

Widening the Unitarian Universalist Circle
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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at First Unitarian Society

ONE

Last week I considered the data storm we are living in nowadays and some ways to at least acquire a mental/spiritual umbrella for the storm.

The wisdom of the ages—from Taoism to Hinduism to Buddhism to Stoicism to Christianity to New Ageism—is somehow to be beyond or above the fray.

Disconnection is good for the blood pressure, but what do we do with wars and rumors of wars? Inequality and climate change.

We all know the old adage, “no decision *is* a decision.” Sitting back mindfully is making a decision to do nothing for the larger world.

But, we do well to remember another adage, “all politics is local.”

#What I want to consider today is at first glance the opposite of quiet mindfulness and disengagement. But actually, I am arguing that the two are of a piece.

“All politics is local” implies engagement at the foundational, fundamental level. “Seeing how the sausage is made,” which is another old adage.

For example, if you want to change First Unitarian Society, get on the committees and task forces. You want to change the city? Start knocking on doors. All politics is local.

In our efforts at justice-making, FUS focuses on the local as well.

We are fortunate here in Minneapolis to have a strong and active group of downtown senior clergy. FUS is one of the smaller congregations involved. When we join with the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Congregationalists, the Lutherans, the United Methodists, the Baptists, the Roman Catholics, the Reform Jews, the Muslims, and on, we cover a lot of ground, and we join in with institutions with deeper pockets. This group speaks not only with moral authority but also with money and connections and numbers.

We meet with the mayor, we meet with city council members, we meet with the police, we meet with state officials, we meet with politicians, and directors of non-profits.

My joining with other clergy aggregates our voices. As I often say, I see congregations as aggregators. Each of us brings our individual social justice passions to the congregation, and the congregation aggregates our voices. The Downtown Senior Clergy group does that as well.

First Unitarian Society also joins the larger Unitarian Universalist Association, and also the humanist and congregational humanist movements. The UU Humanist Association reaches and provides support for the many humanists who attend UU congregations, many of those congregations hostile to humanism.

We also join with the Ethical Culture movement, another humanist organization. And with the American Humanist Association—both the national and local level—and with other secular groups.

There are too many things to mention. But take one example: I chair the Education Committee of the American Humanist Association. The AHA has been working with United Theological Seminary in St. Paul to develop a Humanism concentration in their Masters program. The online program will help us train Humanist leaders, Humanist celebrants, and Humanist chaplains.

The world is ready for secular humanism *and* congregational humanism. We *need* leaders, and we especially need leaders who look like the America of the future. There's nothing I like more than training young humanist leaders, especially young humanist leaders of color. They are the future, and they are here, now, ready to change the world. But their paths are often blocked by white Euro-American assumptions.

As I've said many times, #I am driven by a desire to leave the world better than I found it. I was born into a world dominated by wealthy cisgender straight white men. I want to turn off the lights and lock the door on that world. I work for an America in which character is the defining aspect of every person. No judgement.

As I grow older, I often think of the lines by William Butler Yeats in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium:"

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school . . .

I clap my hands and sing and louder sing for the future of humanism, free thought, and secularism.

“Nor is there singing school . . .” Yeats wrote because the old cannot be taught the future—we will not be attending that school. But we can use our accumulated wisdom to sing another reality into being.

TWO

All Unitarian Universalists need to take seriously and understand the report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change that appeared in 2020 titled *Widening the Circle of Concern*.

Their Guiding Principle was this:

To keep Unitarian Universalism alive, we must privilege the voices that have been silenced or drowned out and dismantle elitist and exclusionary white privilege, which inhibits connection and creativity.

“ . . . which inhibits connection and creativity.” That’s important! Remember that “sing and louder sing” thing. We have to sing a song that exposes “elitist and exclusionary white privilege” for the hogwash it is.

The report also says,

. . . amidst the diversity of the theologies represented in our congregations, justice work has been a proxy for what we believe in some congregations, while in other congregations, engagement with the intellect, debate, and social ties have been the substitute. Our justice work without theological resources and spiritual practices leads us down the path of burn out.

The commissioners are being very polite there. What they mean is that many congregations have made a religion out of progressive (read “Democratic”) politics or

of debating ideas and issues rather than getting their shoes dirty out there in the street and at the government center and at the state capital.

Under "Take-Aways" the report says this:

- These times require a liberatory faith that invites us each into the spiritual work of empathy and healing.
- Justice making is not a substitute for a coherent theology, and faithful justice making requires a liberatory theology.

and,

- A greater emphasis on the theological basis for our work for diversity, equity, and inclusion will help us to make decisions about the forms of this work most appropriate for our individual and shared faith lives.

I agree with the commissioners that these points are vital if Unitarian Universalism is to survive and thrive. Because, frankly, if we don't change these things, there's no reason for Unitarian Universalist to survive. And I think that all social indicators point toward a non-theistic, or agnostic, secular theology.

#Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian—and UU Humanist—William R. Jones insisted in his groundbreaking book *Is God a White Racist?* that the theism/atheism divide is beside the point. The truer distinction is what he called in theology-speak "the functional ultimacy of the human being." "The functional ultimacy of the human being," by which Rev. Dr. Jones anticipated one of the Commission's Recommendations:

Develop more theological resources to center our justice work in our faith and make clear the interconnection between action in the world and spiritual development.

Remember: that's the point I made when I started: #Living mindfully in the here and now and working for justice are not incompatible attitudes. Rather, they are essential companions in finding a purposeful life.

#I'm convinced that there is a moral force to free thinking; a moral force that burns away creeds and dogmas and gets at the essence of human religious thinking. When

the human moral imagination is loosed from the bonds of traditions and conventions and dogmas and creeds, it is a wondrous and powerful thing.

Getting loose is essential for some of us. Staying loose also matters. The *Atlantic Monthly* columnist Arthur C. Brooks, in an article titled “The Meaning of Life Is Surprisingly Simple” says this:

People who believe that they know their life’s meaning enjoy greater well-being than those who don’t. One 2019 study found that agreeing with the statement “I have a philosophy of life that helps me understand who I am” was associated with fewer symptoms of depression and higher positive affect.

Yes, “fewer symptoms of depression and higher positive affect” are the results of having a philosophy of life—a moral code—examining it, and using it as a basis for working for justice.

#When our theological anchors are all about liberation for all through thinking freely, outside the traditional boxes, they are about serving the common good; they are about pro-social behavior; and they in no way require a theist orientation.

Which is called . . . Humanism.

#As Rev. Dr. William R. Jones pointed out, it’s not about believing in one god or another or not, it’s about knowing that human beings can fix human problems.

#First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is the core of Humanism in the United States. We have been since 1916. And we will continue to be as long as the people of FUS *want* it. We, together, can widen that circle, far beyond the Midwest, far beyond whiteness, far beyond . . .

I’m only one blip on the screen of FUS ministers carrying the saving message of Humanism. But I will continue to follow the advice of William Butler Yeats:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress . . .

SOURCES and Further Reading

Arthur C. Brooks, "The Meaning of Life Is Surprisingly Simple." *Atlantic Monthly*, October 21, 2021.

The Commission on Institutional Change

UUA Commission on Institutional Change: Widening the Circle of Concern.

William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium."