

**"The Courage to Grow Up"
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION: Painting the Walls

Suppose for a moment that every human being is an artist. For the sake of argument, let's be specific—a visual artist painting on a cave wall, as our human ancestors did forty and fifty thousand years ago.

Blank canvas, as it were for both the human and the cave walls. There's no past to live up to—no art classes; no coffee table books full of work we can't remotely create. Blank canvas.

Now, what do we as artists paint on the cave walls?

Do we mirror our surroundings, the flora and fauna, in an attempt to get the look as real as possible? Cameras and smart phones haven't been invented, so if we don't paint it, it won't be preserved.

Or do we depict the dead—the remembered faces of those we care about now gone to somehow preserve their memory against the ravages of time?

Or do we paint figures that reflect an inner mood, emotions?

Might we try to draw the unsayable? The stories that we tell around the fire concerning a world we can't see with human eyes?

Is there such a place?

Or do we tire of thinking and merely reproduce the pre-existing clichés—the *doxa*, the *orthodoxy*—of the tribe, passing on to posterity some of the gossip that humans are prone to?

One thing I think is fairly certain: the artists in such a situation will not be attempting to express individuality. That won't make sense or even occur to anyone until overabundance begins to atomize people. The concept of the atomized individual is a

concept born of plenty and safety. And that's not what our human forebears lived with.

No. I think that our pictures on the cave walls are going to be about us . . . our group; the human beings we depend upon and care about and the things we do every day.

My hunch is that the artists would attempt to express some of the most important things to the tribe. The most important things being what we call "sacred." Actually, that's not a guess—that's what we see on cave walls—reverence and gratitude for the sacred in the every day.

The surviving paintings depict the web of existence surrounding the artists and the tribe—the animals and plants that keep the people alive and well. There are paintings of the hunt; of sacred dances.

#So far as I know, there there aren't any cave paintings of people painting in caves. Again, that self-reflexivity piece is the art that comes from a time of plenty. People living on the edge, as our ancestors did, stay grateful and see "the sacred" not as a disembodied something-or-other out in space somewhere. But rather, right here, right now. Today. Among those people and things we care about and care for us.

What I want to consider today is just that: awakening to that wise artist within each of us who sees what is important—our ultimate concerns. #The artist within each of us is struggling to convince us to have the courage to grow up a little . . . to be wise enough to see the sacred—the awesome—right here, right now.

ONE: What's That On Your Back?

#I highly recommend what I see as a good practice for a contemplative time. Write down, or at least deeply imagine, your spiritual biography. The story of your religious and philosophical life.

Were you born into a particular tradition?

How did that tradition suit you as you grew and changed?

Did you leave your birth tradition?

Why?

How many different religious and philosophical traditions have you tried on for size?

How many books and seminars and YouTube videos have you consumed looking for alternatives? For something that felt "true" or "real" or "sacred"?

#The spiritual autobiography has become part and parcel of Western thinking. The first autobiography in the Western world was St. Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*, circa the year 400.

Augustine set the pattern for both the autobiography and the spiritual journal: a life of sin and doubt, a dawning conviction to do right, backsliding, and, finally, salvation.

In both spiritual and secular form, this has become the model of the hero's journey: first we see the hero in the *old* way of living; then there is a crisis, or a series of crises to overcome; and then a *new* way of living with order restored.

In the English language, one of the most famous accounts is by the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan. In 1666 Bunyan published his spiritual autobiography, titled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.

As the style of the time had it, the title page tells the whole story:

Or a brief and faithful
RELATION
of the exceeding mercy of
GOD IN CHRIST
to his poor servant
JOHN BUNYAN

Wherein is particularly shewed, The manner of his conversion, his fight and trouble for Sin, his Dreadful Temptations, also how he despaired for God's mercy, and how the Lord at length through Christ did deliver him from all the guilt and terror that lay upon him.

Yes, classic.

The narrative of *Pilgrim's Progress* relates this same plot. A contemporary video retelling shows how the hero's journey motif is still being used.



Poor Christian, the hero of the story, has a terrible burden on his back that he is so, so weary of carrying. That burden is . . . wait for it . . . sin!

Oh, the trials and tribulations!

Including, famously, a photo shoot at Vanity Fair!

Some of our Christian friends might object, but I would argue that the illustrations for *Pilgrim's Progress* over the centuries contributed to the invention of the fantasy genre.

The imaginations of artists have been inspired over the years to create some great action pictures with some really cool bad guys.

Spoiler alert: Christian eventually runs toward the light . . . And his burden of sin falls away!

Hallelujah! End of story. Happily ever after.

TWO: Would Were It So!

#There's only one problem with this plot: Life doesn't actually work that way, does it?

One major crisis, a few skirmishes and close-calls, then one big solution, and—fade to black—happily ever after.

No, as Unitarian poet e.e. cummings phrased it, "It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are." Cummings recognized the struggle—the nearly constant struggle—of growing up, long after "growing up" is conventionally supposed to be over and done with.

When are we "grown up"? At 25? 35? 45? 65? . . . 95?

No—if you take a look around here, what you see are people in their 90s still learning, doing, growing.

It's not that "growing up" is underrated; it's that "growing up" is not like the hero's journey plot. In reality, a hero's journey is every day. Every day for a lifetime.

Life is about forward motion and change; we learn to live with this reality, or we fight the the change and try to freeze time, which doesn't tend to go well.

Some people have gotten this fact over time.

It's why Christians invented the idea of "backsliding." In *Pilgrim's Progress*, the hero, Christian, loses his burden of sin. Yea! Heaven bound! But we all know that in real life, he's very likely to get that burden back. Lose it. Get it back. Lose it.

That kind of plot won't sell movie tickets!

But it's where most of us live.

And that way . . . the real way that we live . . . has led some to claim that we ourselves . . . the life we live . . . is best considered as a work of art. A masterpiece that we keep working on all of our lives. We are artists of ourselves.

Think for a few moments about Marlene Dietrich, the iconic film star.

She was born in Germany in 1901, named Marie Magdalene. She in fact invented the name "Marlene." Because of her fame, the name subsequently became popular. But she invented it.

She was so obsessed with image that she stipulated that she would OK every photograph of herself that was released—but there are some photos that she did not OK.

What Dietrich did not want for people to know is that her very suave, bi-sexual persona was actually based on her younger self, when she was a brunette cabaret performer in Weimar Germany.

Marlene Dietrich created herself as a work of art.

Explicitly modeling himself on Marlene Dietrich's self-creation, the British rockstar David Bowie created several musical personas, including "The Thin White Duke" and Ziggy Stardust.

Bowie was highly aware of the personas that he created as works of art.

And Madonna and Beyonce. Because even though all of these folks are in the public eye as visual entities, we all know, as Marlene Dietrich knew, that self-creation is mostly about *interior* work; work on our own persons that leads to a change in persona, the outward mask, and visa-versa.

I've quoted philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre before, saying "Napoleon wasn't Napoleon either. He was merely the first person to *think* he was Napoleon." The same is true of Marlene Dietrich. Marlene Dietrich wasn't Marlene Dietrich either. She was merely the first person to *think* that she was Marlene Dietrich.

"It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are."

THREE: The New Materialism

#The courage to grow. It implies an investigation of being itself. It starts in our own minds. It begins there. But investigation—contemplation—leads quickly to the realization that the individual self is an illusion; the self we feel and the self we project as persona is *intersubjective* and relational—our feeling of psychic isolation is an illusion. We are all beings intertwined with other beings.

The painters in the caves understood that instinctively; we today have a much more difficult time realizing our connections.

#The deep investigation of the self, then, leads to the realization and the challenge that *I* must be—I at least *need* to be—otherwise than I am—this is where questions of ethics and morality come in. I must strive to be a more fully-realized version of the me that was born into circumstances that I did not choose. We call it “fate.”

As an old punk rock song phrased it, “It’s a gamble when you get a face.” (Richard Hell and the Voidoids, speaking of self-creation.)

Our birth circumstances are not our choice to make—body-type; race; gender; health; rich/poor. These are the raw materials.

#The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche told us this news concerning self-creation a long time ago: “One must give value to their existence by behaving as if ones very existence were a work of art.”

Kevin Quashie is Professor of English at Brown University, and the author of *Black Aliveness: Or a Poetics of Being*. A poetics of being—“poetics” the term for how poets put poems together. The artistic construction of a poem.

This line of thought is an old one. Alain Locke, founder and philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance, insisted that a life well-lived is a life constructed as a work of art.

Professor Quashie does not use the term “life” but “aliveness.” This usage avoids the static noun “life” to underline the dynamic nature of what he’s talking about. #Life is aliveness. Aliveness is a process that we practice every moment of every day. By so doing, our lives become a work of art, created by how we live each moment.

BTW, I’m not saying every moment is “good” art. I for one write some *extremely* bad poems every day.

Thinking in this direction contributes to a life well-lived. #We are all artists, creating our lives. Reminding ourselves that things that end up in books or museums or the cinema are not the only sorts of art.

Love in its many forms is art. Friendship is an art. Conversation is an art. Cooking is an art. Helping a friend is an art.

No, that sort of art won't sell movie or museum tickets!

But it's an art form all of us can practice.

Beautiful thoughts make a beautiful life. Beautiful actions make a beautiful life.

CONCLUSION: It's Not In the A.K.A.

You don't have to be born Marlene Dietrich (aka Marie Magdalene) or David Bowie (aka David Robert Jones) or Beyonce (aka Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter) to be born into the challenge of being an artist of yourself. Each of us is born into that challenge. It's what we do with the challenge of being that defines each of us.

#As a Humanist I think that religion is in the same category of human activity as painting, poetry, music, dance, fabric, architecture, and all the other human arts. Dance is something we do. Religion is something we do.

Creating and re-creating ourselves each day is something we do. Because we respect ourselves and the web of existence around us enough to do the work of the artist. Every day.

In that way, we go back to the cave when humanity was young. And we paint, with all the awe and wonder at the simple, sacred amazingness of life.

SOURCES

Sam Mills, "Dietrich showed how adopting a persona can reveal one's true self."
Psyche.co.

www.FirstUnitarian.org