

“What Goes in the Soup?”
Reflection at Equinox 2019:
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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ONE: Sharing, Level 1

In a few moments, we will be seeing our FUS version of the legend known in English-speaking countries as Stone Soup.

The story of Stone Soup is best known here in the United States from the 1947 book by the American writer and illustrator Marcia Brown. But the tale is very old, with versions occurring in Native American tradition, Chinese, Scandinavian, Eastern European, and Portuguese versions with titles such as Nail Soup—“Spikersuppa—Ax Soup, Button Soup, Wood Soup, and Pebble Soup.

I thought I was being very clever translating “stone soup” into Spanish, Sopa de Piedra, but upon a bit of research, I discovered Sopa da Pedra, is a Portuguese version of the tale, and restaurants in the vicinity of Almeirim, Portugal serve the soup, commemorating a monk who came to town and did as the story indicates. There is even a statue of the monk in Almeirim, sitting in front of the pot of soup.

The structure of the tale always involves a hungry wanderer (or wanderers) who comes into a village. The villagers are unwilling to share food, so the wanderer tricks them into sharing by cooking something in-eatable—nails, buttons, wood, an ax, or stones—and pretending it’s delicious.

Curiosity gets the better of the villagers, and they share ingredients, until the soup becomes hearty and delicious.

Interestingly, different spins on the tale lead to different morals to the story.

In some tellings, the cleverness of the wanderer is emphasized, sometimes to the point that the wanderer looks like a con artist.

In other versions—such as our version today—the moral is that an attitude of optimism and plenty is better for everyone than a scarcity mentality.

The stone soup trope exists outside the realm of folk tales. For example, a famous scene from the writings of Mark Twain has his character Tom Sawyer convincing his friends to paint (whitewash) a fence for him by pretending painting is so much fun.

Some theologians claim that the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes reported in Christian scripture is a stone-soup trope.

The scenario was that Jesus had preached waaaaay too long. Everybody was getting hungry. The disciples decided that they would have to send everybody home—they didn't have a Tracy Yue to cook a mini-meal. So they were going to have to cancel the noon programming.

Then Jesus said, "hey, here's some food!" Everybody had packed up a picnic lunch but had been holding out because they were afraid to share. Jesus got them sharing, and, by golly, they had more than enough food to go around.

Noon programming was saved!

One of the reasons I became a Humanist many years ago is a phrase in the first Humanist Manifesto—

The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.

Sharing life and sharing the world may appear at first to be idealistic, unobtainable goals. Yes: there are reasons not to share. Yes: there are reasons that we can't share.

The Stone Soup narrative pares the question down to its essence: Even though there are always lots of reasons not to share, sharing is the most noble of human emotions. We want to share. We want things to be fair and equitable.

We often don't agree concerning how to achieve fairness and equity. Yet, deep down, each of us wishes for that. Being human is about longing to share life in a shared world.

Politics and ideologies get in the way. Yet, still, each of us has a sense of fairness; a sense of curiosity; and a sense that sharing is the way.

TWO: Sharing, Level 2

Scarcity or abundance? In the song "Magic Penny" we hear:

Love is something if you give it away,
You end up having more.
It's just like a magic penny,
Hold it tight and you won't have any.
Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many
They'll roll all over the floor.

But what about difficult realities? What about the politics of "love"? As theologian Cornell West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." So what about justice?

I think it's clear that for Humanists sharing is a moral imperative. After all, our origin story says that human beings are primates; that we evolved along with all the other animals; and that we are 100% the stuff of the Big Bang and the stars: hydrogen, helium . . . and on. As is the earth, the plants, our fellow animals.

Stone Soup shows us that "it takes a village," but care and sacrifice can lead to a wonderful moment of sharing.

Consider open source software. Linux is one example. Starting from one bit of code, people add, change, critique. And now—open source software is the primary way that human beings interact with technology. "Open-source" is Humanist. It is building a shared life.

When we join together, good things can happen. Might single-payer health care be like Stone Soup? Might affordable childcare be like Stone Soup? Might a universal basic wage be like Stone Soup?

Yet—aren't some resources really and truly finite resources?

What about our planet and its environment? Might we be able to use it up?

In order to feed more people soup, do we throw the Amazon Rain Forest into the soup pot? Do we throw the Boundary Waters into the soup pot? Do we throw tribal lands into the soup pot?

The ecological theologian David Barr sums the question up nicely:

If much of our impact on nature emerges from the pursuit of real human goods, it follows that our impact results not just from what we do wrong (greed, misogyny, imperialism, etc.), but from what we do right.

The United States and European nations have plenty of soup at the moment, but what about world's resources that belong to poor nations vulnerable to industries with lots of money?

Who decides? Borders are about power.

For the moment, many nations have plenty of soup, but how many people can each nation allow in, when jobs are limited; housing is limited; and what about medical care, support for those who can't entirely care for themselves, and what about retirement?

"A shared life in a shared world" is certainly a moral imperative, I would argue. But how to share becomes a political question.

I've been looking at the soup from the standpoint of humanity. But about looking at things from a non-anthropocentric point of view—a point of view from the animals, the planets, the trees and the water?

The First Humanist Manifesto from back in 1933 focused on human needs. The most recent Humanist Manifesto, called "Humanism and Its Aspirations" from 2003 says this:

Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change. Humanists recognize nature as self-existing. We accept our life as all and enough, distinguishing things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be. We welcome the challenges of the future, and are drawn to and undaunted by the yet to be known.

There's an implication to thinking as Humanists do: we must realize that we are "an integral part of nature." "Integral." "Integral." That means that we human beings are in

nature. We are nature. And so are the rabbits and birds and the waters and the air. Everything is part, including us.

We accept our life as all and enough, distinguishing things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be.

Are we more special than the other animals? Do we get to throw other animals in the soup pot? Why should we be able to do that?

These are the questions. It's good to know the questions. That section of the Manifesto ends this way:

We welcome the challenges of the future, and are drawn to and undaunted by the yet to be known.

It's difficult sometimes to "welcome the challenges of the future." Those challenges look really, really big. Yet we insist that we are "drawn to and undaunted by the yet to be known."

It always has and always will be a very basic question: What goes into the soup?

SOURCES

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"Humanism and Its Aspirations" <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>

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