

**“Rules of the Game”
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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Blurb: Games are fun, when we understand the rules. The rules of human societies, however, can be unstated, even invisible. From family groups to congregations to governments, some get it and some don't. How do we make the rules explicit for everyone?

INTRODUCTION: a Little Shade

The theme for June is Play. Play in its many manifestations. Today, I want to talk about the rules of games. And I want to consider the concept of games in a wide context.

Mostly, I want to examine how not knowing the rules of the game can be debilitating.

First, take a light example. It's getting warm here in Minnesota. The other afternoon my wife Theresa and I were out for a walk. Theresa mentioned that in many cultures, carrying a parasol to block UV rays is common and accepted. Here in the US, it's eccentric. A little weird.

Where did that rule of the game come from?

The word itself says what a parasol is actually for: *para* is “against,” and *sol* is sun. Parasols are about keeping out the sun, not the rain.

What about “umbrella”? *Umbra* is Latin for “shadow.” *Ella* is a diminutive: an umbrella is a little shadow, which is not something one needs in the rain, but is a very good thing to have when the sun gets intense.

Why is it that the “rules” of US culture make something as simple as carrying around some shade appear quaint or eccentric?

Rules. They are always there in human relations. Sometimes we know them, sometimes we don't.

A personal example: I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household. That meant a whole litany of things, including, for one, playing cards were not allowed in the house. "Of the devil." As a matter of fact, playing cards were labeled "the devil's picture book." So, I wasn't allowed to play cards, and consequently, I didn't know any card games when I moved away to college. Where it seemed to me everyone was always wanting to play cards.

Well, just learn! Right?

Do you realize how many card games there are when you don't know *any*? I struggled to learn the rules of the card games my new friends were playing. What's a "suit"? What's an ace? What do you mean, "the Joker's wild"? I was clueless.

ONE: This is a Test

Rev. Jim read from Susanna Crossman in his welcome: "For group play to function, everyone must feel safe to play."

#Social rules are often unstated. Often even unnoticed by those who practice them, until some outsider breaks the rules. As someone who came from a culture of poor farmers, I learned—almost subconsciously—that I needed to watch the unspoken rules of the American middle class very carefully.

It's the little things. In my culture, for example, people don't look other people in the eyes. I don't know why that is. But looking someone in the eyes is considered aggressive. We even have a saying, "I looked him straight in the eyes." That's about aggression.

A big challenge for me has always been the American middle class propensity to express confidence, no matter what. Where I come from, it's considered prideful to say you're good at something. If someone says, "Hey, I hear you're a master chef," the answer is, "I can cook some stuff, yeah."

The majority culture makes fun of that propensity by calling it the "aw-shucks" attitude. "Aw-shucks, I ain't that good." "Aw-shucks" *is not* an Ozark expression. Nobody says that. It's a way of denigrating people who shuck corn . . . and don't know the rules of the game.

The rules of one culture jars against the rules of another culture.

Where I come from, if you express great confidence, as in, "Well, I would never do that," the answer is "you're born but you ain't dead." Meaning it is the height of pridefulness to assume what you would do given certain circumstances. You might do just about anything— "you're born but you ain't dead."

Given the fact that 85% of people lie on their resumes, where does that leave people who come from the sort of culture I do?

In other words, #unspoken social rules among dominant social groups make people feel like outsiders, and unspoken social rules make people in dominant groups assess outsiders falsely. If I come into a job interview and don't look you in the eye and don't express confidence that I can do the job, where's that going to get me?

Here's another example: Candidates going into Unitarian Universalist ministry have to get a psychological evaluation. Not just any psychological evaluation but a particular one. So everything is standardized, right?

I noticed as I took the test that several questions had to do with hearing voices—the voice of God and the voices of the dead.

Where I come from, expressing things as if God or the dead are speaking to you is just the way we talk. BTW, we would never say the word "god"—there's a lot of superstition around that—but it's common to hear people say, "Well, I was just standin' there and the Good Lord told me . . ." Or something like, "I heard my mama—Lord bless her soul (meaning she's dead) "I heard my mama just as plain as day sayin' 'don't you do that, now!'"

When I took the test, I knew the proper white middle-class answer to the questions—you're not supposed to hear God or your ancestors speaking.

Unspoken rules.

TWO: That's Not Funny!

#Unitarian Universalists express great dismay at why people of different groups don't want to be Unitarian Universalists. I suspect the answer is far more about unspoken social rules than it is about beliefs. Many people visit Unitarian Universalist

congregations and realize fairly quickly that they don't know the rules of the game. They aren't part of the group.

I'm just talking from my personal experience here. As someone who came into Unitarian Universalism from the working class.

For example, among UUs "sharing your feelings" is a big deal. "Let's be honest with each other." But here's the thing: there are rules to the game of sharing your feelings. You can only share *certain* kinds of feelings. And you had darn well better have *some* feelings and *not* have *other* feelings.

I learned very early on in my UU experience that my reactions to many things were not "acceptable."

"Why are you laughing at that? That's not funny!"

"Why are you smiling? That's nothing to smile about!"

We hillbillies tend to be very cynical people—we don't expect things to go right. It's a dark sort of humor. So, there I am, being told that my "natural" reactions are "wrong."

So, what do I do?

No, I don't say, "no, your cultural norms are nonsensical to me." No.

I "dissociate." And I withdraw. And I say that I don't like sharing my feelings. Actually, I'm not withdrawing from sharing feelings; I'm withdrawing *from being judged according to unspoken rules* for my perceived "wrong" feelings.

So, when it's "time for sharing," I suppose many UUs find that a very warm and fuzzy place to be. For me, it's about weaving and dodging and hoping I don't get angry and say what I feel.

Now, I'm saying all this not to say "poor pitiful me." What I'm saying is that I learned very early on that being a Euro-American heterosexual male, I could fairly easily disappear into the woodwork. All I had to do was keep my true feelings to myself. Besides, I did achieve attributes that are highly prized in UU circles, including an education, a professional job, and a certain articulateness.

Many individuals—for many different reasons—can't disappear into the woodwork as I did. For one thing, disappearing into the woodwork is something we hillbillies like to do anyway. "Just pretend I'm not here." Please! For many people, that is *not* a value. As a matter of fact, many see it as hypocrisy.

#Rules of the game. Each of us has our own rules; each of us has those rules we've learned due to our social location; and many of us find ourselves in spaces and places where there are very different rules of the game than those we know. Invisible rules of the game.

THREE: The Neighborhood of Boston

As I've said, I was lucky.

W. E. B. Du Bois coined the term "double consciousness" to describe the experience of African Americans in white spaces. Du Bois pointed out that African Americans experience this challenge as they process the knowledge that Euro-Americans are measuring them through the lens of white supremacy and finding that the actions of African Americans never meet expectations.

I was lucky. Despite my social class, I could disappear into the dominant culture of whiteness. That's not what we want of Unitarian Universalism.

#A very old discussion in Unitarian circles has been the question of whether or not the movement could go beyond "the neighborhood of Boston," as the old saying went. This is still a question; perhaps *the* question for Unitarian Universalism, because "the neighborhood of Boston" is more than a geographical location. It's a *mental* location. It's a mental location created by a very Boston set of rules for the game. A very New England set of rules for the game.

Sure, #nowadays, Boston is a multicultural city, but the Boston that created Unitarianism was not.

The rules of that Boston Unitarianism set a high standard for education; for professional achievement; for public service; for etiquette; for disinterested debate; for intellectualized discussion; for self-confident individuality; for what once were called "refinements" of taste and aesthetics—code for *very Euro-American . . . very white. WASP.*

Humanism has unfortunately now taken on many of these trappings and assumptions –many of the rules of the Unitarian and Universalist game. But we do need to remind ourselves that Humanism did not start out that way. Humanism was a midwestern phenomenon, not a product of the neighborhood of Boston.

Actually, Humanism was immediately and viciously opposed by the East Coast Unitarian elite. What at the time was known as “the humanist controversy” wasn’t a controversy for the Humanists—it was a controversy because theists made it one. What were a couple of midwesterners—John Dietrich and Curtis Reese—doing wading into liberal theology, which everyone in the neighborhood of Boston knew was the purview of Harvard graduates?

Both Reese and Dietrich had started out as ministers in decidedly outré religious traditions. Dietrich's Minneapolis and Reese's Des Moines were places that new immigrants—Scandinavians and Germans—lived. Not at all the WASP blue-blooded Brahmins of Boston’s Beacon Hill, where the Unitarian denominational headquarters sat.

Questioning the Christian tradition and the Protestant god—and thus the whole concept of a certain sort of America—was against the rules. Saying that pedestrian, plodding, workmanlike science explained more than high-soaring theology and philosophy was breaking the rules.

Roasting sacred cows is not an activity for the well-bred. I think Humanists do well to remember our roots. I for one would never have become a Unitarian Universalist if it hadn’t been for Humanism. The Boston god doesn’t make any more sense to me than did the Ohio River god I was brought up to believe in.

CONCLUSION: Joining

But wait a minute: isn’t all of this a contradiction?

Reflect for a moment that I’ve spent my time this morning talking about how we human beings create and conform to rules that often exclude people. But #reflect on this paradox: isn’t one of the most basic of basic things that human beings want and need to be with other human beings? Isn’t that the starkest lesson we’ve learned during the pandemic?

Think of all the ways we create ways of being together.

#Unfortunately, we create both ways to be together and ways to exclude others. What's up with that? In many ways, we so desperately want to be with other human beings, yet somehow we also have that desire to be with like-minded people. People who understand us. People among whom we don't need to be self-conscious or careful. People just like us . . .

That may be the purpose of a softball team or a bowling team, but it is *not* the purpose of a congregation.

Last week when I was answering questions, I said that all of us at FUS want more diversity. We have a group, our Moving Toward Equity Team, tasked with helping us find ways to be more open to diversity. It's an aspiration. It's a goal we strive toward.

And one way we can get there is by calling out our own unstated rules. #That's what a culture *is*—rules of the game.

As an old Midwestern farmer, allow me to close by saying what I think is the most damaging of Unitarian Universalist rules of the game. Actually, it goes straight back to those old Puritans. It is the propensity to confess to being the greatest of sinners and then asserting being miraculously, hugely, forgiven: the greatest of sinners and the most marvelously redeemed. Which comes down to saying, "Once I was wrong, but now I know I'm right."

I still like the Pentecostal view better, which is a lot like that old saying "you're born but you ain't dead." Those mistakes are just gonna keep on comin'.

#I invite us all to see ourselves as quite mundane on the sinner scale.

I invite us all to remember that we don't need forgiveness. We only need the grace and the gumption to keep on—try; fail; try, fail better.

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