

Awkwardly and With A Great Deal of Mess: the Path of Change
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION: A Wilderness of Spirit

Back in the year 2000, the American writer bell hooks wrote this:

I feel our nation (is) turning away from love . . . moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love.

SLIDE: BELL HOOKS AND HER BOOK

She also wrote:

We do not have to love. We choose to love . . . When we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist.¹

That's what I want to talk about today: Our theme for the month of November has been change. I've talked about change as not only inevitable but, as Heraclitus taught, our only constant.

#Change is everywhere, from our climate, to the political world, to the nation's spiritual malaise, to our personal relationships and our own bodies and the bodies of those we love.

We can choose despair, or we can learn to embrace the fact of change and work to begin again in love.

#As creatures capable of strategizing and planning, and as people who believe that human beings can fix human problems, the work for every one of us is to minimize the damage and maximize the good.

To repeat those words of bell hooks who saw us as a nation . . . quote . . .

. . . moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love.

¹ bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions*. New York: William Morrow, 2000.

Change and love.

SLIDE: LEMONY SNICKET QUOTE

BTW, the title of my talk today comes from the author who calls himself Lemony Snicket:

Love can change a person the way a parent can change a baby—awkwardly, and often with a great deal of mess.

ONE: VUCA

SLIDE: VUCA 1

US Army strategists invented the acronym “VUCA”—V-U-C-A: “volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity.”

Volatility. Uncertainty. Complexity. Ambiguity.

That acronym has now become popular among business consultants as well.

Clearly, the Army strategists who coined the term thought that some situations are more VUCA than others.

SLIDE: VUCA 2

In war scenarios, perhaps. Sometimes in business too. But in life, I agree with Heraclitus: the situation—the human situation—is always volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

The acronym SNAFU was also coined in the military. I want to talk about another acronym that I just invented: SNEB. S-N-E-B: Situation Normal: Everything’s Burning.

SLIDE: VUCA, SNAFU, SNEB

Always.

SLIDE: A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

I agree with the late bell hooks: What we have here is a failure to love. And, yes, I agree with Cornell West: “justice is what love looks like in public.”

#As bell hooks saw coming, this nation is now in the throes of a love crisis, which is a *spiritual* crisis. Our present situation can turn out a couple of different ways. We have

already entered a period of social retrenchment: Hard-won freedoms are being taken away; thugs are emboldened to maim and kill people for who they are; the processes of liberal democracy itself is being questioned.

SLIDE: CORNEL WEST QUOTE

How do we Unitarian Universalists and Humanists—a tiny band of liberal folks—how do we affect the direction of a nation in this VUCA time—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous and this SNEB time: Situation Normal: Everything's Burning.

SLIDE: SNEB

Small and perhaps getting smaller. Something on the order of fifty Unitarian Universalist congregations have closed down since the beginning of the covid crisis.

The situation is VUCA! And SNEB!

But our liberal tradition has the resources to reverse this trend. I've talked a lot recently about the thought of the twentieth century Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. He and bell hooks would have had a lot to talk about. Dewey phrased it this way:

“Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association.”

Moral and spiritual association.

#Dewey saw democracy is a moral argument. According to Dewey—and I think he was correct about this—were democracy only a political argument, perhaps other forms of government could prove better able to reflect the will of the governed. Maybe.

#Yet, from a moral sense, democracy is key to human flourishing because democracy begins in an assumption of an individual with inherent rights and responsibilities embedded in a societal framework which also has rights and responsibilities. This framework works due to the conversation about moral and spiritual association that democracy requires.

Democracy is also our method of congregating. That too is hard-won.

As many of you know, I spoke last Sunday morning in one of our tradition's oldest congregations, First Church in Boston, founded in the year 1630. By Puritans.

In the Boston of those days, anyone who did not attend church on Sunday morning was fined for failing to do their religious duty.

Now, wouldn't it be nice if we still did that? Wouldn't it be nice if we could send cops door to door and ticket everyone who didn't bother to come to church this morning?

No! That would *not* be nice. It wasn't "nice" in 1630; it's not "nice" now.

bell hooks gets it right: force is not the way to engender love. Force is not the way to address our deep national spiritual crisis.

Reflect: The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a revolt against the theocracy that was the British Empire. Many then revolted against the theocracy that was the Massachusetts Bay Colony: a few weeks ago I talked about Anne Hutchinson who showed the Puritans to be . . . well . . . puritanical! And the Quaker Mary Dyer hanged on Boston Common.

They marched her to the hanging tree surrounded by beating drums so that no one could hear what she said.

That was cold, brutal theocracy. Yet, just as theocracy has again and again been the project of some Christian groups in this nation, theocracy has again and again been beaten in this nation.

Religious rebellion is in our DNA. And so is religious and philosophical variety and plenitude.

So is freedom of speech.

So is the practice of democracy,

In this VUCA time—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous and this SNEB time: Situation Normal: Everything's Burning—we are here to stand for those words of Thomas Dewey: "Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association."

But, yes, democracy is messy.

TWO: Liberation

#The Unitarian Universalist and Humanist traditions are about democracy as a spiritual practice if you will. Why? Since we have long been on the heretical margins, our ability to practice openly is about both freedom *of* religion and freedom *from* traditional religious creeds and dogmas.

#Today, as more and more people are voting with their feet and leaving all forms of organized, public religion, as I see it, we—our heretical traditions—are more important

than ever. Exactly because our traditions have been practicing how to live in a moral, spiritual, democratic, and secular world for a long time.

As all American religious institutions suffer losses of members, I frankly can't help seeing this moment in our nation's history as a marvelous, wonderful, and very cool thing.

Why?

#Because, as theologians, philosophers, and anthropologists have been pointing out for years now, the Western world—by which I mean Europe and many of its colonies such as the United States—has developed an extremely odd concept of what religion is.

I've talked about the origins of this oddity before. Fact is, what we call the Reformation, which began the split between the then-dominant Roman Catholic Church and what we have come to call Protestantism, introduced extreme doubt into the minds of many Europeans. As the fractures turned into chasms, various strains of Protestantism merely kept splintering. And doubt just kept growing.

The resulting wars of religion in Europe killed, starved, and displaced hundreds of millions of people, eventually spinning off the Pilgrims, Puritans, Presbyterians, Lutheran's, various sorts of Baptists, and, of course, Universalists, and the Unitarians who eventually became Humanists in this congregation.

Here's what many miss about all of that folderol that seems so long ago: *We are still living it.*

What came out of the disaster is the notion that something called "religion" can be separated out of other aspects of life. In order to stop the killing, Europeans began identifying things called "religions."

Thus, people could say, "Hey, I'm a Unitarian, please don't kill me!" And, some flavors of Christianity would kill you, and other flavors of Christianity would not kill you, and so it went, until Europeans had fetishized, if you will, the notion of religion and the many flavors of Christianity.

This new concept swept through Europe. Then Europeans, with this new concept of religion as being distinct from other forms of human activity, swept through the world, colonizing peoples. When they showed up somewhere, they said, "And we're Christian. Christianity is the only true religion. Whada you got?"

And, in comparing, guess what? Europeans always decided that Christianity was the perfect religion and everything else was second-rate.

What the colonizing Europeans missed, and what many still miss, is that for most human beings in most places, what we call religion is culturally-based. It's just another thing you do when you are from a particular place: You honor your dead in a particular fashion; you

get married in a particular fashion, you wear particular sorts of clothing, eat particular sorts of food.

Sure, the peoples on our planet have gotten considerably more homogenized in recent decades, but the fetishizing of certain practices as required or prohibited by certain labels we call religion is still an odd concept.

And, if my crystal ball is working properly, that fetishization is what Americans are more and more ignoring with the movement that has come to be labeled “spiritual but not religious.”

Which, BTW, has become another acronym, S-B-N-R.

So, see, you’ve learned something today:

VUCA
SNEB
SBNR

What a big SNAFU!

THREE: Things of the Spirit

SLIDE: YIN YANG

As I see it, here’s the fact of it: The decline of organized religion is not the decline of the human religious impulse. It’s merely a reorientation back to how people have always done religion. Actually, as I see it, it is, as both Taoist Laozi and the Mandalorian would say, This is the Way.

SLIDE: THE MANDALORIAN

Now, don’t get me wrong: congregations are not all closing down. But, here’s the thing: #Organized religions are to the human spiritual impulse as restaurants are to human nutrition: Merely a tiny part: one aspect.

The restaurant analogy is where congregations fit into the landscape of democracy, religion, and spirituality in this nation’s future.

Let’s face it: At the moment most denominations in the United States are *sustaining a model* of religious practice, not *innovating models* of religious practice.

What might innovation look like? Of one thing I'm sure: all liberal religious institutions are first and foremost scrambling to figure out how to survive. Everything's burning!

Thriving is another level of challenge. But the answer is far more than merely an attempt to keep up with the times.

I think that we in the United States are currently in the beginnings of a second Reformation. In the face of that, traditionalists are working hard to establish Christian theocracy. Their success can be measured in laws that make no sense outside of traditional Christian thinking. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is the perfect example.

As I said earlier, dreams of theocracy have haunted the American mind since the beginning of the European invasions of this continent. Those dreams have succeeded in doing real damage through the years.

Driving through rural Wisconsin not long ago I saw a sign nailed to a fencepost: "God *has* blessed America. He sent Trump!"

This is the traditionalist response to this new Reformation.

That sign in rural Wisconsin perfectly exemplifies the "wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again" that bell hooks wrote about. As a nation, we have "turned away from love."

Our job is to join in the "call for a return to love."

We are well suited to this messy task because we are iconoclasts and heretics.

Many Americans over time have dreamed of establishing a theocracy in this country. All attempts have failed. And to me, that's a glorious fact.

CONCLUSION: Awkwardly and With a Great Deal of Mess

SLIDE: SNEB

"Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association."

"Moral and spiritual association."

Love can change a person the way a parent can change a baby—awkwardly, and often with a great deal of mess.

Our situation today is normal: Everything's burning.

#Let's love the mess. Let's love the change. And let's begin, here and now, to *re-settle* America.

Let's get it right this time.

SOURCES

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