

“Committing to the Seasons and the Change: the Magic of Yet”
A talk in two parts by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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Blurb: “Committing to the Seasons and the Change: the Magic of Yet.” Human religions have marked the seasons most likely since the beginning of human consciousness. But it isn’t the seasons that frighten us so much as the change.

Part One: The Difference Between Equinox and a Tree

A couple of weeks ago I talked about the common mistake of adopting a philosophical term without understanding that term’s context or reason for being. My example was the term “lived experience.” We hear it everywhere nowadays. But a very incisive question to ask when you hear the term is: Is there a “dead experience?” Don’t only lived experiences actually get experienced?

The answer to that question is “yes.” Only the living have lived experiences. But, as I pointed out then, the term exists to compliment another term, “lived body.”

But wait a minute! Don’t we have to have a body in order to live? The answer is yes, and now we are getting somewhere—“lived experience” and “lived body” are terms designed to help us see that we are not merely walking minds filled with consciousness; that we are not disembodied spirits floating around the universe.

#Our experience, in our lives and in our bodies, is grainy, greasy, salty, painful, luscious flesh. And *that* experience is our only experience.

We didn’t ask for it.
 We didn’t choose it.
 We merely have it.
 And we have it for
 a very limited time.

Lived experience, lived body.

Take a tree as example. A tree is a tree, isn't it?

Well, yes, there are the facts of trees. We can look them up in books or online or ask experts.

But is there something else?

Take as an example the water oak. It's a tree. It doesn't grow in Minnesota, but it's very common where I grew up.

My father and grandfather and uncles taught me about trees. Knowing which tree is useful for what is indispensable knowledge for farmers.

Water oak is useless in terms of building anything. It rots quickly.

Where I'm from, the best tree for most lumber purposes is white oak. I haven't seen those around here. White oaks are best, and somewhere in between is burr oak. Which, this area has, because there's a Burr Oaks Park in town.

So, my lived experience of water oaks, white oaks, and burr oaks is of a particular type of experience; my experience is about their usefulness around the farm. And my lived body knows it's a heck of a lot harder to chop down and dress out a white oak than a water oak.

Water oaks are only good for firewood, in my lived experience.

Your experience may be that water oaks are the most beautiful things ever. If you grew up in most of the southeastern US, you may have grown up loving water oaks because . . . they grow near water. Maybe you've got precious memories of water oaks growing by a meandering creek.

Same tree. Different *experiences* of the same tree.

Fact is, this example is true of almost everything for almost everybody. Automobiles. Beds. Fabric. Oatmeal. Grits. On and on. Subjective experience defines them.

But why focus so much on our own, subjective experience?

The answer is: In order to realize that our subjective experience *is our* subjective experience. This serves two functions:

One, so that we examine our own experience and realize that we are living in our bodies in a particular time and place. And,

Two, so that we realize that our own experience is not everyone else's experience.

For example, when the subject of being in nature comes up, I half-jokingly say that going into the woods doesn't feel relaxing to me. It feels like going to work.

Some might say, "Oh, that's horrible!"

No. It's not. It's merely different . . .

But, how do so many of us respond to difference? Often, not in a particularly constructive way: "You see trees *that way*? That's just weird!"

Subjective experience.

I didn't *choose* how I feel about trees. My feeling came from my experience. *You* didn't choose how *you* feel about trees either. Your feeling came from your subjective experience.

Once we get that crucial fact through our heads, the world begins to look a whole lot different. Suddenly, the world is not a collection of facts. It is, rather, a subjectively constructed reality based on subjective experience.

#One of the poisons of the dominant white middle class mindset here in the US is that the white middle class see their experience and options as *normative*. And, unfortunately, many oppressed people also see white middle class prejudices as normative.

And then begins the cycle of saying to yourself, "I'm not good enough. There's something wrong with me."

But here we are at the Equinox. Consider the difference between the subjective experience of a tree and the subjective experience of the Equinox. There's one big difference between the two experiences: All of us can use our sense perceptions to experience a tree; none of us can actually feel when the Equinox occurs.

Alone, I would never figure it out. The Equinox is an experience because *other people* are having the experience, and human beings have—amazingly—figured out how to make that event concrete. Into an experience.

When the sun rose this morning at Stonehenge, people there could actually experience the Equinox. The sun rose over the Heelstone, and those inside the stone circle could see physical evidence of the Equinox. They *experienced* it (even though in fact the sun rises slightly to the right of where it rose 5000 years ago).

But notice what has happened. The Equinox is a collective, social activity because people were able to build an astronomical device that made an abstract concept into an experience.

The difference between a tree and the equinox is an important distinction. Which I will consider further.

Now, let's listen to a story about something that appears magical, but . . .

Reading of *The Magical Yet* by Angela DiTerlizzi

Part Two: The Big Picture

Dr. Jerome Stone is a philosopher and theologian best known for his advocacy of religious naturalism, a non-theistic way of understanding reality which is a companion movement to Humanism. #Dr. Jerome Stone wrote: ". . . religion is an effort to orient ourselves in the big picture."

That rings true to me. True not only concerning the continued existence of religions but also quite possibly it is the very origin of religion.

Orienting ourselves toward the big picture and connecting with . . .

ourselves,

others,

the planet,

and the cosmos.

This human enterprise has been going on for some time now.

We still don't know for sure what megaliths such as Stonehenge are all about, but they appear to have been markers of the seasons.

#Think about it: How amazing was it when human beings figured out how to pull four days out of the morass of days and see that those days were unlike the others, were turning points of the seasons. How did human beings figure that out? They didn't know how many days there are in a year. They didn't know what a year was!

(We all know Stonehenge, but in fact, cultures all over the planet figured out how to mark the seasons.)

What a huge human enterprise. And think about the people who figured out the astronomical alignment for things such as Stonehenge. I think I'm safe in saying that *those* people were not the same ones who figured out how to quarry and *move* those 25 ton stones well over a hundred miles. Different talents. Different engineers.

And all *those* creative people were dependent upon other creative people who figured out the logistics for that number of people to move that number of stones.

Human beings are amazing.

Look around. How many of us can imagine how to construct a building of this size? How many of us can make glass? How many of us can make bricks? How many of us can lay bricks? (Actually, I can, and my experience of laying bricks tells me that the masons who built these walls were amazing!)

Look around. How many of us know how this microphone even works, let alone know how to build this microphone? Or how to turn the knobs and push the buttons to make it connect with the world wide web?

Then, think about today, the spring equinox.

#The various religions that human beings have created over the years have coöpted seasonal markers such as the spring equinox, pinning their own versions of nature and the gods onto these quarter points. But the seasons came first; they are the reality. The rest is window-dressing.

#It is fitting that we Humanists have returned to celebrating the original days rather than appropriating a Passover, Ramadan, Easter, Nowruz, Hindu Holi, Taoist Shen of Water, or the earth-based Ostera. All these are spring celebrations and celebrations of spring. All are human efforts to orient ourselves toward a bigger picture. As Dr. Stone said, ". . .religion is an effort to orient ourselves in the big picture."

So is science. So is literature and architecture and painting and music and on and on.

#For some, "the big picture" is a god on a throne. For some, "the big picture" is a god or gods emanating from the earth. For others, "the big picture" is our sense of awe and wonder at the whole bloomin' thing.

And us. That naturalistic, materialist understanding of "the big picture" has been hard won, and many people on our planet today cannot express that truth, even if they believe it. #The non-supernatural vision has inspired many but frightened many more, and our ability to say it, loud and proud, is a hard-won right earned by forebears who were willing to say their truth, even in the face of excommunication, prison, torture, and execution.

Many of us wish to "orient ourselves in the big picture" with an understanding as close to the *factual* big picture as humanly possible. Those forebears gave us that chance.

Human enterprise is a wondrous thing.

#Human enterprise is a whole lot of people for a very long time experiencing that power of "yet."

Imagine: Many years ago, someone said, "We don't know what the movement of the sun has to do with the seasons."

Somebody said "yet."

"We don't know how to build a device that accurately marks the seasons."

Somebody said "yet."

People said, "It's not possible to speak the truth of reality in the face of totalitarian religion."

Somebody said, "yet."

People said, "There's no institution in Minneapolis where heretics can gather together with mutual respect and care."

Somebody said, "yet."

"Yet" is indeed a powerful word.

Today, we're saying, "We don't know how to save the planet from climate disaster."

Some folks—like our climate justice team—are saying, “yet.”

People are saying, “We don’t know how to be with people who are not like us.”

Some folks—like our Moving Toward Equity Team—are saying, “yet.”

People are saying, “I’m overwhelmed by all the problems in the world. There’s nothing I can do!”

Some folks—like our Active Voices Team—are saying, “Here’s something you *can* do, *now, today.*”

As Jane read this morning in *The Magical Yet*:

“Be patient.

Yet can’t do it all overnight.

Some things take days, months,

or years to get right.”

#Our species has been on this planet for something on the order of 300,000 years. The dominant world religions emerged somewhere between five and seven thousand years ago. A blink of an eye in the life of our species. There is so much more wisdom out there than is contained in any or all of the religions we have—shamanism, animism, polytheism, monotheism, materialism, naturalism . . .

All of them, all of them are about that work that Dr. Jerome Stone wrote about: “. . . religion is an effort to orient ourselves in the big picture.”

#Our bodies hold a lot more wisdom than those johnny-come-lately religions do.

What are we afraid of?

#We today are afraid of exactly what human beings have always feared: change. The passing of time from what we understand (in our own lived experience, anyway) to what we can’t even begin to understand.

#We can cower into a corner and say, “No, I can’t take responsibility! All the truth is known and there’s a god in charge and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Or, we can say, “We haven’t yet.”

#There's no better time of the year than spring to see how powerful "yet" can be. Yes, change is frightening. But look around—the change we are seeing is about possibility.

#We can cower back into dreams of a time we thought that we did understand
But, you know what? We didn't.

And we don't.

And we may not ever.

But #change is the only constant in our cosmos. The best way to enjoy the ride is to keep in mind the magical possibilities of "yet."

That's my invitation to you and me. When change looks frightening, I invite us to reply, "yet!"

SOURCES and Further Reading

Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.

D.J. Hobbs, "How to think like a phenomenologist," *Psyche*.