

"So. Here We Are"

A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

At First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

15 September 2019

Reading: "The Way It Is" by William Stafford

<https://onbeing.org/blog/a-thread-to-guide-us/>

"We live forward, but we understand backward."

~Søren Kierkegaard

INTRODUCTION

"We live forward, but we understand backward." That little quote from philosopher Søren Kierkegaard fairly well sums up the human dilemma, doesn't it?

"We live forward, but we understand backward." The existentialist philosophers, beginning with Kierkegaard, were attempting to get at something that Buddhists had already been wrestling with for 2500 years.

The problem is this: We human beings do a good bit of ruminating about our pasts or worrying about the future, but we find it difficult to focus on the only time that we can actually control—which is *right now*.

That's why I've titled my talk today, "So. Here We Are." I want to think a bit about "now."

A later existentialist philosopher, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, tried to get at that odd feeling we have when we consider where we are in this moment. Heidegger named the feeling *Geworfenheit*, "thrownness." It's the feeling that we're here, but we don't really know where "here" is and we don't know what to do *right now*.

That feeling can produce anxiety, and it can be debilitating. That's why William Stafford, in the poem I read, insists,

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

Because it's a choice—*anxiety*, or, alternatively, we can thrill in the *expectation* of what's next.

Our theme for the month of September is Expectation. This morning I want to consider three things that we've got going on, here, now:

First, what is our part in the existential situation of our nation?

Second, what is Humanism in this moment?

And, third, what's happening here at First Unitarian Society?

ONE: What is our part in the existential situation of our nation?

So. Here we are. Beginning the 138th year of congregating as "First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis." And we begin the 103rd year of our experiment in congregational humanism.

We are here. Now. And, as all "nows" feel, it feels . . . disturbing. It feels as if we've been *thrown* into middle of something, but we can't quite make out what is.

What should we be *doing*?

Let's "understand backward" for a moment:

When this congregation began our experiment in Humanism, back in 1916, the world was in the midst of the bloodiest war yet seen in human history. Some of the young people sitting in the pews would soon serve and some would be maimed or killed in that war.

As a consequence of that war, the coal-propelled British Empire began to shrink before the encroachment of the petroleum-powered US empire in a time that would come to be called "The American Century."

And a lot of young people sitting in the FUS pews in 1940 would serve, and some would be maimed or killed in the next most bloodiest war in human history.

And in the long Cold War. And the next war. And the next war.

As we begin this 103rd year of our congregational humanist experiment, US world power is in rapid decline, and the flailing to regain power has exposed some things about American government that had long been ignored or kept hidden.

So. Here we are.

The Buddhists and the existentialists both point out that *every moment* is a moment of decision. A moment of decision, because we must "live forward."

Citizens of all the nations spawned by European colonialism must now decide to live *forward*, rather than clawing to go backward.

Each citizen and each nation must decide to live in nostalgia, or to live in the world as it is.

Which will it be? And what can we do . . . now?

I think *now* is a very exciting and hopeful place to be, because perhaps at last Americans can finally calm down and stop trying to prove something to the world and trying to impose something on the world.

Our democracy isn't cleaner; our capitalism isn't more efficient; our science isn't more logical; our Christianity isn't truer or purer. Realizing those things, we can at last productively join the human family.

We can join with other progressive people on our planet as partners rather than oppressors. Partners in nourishing people, all living things, and the planet itself.

Becoming partners rather than oppressors is a worthy goal for the now that we live in. Though, for that to happen, our ways of thinking will have to grow up some.

Do we live in nostalgia for an empire lost? Or do we strive to make this nation a contributing member of the world community, and one that is safe for humanity, living things, and nature?

Here we are.

TWO: What is Humanism in this moment?

Given my prophecy for the future of the United States, I think it's time for both Unitarian Universalism—and the Humanism that developed out of early-twentieth century Universalism and Unitarianism—to change.

Right now.

Both of the theological systems—Unitarian Universalist and Humanist—as they exist today are rife with assumptions of American exceptionalism, European and American Empire, racism, European superiority, and Christian exceptionalism.

Hear what I'm saying: Christianity works when people work it. But the "truth" of Christianity exists only in the lived experience of people. Unitarian Universalism works when you work it. But the "truth" only exists in the lived experience of people.

Why talk about Christianity when we're talking UUism and Humanism? Well, the history of Humanism and Unitarian Universalism is usually told as a subtraction story. A subtraction narrative. That's how we understand UUis backwards.

Universalists stopped believing in eternal punishment in hell. That was a Christian idea. Eternal punishment was subtracted.

Unitarians stopped believing in the Trinity, then in the divinity of Jesus, then in the divine inspiration of the Bible. Subtraction from Christianity.

Early twentieth century Humanists took it all a step further and stopped believing in the Christian god altogether.

A subtraction story. Minus, minus, minus, equals . . . truth? How might that make sense?

It doesn't!

How could purging the wrong ideas from Christianity in some way lead to the truth . . .

Firstly, who gets to decide what and how much gets subtracted? Ministers? Scholars? The people in the pews? Do some people know something that others don't? Why would that be? Or is it all about power and influence? And why would power and influence equal truth?

Secondly, why posit that Christianity—a relative newcomer on the world religious scene—might somehow contain more truth or more validity than, say, ancient Egyptian religious thought?

Why would that be?

When you think about it, privileging Christianity is an odd sort of geo-centrism: because a particular strain of a particular religion came from a particular place and was successful in a particular part of the globe, it must be truer than other ideas.

Very odd indeed.

(Wrong answer: Oh! Because my grandmother believed it!)

Why can't we find the truth by subtracting ideas from Zoroastrianism? (Which Rev. Wendy Jerome is going to talk about at 9:30am next Sunday . . .)

Subtraction is the wrong way to tell the story.

I'll repeat: Christianity works when people work it. But the "truth" of Christianity exists only in the lived experience of people. Unitarian Universalism works when you work it. But the "truth" only exists in the lived experience of people.

If you don't believe it, it doesn't work.

If there's something that needs to be subtracted, it's the insistence that these and only these ideas are true and valid for human consumption.

Right now. At this moment. Is the time for Humanists to awaken to the realization of our true place on the planet.

All the world's peoples have created religion and philosophy and art in *all* the planet's regions. These creations are our human birthright.

Further, it is our *obligation* to *respect the variety* of cultural production, keeping an open mind to new ideas.

However, it is *not* our obligation to kow-tow (BTW an appropriated Chinese expression) to the past. We do well to learn from the past, but we must "live forward."

Every person ever born has been born into a body, a social location, a culture, a geographical region, and on and on.

No one has ever known much. Still, isn't it a worthy goal to attempt to think *beyond* all the limitations, grasping toward being a compassionate citizen of the cosmos?

How about *addition* rather than subtraction? What an idea!

We Westerners must learn that we do not exist for the purpose of ensuring the rights of white-splainers, man-splainers, or pontificators. We exist to participate in and *facilitate conversation*. Open. Compassionate. Deep conversation.

Be a Humanist. Be a UU. Be a Christian. Be a Buddhist. Be a Sikh. *Live the religion*. But realize that its truth is a *lived truth*. It is or isn't "true" for others.

Our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person is not aimed toward creating a rampant and solipsistic individualism.

Rather, we are about *relationality*. Beginning in the assumption that every person and every culture and every belief system has inherent worth and dignity. From that place of compassion, we can relate to others.

We must continually remind ourselves that Humanist theory works from a naturalistic, evidence-based foundation that is not the sole product of European or European-Colonial thinking.

As a naturalist, materialist philosophy, Humanism follows Daoist thought, Confucian thought, Buddhist thought, Jain theology, Epicureanism, some African philosophies, and some schools of Hinduism, to name a few.

This is important to remember. Religious naturalists are part of an ancient global human movement.

In my view, It's important to understand that Humanism is not *atheistic*, as in being anti-theism. Humanism is *a-theistic*, meaning that the concept of deity does not figure into the commitments and propositions of Humanism or the daily, lived, lives of Humanists. (Except for maybe when we lose our keys.)

As I mentioned last week, Daoists taught that observing the creative universe and acting according to its observable laws leads to a fulfilled life in community.

Confucius argued that whether or not gods exist, we must act with respect for all that is . . . in community.

The Buddha argued that whether or not gods exist, our trouble is distinctly human and the gods aren't going to help us. We are on our own.

Epicurus argued that whether or not the gods exist, they don't appear to interact with human reality. We are on our own.

The great Hindu philosopher Ajita Kesakambali—from something around 600 BCE—and the Charvaka movement he founded in India—argued that the logical end of the totalizing of Brahman is that, *if all is god*, nothing is god, and observable reality is what we have to work with.

Humanist thought follows these time-honored traditions. It's not that Humanists don't relish speculating about deities—and even sometimes praying to one or another of them when we've lost our keys—it's merely that we don't speculate about them when we consider ethics and morality.

We work from the assumption that . . . we humans are on our own.

Humanism must consciously join into the ancient and worldwide movement that is actually part of. In this case, we "understand backward" into too short a time. Forget European and American exceptionalism.

THREE: What's happening here at First Unitarian Society?

So. Here we are.

What's happening at First Unitarian Society, right now?

You are what is happening. *We* as a community is what is happening.

After Assembly today, we have our involvement fair. Get involved. "Do what makes you come alive!"

Are you a nurturer at heart? Hey, right now, we are cooking a warm meal downstairs. We serve one every Sunday after Assembly. Do some nurturing. Go forth and peel some potatoes!

Are you good with tech? Over six thousand people interacted with FUS social media last week. The more of our talks and classes and discussions we get online, the more interaction we get from a wider and wider audience that needs to hear our message. Go forth and tech!

Are you a teacher at heart? We have book groups, discussion groups . . . all sorts of groups to lead or join. Go forth and teach!

Direct action. Systemic change. We're working on them both right now. Next Sunday at noon Rev. Kelli will be talking about our initiatives in social justice this year. "We live forward, but we understand backward." Honoring this congregation's unique leadership in a woman's right to choose, we are NOW engaged in a lawsuit, joining with UnRestrict Minnesota. We are NOW leaders in the struggle for legislation to legalize Medical Aid in Dying in this state. And you can walk right downstairs this morning and communicate directly with our elected officials through our Active Voices group.

Go forth and create justice.

Enjoy working with kids? Help make our religious education program the strongest in the Twin Cities. Our approach—studying and respecting religious traditions without pushing or privileging any one of them—that's the future, and it builds respect for others while empowering self-awareness.

Go forth and teach.

And the list goes on, as you will see in a few moments when you go downstairs.

CONCLUSION

“We live forward, but we understand backward.” That’s a true description of the human condition. But that fact need not lead to paralysis.

If we hope to build a better world, we must stop doing things the way they’ve always been done, because “understanding backward” isn’t enough. Go forth and get on with the job at hand.

Late in his life, Martin Heidegger came to the conclusion that “being” is what happens between people. As that is phrased in one African form of Humanism, Ubuntu, “I am because we are.”

Awakening from the dream of the past is not enough; we must also awaken to action right *now*.

We must strive to be present with each other and the world as we each experience it.

So.

Here we are.

Our call is to wake up and grow up. To embrace the human family. And—working with others—to save our world.

www.FirstUnitarian.org

Podcasts: <https://firstunitarian.org/category/podcasts/davids-musings/>

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=first+unitarian+society+minneapolis