

Reality Unzipped: Zip Codes and Destiny
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First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
1 October 2023

INTRODUCTION

Our theme for the month of October is heritage. The places where we live have a heritage. Liberal religion has a heritage. Political liberalism has a heritage. Each of us individually has a heritage.

First Unitarian Society has a heritage. A reason we are here, a “Why?”

#*Why* is First Unitarian Society here? I have a simple answer: Change. Transformation.

#First Unitarian Society has been, and is, and will be, here to change things, to transform things: society, religion, ourselves.

That’s what we will be talking about on Sundays this month.

#Yet transformation—transformation in our thinking and change in our society—these are tough. Not least because our culture is full of mixed-signals.

Take, for example the idea of how much choice we have

Tyche was the god of fortune in ancient Greece. “Fortune” as in random chance.

Nowadays we call natural disasters “acts of god.” In ancient Greece, those were “acts of Tyche.” One of Tyche’s devotees—so the story goes—invented dice for her amusement. She was random chance.

A throw of the dice.

BTW, one of her running-buddies was Nemesis, not a god anybody wants to meet up with.

But, a funny thing happened on the way to the Roman Empire: the god Tyche becomes the Roman god Fortuna.

La Fortuna, Lady Fortune. And the “wheel of fortune” becomes not a roulette wheel but an engine of inevitability. Of destiny. A description of the way the world works.

What we see as time goes on is a transformation from the Greek concept of random chance in the universe to the Roman concept that there is *something* in the universe that both creates order and creates inescapable fates for human beings—*destiny*.

The Romans called this *logos*.

What we also see developing is the template for what would become the monotheistic god: all-powerful and all-knowing. For most ancient Greeks, the world was filled with local gods of various sorts, from water and tree nymphs to the great god Zeus.

With the Romans this began to change, and eventually the *logos* became the rational, controlling one-god of the universe.

Christian theologians and priests latched onto the developing concept that chance simply could not exist in a universe created by an all-knowing god.

This then became a basic assumption of the developing Christian movement, an idea that remains with us today in the minds of millions.

And, with the death of chance and the rise of destiny as the model for thinking about reality, another question arose: What about free will in such a universe?

What is it about our lives that is up to us, and what is up to luck, chance, or the will of a god?

Can we ourselves change our lives? Can anything at all be changed from “the plan”?

Soon, in European-dominated cultures such as the US, what people thought of what god was able to do and not do became basic to how people acted in the world, and *how* people expected others to act in societies.

#Our tradition, the liberal religious tradition, came down on the side of human beings: human beings *can* transform themselves and their world.

That's our defining "Why?"

ONE: Free Will and Zip Codes

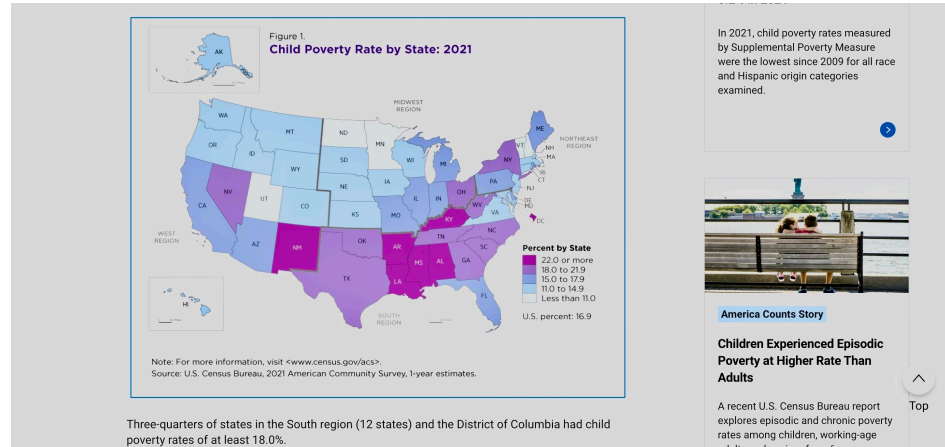
A.

#Wherever we come down on the free will debate, we know that there *is* determinism at work in our lives.

#We talk about the fortunate. We talk about destiny and the American Dream. Yet, we also have to face tragic reality: In the United States today, the zip code where you were born, where you grew up, and where you live now significantly affect your fate.

As does the color of your skin, your gender.

And on.



We all know this.

Many of us here have fought this battle both for ourselves and for the sake of our loved ones and fellow human beings.

B.

Poverty is everywhere in the United States, though the Mason-Dixon line is clear and vivid when we look at any map of poverty, hunger, or poor health in the US.

The old Confederacy still shows its regional dominion. Remind yourself that had the South won the Civil War, the intention was to establish the Ohio River as the international border, just as it is today with the Rio Grande at the Texas / Mexico border.

That didn't happen, but the effects are as stark today as they have been since the beginning of the European invasions.

#Your zip code determines a great deal. Yet, even born into a relatively affluent zip code, most people are pretty well stuck. In terms of social mobility—moving from one social class to another—the US does not make the top twenty list among nations.

If fact, though Americans have long sneered at British social class snobbery, by most measures, the UK scores above the US nowadays in terms of social mobility, although the UK is not in the top twenty either.

#Whatever the existence or non-existence of a metaphysical free will, in our world and in our nation and in our community, the circumstances of a person's birth has large effects on that person's life. That person's fate.

In an essay titled "Fate," Ralph Waldo Emerson—one of the central thinkers in both liberal religion and social liberalism—addressed social location in the United States of the 1840s:

Ask the digger in the ditch to explain Newton's laws: the fine organs of his brain have been pinched by overwork and squalid poverty from father to son, for a hundred years. When each comes forth from his mother's womb, the gate of gifts closes behind him. Let him value his hands and feet, he has but one pair. *So he has but one future, and that is already predetermined in his lobes, and described in that little fatty face, pig-eye, and squat form. All the privilege and all the legislation of the world cannot meddle or help to make a poet or a prince of him.*

Emerson is talking about my family there. Perhaps yours too. And, yes, it's offensive. Emerson—though liberal—was a person of his time: racist, sexist, classist.

We can certainly say that Emerson is making the classic capitalist mistake here: Equating what a person *does* with that person's "worth." Yet Emerson does have a glimmer of a a thought that fate is in human hands and can be changed. Notice that he says of the poor,

When each comes forth from his mother's womb, the gate of gifts closes behind him.

Nature has provided, though culture will clearly do no such thing. And poverty writes on our bodies even in the womb:

he has but one future, and that is already predetermined in his lobes

The baby's brain is already constricted by poverty and social class.

Now, I know what my ditch-digging forebears would have said—did say—in answer to this: “We ain’t interested in no egg-head Harvard stuff nohow.”

That is a very human response, when we know that something is utterly denied us, that we denigrate that thing that we can’t have: “We ain’t interested in no egg-head Harvard stuff nohow.”

To me this is about opportunity. The *chance* to be educated if one wishes to be, which my parents, for example, never had.

One “change,” one “transformation” that needs to occur in the US is about educational opportunity. And that’s one the things the people of this congregation have fought for for a long time: from insisting that Darwin be taught in Minneapolis public schools in the 1920s to our reading initiative here with LoveWorks Academy kids.

Emerson was no doubt realistically describing social mobility in the United States in the 1840s. And to a slightly-lesser extent in the 1940s. But that’s not the type of nation many of us want to see in the 2040s.

Our “Why?” is change.

TWO: Change

One central concept in our society’s consideration of fate has been a phrase from the philosopher Heraclitus, who lived in the 400’s BCE. Heraclitus is reported to have said something on the order of “Character is fate.”

The phrase suggests that an individual's character fundamentally shapes their destiny or future, emphasizing the importance of personal virtues and vices in determining the course of one's life.¹

Or, at least that is often what we *think* that the old cliché means. But does it?

êthos(ἦθος) is the Greek word often translated into English as “character,” but at in ancient Greek it meant “custom” or “habit” or perhaps what we nowadays term *zeitgeist*, the world-spirit of a particular time.

anthrōpos (ἄνθρωπος) in this case means “to a human.”

And *daimon* (δαίμων) is “spirit.”

When we look at the phrase from this angle, “habit (or “*zeitgeist*”) is a human’s spirit,” perhaps Heraclitus saying something else. . . .

The English word *character* derives from the Greek word *kharaktēr* (χαρακτήρ) meaning a stamping or engraving tool.

It’s no accident that author Ibram Kendi titled one of his books: *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*.

#Cultural assumptions concerning fate and character are indeed too often the stamping tool that destroys lives.

After all, in English we often use the phrase “character traits.” Determinism: Actors play a character, which has pre-determined traits—there’s a script. Yet we have long talked about *developing* character is a positive good, even a moral imperative.

So, in fact, this word *character* comes with a lot of baggage both positive and negative: Is character predetermined, developed, or both?

Or both/and?

#The waters are muddy, yet I contend that it is absolutely imperative that we consider character—if that’s what we call it—the *self* perhaps—it is imperative to view you-

¹ Note that this series of assumptions presupposes a level playing field.

yourself as a work in progress, not a stamped coin. That you *can* transform your self and your society.

That's essential.

Fact is, Heraclitus did not choose to use the metaphor of a stamping tool, *kharaktēr*.

Instead, he chose the term *êthos*.

We don't use the word *ethos* in common English usage. Much more common nowadays is the German term *zeitgeist*, meaning the spirit of an age or time period.

What this Babel of languages—even if all the words *have* come into English over time—what this Babel of languages creates is fog surrounding what will happen to a human during that human's lifetime—no wonder so many of us are confused.

Do we have free will?

Do we have free will within specific limits?

Is free will an illusion?

Again, back to the gods: the Greeks created Tyche when the majority of Greeks thought that we *do* have free will.

The Romans created Fortuna when the majority of Romans thought that we do not have free will.

On the other hand, the Chinese thought that we do. In some human cultures free will has been the ultimate question of individualism; in other cultures free will is secondary to a person's willingness to fit into larger social norms.

We can see this confusion tangled up with Tarot and astrology: running through is the question: is this telling us what *will* happen, or what *might* happen given decisions you yourself can make?

What about this other way of seeing Heraclitus' statement:

The Zeitgeist is a person's spirit.

In other words, we are going to *think* in ways that our culture has taught us. We are in our culture, learning and obeying social norms.

But what if those social norms are *wrong*? Even evil?

Then we must dig and delve; we must get below the layer of social habit and custom and find . . . ourselves.

That is personal change. Personal transformation. And it isn't only *possible* for each of us, wisdom tells us it is the only ethical thing that we can do.

#Change. Keep changing. Wiping away the detritus of social norms and prejudices.

Isn't that what Henry David Thoreau meant by that "different drummer"?

Emerson put it this way:

Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house, a world; and beyond its world a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you: build, therefore, your own world. ("Self-Reliance")

CONCLUSION

#Each of us is stamped from the beginning. We are stamped by social norms, social class, social prejudices and assumptions. Some stamps are overvalued; some stamps are counterfeit at best.

Many Americans believe these walls are permanent and even just.

Yet, we, here believe otherwise. We are *countercultural* in the true meaning of the term: we work against the *zeitgeist*. Against the prevailing nonsense of this age and all epochs.

There weren't any zip codes when I was born, but today it is 62040. A poor industrial suburb of Saint Louis, on the "wrong" side of the river.

Today, viola! I'm on the other side of the Mississippi River. Yeah, I owe Tyche some homage for all the luck I've had. I owe Fortuna for some good fortune. I owe the times in which I have lived.

#And I owe this tradition: the tradition of Unitarian Universalist Humanism. Because it tells me that the *purpose* of life is to struggle for a “shared life in a shared world” for all sentient beings and it tells me that such a world is *possible—if* each of us reaches into our best selves and grasps the only real change: liberation for all.

SOURCES and Further Reading

"AI and the Human"

Life Expectancy in the US.

R.W. Emerson, "Fate."