

Gaga for Dada: Art and the Self Redefined
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Blurb: We human beings crave community and will invent communities when they do not exist. We can still learn some lessons about resilience and resistance from the motley band that called themselves Dadaists.

INTRODUCTION: Making Noise in the System

I'm fascinated by human groups of resilience and resistance. Why they form. How they form. What purpose they serve in the lives of the people who build and join them. Their effects on wider human cultures.

We band together for so many reasons: companionship, obviously. Safety. Support. Challenge. Learning. A desire to help. A need to join into larger meanings and purposes.

I've talked often of the "din of conversation."

That saying originates with the literary critic Terry Eagleton, who said, #“The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have.”

That is a profoundly Humanist, freethinking statement: “The din of conversation is as much meaning as we shall ever have.”

It's a profoundly Humanist statement because it underlines the facts as we understand them: #We must care for each other because we are all we have. All we have is each other. But that is enough

One such din of conversation was created by a group of young people who called themselves Dadaists.

Dadaism was an art movement that began in Zurich, Switzerland in 1916 during the First World War. The Dada group was made up of people from both sides of the Great War.

By 1916 the war had killed, maimed, and changed irreparably millions of their peers, a group that would later earn the name "the Lost Generation." But the Dadaists already knew that in 1916, and, on the surface at least, there was *nothing* they could do about. They were powerless before entrenched elders and governments.

As artistically-inclined young people, the Dadaists were convinced that it was logic, reason, and the symbols of their civilization that was creating the carnage.

After all, they had been bombarded for years with pro-war propaganda. And they had concretely seen the human-created insanity of war. Think of it: by crossing an imaginary line between one country and another, instead of murdering each other in the trenches, German and French young people could have coffee and wine and write poems together and stage musical events and plays.

#We often speak of war as chaos and madness. At one level it most certainly is. But war is also the most scientific, reasoned, and logical of human activities: the logistics of weapons and food and troops; the technological know-how to create poison gas and machine guns, airplanes and artillery.

War is chaos only for those being killed by the poison gas and the machine guns and airplanes and artillery.

#The Dadaists set out to wreck the war machines of Europe by generating as much noise in the system, as much nonsense, as possible. In so doing, they created methods of resilience and resistance still valuable to us today.

ONE: A Sensibility that is Charming

One of the founders of Dada, Tristan Tzara, wrote in "Manifeste Dada," in 1918:

I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air; I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense.

Perhaps the closest that Tzara comes to making a graspable statement of the Dada creed is this:

There is no ultimate truth . . . Does anyone think that, by a minute refinement of logic, they have demonstrated the truth and established the correctness of their opinions?

. . . #I detest greasy objectivity, and harmony, the science that finds everything in order . . . I am against systems, the most acceptable system is on principle to have none.

Another Dadaist, the German Hugo Ball, wrote in his manifesto:

A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by stockbrokers' hands, hands worn smooth by coins. I want the word where it ends and begins. Dada is the heart of words.

Here are Tristan Tzara's infamous instructions on how to write a poem:

- Take a newspaper.
- Take a pair of scissors.
- Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
- Shake it gently.
- Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
- Copy conscientiously.
- The poem will be like you.
- And here are you a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

BTW, if you haven't done this, do. You will be amazed by what you create.

Sound poetry, cut-ups, collage, found poetry, *frottage* (taking a pencil rubbing of a surface as the basis for an art work), installation art, performance poetry, and

performance art in general—all became acceptable and essential because of the Dadaists.

After the war, *l'esprit moderne*—Modernism—was everywhere, even coming to the United States in the person of French artist Marcel Duchamp. Until the nineteenth century, Western arts had attempted to “mirror” nature. But Modern art sought to illuminate nature. Reality. Being itself.

For the Dadaists, being itself had become deadly.

Toward the end of the war, came the pandemic, which created suffering and dislocation the likes of which were not experienced again until a few months ago.

Warfare. Disease. Revolutions and social unrest in many countries around the globe: It does put the suffering and uncertainty of our own time into perspective . . .

#The din of conversation in their time; their resilience in the face of disaster; and their resistance to oppression and brutality . . . the Dadaists have something to say to us across the abyss of time.

Even if their words and artworks seem a bit dated to us today, their artistry, the way they chose to creatively deal with apocalypse, has a lot to say to us today.

TWO: The Din of Conversation

#Far from being a disenchanted people in a disenchanted age, as many Christian theologians and *New York Times* opinion writers argue, we who are alive today are most likely the most myth-obsessed, myth enchanted, and myth-saturated people in the history of humanity.

#Myths surround us in movies, TV series; in games and books and ads and even the news. Myths surround us on screens large and small, from Times Square and Piccadilly Circus to our own pockets.

When the Dadaists began their assault on entrenched bourgeois belief, “high” art was still an assumption. Artists were seen as denizens of a rarified cultural elite. “Fine art” lived in museums and concert halls.

The Dadaists considered “high art” and “fine art” only more cogs in the machinery of oppression and war. In this way they were—consciously and not—following the Marxist aesthetics of the time, which insisted that art is an element of the struggle between the classes.

The Dadaists meant to bring art down from its pedestal. Take art out of the concert hall and into the bar.

The din of conversation was all they had.

But imagine what human conversation has given us.

#Imagine the din of conversation under the porches and under the trees in Athens during the time of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

#Imagine the din of conversation in Baghdad in the late 700s when an institution called the House of Wisdom opened its doors—an attempt to gather all the wisdom in the world.

#Think of the din of conversation in Florence that led to the Renaissance. The din of conversation in Shakespeare’s London. The din of conversation in the Paris of the 1920s. The din in Harlem that created the Harlem Renaissance. The din in Greenwich Village. Or North Beach in San Francisco in the 1950s that gave rise to the Beat Generation.

#Think of the din of conversation in Liverpool, England that led to the Beatles, a youthful freshness springing from British streets still littered with the destruction of bombing raids.

Or the din of conversation in a little recording studio called Sub Pop that led to the Seattle Sound, better known as Grunge. The din of conversation in the Bronx clubs of the 1970s that led to hip hop.

#Too often we think of lonely geniuses, but genius is seldom lonely. Shakespeare and his Globe theatre were not the only show in town. Shakespeare’s London had twenty-seven public theatre venues. More than fifty British bands made up the so-called British Invasion. The Beatles were not alone.

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 is why oppressors ban books and block websites and social media.

#It's a tragedy when we fail to converse . . . and it is dangerous. Democracy itself is constructed of the din of conversation. When we stop talking, democracy ceases, and fascism fills the void.

CONCLUSION: It's Us

"Stop Making Sense" is the title of a concert film from back in the early-1980s featuring the Talking Heads. The title is inspired by Dada.

#"Sense," that "common sense" that Tristan Tzara mentioned disparagingly back in 1918, making sense still appeals to the fascist mentality. Look at Q-Anon and all the conspiracy theories alive in our culture at the moment.

#Far from being Dada nonsense, conspiracy theories *make sense* out of chaos. And the kind of sense they make is based on us-and-them, in-and-out, binary thinking. Sense. Logic. Reason. The very stuff of war.

The Nazis hated the Dadaists. And the hatred was mutual. Dada was at the top of the list for what the Nazis called "degenerate art."

Why? Because the fascist mind craves certitude and sense.

#The free-thinking artistic act is anathema to the fascist mind. The din of human conversation—the gatherings of people to talk and laugh and create—is anathema to the fascist mind.

That's why the third Aspiration of First Unitarian Society says,

- Pursue wisdom through reason, science, art, and the stories of civilizations.

#Reason and science can save us from COVID. But art and the stories from the amazingly rich din of human civilizations save us from myopia of science and reason.

#Long ago, back in the days when the world was hurtling toward yet another world war, John Dietrich said, "the great word of humanism is 'us.'"

"The great word of humanism is 'us.'"

It's really that simple. And that complex.

#No, relationship is never easy. Never. It *feels great sometimes*; it feels like its traveling on greased rails sometimes. But there's always that moment of "I." That intrusion of ego. It's going to happen. It's the nature of the beast.

#When the going gets difficult, that's when we have to remind ourselves of why we're doing any of this congregating thing.

#Moving from "I" thinking to "we" thinking is countercultural in the extreme. It was for the Dadaists; it is for us. Yet, that is what congregational humanism calls us to do. We're doing it because in reality "I" is always "we." It's Ubuntu: *I am because we are*. That's the din of conversation.

Earlier I read from a book titled *Relational Being* by the social psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen, who writes:

My hope is to demonstrate that virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from

relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone.

Dr. Gergen states it bluntly:

It is the future of our lives together that is at stake here, both locally and globally.

#Relational being. We've learned a dangerous and damaging lesson from the way we do politics in the Western World: that factions can be crammed into two "sides." That's a binary. And outside of things such as on/off switches, binaries are dangerous fictions.

#When we talk about the interconnected web and the oneness of life, that's not merely pious words. That's telling it like it is. It is a way of knowing, a wisdom, to live up to. Because the din of conversation is all we have. When it stops, we stop.

Keep talking. Keep creating.

SOURCES

Gergen, Kenneth J. *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. (2009-07-29T23:58:59)

Surreal Lives: the Surrealists 1917-1945 by Ruth Brandon.

[Click for books on Dadaism.](#)