

Mechanisms of Reply: On Being a Telephone People
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
October 25, 2020

Tag: The twentieth century cultural critic Theodor Adorno contrasted the invention of the telephone with the invention of radio. One is about two-way communication, one is about passively listening. Guess which one Dr. Adorno approved of . . .

#Listening #Understanding #Conversation #Humanism #UnitarianUniversalism

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” ~George Bernard Shaw

Part I: INTRODUCTION: Customer 99

My talk will be in two parts today, with a bit of time for singing in between.

Many of you know I own a family farm in rural Southern Illinois. Two of my kids live on the farm and take care of it. We don't pay for a landline telephone anymore, but we have internet provided by the county telephone co-op, which the family has belonged to since sometime in the early 1920s. I'm always amazed when I see the telephone bill because we are "customer 99." It's not often that people on as remote a farm as we have are "early adopters" of technology.

Long before running water or electricity, we had a phone line. The reason the family were early-adopters of the telephone has to do with an old folk tradition that certain chosen people can repeat a particular bible verse three times and a flow of blood will stop. My grandmother was one of those "certain people."

It's called the "Blood Verse," Ezekiel 16:6. The verse goes like this:

And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.

Before the arrival of the telephone in the county, my grandmother was known as one of the people who could repeat that verse and stop bleeding.

This was a valuable service in a rural area without access to physicians or hospitals. (Ambulance service didn't come to the area until long after I moved away.) After all, there are a lot of agricultural accidents and a good deal of bleeding.

So, my grandmother's skill was a valuable commodity in the neighborhood, and, when the telephone became a thing, someone—I'm not sure who—decided that the repetition of the Blood Verse was just as effective . . . long distance, if you will.

And so the family farm is "Customer 99."

And the telephone is a fascinating invention. From the get-go, the telephone has been about two-way conversation. The first words to travel by telephone wire were a plea for interaction: "Mr. Watson—come here—I want to see you."

The theme for October is Deep Listening. I suspect that my grandmother was listening deeply, even on the newfangled telephone. I suspect that the person bleeding, who had no other method to make it stop, was listening deeply to those words my grandmother recited.

ONE: First We Build the Tools

By contrast, the first use of radio was a Christmas Eve service in 1906. The people who heard it were an "audience." The audience's choice was to listen or to not listen.

The advent of the radio and its effects on human society can't be overstated. Already we had telegraphs and telephones. There were already phonograph machines that played recording of music. All these innovations were about private experience.

For example, the news of the death of Abraham Lincoln was announced around the world by telegraph, but it took print journalism to bring that news to the masses.

Radio was different. Suddenly, millions of people could experience the same thing . . . simultaneously.

One contemporary commentator said of the advent of radio: "There is now very little danger that Americans will resort to the vice of thinking"

Next came the probing eye of the television camera, that could focus on one drop of sweat—or eventually one fly in the hair—and broadcast that image to hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

As the twentieth century philosopher of media Marshall McLuhan said: "the medium is the message." The medium of the telephone produces the message of communication—we can talk. The medium of radio and television is mass and one-way.

And now, our radios and televisions are on our phones.

Marshall McLuhan said, "We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us."

Or, as he rephrased a bit more ominously:

"First we build the tools, then they build us."

Part II: TWO: Two Cultures, Two Culture Industries

In part two, I will be considering the competing culture industries.

Nowadays, critiques of European Enlightenment ideas and projects is commonplace. The European Enlightenment clearly, for example, led to the disaster of European colonialism.

This critique is not new, it merely took a while for it to escape the bounds of philosophy and academia to enter the American cultural conversation.

The idea comes initially from a book titled *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* published in 1947 and written during the course of the Second World War by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, two of the great Frankfurt School philosophers. As two thinkers who had lived through the advent of telephone and then radio, then watched the rise of the fascists across Europe, the lesson appeared clear—the one-way communication of mass media is extremely dangerous in the hands of fear-mongers.

We hear a lot nowadays about “critical race theory,” where the term “white supremacy” in current usage comes from. The book *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* invented those understandings. Central to the thinking of Horkheimer and Adorno was the tension between freedom and oppression

Their ideas remain important. Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, for example, has read deeply in the Frankfurt School critical theory tradition.

Both Horkheimer and Adorno were European Jews who had fled the rise of Nazism and who lost family to the Holocaust. The Frankfurt School philosophers were Marxists, and they were baffled by the fact that Marx’s predictions had not come to fruition.

As a matter of fact, what had happened in the case of the rise of fascism was *exactly the opposite* of what Karl Marx had predicted. In the case of fascism, instead of a revolution of the leftist working class, the “forces of production”—the workers—had in fact in large numbers sided with the *means of production—the bourgeoisie*—and created fascism rather than freedom.

What had happened?

Fascism is the victory of superstition, myth, and irrationality over the projects of the Enlightenment. But, with the defeat of fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer did not see a rise in rationality or liberalism among the victorious Western democracies. Instead, Western democracies were embracing the superstitions, myths, and irrationalities of fascism and disseminating those ideas through the “culture industry,” a system designed—according to the Frankfurt School—to create artificial desires rather than creating justice and equality.

Now, if you’ve been paying attention, you’ve heard me saying that Adorno and Horkheimer were tracing exactly what has been *intensifying* in the US (and some other parts of the world) in recent years: a rise in superstition, myth, and irrationality. And most of all, fear.

Fact is, the Frankfurt School philosophers were very good at tracing and highlighting the dynamics of oppression, but their solution to the issues they highlighted was a revolution of the working class, something which is increasingly unlikely.

When I was a boy, the working class of my parent’s generation did indeed lean left. Now, that is not the case for a majority of poor people in the United States. Through

various forces within the “culture industry,” many among the poorest Americans have shifted toward the right. It is the *privileged* who have shifted left toward the ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno.

The result is right-wing populism.

Whatever the outcome of the upcoming election, this dynamic will remain.

Here’s my two cents worth of analysis on this dynamic: the culture industry has now broken in two. Yes, there *is* a liberal media bias—in the media created by and for the cultural elite. The educated. Us. Newspapers and their websites; magazines and their websites; media outlets; books; movies; radio; television; and the rising social media—a left-leaning cultural industry. (Whether the left-leaning culture industry is promoting freedom and democracy is a debatable point.)

The right wing has developed an alternative to this culture industry of the elite. QAnon is the latest phenomenon in a long line that goes back to the John Birch Society from good ol’ middle-American Indianapolis, Indiana.

One culture industry worships at the altar of rationality, evidence, and education. One culture industry worships at the altar of superstition, myth, and irrationality.

One promotes progress and hope; one promotes nostalgia and fear.

The best solution to the dynamic that Adorno and Horkheimer described long ago . . . the only workable solution, so far as I can see . . . is a reconciliation between the two culture industries—which means that progressive people will educate ourselves about the concerns of the oppressed. *All* of the oppressed. Not just the ones we like.

THREE: We Are Telephone People

The push of radio in contrast to the pull of the telephone is still with us.

Where is listening—hearing—now?

The spiritual practice of listening and conversing rather than pontificating and arguing is one of the toughest of disciplines. Right up there with asceticism and sitting naked on top of pillars in the desert.

Still, we are called to practice conversation. Despite the difficulty. Despite the ugliness of the cultural and political ideas of “the other side.” In liberal democracies, there simply can’t be an “other side” if those democracies are to survive.

Listening rather than arguing.

Democracy can’t work when every message is out of a radio—democracy is about dialogue.

Winning *this* time implies that there will be a *next* time. And a reckoning. And ‘round and ‘round it goes.

In the 1920s a critic wrote of the advent of radio: “Thus dies the art of conversation.”

We Humanists necessarily combat that trend. We are telephone people; not radio people.

Many of you know that we have a YouTube channel called “The Din of Conversation.”

That title is based on a phrase from the British literary critic Terry Eagleton who wrote: “The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have.” I like with that phrase a lot. That is a profound, freethinking statement: “The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have.”

Imagine for a moment what human conversation has given us: Stoicism; Epicureanism; the House of Wisdom in Baghdad; Florence of the Renaissance; Shakespeare’s London; the Paris of the 1920s; the Harlem Renaissance; Greenwich Village or North Beach, San Francisco in the 1950s; Liverpool at the time of the Beatles; the Seattle Sound that led to Grunge; the Bronx clubs of the 1970s that led to hip hop.

Looked at from this perspective, from the view of what gets created in the crucible of human sharing, Eagleton’s phrase does not sound quite so bleak. “All we have?” Why ever would we want *more* than human conversation?

Would we *really* want a voice from on high coming to proclaim the once and final truth? Isn’t the mystery more beautiful; the stabs in the dark of the millions of human beings who have taken part in this great din of conversation?

That's why I believe in community. A place where people talk with each other. In coffee houses. In bars. In streets and market squares—even some churches—public spaces and the din of conversation—this is the meaning of meaning. And it is why totalitarian regimes fear the public square and it's why oppressors ban books. It's a tragedy when we fail to converse . . .

CONCLUSION

Sure, we want what we want. And we want everybody to want what we want and love what we love and think what we think, even sometimes to the point of forcing everyone else to listen. That appears to be a natural aspect of being human.

It's gut. It's emotion.

But it's not democracy.

We humans have this extraordinary feature: It's not easy to find, but it's right there . . . if you read the owners manual: reason and empathy.

How do you argue with a ____? Don't. Just don't.

How about listening instead? Because we might learn something, even if it isn't the subject of the conversation. Yes, the evidence suggests that no arguments will change another person's mind.

Listening and discussing calmly. That's one tough spiritual practice.

Yet, being a Freethinker means accepting and striving for growth. For self-cultivation. Not answers, but striving, staying in community and conversation. Collective learning and action.

Whether the information is coming from a conversation; or a book; or a website; or TV or radio or a stage, for information to be exchanged, we have to embrace the lessons of the telephone—cooperation, effort, listening.

That may seem like an obvious statement, but think about how little of that is happening in this political season.

We can be the change; we can be a telephone people.

SOURCES

"America in Class: The Radio: Blessing or Curse? A 1929 Debate."

Dialectic of Enlightenment