominate the things that dominate us.

That's freedom. That's the ideal of Humanism. Its opposite is an attempt at time travel, going backwards in time.

All the various and sundry authoritarian projects and fundamentalisms work in exactly the same way—they are insisting upon a certainty that sometimes existed in the past, yes, but that certainty existed due to parochialism or isolation. They are insisting upon certainties that cannot exist on our very small planet today.

As fundamentalism insists upon certainty, it gets more and more shrill. More and more fearful, unreasoning, and unjustified.

Those conditions—fear, unreason, and injustice—are the exact opposite of the Humanist, pluralist, secular project.

TWO

One of the readings this morning is from the *Washington Post*, written by contributing columnist Robert Kagan, who is a neoconservative American historian and foreign-policy commentator and advisor to US presidents.

Why am I quoting someone on the opposite side of the political spectrum from my views?

Because I think Kagan hits the nail on the head in this article concerning the true threat to liberal democracy here and abroad: not communism, not fascism, not totalitarianism, but authoritarianism: trust in populist leaders who rule first by personality, then by force.

I think Kagan has a point we all need to think deeply about. A recent study by Brookings Institution (a center-Right think tank) reports:

Of the Americans who regard themselves as economically liberal but culturally conservative—one standard description of populism—40 percent express openness to non-democratic forms of government, and fully 52 (percent) support a strong leader without checks and balances from Congress or elections. This group dominated the crucial nine percent of voters who supported Barack Obama in 2012 but shifted to Donald Trump in 2016.

No, I don't agree with the neoconservative view that the US should be out on the world stage forcing liberal democracy on other nations. But I do think that having a few liberal democracies on the planet is a good thing.

The key to authoritarian success is fear and anger, what President Franklin Roosevelt famously called—"fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified."

Here's the thing: "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified" are the very things we Humanists most oppose.

We Humanists get a lot of gaff about our dedication to reason and naming and justification. To put it succinctly, we get gaff about our dedication to Enlightenment values.

Yes, the Enlightenment period—beginning sometime around the turn into the 1700s—was a time of European colonialism. And, yes, science in those days got used as a tool

to justify the oppression of non-Europeans and women and people identified as “other.”

All of these things are true. We all know that there is this thing called “motivated reasoning,” and when people use it, the result is faulty reasoning—“unreasoning.” And, yes, often that continues to happen to this day.

No, reason is not the cure-all for the human condition. It’s a tool. But it’s a valuable tool.

As a matter of fact, the wrongs attributed to the Enlightenment period were also demonstrably more true of the time before the Enlightenment.

For example, you may have read that recently Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador asked Spain and the Vatican for an apology for the Spanish, Roman Catholic invasion and occupation of Mexico five centuries ago.

Old news? Well, not so much, given the continuing poverty of indigenous peoples.

President Obrador wants an apology to “the original peoples for the violations of what are now known to be human rights.”

Outcome? No apology.

Obrador chose his words carefully: “for the violation of what are now known to be human rights.” These are now known to be human rights because of Enlightenment values.

Traditionally, religions have mitigated *against* individual freedom and individual expression, clearing the way for communal and state action. In the case of Spain, Portugal, France, and Protestant England, massive genocidal state action in this hemisphere.

The pressure of Enlightenment values is—perhaps paradoxically— to lighten up: we Humanists and freethinkers insist that other people have the same rights and the same social responsibilities that we do.

No, historically, that’s not the way the Euro-liberal democracies have functioned in reality—people of color, women, foreigners, the other-abled, the poor, those of different religious beliefs, sexual orientations, etc, etc have been excluded.

But at least some of us consider those oppressions contradictory to the basic claim for the existence of liberal governments: that everyone be treated with inherent–inborn–worth and dignity.

Rights and responsibilities, we claim, are universal. Every human being everywhere is born with them.

Sure, this is an ideal, not a reality. The ideal wasn't achieved in the 1700s. It hasn't been achieved yet. But it is a vision we are dedicated to working toward.

And it's all because we insist upon not succumbing to "fear itself." It's all because we insist upon naming those things that are dangerous; because we insist upon reasoning about those dangers; and because we insist upon justifiably deciding what the real dangers are and what to do about them.

THREE

Let's be blunt: Enlightenment values frighten authoritarians and the socially conservative. The Enlightenment vision of individual and universal rights leads to secularity and pluralism, separating laws from religions and accepting the belief systems of other cultures not grudgingly but as equally valid as the belief systems of dominant cultures.

Secularity and pluralism function to humble us. After all, reflect on the fact that when Enlightenment philosophers began to insist that each citizen has equal rights, what they were actually envisioning is where all of humanity started: in hunter-gatherer tribes, anthropologists tell us, people are treated equally.

But that's another story for another day . . .

The Enlightenment project is about pluralism and diversity. You've got to have them if the human individual is to have rights and dignity. But for many, pluralism and diversity feel strange and dangerous and chaotic.

Hence, fundamentalism in its many guises. Hence the rise of authoritarians who promise to return us to certainties that never actually existed, or if they did exist, were certainties based on sheer ignorance of the facts.

And so all across the planet authoritarians are on the rise, and people are choosing to sell their freedom for an illusory certainty.

That's why we who believe in the liberal project must keep reminding ourselves that there's a difference between broken and *really* broken.

Yes, we have a broken immigration system in the US. It's broken because most Americans fear fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified.

Sure, it's a big problem and getting bigger . . . because we don't deal with it except in haphazard, makeshift fits and starts.

Name it. Reason about it. And come up with just solutions.

The great error of Enlightenment ideology is that it will somehow automatically and magically sustain itself—that “bending toward justice” thing.

The quote in this mornings order of service from Robert Kagen says the truth:

We have been living with the comforting myth that the great progress we have witnessed in human behavior since the mid-20th century . . . cannot be reversed.

This is absurd. There is no universal spirit of the age pushing toward secular freedom, the inherent worth of individuals, or treating all justly

Far from it.

Here is where it comes right back to the individual. Because those authoritarians and those who long for the old days, what they want deep, deep inside is a return to traditionalist social structures. Certitude. Mono-culturalism.

But back to the personal. Who advised the young woman in Marge Piercy's poem “to play coy,” who “exhorted” her “to come on hearty,” to “exercise, diet, smile and wheedle”?

It wasn't one guy; it wasn't ten people. It was a system in which white, male, heterosexual, cisgender people ruled the roost and too many others piled on, complicit in the systemic oppression. It was micro-aggression after micro-aggression, until

Her good nature wore out
like a fan belt.

Researchers have recently begun to study a phenomenon they are called “stereotype threat.” Their research indicates that even mentioning a stereotype to a person who is often stereotyped causes that person to score badly on tests. “Stereotype threat.” That’s subtle. And it’s everywhere.

Robert Kagen phrased it well:

Average people had little control of their destiny. They were imprisoned by the rigid hierarchies of traditional society—maintained by brute force when necessary—that locked them into the station to which they were born.

CONCLUSION

The girl in Marge Piercy’s poem wasn’t broken, but she broke under the pressures of social expectations. The very act of questioning social expectations rather than knuckling under and buying the social norms—that’s an act of heresy. It’s an act of reason.

We will soon be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. On the night of that police raid on a gay bar called Stonewall, there were some brave people there that night. And they said, “*I am not broken!* It is YOU, society, that is messed up!”

Stonewall was the Enlightenment in action. That’s a product of reason.

Our call is to face the fear. Our call is to lose the fear.

Name it. Reason about it. And seek the justice that only reason can create.

SOURCES

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