

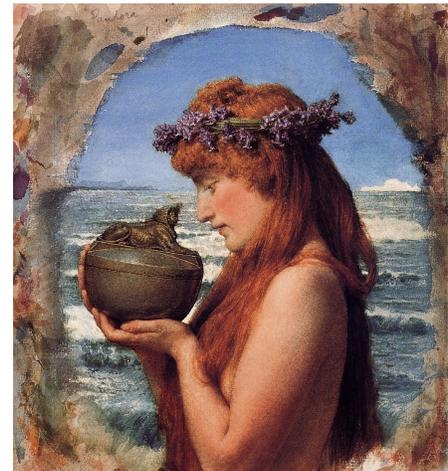
"I Hear You . . . Acoustically"
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
4 October 2020

INTRODUCTION: a definition of hope

A couple of weeks ago I talked about the concept of hope. I mentioned how early tellings of the Pandora story demonstrate that the ancient Greeks considered hope a *curse* rather than a blessing—because they saw hope as debilitating: hope, they thought, would lead to passivity in the face of fate.

We don't think of hope in that way anymore. As a matter of fact, we often consider hope an emotion—something like pessimism or depression—feeling hopeless is categorized as a mental/emotional condition. But that's not all it is.

I ended that discussion by looking at hope according to the definition of the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty—that hope is a commitment to a set of outcomes, even if those outcomes aren't likely to ever be achievable. "Justice," for example, or "democracy," or "world peace."



Hoping these things occur is hopeless. Making a commitment to achieving these goals gives life meaning and purpose.

It's a tragic misunderstanding of ancient ethics to see the things they were talking about as solidified and constant states of being. Take that most frequently mentioned thing, "virtue." The philosophers were saying that virtue was a goal in the process. They were smart enough to know that neither they nor anyone else was ever going to achieve "virtue." There's no reason to hope for that goal. The attempt to live virtuously is the process of living life.

Humanists think in that way as well: We are life living life. Responsibly.

Humanism is a way of thinking and living that focuses on human action in relation to the wellbeing of sentient beings and the planet.

The ancients were wrong: there's no such thing as "fate."

There's no such thing as an end to the work we are dedicated to.

This has practical, day-to-day consequences. Members and friends of this congregation aren't sitting around complaining about the effects of COVID on our congregation. They—YOU—are stepping up and getting down to the work of making this Assembly happen online. Of making the 9am M-F "Coffee and Wisdom" a success. Of taking all the media we have producing and putting it into usable form. Of getting the message out. AND working to get the building ready for a totally new way of doing congregational life, even after the quarantine is over.

ONE: an apple pie from scratch

This understanding of hope is all about living your values. And living your values is the process that Humanism is about. "How can I be and do a little better today than I did yesterday?"

So, the emotional view of hope is subjective, individualistic, even solipsistic, while viewing hope as a commitment is necessarily a communal understanding—relational.

That's our theme for the month of October—deep communication and deepening relationships. Listening; empathizing; living in relationship.



I mean, if you're thinking that you can achieve world peace, true democracy, and social justice *all by yourself* . . . it may be time to talk to a professional!

I'm reminded of Carl Sagan's famous phrase: if you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.

Sagan is pointing out the simple fact of our reality: We exist *because of* and *in* process and in relationships. Relationalities. Relationalities such as respect and gratitude for our connectedness, respect and gratitude for our community; and a commitment to

preserve the relationships by taking responsibility, practicing stewardship, and staying in community despite all the challenges that community throws our way.

The German philosopher Theodore Adorno said, "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass." The very flaws that we work against in ourselves are the reasons we can empathize. They teach us to listen to others.

Relationalities. In them is our meaning and purpose and our sense of belonging. And the only chance that humanity has to survive.

The sociologist Georg Simmel described gratitude as "the moral memory of humankind." It's a "moral memory" because we realize that we exist due to the collective human project sustained over millennia.

And it's moral memory reminding us to respect what we have been given by caring for it and sending it on into a sustainable future.

TWO: I had not known we quarreled

We Humanists commit to the process of solving this-world-problems *in* this world!

As you probably know, Henry David Thoreau died young due to tuberculosis. One of his well-meaning aunts asked him on his deathbed, "Henry, have you reconciled with God?"

Thoreau answered, "I had not known we quarreled."

That's a Humanist answer. In Henry's time, slavery was a problem; rampant industrialization was a problem; the genocide of natives was a problem; unjust war was a problem .

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Reconciliation with "god" was not a problem.



I've said many times, the human ship is *always* sinking and always *has* been sinking. And, fact is, there's no indication that a whole lot of prayer is doing a whole lot of good. You can't pray COVID away. You can't pray wildfires away. Prayer is much like the ancient understanding of hope—you feel better, perhaps, but what are you doing?

What can we do? That's the human question.

To begin, we do well to remind ourselves of the fact of the human condition: We know *what* we know and feel what we feel because of—due to—our relationships with each other and the planet.

We are finally learning—even in the Western world—that the independent, isolated, bounded self is at best a fiction and at worst a lie. It isn't "I think therefore I am," it's "*I interact therefore I am*" (Bolis and Schilbach).

The internal and external are in constant interplay, creating our reality.

There are words bouncing around everywhere—in print, in gestures, in the air. How many do we attempt to comprehend? What should we even bother trying to comprehend?

One intriguing recent theory is called "shared intentionality." Shared intentionality theory posits that through "sharing intentionality" over the millennia humans developed the ability to jointly consider one problem at the same time, together, and language, imitative learning, and teaching all spring from sharing the intention of getting something accomplished.

Fact is, we really don't know what it means to think outside the collective consciousness—we are human because we have evolved to share intentionality and thereby accomplish what we accomplish.

That's why it's so frustrating to us when we see so many people ignoring COVID, thinking it will go away; or ignoring climate change thinking that it will just go away. We know that human shared intentionality is the answer in both cases.

Hope lies in commitment to the goals—in shared intentionality.

THREE: communities

We've got polarizing issues happening in the United States at the moment. A broken social contract. We don't listen. We can't listen. We can't comprehend.

That's why we are all in such desperate need of the voluntary associations that make up a civil life. Associations such as congregations.

Now, think with me for a few moments about about what a community is about. There's a great little book by Charles H. Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging*. Vogl says that communities form around four principles of agreement:

A community has an *origin story*—how things began.

A community has a *cosmology*—what the universe is like.

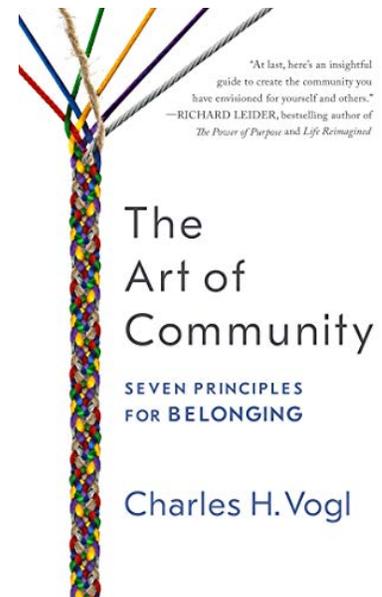
A community has an agreed-upon *source of moral truth*.

And a community has a *shared epistemology*—that is, how truth can be identified.

I tell the story of how congregational humanism began at First Unitarian Society as often as I get the chance. Because it matters: this congregation came from a group called the Liberal League, a nation-wide movement in the late nineteenth century dedicated to fighting censorship in the US Mail—censorship of such things as birth control and women's health and religious liberalism.

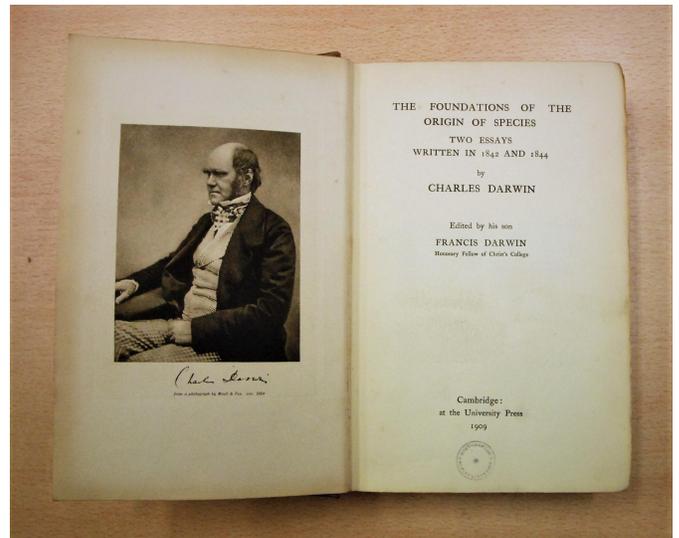
The Liberal League lost that battle (the censorship went on for another six decades). But the Liberal League of Minneapolis continued meeting, becoming a reading group studying the ideas of Charles Darwin. That was 1881.

Thus, in 1916, when John Dietrich interviewed for the position of minister and he said that he had invented this new thing called religious humanism, the congregation was open and intrigued.



We have an origin story: how things began and what we're about. As the Aspirations of our Society phrases it, to "Support one another's journey toward meaning and connection in the here and now."

We also share a cosmology—what the universe is like. It's amazing and awe-inspiring, but it also has laws that allow us to know something about it. As our Aspirations puts it, to "Live joyfully and ethically, in loving, reverent relationship with humanity and nature."



A community has an agreed-upon source of moral truth. We believe that evolution shaped the human animal into a cooperative, social animal able to solve problems. As our Aspirations phrase it, to "Make the change we need for a more just, compassionate and peaceful world."

And a community has a shared epistemology—that is, how truth can be identified. We believe in, as our Aspirations put it, "Pursuing wisdom through reason, science, art, and the stories of civilizations".

So, we are a community and we agree to, as the Aspirations phrase it, to "Support one another's journey toward meaning and connection in the here and now."

As John Dietrich put it: "The great word of humanism is that one word: together."

CONCLUSION: I interact, therefore I am

Sure, individuality is a product of Western thinking. It developed out of the Christian theology that claimed there is an isolated self facing eternal hell or paradise in a solitary psychological battle—that's the bounded self.

And that bounded self became the cornerstone of capitalism: the self is an ideal sort of concept to sell products to. Because . . . the bounded self is a lie.

When we separate ourselves out and assert a false independence, we always feel a lack. A chasm of meaning. And that void can be sold to. Can be convinced to consume all manner of things in a hopeless attempt to feel complete. To feel comfortable in the world.

Individualism: first it was a tragedy, now it's a farce.

But that wrong-turning of the Western Christian mind did give us a powerful tool: the insistence that the individual consciousness must be free to make decisions.



And from that freedom—so baked into the liberal religious tradition—we are free to choose the truth: we are in truth *relational* selves. “I *interact* therefore I am.”

I am because we are—that great saying from the African humanist tradition of Ubuntu: I am because we are.

I have hope because I see the evidence of human cooperation. I see people willing and able to listen,

comprehend, and join into solutions.

No, the wider nation does not share a common origin story; a common cosmology; a common agreement about the source of moral truth; nor a shared epistemology concerning how truth can be arrived at.

That is a tragedy. It's a failure of economic policy. It's a failure of public education. It's a failure of leadership. One of the Proverbs from Hebrew scripture sums up the problem: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (28:18).

Two-hundred-thousand and counting. Wildfires. Flooding coastlines. Hurricanes. Drought. And the list goes on.

For those who see hope as an emotion, I can see why they are in despair. But for those of us who embrace relationship and process and community and shared intentionality, hope is a commitment, not an emotion.

And no one can stop OUR commitment to our shared values.

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