

“But I Didn't Mean To!”
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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Blurb:

“But I Didn't Mean To!” Our theme for the month of January is “Living with Intention.” One aspect of living with intention is the willingness to question our own assumptions, sometimes the deepest ones. Let's take some of those assumptions out and look at them.

READING

From the poem "Auguries of Innocence" by William Blake, written in 1803 but not published during his lifetime. The poem is a series of paradoxes in which “innocence” is juxtaposed with evil.

INTRODUCTION: An Age of Retrospection

Welcome to January of 2022. We've just lived through a week of retrospectives. Reviews of a year that did not go as planned for most people on the planet.

Ralph Waldo Emerson began his greatest essay, titled “Nature,” with these words:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?*

Emerson was calling for our theme for the month: “Living with Intention.” In the essay, Emerson explicitly dismisses the “religions of the book”—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—by preaching:

Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

Living with intention. We sometimes call it “living authentically,” but that phrase has gotten muddied and confused by the very tradition and retrospection that the phrase calls for an end to.

As Emerson would be quick to point out, one aspect of living with intention is the willingness to question our own assumptions, sometimes the deepest ones. So, today, that’s what I hope to do: To encourage us all to take some of those cliches, conventions, and assumptions out and look at them.

All the while keeping in mind lines from the poem “Auguries of Innocence” by William Blake—

A Truth that’s told with bad intent
Beats all the Lies you can invent

ONE: “They Ain’t Like Us”

When I was a kid growing up on a farm, there was a huge perceived difference between “country folk” and “town folk.”

Now, I’m not talking about Appalachia versus Manhattan here. I’m talking about people like me who lived on farms and people who lived in the town where the grade and high schools were—ten miles away—all of 1100 people.

The animosity ran so deep that, in the 1980s when Walmarts began opening, destroying small town family businesses, my mother’s response to my expressed sadness about that situation was, “Them city folk never did treat us right nohow.”

When my father died, I wanted to get his suit dry cleaned before he was buried in it. I went to the local dry cleaners and asked if they could do that quickly. “No.” was the answer. I explained the situation. The owner of the dry cleaners asked, “What was your dad’s name?”

I walked out, knowing what the answer would be.

How did people who have lived within a handful of miles of each other for generations develop such animosity?

Now admittedly, my father never took a shower in running water; never saw a flush toilet; never had his clothes washed in a machine until he went away to the army.

But, by the time I was around there, most of the country folks had running water and electricity, just like the town folks. In other words, we didn't take bathes any less frequently than the town folks; most of us didn't use corn cobs or the Sears catalogue for toilet paper anymore; we didn't wash our clothes in boiling pots of lye soap.

Still, the suspicion and animosity remained.

I experienced it from the other end as well. After word got around that I had gone to college, I more than once heard the comment: "You ain't gonna try learnin' me none a that, are ya?"

So: what was happening there?

TWO: Mountains Out of Mole Hills

I want to say one word to you. Just one word: *schismogenesis*.

Schismogenesis.

The term schismogenesis was coined in 1935 by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Nowadays Bateson is best remembered as being married to the vastly more famous anthropologist Margaret Mead. But in his time Bateson was a public intellectual and innovative thinker. We still use some of his ideas today, even though he no longer tends to be credited as the originator of the ideas.

In his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson defines schismogenesis as a "creation of division."

The term derives from the Greek words σχίσμα *skhisma*, "cleft," (borrowed into English as *schism*, "division into opposing factions", and γένεσις *genesis*, "generation" or "creation."

Schismogenesis is "creation of division."

Dr. Bateson claimed that we human beings *define ourselves and each other* through schismogenesis.

Remember: Bateson was an anthropologist. He was describing schismogenesis as something *endemic* to the human mind and human societies. Professor Bates was not attempting to fix the world with his idea of schismogenesis. He was trying to *describe* the world and how it works so that we can better see ourselves.

Schismogenesis is our method of both self-differentiation and group identification.

We humans tend to find polar opposites and then attempt to define things by examining them in that frame of opposites. This is a way that we have learned to think about our concepts and a way we have found to create solutions to our challenges.

#Think of all the ways we human beings create difference: gender, race, age, ethnicity, social class, generation, urban-suburban-rural . . . and the list goes on.

Schismogenesis is a feedback loop that functions in two directions: continually feeding us *differences* and continuously feeding us *similarities*, with each iteration amplified by the last iteration, and forever escalating: “I have *nothing* in common with those people” or “I’m exactly *like those people*.” Or, tragically: “I am alone and no one understands me.”

Schismogenesis can also occur in terms of negative communication: no one says anything or shares anything: if I perceive that you are holding back, and you perceive that I am holding back, then we both begin to hold back.

Schismogenesis gives us things to think about and things to talk about.

Schismogenesis can also be at work in situations of domination and submission.

That’s how “mansplaining” and “white-splaining” develop into feedback loops: many white men fit into and understand the dynamics of a white, heteronormative patriarchal structure, which brings with it assumptions concerning appropriate communication style. Therefore, white men feel confident navigating that structure, and therefore talk more and explain more, while those who have been traditionally marginalized can’t get a word in edge-wise.

This dynamic was explored by feminists in the 1970s with the concept of “male-identified women,” meaning women who bought into the patriarchal system but learned to use it—“steel magnolias.”

Given the concept of schismogenesis, it isn’t difficult to see why, in the tiny world I grew up in, there was such antipathy between “country” folk and “town” folk: We were so isolated from and different from mainstream America, and so similar to each other, that we found ourselves making, as it were, mountains out of mole hills.

THREE: Info-genesis

Schismogenesis leads to us/them thinking. It leads to viewing others as opponents rather than partners.

Allow me to add that Gregory Bateson was also an early proponent of the term *cybernetics*, by which Bateson meant—to simplify a bit too much—feedback loops. In terms of the cybernetics of schismogenesis—the creation of division—the opposite of schismogenesis for Bateson was his definition of “information.”

Bateson defined information as “a difference that *makes* a difference.”

#The takeaway is that we human beings often find differences that aren’t meaningful differences. Or differences that aren’t important differences in all situations. A distinction without a difference.

In other words, too often, our acts of schismogenesis do not create information. Only . . . noise.

For example: What’s the difference between a “conservative” and a “liberal”?

Have you noticed that those terms are being used in the place of Republican and Democrat?

What is a “moderate”?

Think about it: “RINO,” a “Republican in name only.” What the heck does that even mean?

We can label ourselves into complete abstractions.

What’s the opposite of “far-right ultra-nationalist Christian authoritarianism”?

“Far-right ultra-nationalist Christian authoritarianism . . .”

Hmmm . . . let’s see . . . “far-left (or would it be “near left”?) ultra-globalist secular . . . libertarian”?

#Just as our human minds can always imagine the largest number, then add “one,” so we can always add one more label. One more hyphen.

Schismogenesis simply has no boundaries. Neither do our capacities for fear and hatred.

CONCLUSION: Why Should We Not?

Professor Bates provides us with a way to clarify our differentiation process so that we can see and use its possibilities and its limitations. The concept of schismogenesis is a tool in the thinker's toolbox.

Because, the human capacity for compassion and love don't have any boundaries either.

Remember our theme for the month: "Living with Intention."

Intention.

Without intention, we merely continue to wallow in the pit that is the creation of divisions.

Without intention, we can even get at half-truths and partial truths, which are far more damaging than simple lies, as William Blake reminds us—

A Truth that's told with bad intent
Beats all the Lies you can invent

Also remember those words of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

We can ask similar questions:

Why shouldn't we have a worldview of insight and not of tradition?

Why shouldn't we have a politics of insight and not of tradition?

Why shouldn't we have a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

As Emerson would point out, one aspect of living with intention is the willingness to question our own schismogenesis—the ways we are told that difference exists when in fact those differences are merely noise.

I invite us all to take the "Emerson Challenge:" Live with intention, questioning always our assumptions, even the deepest ones.

SOURCES

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature."

"Schismo....what? Anger is contagious and so is goodwill." Linda and Charlie Bloom.

For a careful consideration of how damaging schismogenesis can be, see:

"Schismotopia: Environmentalism, Schismogenesis, and Heterotopia in Austin, Texas

<https://firstunitarian.org/>

FUS on YouTube

Din of Conversation