

**Becoming is an Anti-memory  
a homily by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
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The Taoist Zhuangzi told this tale:

Once there was a frog that lived in a deep, narrow well. He had never seen anything else.

One day, a sea turtle came upon the well and shouted down the deep, narrow hole: "Hello! Anybody down there?"

"Yes," said the frog. "Come on down for a visit and see the greatest body of water on earth!"

"What?" said the sea turtle. "Haven't you seen the ocean?"

"Why would I want to?" shouted the frog.

"Because you are mistaken!" said the sea turtle. "The ocean is much greater than your deep, narrow well. The ocean is so grand that drought never makes it lower and floods never raise it."

"Liar!" shouted the frog. "Go away!"

So, the sea turtle went on her way, wondering at the depth of willful ignorance.\*

A story for your reflection.

On this Sunday when we celebrate the many, many volunteers who make First Unitarian Society the place that it is—and I'm sure we have left out a goodly portion of the volunteers—I'd like to get all of us thinking about the question of "what next?"

Sure, your newly-elected FUS Board will soon be joining together to envision a future for FUS. And I'm confident that their vision will be far-reaching. Yet, this *is* a democratically governed congregation. The Board and the staff need to hear from *you*.

Broadly speaking, #all of us are working toward the same goal: saving the planet and its living things.

More narrowly speaking, our mission statement reads: As a congregational humanist community, we at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis foster a free search for knowledge and meaning, strive for justice, and serve one another, the Twin Cities, and beyond.

We list our values: Compassion; Integrity; Equity; Engagement; Connection.

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Our theme for June is Celebrating Blessings. Sure, #celebrating blessings can be about listing off instances of personal good fortune. But it can also be about realizing the unique gifts each of us has to share with this unique congregation.

A few ideas to get you thinking: I've talked about some of the ideas of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze before. Back in the 1980s Deleuze created the term "anti-memory."

#"Anti-memory" for Deleuze is a way of conceptualizing how we combine memories from the past and anticipation of the future to creatively live in the possibilities of the moment.

It is an "anti-" "memory" because were we to act in *this* moment in exactly the same way that we acted in the past, we would not be acting freely or creatively. We would be living in memory alone.

Rather, we must act in a way *other than* how we have acted in the past.

Oddly enough, Deleuze coined the term—and he has been dead for some while now—but the term has been reinvented in the field of neuroscience.

Nowadays the term *antimemory* is at the cutting edge of neuroscience as a way of examining why most of the memories we create disappear within minutes.

For example, what did you have for breakfast? Now, while you were eating breakfast, you were conscious of what you were doing. While you were eating breakfast, had

someone asked you what you were having, the answer would have been easy. Now, it's probably not as easy. Three weeks from now, you most likely won't remember at all . . . that is, except if you eat the same thing every Sunday morning! (Which would be the other kind of "anti memory.")

Neuroscientists have been asking: How is it that a conscious memory—which is a neural firing in the brain—how and why does that memory disappear?

At the moment, some scientists are beginning to think that anti-memory is a property of the brain—a memory is a neural firing and an anti-memory is a neural firing that erases the other neural firing, the memory. Quote:

So it seems that in humans as well as in animals, antimemories are critical to prevent a potentially dangerous build-up of electrical excitation in the brain, something that could lead to epileptic-like brain states and seizures. It's thought antimemories may also play an important role in stopping memories from spontaneously activating each other, which would lead to confusion and severely disordered thought processes.\* (end quote)

This is true of all mammalian brains.

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze got there *intuitively* decades ago by thinking through the question: How do we go about doing something that we don't remember doing before: How do we manage to do a new thing?

Memory is part of that, no doubt. But so is anticipation of the future being different than the situation in the past.

Think for a moment as an example the invention of the automobile. Early automobiles looked like—and were called—"horseless carriages."

The model—the memory—going into early automobiles was the buggy or carriage pulled by horses. Part of the reason for that sameness was *necessity*. The technology for building automobiles was based on existing carriage making. Carriage makers were the ones who knew how to build an object light enough to hold people and be propelled by internal combustion engines.

General Motors products, for example, until the 1990s, had a little plate on the floorboard that read "Body by Fisher." (Some of you remember that.)

The Fisher brothers first made carriages. Then they designed and built the car bodies for General Motors automobiles.

Another reason early cars look like carriages is that there were almost no paved roads when cars began to travel the roads. Early automobiles had to negotiate roads built for horses—muddy, rutted, very few bridges. Therefore, they had to have the road clearance that carriages had.

Or consider the example of the simple tea kettle. Tea kettles were first designed to sit on coals from an actual fire in a fireplace. They were made of iron. Then, they were used on ranges. They were made of steel or tin rather than iron, but they retained their former shape.

Now, we have electric tea kettles. There's no particular reason for electric tea kettles to look like tin tea kettles that looked like iron tea kettles. But many do, though nowadays some have begun to look more like pitchers. But pitchers were never heated in fireplaces or on range tops. So they don't *look* like tea kettles.

(Although some of us are old enough to remember stovetop aluminum coffee percolators—now a nostalgia item. Those did indeed look like pitchers and the contemporary electric tea kettle.)

We can watch this in real time in our own day, as more and more cars are electric. Electric cars do not need to be designed in the same way that internal combustion cars were. We can watch the subtle shifts in how electric cars are engineered.

At the moment, electric cars look more or less exactly like internal-combustion propelled cars.

I suspect that, someday, these transitional electric cars will look quite funny to people —“Why did they make them like *that*?”

The answer is: memory and an inability to imagine anything but memories!

The next innovation in electric car design will be an “anti-memory.” It won't be remembering what internal combustion cars looked like, any more than contemporary automobiles now resemble carriages pulled by horses.

Now, apply that idea to what we are doing here today.

That's my question: As a congregation, we're moving from internal combustion to electric; analog to digital. What should the new FUS electric car look like?

To find that, we do well to use anti-memory.

Sure, some memories are good ones and are very appropriate for use in the future: We want to keep the good features of the old design: gathering; singing together; having food together; taking care of each other; having fun . . .

Way back at the beginning of the concept of congregational humanism, FUS minister John Dietrich phrased it this way:

The great word of humanism is that one word: *together*. In just the measure that we can find something of ourselves in all others, and something of all others in ourselves, will we come to share the spirit of humanism . . .

That's the good part of the past; the good memory: *together*.

What needs to be the anti-memory? How do we combine memory of the past and anticipation of the future to live in the creative possibilities of the moment?

For example, the pandemic forced our hand on the audio-visual equipment that we are using today. We had been planning on something like this for several years, but the cost in equipment, time, and staff stopped us. But we had imagined the anti-memory of the AV equipment we have today, and when necessity arrived, we were ready.

But at this moment, the technology follows the memory of how we did our assemblies before covid. Is that the right way to do it, or do we need to use our anti-memory?

Have we merely put a motor on a buggy?

It's a question to ask.

What other opportunities are we missing after this long pandemic's time-out-of-time?

That's my invitation to us all: Let's live not in memory but in the anti-memory imagined by Gilles Deleuze.

What shape should the next tea pot of congregational humanism look like?

The future is truly in your . . . hands, yes, and in your imagination.

### **SOURCES and Further Reading**

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