

**The Islands That Aren't
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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INTRODUCTION: Books of Beasts

Medieval Europeans believed that God revealed valuable lessons in morality to humanity through nature itself. A very popular way of teaching those lessons—through a bit of church intervention—were books called Bestiaries, or “Books of Beasts.”

Now, I hasten to add that by “nature” and “lessons of morality” I mean the often *imaginary* nature created by priests and monks who didn't get out much and had not seen much of the real world. In other words, many of the creatures related in the books of beasts were completely imaginary. Legends.

But the books of beasts often had elaborate illustrations, and in those pre-screen days when most Europeans could not read either their own vernacular language or church Latin, the illustrations were the most important part, admired and treasured.

Probably the most enduring story from those books is of the phoenix, an immortal bird that cyclically flies into flames, is burned to ash, and then regenerates for a new lease on life. In Medieval Europe, the story was used to illustrate the sacrifice of Jesus. But it also had a subtext of personal change—hitting rock bottom and starting over again, and that's why, I suspect, the story has endured.

Another story from the books of beasts was of weary seafarers who had been at sea too long and had run out of drinkable water. As the story goes, the sailors are in utter despair for their lives when they see an island. They land on the island, anchor their ship to it, and build a fire, planning to find fresh water and cook a hearty meal.

Alas for the sailors, they have anchored themselves to a sleeping whale. The fire scorches the whale, wakes it up, and, in pain, the beast dives to put out the fire. The unfortunate sailors are dragged to their doom in a watery grave.

It's a cautionary tale. Not only for seafarers, but for all of us. As with the legend of the phoenix, there was a religious point to the tale: anchor yourself only to the true and real God, not the transitory illusions of safety and well-being in this world.

But also like the story of the phoenix, it has another, underlying story: Don't let your expectations get ahead of a realistic assessment of the situation.

That's what I want to talk about today: expectations and pragmatic realism. After all, there appear to be a lot of islands, but, indeed, many of them are not actually there.

ONE: My Summer Vacation

Well, my summer vacation! As many of you know, I took a short sabbatical this summer. The time off was in order to work on some longer lectures. Back in June, I presented a paper at the annual conference of the Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought (IARPT) titled "Lived Theologies of First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis."

I told the scholars gathered there—mostly philosophers and theologians in seminaries and religious studies programs—part of the story of how this congregation has been an outlier among Unitarian Universalist congregations by staying explicitly Humanist since 1916.

After all, the philosophy of Humanism has changed a lot since 1916, and a congregation is not like a graduate seminar in which you simply start where you left off at the end of class last week.

Here we deal with life, death, birth, aging, disease, and on and on—all the challenges and triumphs of human life. Living a full life can be a *subject* in the classroom, but *actually living* a full and fulfilling life in the real world is considerably more complex. And an ever-changing group of human beings navigating life across generations is even more complex still!

But . . . there we are. Here we are. This congregation continues. We are not an imaginary island.

I tell the story of First Unitarian Society whenever I get the chance. Most people—even scholars of liberal religion—have no idea that this unique congregation exists as it has for well over a century.

Speaking of graduate seminars, another sabbatical item was preparation to teach a graduate class for United Theological School, an introduction to Humanism that I will be team-teaching with Rev. Kevin Jagoe. As some of you know, Kevin started attending this congregation some years ago, became our media coordinator for some time, married his husband here; and trained for ministry. He is now minister in a congregation in Pennsylvania. Kevin and I will be conducting that class on Zoom, BTW.

As you may know, United Theological Seminary is now offering a Humanism concentration in their graduate program, which will prepare Humanists for leadership in secular groups, congregations, and chaplaincy.

I have also been researching and writing for a series of three lectures that I will be presenting in Boston this winter and at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly next summer. The series is called the Minns Lectures, sponsored by two of the oldest Unitarian Universalist congregations, King's Chapel in Boston and First Church, Boston.

The overarching subject of the series I will be presenting is the relationship between Humanism and Pentecostalism. Frankly, there hasn't been much of one. But as some of you know, I grew up Pentecostal, and there are several former-Pentecostals who have become Humanists . . . including FUS's own Jé Hooper. (Jé will be joining me for the talk I give at General Assembly next year. In Pittsburg.

Pentecostalism and Humanism are both twentieth-century inventions, though of course the ideas embedded in both movements go back millennia. But both movements really took off as they now exist in the early-twentieth century as fringe, extreme reactions to the theory of natural selection.

Humanism went into a hard materialist, naturalist, reaction: If you can't measure it, it most likely doesn't exist.

Pentecostalism went in exactly the other direction: For Pentecostals there is a God above and beyond the natural cosmos that can and does ignore the laws of nature, and true knowledge is available only through the inspiration of God—what Pentecostals consider an in-filling of the Holy Spirit.

Humanism started small and has remained relatively small. Pentecostalism started small and is now second in size only to Roman Catholicism worldwide. There are

approximately 68 million Pentecostals in the US today. A few more people than Humanism can claim!

What's going on?

Pentecostalism is one of the most diverse religious traditions; Humanism and Unitarian Universalism are still not very diverse. What's up with that?

So, some questions. And a lot of research and writing!

That's what I did with my summer vacation. And I will be sharing my findings with you, of course.

But now, back to work!

TWO: Expectations Dashed

That whale in the Medieval books of beasts pulled a ship and its crew down to a watery grave, all because the sailors got an idea in their heads: They believed they had found an island at last. "We're saved!" I'm sure some shouted.

Expectations dashed.

Kind of like Charlie Brown and Lucy and the football. Every time, Charlie accepts Lucy's invitation to kick the football. And, every time, Lucy snatches the ball away at the last millisecond.

So, why doesn't Charlie Brown stop accepting Lucy's invitation to kick that football?

Why does he allow his expectations to be dashed every darn time?

To be fair, Charlie *does* wise up to some extent, but . . . his skepticism is outweighed by his *wish* to trust. Charlie just can't handle Lucy's response to his skepticism: "Waaah. You don't trust me!"

Expectations dashed.

We've all got 'em. We know . . . we *just know* that our wayward loved ones are finally going to straighten up and fly right, as the old saying goes.

We know . . . we *just know* that our nation is right on the cusp, right on the edge of straightening up and flying right, realizing at last that compassion and justice are the right way for a nation to go . . .

Expectations dashed.

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The long Covid shutdown—the effects of which—as we all know—just keeeeeep going!—has dashed all sorts of expectations, from weddings to memorial services to vacation plans to job security to the entire world economy. It's not what we expected! It just wasn't supposed to be like this!

Yet, the effects continue to ripple, and no one really knows how this disruption will eventually reshape traditional social structures—whether that be how and where we work or attending congregational gatherings.

Nobody knows, but as a congregation, we have to decide—the Lucy called Covid just keeps snatching away the football. What to do: island or whale?

Well, we're not the first generation to experience dashed expectations. The Buddha long ago began teaching that attachment to desired outcomes is the cause of much of human suffering in this world. The Buddha trimmed the message down to a succinct point: Attachment to specific outcomes is just like thinking a whale is an island.

Stoic philosophers knew the danger of illusions and expectations. Marcus Aurelius put it this way:

The art of living is more like the art of the wrestler than the art of the dancer. Be ready, stand firm, and expect to be hit. (*Meditations* 7. 61)

Saul Alinsky, one of the most successful community organizers of all time, knew the danger of false expectations. In his book *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky was nothing if not pragmatic. In the introduction to the book he says this:

As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be—it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be.

In reply, all I can say is, “Darn! I wish he wasn’t correct. But he is.”

In another entry, Marcus Aurelius writes,

A cucumber is ruined? Don’t eat it. There are briars in the road? Go around them. That’s enough to do. No reason to ask, “Why are there such things in the world?”

People who know the nature of the world will laugh at you. (*Meditations* 8.50)

Dashed expectations.

Sure, we all hope to stand on solid ground, firmly anchored, rather than building a fire on a whale’s back. But . . . overconfidence leads to disaster: “People who know the nature of the world will laugh at you.”

Isn’t the pandemic supposed to be over? I expected it would be done after a vaccine came out! Well, at least after . . . what is it . . . three shots at this point? Four? I can’t even remember!

That darn island that I thought I saw? It wasn’t there.

And so many other islands we saw were in fact only sleeping whales:

The Roe versus Wade decision.

The stability of US democratic ideals and practices.

Endless gun violence.

The climate.

Inflation.

The list—unfortunately—goes on . . . whales, not islands . . .

As Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön puts it,

When we resist change, it's called suffering. But when we can completely let go and not struggle against it, when we can embrace the groundlessness of our situation and relax into its dynamic quality, that's called enlightenment.

As Chödrön points out, when our expectations are dashed, that's an opportunity for enlightenment!

If we can let go rather than resisting and struggling;
if we can accept the limitations of our own power and knowledge.
"When we can embrace the groundlessness of our situation and relax into its dynamic quality . . . "

The #Buddhists are here to tell us . . . *it's all whales.*

My favorite aphorism concerning attachment to future outcomes comes from ancient Japan: "Demons laugh at talk of next year."

"Demons laugh at talk of next year."

CONCLUSION: We're Back!

That said, nothing gets done without planning, and planning requires "talk of next year," even though the wise give the various demons in the details their due!

What do *you* hope to see in the coming months? Be watching your email. A congregational survey will be arriving in the coming weeks.

And, most of all, talk with staff, with leaders, and with each other—what do *you* want to see . . . and, more importantly, what do you want to *do* inn this congregation?