

**Vulnerability, Wounds, and Staying Open Despite It All**  
**a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden**  
**First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis**  
**March 5, 2023**

**INTRODUCTION: Farming**

The new words and phrases making it to the dictionary are out. And a top one is . . .

**SLIDE: "RAGE FARMING"**

"rage farming"

Rage farming: the tactic of intentionally provoking political opponents, typically posting inflammatory content on social media, in order to elicit angry responses and thus high engagement or widespread exposure for the original poster.

**SLIDE: JOE BIDEN CALLED FOR CHRISTIANS . . .**

Here's a good example:

**ALERT: JOE BIDEN CALLED FOR CHRISTIANS TO BE ADDED TO TERROR WATCH LIST!**

Uncategorized

February 26, 2023 Dan 2398

(Natural News) Former Vice President Joe Biden – who will never be elected president, by the way – has a message for American Christians: If you don't defect from your faith and embrace leftism, then you're going to be added to the government's terror watch list.



This is what Biden promised during a recent CNN "town hall" event as he decried believers in Jesus Christ for opposing the

Which, if I had time, I think deserves a bumper sticker campaign:

## **SLIDE: "FARM CABBAGE NOT RAGE"**

Something like, "Farm Cabbage Not Rage!"

(Think it'll catch on?)

Our theme for the month of March is vulnerability. Last Sunday I was chatting at the front door here. When I asked someone, "How're you doing?" I got the very honest answer of, "I just haven't felt right since, oh, I don't know, covid I guess."

Which I think is how a lot of us are feeling. And a lot of that has to do with feelings of vulnerability. I made a list:

## **SLIDE: VULNERABILITY OF ...**

- Physical vulnerability due to covid.
- Emotional vulnerability due to isolation.
- Financial vulnerability due to job loss and inflation.
- Vulnerability of US democracy.
- Intellectual vulnerability due to the Culture Wars.
- Vulnerability of the earth and its beings.

I'm sure I'm forgetting some . . .

What is common to all these is the "vulnerability" bit.

All of us have felt some of these; some of us have felt all of these and more!

What—if anything—have we learned from the pandemic and the January 6 uprising and all the things that have happened since . . . when? March 2020? June 6, 2021?

And the hits just keep on coming!

## **ONE: Those Darn Paradigms**

## SLIDE: PARADIGM SHIFT

The American physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn created the phrase “paradigm shift” to describe a situation in which basic assumptions and practices have or are changing. For example, social media has been a paradigm shift in the basic way that we communicate with each other. So-called “rage farming” is a consequence of this paradigm shift.

How we now do Sunday Assembly in both live and online formats is a paradigm shift. Covid has led to all sorts of paradigm shifts, from education to conferences and committee meetings to how restaurants operate.

#Part of navigating a major paradigm shift is seeing (realizing) what has changed irrevocably. What has changed irrevocably is spilt milk: No use crying over that, as we all know too well.

#Paradigm shifts often include a sense of losing control: How do we do congregational life in the new paradigm? How do we do education in the new paradigm? How do we do committee meetings and book groups and conferences in the new paradigm?

#What paradigm shifts do to our minds is convince us that we are not in control. Which feels very uncomfortable . . . until we realize that the feeling of control is mostly an illusion in the first place!

## SLIDE: DECODER RINGS

A metaphor that I find useful in thinking about how we go about thinking and finding ways to think about reality—a paradigm for thinking about paradigms, if you will—is that a philosophy or a religion is like a decoder ring.

At one time, toy decoder rings were very popular as “surprises” in such things as breakfast cereals and Cracker Jacks. Obviously, the manufacturer’s motivation was to get kids to beg their parents to buy particular brands.

## SLIDE: “IT ALL MAKES SENSE NOW!”

The promise of a way-cool decoder ring

was the ability in encode and decode secret messages, and the ultimate goal was to exclaim, as a kid does in this ad, "It all makes sense now!"

Religions are like decoder rings: They promise to unlock secret knowledge. Knowledge about the great mysteries, such as

How Things Are (cosmology)

and

Which Things Matter? (ethics).



What is obvious with decoder rings is that there is one code: a message is encoded by someone with a ring and then that message is decoded by someone else with the same ring. What isn't immediately clear is that someone with a Cracker Jacks decoder ring will not be able to communicate with someone who has a Rice Krispies decoder ring.

And, I argue that the same is true of religions and denominations within religions: A Roman Catholic with a Roman Catholic decoder ring will not be able to communicate efficiently with someone who has a Unitarian Universalist decoder ring.

The intentions are the same but the information concerning the questions of how things are and which things matter are very likely to disagree with each other.

For information to be coherently communicated, the decoder ring that we use to encode the message has to be the same as the decoder ring that we use to decode the message.

Sure, the concept of the decoder ring crosses these boundaries, and they all work in a similar fashion. The intentions and outcomes of all religions are similar. However, the understanding of how things are and which things matter are often not similar.

The paradigms are different.

The paradigms of Unitarian Universalism and Humanism insist that our attitudes and intentions should comport with a commonly agreed upon objective reality. We

believe in the free market of ideas. We believe in experiment and investigation. We agree that the changing of social and scientific paradigms requires us to reevaluate past paradigms and adapt or change our paradigms. We generally think that there are many little-t truths rather than a few big-T Truths.

In my life, I set out early very specifically to discover Truth with a capital T. In my search, I have found that there is very little truth to know, at least among those who are honest about it. Truth is mostly some good guesses that work, mostly based in the cultures where those truths reside and usually not transferable to other cultures.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "To know the truth partially is to distort the Universe." "To know the truth partially is to distort the Universe."

In his time, many assumed that we human beings are capable of discoing Truth finally and absolutely. Most of us don't think that anymore. So, we accept that our truths concerning the cosmos will always be partial and therefore distorted.

Based on this fact of our liberal religious tradition, we are progressives because historically we have searched for new paradigms.

Being progressive doesn't mean that we believe in progress as inevitable or fixed. Far from it. Progress in human social incarnations is difficult, slow, and often painful.

However, in our rapidly changing planetary and social lives, believing that progress can be made is an advantage. Even a comfort.

## **TWO: See a Whale**

Take for example a few words from the University of Chicago professor of ethics Martha Nussbaum:

### **SLIDE: QUOTE FROM MARTHA NUSSBAUM**

New issues arise constantly. The world needs an ethical revolution, a consciousness-raising movement of truly international proportions. But this revolution is impeded by the navel-gazing that is typically involved in asking, "What is it to be human?"

Let's rekindle and extend our sense of wonder by asking instead: "What is it to be a whale?" Then let's go observe whales as best we can, and read the thrilling research of scientists . . .<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Nussbaum makes an excellent point: Perhaps we can re-see the human condition by looking at beings besides humans.

We can awaken to our humanity when we stop prioritizing the human, and we place the human animal into the web of our planetary existence.

What Dr. Nussbaum is describing is a religious experience: Religion is about entering into a mental and heart space in which we open ourselves to experience "the other"—whether that "other" be another human or a whale—as not exotic or foreign but rather as a respected fellow being in the web of existence.

"Love thy neighbor" means loving whales too.

An ethical religious or philosophical stance is taking responsibility for the vulnerable by joining with other people and other sentient beings and the planet itself as co-creators of a positive now and a positive future.

Our liberal religious traditions are about encouraging the flourishing of sentience itself.

### **SLIDE: QUOTE FROM MIKE HOGUE**

Dr. Michael Hogue is Professor of Philosophy, Ethics, and the Philosophy of Religion at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. He says this:

Genuinely internalizing the meaning of vulnerability for us and the Earth can discipline us to align our actions and thoughts more rigorously with our intentions.

In aspiring to this alignment, we discover that we are not alone, and we need one another—we cannot live intentionally apart from others. In recognizing this

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<sup>1</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum "What Does it Mean to be Human? Don't Ask." *New York Times*, August 20, 2018.

need for others, we discern the importance of trust—showing up, being there, and holding ourselves accountable.<sup>2</sup> (“Spiritual Resilience and the Climate Emergency”)

I will break that down a bit: When we understand—genuinely feel in our bodies—that our nation, the living beings on our planet, and the planet itself are vulnerable—we will take action, we will take responsibility, to the best of our abilities.

As we earnestly do that work, we will discover others fighting the good fight. And not only that, but we will discover a need for each other. Dr. Hogue puts it simply: “We cannot live intentionally apart from others.” That realization awakens us to trust and personal accountability.

It begins in vulnerability. It becomes accountability.

That is what congregations are for:

We wake up.

We show up.

We embrace our need for each other.

We embrace our accountability to each other.

We are better together.

**SLIDE: TRUCK WITH FARM CABBAGE NOT RAGE BUMPER STICKER**

## **CONCLUSION:**

After all we’ve been through in recent years, nearly everyone is a bit weary and a bit wary. That feeling of vulnerability, however, is a positive sign. It means that we realize that none of us are alone in a remote citadel. It means that we have realized that we ourselves, our loved ones, our society, living things, and the planet all are interconnected. A web of mutuality.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hogue “Spiritual Resilience and the Climate Emergency”

Vulnerability is a sign of life.

Now to realize that we all have the same really nifty decoder ring.

Let's communicate. And let's stay open, despite it all.

**SOURCES:**

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Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*.