

Thresholds Go Both Ways

An on-line talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
May 17, 2020

Blurb: "Thresholds Go Both Ways" The FUS Annual Meeting is a threshold. We look back at the past year; we vote on our budget for the next year. Furthermore, we recommit to the values the congregation has embraced since the beginning. Rev. David will reflect on the past, present, and possible futures for our congregation.
#Thresholds #Tradition #Humanism #Unitarian #Progressive #UnitarianUniversalist

Our Annual Meeting can't go on as it has for the first 138 years of The Society. After Assembly on May 17, we will vote about having our Annual Meeting virtually. There are firsts and lasts for everything, but our commitment to the democratic process continues.

Reading:

Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote this:

Do not disturb yourself by thinking of the whole of your life. Let not your thoughts at once embrace all the various troubles which you may expect to befall you: but on every occasion ask yourself, "What is there in this which is intolerable and past bearing?" For you will be ashamed to confess any such thing. In the next place remember that neither the future nor the past pains you, but only the present. But this is reduced to a very little, if you only circumscribe it, and chide your mind, if it is unable to hold out against even this. (*Meditations*, Bk 8:3)

INTRODUCTION: The Lord Will . . . Um . . .

A saying that cropped up all the time when I was young is some version of "The LORD will never give you more than you can bear." Or, in my dialect: "The LORD won't put nothin' on ya that you cain't carry."

Like the saying cleanliness is next to Godliness or Pride goeth before a fall or God helps those who help themselves, this saying is not actually in any scriptures.

The verses that come closest to "The Lord will never give you more than you can bear" occur in Hebrew scripture:

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. (Isaiah 43:2-3 KJV)

Like that "taking up serpents" thing, this is metaphor, not suggestions for the faithful to walk into rivers or fire.

So it is that the desire that a reassurance exists in scripture leads to the invention of a phrase that ought to be there but isn't.

I belong to a multi-faith clergy group in downtown Minneapolis. When we are planning multi-faith services, my clergy friends have a good laugh when someone mentions that "the Humanist" will no doubt want to read some contemporary poetry as scripture.

The why for what I do is two fold: Well, yes, because as Humanist clergy I can do something a bit different, but also because scriptures don't generally contain much in the way of reassurance outside of supernatural intervention.

Contemporary poetry, on the other hand, often does.

In her poem "The Weighing," the American poet Jane Hirshfield gets at a very Humanist vision of how human beings can cope:

So few grains of happiness
measured against all the dark
and still the scales balance.

The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

Jane Hirshfield's reassurance isn't all that reassuring, but it's considerably better than walking through rivers or fire or taking up serpents. In Hirshfield's view of reality, there's one more straw, and then another straw, but the camel's back, rather than breaking, strengthens just enough.

This idea rhymes with Marcus Aurelius's view of a method for bearing burdens that is the reading for this morning:

Do not disturb yourself by thinking of the whole of your life. Let not your thoughts at once embrace all the various troubles which you may expect to befall you: but on every occasion ask yourself, "What is there in this which is intolerable and past bearing?" For you will be ashamed to confess any such thing. In the next place remember that neither the future nor the past pains you, but only the present. But this is reduced to a very little, if you only circumscribe it, and chide your mind, if it is unable to hold out against even this. (*Meditations*, Bk 8:3)

Hirshfield and Marcus agree: When we look at the challenge immediately before us, we generally find that we can meet that challenge. What's one more straw? What are all those grains of darkness weighed against the elation of happiness? As both Hirshfield and Marcus counsel: You can make it.

ONE: Thresholds Imply Doorways

Our theme for the month of May is Thresholds. A couple of Sundays ago I talked about the fear of the spaces between, liminal space.

Those spaces have always frightened people. In the Western World, people wear black to funerals because of an ancient belief that the souls of the dead are often confused about where to go. They follow the family out to the graveyard, the superstition goes, out of habit. And they will go home with family after the burial, out of habit, if they can. So, we wear black in order to avoid having the spirit follow us home.

There are several explanations concerning the origin of the tradition of husbands carrying their new wives over the threshold, but one tradition sees the practice as a ritualistic removal of the wife from the "grounding" of her family and bringing her into a new home and a new family.

Thresholds are scary places, be they the newly dead or the newly wed or merely the question of what will happen next.

Astrologers, soothsayers, fortunetellers, Tarot Cards or tea leaves or the intestines of animals or the I-Ching—these all exist as ways to tell us what happens next.

The use of astrology is way up, despite the fact that astrologers did not predict the coming of COVID-19.

Oops.

Bibliomancy is the practice of thinking about a challenge, then opening the bible randomly and assuming that the random verse is a message from the other world.

Alexander the Great depended upon bibliomancy to make decisions, by randomly choosing a verse for Homer's Iliad.

The words divine and divination have a common root. Divination is a method for discovering the secrets of the divine, thus of discovering the future.

The discovery doesn't have to be supernatural. In the rural South, we have water diviners, who do what's called dousing or water witching.

In the neighborhood of my family farm was a water witch, the seventh son of a seventh son. He used a particular type of wood believed to seek water, witch-hazel.

I watched him work when I was a kid. For twenty bucks, he would come out to your farm, go into the nearest woods and find a Y-shaped branch, carefully strip the branch with his pocket knife, then walk around very slowly to find water.

Yes, I saw the stick point down. And yes, there was water there.

Nowadays, divining is still done, but most diviners these days use two bent steel rods placed in the mouth of a glass bottle. When the two rods cross into an X, there's the water. Superstitions can take more contemporary form.

We want to know where the water is before we go to the effort of digging a well. We want to know what happens next.

The Roman god Janus was the god of doorways and thresholds. Janus had two faces, one looking backward, one looking forward. The month of January is named in his honor.

Janus was invoked at the beginning and end of every ritual, as a way to open the spirit world and as a way of closing it up again.

Papa Legba serves the same function in Voudon, popularly known as Voodoo.

In Christian scripture, angels announce the birth of Jesus, passing from the heavenly realm into the mundane human world.

We human beings naturally want what is hidden to be uncovered,

All of us desperately want to know what will happen next.

TWO: Your *Telos* is Showing!

But what about those of us who believe in logic and reason as the best ways to uncover the hidden and to consider the future?

The Greek philosopher Aristotle did quite a bit of thinking about how human beings think. He had specific advice concerning making decisions about the future and the unknown.

Aristotle advised that we do well to begin with the consideration of virtue. We must begin deliberation committed to acting according to virtue. Acting according to virtue is what Aristotle called the *telos* of action.

In Aristotle's conception of *telos* every person, every profession, and every institution has an end, is oriented toward doing something virtuous.

After we have the *telos* in mind, Aristotle counsels us to seek frames for the present situation. By knowing human history, we can find a frame that will approximate what the future may well look like.

Those of you who have been listening in for the past several weeks know that since the shelter-in-place began, I have been considering frames: The 1918 flu; the First World War; the Great Depression; the Second World War; 9/11; the 2008 financial collapse. What happened to FUS and the congregational model after those major disjunctive events?

In the Annual Report for this year, I have included a short excerpt from Humanism for Today, an FUS membership pamphlet from 1938.

What frame can the FUS past offer for seeing where we are now?

In the year 1938, the US was slowly and painfully working its way out of the Great Depression. Economic gains reversed that year, industrial output dropped, and unemployment went back up to 19%. (BTW, the unemployment rate today is 14.7%.)

In 1938, the Empire of Japan was consolidating its conquest of China, having murdered over 300,000 Chinese civilians. Mussolini's Fascist Italy occupied north Africa. And Nazi Germany was at the height of its power: In March of 1938, Hitler seized control of Austria; in May, the month of the FUS Annual Meeting, Hitler declared his intention to invade Czechoslovakia.

Meanwhile, the membership committee of FUS printed a pamphlet called Humanism for Today, which included these words:

All people in the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis are expected to do their own thinking on religion. It does not ask or expect or even wish its members to assent to any certain beliefs, it imposes not the slenderest creedal obligations, either expressed or implied. Just as a university needs no creed and yet arms students with knowledge and convictions and creative faith, so does this creedless congregation strive to incite its people to think out their life philosophy, to achieve convictions, to become animated with faith, ideals, vision.

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Heady aspirations in a very dark time. Upholding the ideals of forethought and human freedom in the midst of darkness and chaos.

But what else could Humanists do in 1938?

They knew that no gods were going to stop economic catastrophe and wholesale starvation in the US. They knew that no gods were going to intervene in the Dust Bowl ravaging the Southern Great Plains.

They knew that no gods were going to stop the Wehrmacht; no gods were going to stop the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia or Albania. No gods were going to stop the wholesale slaughter of civilians in China. No gods were going to make the US a free and just society.

Only collective human action was going to ameliorate the suffering in the world.

That's a frame to consider: aspirations; the readiness to pitch in for the greater good. Always keeping the *telos* in mind: all people must be free. We must resist the easy impulses toward oppression, theocracy, and greed.

For the Annual Meeting in May of 1938, things looked bad. And it was going to get worse. Worldwide, something on the order of 350 million people were about to die violent deaths.

One of the most valid measures of a human being or an institution is resilience under extreme stress. We are resilient because we keep our eyes on our aspirations; we frame the chaos of the moment; and then we consider the alternatives open to us.

This year, the 138th year of First Unitarian Society has been a challenge. And we have met that challenge and grown from the experience.

Through the necessity of electronic Assemblies, we have re-connected with people far from our walls; and we have offered the opportunity to see how we
think out our life philosophies,
achieve convictions,
and become animated with faith, ideals, vision as our forebears said in 1938.

Free people in a free religious tradition.

Fact is, more volunteers have stepped up doing more things than ever before in our congregation.

What is the end we as a congregation are pursuing? Congregations, like individuals, must be self-reflective: We want to do the right thing for the right reasons.

Our mission statement says what our *telos* is:

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is a congregational humanist community dedicated to promoting a free search for truth, meaning, and justice.

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The *telos* of our congregation. We are the foundation and the beacon of congregational humanism. We are a safe place to share dangerous ideas.

We believe not in the voice of fear and authoritarianism, but in reason and in the din of conversation in democracy.

CONCLUSION: We Can Carry that Weight . . . Together

No, the challenge isn't over. But we will carry on and we will grow from the challenge. Our generation will meet our challenges as past generations met their challenges.

We keep our *telos*, our aspirations in sight; we frame the chaos; we consider the alternatives, all the while knowing that there are few black-and-white issues, the color of reality is usually gray, and we must sometimes choose between competing goods; and we must sometimes choose between competing bads.

We contextualize; we look at alternatives, we choose the best option(s) even when there are no good ones; and then, we implement the decision.

There's work to be done. #People are searching for community and freedom of thought and that rarest of things: freedom of thought in community. As a state and as

a nation we need to elect competent leaders. We need to fight systemic oppression and systemic poverty.

The question is how we personally and as a congregation deal with disaster. Do we choose magical thinking and succumb to the fear that leads to anger and scapegoating; or do we cling to a hope that leads to compassion?

The great danger of institutions is that they become reason engines; logic engines; virtueless bureaucracies through which compassionate individuals can be turned into dispassionate ciphers in a vast, pitiless script.

We have watched our nation do just that. Here, we will keep our eyes on the *telos*.

We are a congregational humanist community
dedicated to promoting a free search
for truth, meaning, and justice.

We see historical wrongs and we see systemic wrongs.

And we join together to do what we can.

The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

SOURCES

Jane Hirschfield, "The Weighing" <https://poets.org/poem/weighing>

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis archives: <https://firstunitarian.org/FUSArchives/>

