

"Natural Supernaturalism"
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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Out of Eternity
This new Day is born;
Into Eternity,
At night, will return.

~from "Today"
by Thomas Carlyle

INTRODUCTION: Generational Tweets Revisited

Last week I shared a series of three Tweets that I saw recently on American Atheist Twitter. The first Tweet read:

I quickly became an atheist after leaving an orthodox Christian faith. Five years later I'm open to spirituality but absolutely no organized religion.

A response to that Tweet read:

I cannot get my head around what is meant by "spirituality." Are we really talking about "spirits" in this day and age? LOL

The response came back:

For me, spirituality is embracing the unknown with a sense of awe and childlike wonder. There's plenty we still don't know about life. I'm open to the strangeness of the universe without dogma.

As I pointed out last week, these three Tweets demonstrate not only a personality difference among secular, non-religious people such as humanists, atheists, and agnostics, but also a generational divide.

#In a multi-cultural, multi-generational congregation such as First Unitarian Society, respecting diverse ideas is what we do: it is *part of the practice* of a relational, communal, gathering. After all, each week we repeat our congregational covenant and say,

This is our great covenant:
to dwell together in peace;
to seek the truth in love;
and to help one another (James Vila Blake, 1880, adapted)

We mean that. #Both Humanism and Unitarian Universalism stand or fall according to how those already within the movement welcome those joining the movement.

To help frame how this works, I pointed out last week that I see Humanism as breaking into three distinct historical periods: the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Humanism that closely followed the thinking of Pragmatist philosophers such as William James and John Dewey. That's the first period.

The second distinct period of Humanism was born out of the experience of the Second World War. This Humanism was the result of vast Federal spending on science and technology, which led to explosive growth in American universities, and built the America we live in today—including the sprawling segregation of American suburbs and neighborhoods and the brutalizing extremes of poverty and wealth.

The Humanism of that second period reflected the optimism of the time, a vision of science and technology building a nation of educated, affluent citizens.

Those hopes underlie the sentiments in the second Tweet:

I cannot get my head around what is meant by "spirituality." Are we really talking about "spirits" in this day and age? LOL

I'm calling this attitude that results from second-wave Humanism, "Suburban Humanism," with all the dripping irony that the word "suburban" has come to reflect, including scientism, opportunity-hording, and white-flight.

#As I see it, a new Humanism, a third-wave Humanism, is struggling to be born, one that, as the third Tweet expresses it, exhibits an openness to "strangeness."

Because, if there's one thing our planet has plenty of at the moment, it is strangeness. . .

ONE: Where's the Pizzazz?

I.

Let's dig deeper into the thought-worlds—the "imaginariums" reflected by those two Tweeters.

In our strange world today, there is a lot of anti-Enlightenment sentiment. When we talk about the Age of Enlightenment, the focus is generally on the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when ideas such as

the scientific method, secular government, representative government, individual rights, and the rule of law became popular topics among educated Europeans.

To complicate the picture, it was also the era of the murderous expansion of European colonialism and of racialized slavery.

#There are lots of things to respect and lots of things to criticize about Enlightenment thought. But one thing that often gets forgotten in our contemporary dismissal of the Enlightenment is that criticism of the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment is nothing new. I would even argue that there has been far more ink spilled *criticizing* the Enlightenment than in furthering its aims.

The European artistic matrix nowadays called Romanticism was an early reaction against the increased focus on reason and science. If you've ever taken European history, you memorized the standard periods: Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Romanticism . . . etc.

The Romantic movement started in Germany, spread across Europe, and eventually came to the United States in a movement among Unitarians that we call Transcendentalism.

The essence of *all* the movements—and the center of criticism today—is that scientific thought and reason is *reductive*.

Where's the mystery?

Where's the art?

Where's the *sturm und drang*?

Where's the spirituality?

Where's the room for strangeness?

Where's the wonder and awe in a naturalistic/materialistic view of the cosmos?

II.

One person who took the question of reductivism extremely seriously was a Scottish writer of the nineteenth century named Thomas Carlyle. Not much known today outside of universities, Carlyle was the most important influence on young American writers from the 1830s through the American Civil War.

Carlyle's thought was so important to artistic young Americans, that the young and then unknown Ralph Waldo Emerson took ship to Scotland and showed up unannounced on Thomas Carlyle's doorstep. Thus began a bromance that lasted throughout most of the nineteenth century, since both writers had long lives.

At the end of his life, deep in dementia, Emerson still recognized and commented on photos of Carlyle.

The book that inspired an entire generation of American writers and created the movement we call Transcendentalism was a novel by Carlyle from 1831 titled *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*.

"*Sartor Resartus*" is Latin, meaning "The Tailor Re-Tailored."

In the novel, Carlyle creates a character named Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, meaning something along the lines of "God-born Devil's-dung." Teufelsdröckh is a troubled young German Romantic scholar who has written a book titled *Clothes: Their Origin and Influence*.

(By the way, Carlyle is credited with *creating* the field of study concerning clothing, which did not exist when he made it up, apparently thinking such a subject was a total joke.)

So, what was Carlyle saying that was so new and exciting to young Americans of the time?

For one thing, Carlyle was fluent in German, and so read the German Romantic poets and philosophers in the original, before those works had been translated into English. Carlyle was communicating something **brand new** to the English-speaking world.

What did Carlyle say? He titles one chapter of his book "Natural Supernaturalism" and says this, for example:

. . . existence itself is miraculous . . . life contains elements of wonder that can never be defined or eradicated by physical science.¹

You can see how this idea summarizes what young Americans were looking for: a way to *transcend* the senses and materialism, therefore evading the *reductive*, while at the same time respecting advances in reason and science. That was the program. Carlyle said this in a letter from the time:

That the Supernatural differs not from the Natural is a great truth, which the last century (especially in France) has been engaged in demonstrating. The *Philosophes* (i.e., the French Enlightenment philosophers) went far wrong, however, in this, that instead of raising the Natural to the Supernatural, they strove to sink the

¹ Sartor Resartus, p. 294. Scanned image and text by George P. Landlow

Supernatural to the Natural. The gist of my whole way of thought is to do not the latter but the *former*.

“Instead of raising the Natural to the Supernatural, they strove to sink the Supernatural to the Natural.”

The word “sink” says it all.

Carlyle’s project, which become the project of the Unitarian Transcendentalists in the US and other American writers such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, became an effort to “raise” the natural world to the level of the supernatural world . . . ”

To *enchant* the world that reductionist science and materialism damage.

As Emily Dickinson wrote—scandalously for the time:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -
I keep it, staying at Home -
With a Bobolink for a Chorister -
And an Orchard, for a Dome -

...

God preaches, a noted Clergyman -
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
I’m going, all along. (#236)

Carlyle praised writing by the Transcendentalists for “the recognition . . . by these Transcendentalists . . . of a higher faculty . . . than Understanding;

of Reason (*Vernunft*), the pure, ultimate light of our nature." (*Works*, 27: 27)

This, by the way, points out a common mistake concerning what people such as Dickinson, Emerson, and Thoreau were attempting to do. They were *not* searching for ways to exist on pink clouds of imagination in a fantasy world. They were looking for ways to express that *real clouds*—clouds that can be seen and painted and photographed—are the actual wonders of our existence on this planet, revealing to us “the pure, ultimate light of our nature.”

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
I'm going, all along. (#236)

TWO: Tik

I.

Awe. Wonder. Mystery. Strangeness. “The pure, ultimate light of our nature.”

For strange, how about the Tiktaalik roseae, a reptile from the Late Devonian Period, approximately 375 million years ago.

Many now think that Tiktaalik is the so-called “missing link,” a sea creature that—by random mutation—evolved the ability to survive part of the time out of the water, thus gaining an edge that eventually led its descendants—such as *homo sapiens*—to exist on land.

Online, you can purchase a throw pillow to celebrate your ancient relative, Tik. You can even purchase greeting cards to send to all of your relatives, celebrating *everyone's* relative, Tik.

Awesome. Wonderful. Mysterious. Strange "The pure, ultimate light of our nature."

But, now, consider another creature, the Epaulette shark.

Epaulette sharks are evolving right before our eyes. Some Epaulettes are adjusting to the disappearance of water due to climate change . . . by spending more and more time on land. They are now ranging up to a hundred feet from the water's edge.

In the case of the Epaulette shark, we may well be looking at the next master of the planet, long after the environmentally-disastrous reign of *homo sapiens* has been long forgotten.

Awesome.

Mysterious.

Strange

II.

I hasten to mention that #I love living with a naturalistic worldview. I don't believe the universe has a purpose or that it is headed for one. That's good with me.

I don't believe that human beings are the cosmos attempting to be aware of itself any more than I think that the universe is attempting to be aware of itself (or not aware of itself) in sparrows or squirrels or rabbits.

#I also don't believe that human consciousness continues to exist after death, but that's fine with me. The vase recycling center that is the cosmos is all the eternity I need. Imagine the "places you will go" and the shapes you will be!

#We are conscious animals among many other varieties of conscious animals. We are on a planet among many other planets. We are in a solar system among many other solar systems.

And that?

Awesome.

Mysterious.

Strange

III.

#What Thomas Carlyle attempted to achieve with the concept he called “natural supernaturalism” was “raising” the natural world to the level of the supernatural world, to *enchant* the material world that science and the human senses easily perceive and thus, sadly, we forget how amazing our reality is. “Natural supernaturalism” is nowadays called “religious naturalism.”

Dr. Demian Wheeler, a philosopher of religion at United Theological Seminary, defined religious naturalism in this way at a forum right here at First Unitarian Society:

. . . religious naturalism is a perspective that regards nature as both exhaustive of reality and worthy of deep reverence and devotion. On the one hand, nature is all there is; there is no such thing as the supernatural. On the other hand, it is both possible and desirable to live a spiritually fulfilling existence on a completely naturalistic basis.

The photos we have on the wall of our Upper Assembly Hall this morning were taken by the Hubble telescope. So far, the Hubble has photographed objects as far away as 10-15 billion light-years, the farthest area being called the Hubble Deep Field.

Ten to fifteen billion light-years away.

Now consider photos from the James Webb Space Telescope, just now up and operating. The James Webb Space Telescope has now peered 35 billion light-years away.

Human "sight" more than doubled in length, a distance measured in light-years.

If the photos sent back by the James Webb Space Telescope don't knock your socks, as the old saying goes, "you ain't got no socks!"

Dr. Wheeler says it better:

For the religious naturalist, *nature itself* is capable of evoking awe, wonder, gratitude, amazement, celebration; *nature itself* is the object of our ultimate concerns and commitments; *nature itself* is sacred—i.e. vitally and centrally important and, thus, deserving of our utmost loyalty.

Thomas Carlyle could not have said it better . . .

CONCLUSION: Unlearning

#Being or becoming "transcendent" is not the right term for a mystical experience that convinces you that all that you see in the natural world is in reality supernatural. As Thomas Carlyle said,

That the Supernatural differs not from the Natural is a great truth . . .

As for me, I would say that *that* is the greatest truth of all. And, not only is it a truth, it is a fact.

How do we achieve the wholeness that we feel we've lost? By re-enchanting our worlds.

How do we each re-enchant our world? By becoming magicians, wizards . . . artists.

Artists doing all sorts of arts, even the art of creating ourselves.

The poet, visual artist (and Unitarian) ee cummings wrote, "The Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself."

Allow me to broaden the genders there:

"Artists are no other than those who *unlearn* what they have learned, in order to know themselves."

That's the invitation that life extends to each of us: to experience deeply "the pure, ultimate light of our nature."

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
I'm going, all along. (#236)

SOURCES

Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus: *The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, 1831

"Today" by Thomas Carlyle

Emily Dickinson, #236

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