

**My Way or the Policy**  
**a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden**  
**First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis**  
**April 16, 2023**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I titled my talk today "My Way or the Policy."

Which, yes, that's about as "slant" as a rhyme can get: pol-i-say.

No, that doesn't have a snappy rhyme like "my way or the highway." However, today I hope to get at a very good question: What is the most effective way to achieve the second aspiration of First Unitarian Society:

to make the change we need for a more just, compassionate, and peaceful world.

"Just. Compassionate. Peaceful."

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."<sup>1</sup>

"If we but know what to do with it." That's often the question, isn't it? "Does anybody really know what time it is? And, Does anybody really know what to *do*?"

In order to tie our theme of the month, Resistance, to a consideration of how best to achieve our aspirations, I want to start with a consideration of what a hero is. I will proceed from there to a consideration of challenges from times past, and, I hope, finish today with the suggestion that we all *are* and can continue to be . . . heroes of the resistance.

## **ONE: What a Hero Is**

---

<sup>1</sup> "The American Scholar," 1837

I'm going to start in what might appear to be an odd spot—but, hey, you can vicariously experience what it feels like to be inside my brain: I'll start with an album cover from 1968 for the Thelonius Monk recording *Underground*. An incredibly complex photograph that grows more complex with each viewing . . .

Your music trivia for the day: the album cover of the Bob Dylan album *Basement Tapes* is an homage to Thelonius Monk's album. And . . .



Monk's album cover is an homage to Baroness Kathleen Annie Pannonica de Koenigswarter (*née* Rothschild). Yes, the "*née* Rothschild" is important, in that the Baroness became a patron of the arts, specifically jazz, and she promoted Monk's work when he was a complete unknown. Hence, the album cover.

The photo is of the underground, because the Baroness, known as "Nica," was a hero of the French Resistance. Hence the WW II-era weapons and technology in the photo.

Baroness Nica was without question a hero. Despite the social status and riches that could have shielded her, Nica repeatedly risked her life fighting the Nazis. And, after the war, she used her wealth and social status to encourage young jazz artists such as the now-legendary Thelonius Monk. Who, parenthetically had the coolest name ever. And, who knows his middle name?

Sphere!

Thelonnuss Sphere Monk. That gets my vote for coolest name ever.

But back to Baroness Nica—she was a hero. And perhaps we could argue that Thelonnuss Monk and Bob Dylan are heroes as well. Heroes of another sort, perhaps.

And that's exactly when the word "hero" seems to be acting a bit weird . . . there are different *sorts* of heroes, aren't there? For example, in militaries around the world, there are different types of heroes and even different levels of heroes designated by different sorts of awards.

There are all sorts of heroes. So, what does the word even *mean*?

Strangely, the word has come down to us from Greek with almost no alternation in spelling.

The meaning, however, has definitely changed. In ancient Greek, *hērōe* meant "demi-god." A person whose nature and being was part god. And not "godlike" as in larger than life, like Beyoncé, but actually part god.

Part god, as in flying, performing miracles, walking on water, raising the dead, that sort of god-like super-natural behavior.

The Romans embraced this Greek idea as well, which is why emperors were declared gods. This concept is most likely the origin of the Christian concept of a god-like human named Jesus—part human, part god.

This concept of living demi-gods did not exist in Hebrew thought. There *were* demi-gods in Hebrew myth, but they were all wiped out by Noah's flood.

Something to think about . . .

## **TWO: Springtime of Mussolini in Italy**

Thanks to our Archive Committee for sharing another of John Dietrich's addresses; this one from January of 1936, "The Passing of Free Speech."

Nowadays, I call what I do "talks." Dietrich called his "addresses." Dietrich arrived at FUS in 1916 and published his Sunday addresses as "The Humanist Pulpit" through the 1920s and 1930s.

The building was in our old location, 1526 Harmon Place, nearer to Loring Park than we are nowadays.

In his address "The Passing of Free Speech," Dietrich reports that he has recently returned from two months in Italy and Germany. Two months in Italy and Germany in 1935. Springtime in Italy and Germany for Il Duce and Der Führer, Mussolini and Hitler.

When I reflect on the world situation in the mid-1930s, I am reminded of Charlie Chaplin's masterpiece, *Modern Times*, which very much caught the spirit of the age.

Chaplin's movie begins with a scene of a herd of sheep, then cuts to factory workers piling out of a subway exit. (Not subtle!)

Chaplin plays a factory worker innocent of his exploitation. He is happily a cog in a machine, but the exploitation doesn't stop.

He is, for example, strapped into a feeding machine. With disastrous results.

Yes, hilarity ensues, yet the question remains: How will human beings live alongside the monstrous machines that we have built?

A movie poster from the time sums it up graphically—we humans are condemned by these modern times to make a mad dash for freedom as the cogs in the machines turn.

John Dietrich framed the question this way in his address:

The bigger and more complicated the machine grows, the more insignificant a cog in it does the individual become. Where it will end none of us



can see.<sup>2</sup>

In the plot of *Modern Times*, Chaplin's character accidentally becomes the leader of a Socialist workers strike. That's one way out of the mechanization of humanity. But Dietrich saw another threat when he toured the Europe of the 1930s—Il Duce was at the height of his power in Italy. And Der Führer was at the height of his power in Germany. His famous Nuremberg speech occurred in September of 1935.

Hitler: *Ja!* says the poster.

Even an Easter card with a sweet blonde girl holding her bunny and giving the Hitler salute as she anticipates her Easter basket, complete with an egg decorated with a swastika.

Ja!

Today, we know how the story ended. But in 1936, the German people and the Italian people and the rest of the world and the people here at First Unitarian Society *did not* know how the story would end.

And so Dietrich wrote:

The bigger and more complicated the machine grows, the more insignificant a cog in it does the individual become. Where it will end none of us can see.

Then he added,

. . . unless those of us who still believe in free speech stand by our principles there is no question about where it will end.

Were we doomed to become cogs in nationalist machines that controlled everything from our daily schedules and our eating habits to our health and very lives?

Mass culture was a new concept in the mid-30s. Liberals had thought that given real democracy, "the people" would show their deep and abiding compassion. But the populism that gave rise to a Hitler and a Mussolini did not appear to be of the type dreamed by liberals.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.firstunitarian.org/FUSArchives/files/original/718d6746f7db47deefbd7b9b1edb4e20.pdf>

No. There was a darkness to it . . .

Did the new world of mass work and mass media mean that a masterful demagogue could convince citizens to surrender their freedoms for . . . what? Security?

Dietrich warned: "An occasional person gladly tolerates ideas hostile to his own, but most of us are active or passive advocates of suppression."

As it had with Charlie Chaplin, it had dawned on John Dietrich that modern times would be about the mass. After all, Charlie Chaplin went from the basement vaudeville nightclub circuit to international stardom. Dietrich went from a country church pulpit to the downtown Minneapolis theaters and the radio, with a national reputation.

Dietrich framed it this way:

Must the individual merge all (his) rights and interests in the welfare of the group or institution, or should the group or institution protect and preserve the rights and interests of the individual?

#As was becoming obvious in the mid-1930s, the greatest danger to shared, democratic government is the individual who is so individual that they join a mass movement led by a demagogue who preaches individual freedom while all the time practicing mob rule.

Remember: *demagogue* and *democracy* both contain the same Greek root, *dēmos*, "the people."

So: What's the difference between a *dēmos-ocracy* and mob rule?

Dietrich thought about what was going on in Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany and he realized the difference between those nations and the US: free speech. The first thing fascist regimes do is shut down all the avenues of free speech. The sequence is easy to see: a tyrant uses free speech to gain power, then shuts down free speech.

**THREE: Why We're Here**

Which brings me to *why* First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis needs to be here. It's our mission. It's our vision. It's our values.

Let's look at how others see us. The Wiki page for FUS says this:

**First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis** is a non-theistic humanist community and member of the Unitarian-Universalist Association located at 900 Mount Curve, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Once led by the influential minister John H. Dietrich who is known as the "Father of Religious Humanism," First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is considered in today's terminology the "birthplace of Congregational Humanism."

### History

In the 1870s, the Minneapolis chapter of the National Liberal League began meeting to discuss the ideas of geologist Charles Lyell and naturalist Charles Darwin. Upon hearing visiting Unitarian minister Henry Martyn Simmons (1841-1905) lecture, eighteen members of the Liberal League voted to incorporate as a Unitarian congregation on November 18, 1881 so that Simmons would join them in Minneapolis.

The articles of incorporation defined the Society's purpose as to form an association where **"people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work."**

The sermons of Rev. Simmons on evolution, science, and ethics drew large crowds. Simmons was a vocal opponent of the U.S. invasion of the Philippines and the congregation was instrumental in convincing the state of Minnesota to withdraw its troops from the war.

That's not all that significant except . . . well, for all the descendants of the young men in the Minnesota National Guard who did not die in the Philippines because of . . . are you ready . . . the *resistance* of the people of First Unitarian Society.

OK. I admit it: I get too into history sometimes. But remember that bit of history about how First Unitarian Society formed:

In the 1870s, the Minneapolis chapter of the National Liberal League . . .

The National Liberal League formed in the 1870s to fight the Comstock Laws. And, guess what? They lost. The Comstock Laws went into effect.

The Comstock Laws got chipped away by court decisions—especially during the 1960s—and eventually mostly ignored. But the law never changed. And that’s what came back to bite us all in the judge’s decision to prohibit abortion medications in the the US mail. The laws that the people of FUS were fighting a hundred and fifty years ago are quite clear:

Every article or thing designed, adapted, or intended for producing abortion, or for any indecent or immoral use; and

Every article, instrument, substance, drug, medicine, or thing which is advertised or described in a manner calculated to lead another to use or apply it for producing abortion, or for any indecent or immoral purpose; and . . .

Who is a hero? *You* are a hero. Because you are part of a chain of people stretching back through the years who have insisted—and continue to insist—upon justice and compassion in *this* world.

Are we perfect? No.

Have we gotten *most* things right over the years? Yes.

What more can we ask of a group of fallible human beings?

## **CONCLUSION: Many Resistances**

Our forebears here at First Unitarian Society were heroes. Heroes of the resistance. Actually, heroes of many, many resistanceES.

And you and me? We are the willing inheritors of that tradition of resistance. Emerson had it right: “This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”



What is the most effective way to achieve that second aspiration of First Unitarian Society:

to make the change we need for a more just, compassionate, and peaceful world.

The answer is . . . All of 'em!

Everyone wishes for a magic wand to fix both long-standing and immediate social ills. And sometimes, marches and demonstrations fix a problem.

Unfortunately, often, it's all about the policy, and the work of government and law and the rule of law is frustrating, slow, and inefficient.

#Yet, the track record of this congregation is clear: If justice means getting out in the street, then we will do that. If justice means having the patience to sit at the capital and watch paint dry, then we will do that. John Dietrich said it in the dark days when fascism appeared to be the future:

. . . unless those of us who still believe in free speech stand by our principles there is no question about where it will end.

We, dear heroes, believe in free speech and stand by our principles.

And we invite everyone: Join us in the underground. Join us dancing across the wheels and cogs of the machinery of oppression as we seek a shared life in a shared world . . . for everyone.

Visit the First Unitarian Society archives: <https://firstunitarian.org/about/history/>

[www.FirstUnitarian.org](http://www.FirstUnitarian.org)