

**“Being, Becoming, Befuddled”
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Blurb: I suppose every kid gets asked *that* question: “What are you going to be when you grow up?” The question implies that an adult stasis will occur at, oh, twenty-one or so. Then, that doesn’t happen for any of us. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all reply, “I’m going to be becoming, how about you?”

INTRODUCTION: Equity

On this Christian holiday of Easter, one of the things we will be missing out on this year as a congregation is our egg hunt.

It’s an old FUS tradition to have an egg hunt for our Humanist children on Easter Sunday. The staff lovingly call it the “socialist egg hunt,” because the FUS tradition is for those who gather the most eggs to share equally with those who have gathered the least eggs. A fitting tribute to the First Humanist Manifesto that dreamed of a “shared life in a shared world.”

It’s a small way that we teach the children of FUS about justice and equity.

In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela, wrote,

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.

Ableist language, yes. A very old metaphor. But apt for a person who spent twenty-seven of the ninety-five years of his life in prison. The view from the hill just climbed reveals a view of all the hills climbed and the many hills yet to climb.

In his book, Mandela does not sound like someone tired out from the many challenges. Rather, he is exhilarated by the slow but inexorable progress toward justice that he has been witness to.

His is a classic articulation by someone willing to stay in the *process* of becoming.

The process of becoming is as long and as short as a human life. Becoming rather than being. If the spring of the year teaches us anything, it is that.

ONE: "True Self"

I ran across a very intriguing piece of research the other day.

Three neuroscientists are working on how each of us perceives and develops a sense of "me," the self.

The researchers tested pairs of friends—people who knew each other fairly well. The two friends were fitted with video goggles that presented what the other friend was seeing.

Then the researchers used "synchronous touching," that is, researches touched the bodies of the two participants in the same place at the same time, so that each participant was seeing the other's body being touched yet felt it themselves.

Previous to the experiment, each participant was asked to fill out a 120 question form concerning their self-concept. After the experiment, each was given the same questionnaire and asked to do it again.

Quoting the study:

... we found that even a brief experience of illusory ownership of the friend's body changed the content and structure of multiple beliefs about one's own personality and made them more similar to beliefs about the friend's personality.

This contradicts a folk-psychological belief that most of us have that we are a consistent self over time. Rather, the sense perceptions of our bodies are shaping our

sense of self . . . all the time. The study reveals, “the role of the body in the continuous construction of our sense of who we are.”

Let me repeat that: “the role of the body in the continuous construction of our sense of who we are.” Again quoting the study:

the illusory ownership of another person's body not only modifies attitudes toward this person or toward a social group to which this person belongs but also, and perhaps predominantly, modifies beliefs about the self. Taken together, our results highlight the importance of the sense of one's own body as a foundation of social identity and self-concept.

Which, it seems to me, fairly well explains why it's tough being a teen-ager. And why it's so tough when we are struck with illness and infirmities—changing bodies disrupt our sense of self.

This study also goes some way toward explaining the wisdom of the worldview of a person like Nelson Mandela, dedicated to the process, not the end. Dedicated not to being but to becoming.

TWO: “I Wasn’t Myself”

Start thinking about it, and we actually have lots of sayings about the self that reflect an understanding of the self as not fixed and solid: “I wasn’t myself.” “I was beside myself.” “I surprised myself.” “I got carried away.” “I couldn’t get my head in the game.” “I was out of my mind.” “I found myself!” “I can handle myself!”

What is this “self” of which we speak?

#The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze said, “The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.”

I’ll read that again: “The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.”

This becomes vividly true when we do the inner-work of spiritual practices:

We are that self we were. We can look at the scars on our bodies.

Yet, #despite the scars of history and memory we are not the fixed self of the past—we are becoming; we are always on the threshold of “multiplicities.” Every serious spiritual practice; any serious examination of inner-work will tell you that.

“Multiplicities.”

Recent neuroscience has been awakening us to this fact that we are “embodied cognition.” #There isn’t a mind and then a soul and then a body that can be neatly categorized or dissected. Western science has been wrong about that: We are whole.

But wait: what do these ideas of embodied cognition and the potential multiplicities of self do to another folk-psychological concept, that of the “true self”?

How many times have you heard someone say of a loved one who has done something clearly wrong, “Oh, but that’s not his true self.”

When most people are asked if they would be the same “self” in another body, the answer is generally, “yes.” Because of that folk perception that we *have* a true self.

This perception just doesn’t appear to be the case.

Which does some damage to the old idea that in the afterlife we will be sitting on clouds playing harps.

What self might it be that would be doing such a thing?

It appears that disembodied selves are no selves at all . . .

THREE: Becoming . . . But What?

#Humanist thought and practice teaches us that not only should each of us pursue life to its fullest, while we can, but that we are obligated to strive to provide the means for living a fulfilled life for everyone.

Given the circumstances of this one life we all have, it’s the least we can do for each other.

Reflect a moment: Don’t we admire a Nelson Mandela’s focus on purpose *exactly because* we each know how difficult it is to stay focused on a single goal?

The probability that there are no pink clouds and harps in an afterlife calls us to the responsibility of making this one life we share a good one—for us all.

Furthermore, that probability calls us into a deep engagement with the process of becoming, because becoming is the one thing we are actually and authentically doing . . . all the time. With each breath we take.

#We *are* becoming; this is a fact. *What* we are becoming is largely up to each of us . . . if we're lucky.

There are lots of examples of people overcoming circumstances to become more: even prison doesn't stop those so inclined, such as Nelson Mandela.

Consider another case: Malcolm X spent six and a half years in prison. While he was there, he learned to read and write and even joined a debating society. He used the time to become something that he had not been before. He went into prison a person who made a living by petty crime; he came out prepared to be a national leader. He *became* "Malcolm X."

Almost three thousand years ago the philosopher Heraclitus, born in the Persian Empire, said,

This universal order, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or person, but it always has been, is, and will be an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures.

Heraclitus doesn't appear to have been correct in his assumption that time has always existed, but he nailed the part about change—to be is to be becoming. #Heraclitus saw that we cannot step into the same river twice because the river is never static, and we ourselves are never static: all reality is in the process of becoming, with no end in sight—the hard climb to the top of a hill merely reveals all the other hills to climb and rivers to step into. But, crucially, it reveals that we are, with each moment and step of our lives . . . becoming.

#The Buddha taught that our desire for being without becoming—for stasis rather than flow—is the source of human suffering.

Uncomfortable, isn't it? That's where the befuddlement comes in strong.

#To be is to be becoming.

Everybody is becoming. Becoming something. The question isn't "if" but "what?"

FOUR: "It Looks Cool"

Honestly, even though it's a cliché, I don't remember anyone ever asking me what I was going to be when I grew up.

Where I grew up, the choices for male-identified people like me were farmer or coal miner or drunk.

Once after I had moved away to college, I was back home and a cousin asked me to talk with one of his friends.

This friend, probably in his early 20s, I suppose, had hit bottom: drugs, drinking, a couple of arrests; hopeless. Since I had achieved the marvelous accomplishment of getting into a college, my cousin wanted me to talk with him and buck up his spirits.

So, I went to visit.

This guy lived in a typical Ozark hills mobile home: rusted, up on blocks, weeds for a yard, busted furniture and appliances scattered about; the door wide open. Cats and dogs everywhere.

I asked the guy, "Is there *anything* you're interested in?"

"Photography." He was interested in photography. He would like to be a professional photographer.

I didn't know much about photography, but I asked some questions:

Did he have a camera? No.

Did he know what kind of camera he'd like to have? No—one of those like on TV.

Had he studied the work of a particular photographer, maybe in *Rolling Stone* or something?

No. But it looked cool, taking pictures all the time and getting rich and famous for it.

It didn't take a crystal ball to see this guy was never going to become a photographer. He was headed to jail and an early grave.

Perhaps this would be somehow an instructive or even humorous story if it weren't the story of so many disadvantaged people: "you can't get there from here."

Hence so many deaths from those "diseases of despair" that we hear so much about. #The human animal craves meaning and purpose; craves becoming. When that is stifled, there's going to be trouble . . .

#As writer Alice Walker put it, "people are attempting to decolonize their spirits. A crucial act of empowerment . . ."

#"Decolonizing the spirit." Getting out of the strictures that stifle becoming. Experiencing the multiplicities. This is the joy of life, and it is the tragedy for those who have no models for other ways of being. Those who have no way to find the hills to climb.

CONCLUSION: To Be is to Be Becoming

Yes, as Nelson Mandela, wrote,

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.

This isn't a cry of despair. It is the articulation of a life of meaning and purpose well-lived. It's a long road and there are lots of hills. After struggling up one, we can look back at all the hills we've managed, we can look forward to the hills yet to overcome. But #the wisdom to learn is that life is all about becoming, all the time: it's all hills all the way

That's what wisdom calls us to; it's what the spring of the year reminds us of: #To be yourself, listen to your body; be where you are; and remind yourself: to be is to be becoming.

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