

Preaching to the Preacher
My Personal Responses to Some of Last Year's Sermons
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
July 3, 2016

It's hard to believe we've already completed another wonderful church year together. Amidst all the suffering and injustice in our world, concerns that rightly dominate our heart and minds, it's too easy to lose sight of all the great things that have also happened. There's been so much radical and positive transformation that I remain confident, as President Obama said during his second Inaugural address, "the arc of history" really does "bend toward justice." Obama used this phrase in reference to something Dr. King once said in a speech. King was quoting the famous Unitarian minister and abolitionist, Theodore Parker, who said, to be exact, "Even though the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice." Thus, through patience and perseverance, and the hope in the truth of this principle, we are slowly making progress.

A year ago this weekend, some of you may recall, for the first time ever, I abruptly changed the subject and title of my sermon so I could address our Supreme Court's historic decision determining same-sex marriage is a Constitutional right. As if that wasn't enough to celebrate, the court also secured healthcare for millions by upholding the Affordable Care Act, stopped elected officials from redrawing districts to benefit their own political parties, and upheld the 1968 Fair Housing Act, prohibiting discrimination based on race, religion, gender, or nationality. It was at this same time, in response to the terrible mass shooting at an AME Church in South Carolina, that politicians in the South, including conservative politicians, finally demanded the removal of the Confederate flag from public buildings. All this occurred within the course of just a couple of weeks last summer.

Our year is also ending on a very high note in light of the Supreme Court's other historic decision, just this week, striking down state laws like the one in Texas that, according to the ruling, pose "a substantial obstacle to women seeking abortions, and constitutes an 'undue burden' on their constitutional right to do so." In short, in its strongest statement since *Roe v. Wade*, our highest court has again ruled that a woman has a right to govern her own body and that reproductive freedom is protected by the Constitution.

And let's not forget other giant leaps forward. The Paris Climate Summit, though not as strong a plan of action as we need, was historic in that for the first time ever our world leaders came together to seriously address the greatest threat to life in the history of our planet. And this year a Socialist became a major contender in the race to become the next U.S. President by making income equality, that which Obama has called, "the defining issue of our time," the focus of his platform. And, for the first time

ever, a woman has become the presumptive Presidential nominee for a major American political party and is currently way ahead in the polls.

About this time last year, 5000 Unitarian Universalists from around the nation also gathered in Portland for our annual General Assembly and committed to support the Lummi Nation in it's struggle to keep the largest fossil fuel shipping port in North America from being built on their sacred lands here in Washington. Last month, after much public pressure, the U.S. denied a permit that would have permitted such a terminal from being constructed North of Seattle, which was the last of six West coast export terminal projects proposed by fossil fuel companies five years ago, all of which have been rejected because of tremendous public opposition. From Oakland, California to Bellingham, Washington, people are saying "no" to our fossil fuel addiction.

I begin with all of these victories because I know how difficult it is for us to stay positive amidst all the injustice and hate and violence and cruelty also going on in our world—especially in light of the mass shooting in Orlando only a few weeks ago, or the terrorist attacks at an airport in Istanbul and a family restaurant in Bangladesh just a few days ago, and another horrific attack in Iraq this morning. And, in the midst of all of this, people ask me how I can continue to be so positive and so hopeful. Admittedly, part of the answer is because I need to. I couldn't do this work if I didn't believe we are making a real difference. So I may have a biased psychological need that predisposes me to look for, even exaggerate, all the good things that are happening. Yet, I tend to believe, the opposite is the real truth, that too many of us are predisposed to focusing on all the negative things happening and are unable, even afraid at times, to acknowledge all the positive progress we're achieving. So I'll stop being so optimistic when everyone else stops being so damn pessimistic!

Of course, I'm not always upbeat. My optimism is tinged with much sarcasm and a darker eye for misery after a lifetime of my own personal hardships. I know things are tough. I know there is too much injustice and cruelty in the world. I am not blind to sorrow or to the harsher realities of life. Nor do I allow these experiences, all the tragedy and suffering, blind me to the goodness and beauty surrounding me, or to the feelings of joy and laughter I experience each day, or to all the caring and compassionate people who far outnumber the few jerks I have to also contend with.

A few years ago, shortly before coming here to Spokane, I had been far more pessimistic in my outlook, railing more often against evil others in my sermons, and more easily giving myself over to conspiracy theories and my fears that the whole world is coming to an end. But as I began researching for my dissertation on the psychology of religion, during which I studied the characteristics of the fundamentalist mindset, I discovered this rigid, punitive, black and white approach to the world is predicated on what scholars call *apocalyptic thinking*. In brief, the fundamentalist, being extremist in almost every way, is extremely fearful, causing one's anxieties about life—about all its insecurity and danger—to become full blown paranoia, reflected in the inflated belief that the whole world is coming to an end.

This realization caused me to begin taking account of how I react to my own fear response, realizing that I too, when in heightened states of anxiety, can inflate my own fears. This opened me, I believe, to begin seeing all the good, all the progress, the arc of history bending toward justice, that is also happening around me. Then, just a few years ago, while here in Spokane, I discovered the newest branch of evolutionary psychology, ETAS theory (Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems theory,) which proposes that the first thing any organism does, including the human organism, is to assess the level of threat in any new situation. Upon determining an environment is relatively safe, most creatures calm down, restoring their sympathetic nervous systems to homeostasis. But some creatures, especially humans who have been traumatized or experienced a lot of insecurity, have trouble self-regulating and can remain in almost constant states of heightened anxiety, even when there are no real threats.

This realization helped me to understand just how much fear underlies so much of the injustice and hate and violence in our world. So much so that today I no longer divide the world into conservatives and liberals but into people who can self-regulate and those who live most their lives in fear. Our differences, I believe, are not ideological but psychological. Some of us may adopt fear based beliefs, but this is only because we are afraid to begin with, and choose ideologies reflecting our fears, ideologies we believe will keep us safe, ideologies we, thus, cling to with a vengeance. But we are all neurologically the same in this regard. We all enter every situation a little afraid, assess the threat, and, if it is safe, either calm down or remain in an unnecessary or heightened state of fear—and I believe extremist ideologies reflect the latter.

This trend in my thinking continued during our past year together, and took another giant leap forward as reflected in a sermon I gave last July entitled, “Gray Matters: Your Brain on Uncertainty.” It was based upon what neuroscience now understands happens to us when we feel certain about our beliefs. The first big revelation for me was learning that “knowing” is a feeling, not a rational state of mind. Have you ever had an experience of being sure you know the answer to something, yet can’t come up with it? Even though we can’t come up with the answer, which is the very definition of “not knowing,” we still feel sure we know it. We can also feel sure we know the answer even if the answer we have is completely wrong. As Robert Burton puts it in his book, *On Being Certain*, “the *feeling of knowing*, and its kindred feelings should be considered as primary as the states of fear and anger...¹ Certainty and similar states of ‘knowing what we know’ arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason.”² This is a profound statement that has, again, profoundly altered my own worldview, that knowing is a primary emotion that is independent of reason.

¹ Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You’re Not*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, NY, 2008, p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, preface.

The other big revelation in this research is that the feeling of knowing, the feeling of being certain, releases dopamine into our system. As I explained in my sermon, “Dopamine is a particular neurotransmitter that signals our nerves to feel pleasure, and serves as both a reward and motivator for doing what the brain wants. So the feeling of knowing, being certain, really does feel good, and, like everything else that feels good, it’s hard to stop. It doesn’t feel good admitting we’re wrong, or that we have no idea what the future holds in store for us, even though being wrong and uncertain may be more honest and true.” Or, as science journalist Jonah Lehrer says in his book, *How We Decide*, “Self delusion...[feels] really good.”³

All of this helped me to understand that the more sure I am, the more irrational I am, and the more irrational I am, the more afraid I am; and that the more right I feel, the more righteous I feel, and the more righteous I feel, the more justified I feel battling those I disagree with or whom disagree with me. It’s kind of a painful realization because I see this same thing happen to almost everyone I know, including my lovely liberal friends. And I’m not just talking about big issues like politics, religion, and sports—I see it happen regarding some of the most minor decisions. Churches like ours have had major conflicts over changing the color of paint on the walls, or getting new furniture, or subtle adjustments to the order of service. And even if the conflict doesn’t get out of hand, the arguments often take a moral tone, moving the furniture isn’t democratic, that color offends my senses, the process was unfair, this is supposed to be a compassionate church, how unwelcoming that change is, it’s unthinkable, it’s idiotic, it’s absurd. Can you imagine how difficult it is for those charged with the responsibility for making such decisions to hear their friends suggest they have somehow acted unethically over things so minor when there is so much real injustice in the world?

As I said, it has been a painful realization, because now I see this tendency to moralize over even minor intellectual differences in everyone, liberals and conservatives, including in myself. But it’s what happens when we enter the irrational state of knowing and succumb to the intoxicating effects of certainty. Yet, in realizing this, that this neurological reality impacts us all, I have also come to understand that we are all much more alike than we imagine, and that the difference between being conservatives and liberals may only be how long we remain high on certainty, how addicted we are to the feeling of knowing we are right.

As a result, many of my sermons since *Gray Matters* have appealed to the fearful mind in all of us to help even the most liberal among us develop useful strategies for living comfortably with uncertainty and doubt. Last September, for example, I gave a sermon entitled, “When Corporations Save the World,” a play off the title of David Korten’s bestselling book, *When Corporations Rule the World*. The sermon was the result of my positive outlook, of my ability, that is, to notice many of the good things

³ Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books edition, New York, NY, 2010, p. 205.

happening in the world, and my more fundamental belief, based upon my experiences, that most people want to do good.

Corporations may not be persons, but they are owned and operated by persons who are not unlike anyone else. So when I noticed banks voluntarily raising their own minimum wage, and CEOs reducing their salaries to pay their employees more, and major corporations boycotting states that discriminate against gays and lesbians and transgender people, and corporate billionaires giving away millions to help public schools, and companies as demonized as Walmart ceasing to sale Confederate flags and semi-automatic guns in light of mass shootings, and vowing to use nothing but renewable energy in its stores within the next decade, and to sell only cage free eggs, I couldn't help but theorize that something is happening, that corporations are changing for the better.

And what I happily discovered, through my research, is that business ethics, taught by real ethicists, wasn't part of a standard business education until recently. The field of business ethics didn't even begin until the mid 1970s and didn't become a firmly established field until the 1990's. Interestingly enough, Martin Shkreli, the young CEO who bought the manufacturing rights for a cancer and AIDS drug, then raised it's price from \$13.50 to \$750 a pill overnight, went to a college that doesn't teach business ethics. As I said in my sermon, "after 25 years of the first generation of ethically trained business students working their way up the corporate ladder into top management positions, and a continuing wave of ethically trained business professionals infiltrating a variety of positions, we are beginning to see positive results, despite the despicable actions of 33-year-old venture capitalist Martin Shkreli..."

I bring this up now, however, only to point out how a more positive outlook, and what I believe is a less fearful and certain outlook, has opened me up to seeing the good in places I could not have looked before, and in people with whom I once could not have embraced.

Another sermon, "Dirty Rotten Jokes: Humor in the Age of PC," which I gave in December, was born out of my wish to reconcile the personal conflict I feel over tremendous pressure, especially from my liberal community, to not say things that offend others, especially marginalized groups, while, at the same time, being free to speak my truth and to use humor as an outlet for expressing forbidden thoughts. In researching for this sermon, I became aware of behavioral psychologist, Peter McGraw's benign/violation theory of humor, that something isn't funny if it doesn't violate a cultural norm or taboo, and, at the same time, isn't funny if someone is injured by it. This is why *The Three Stooges* can hit each other with hammers and poke each other in the eyes and we still laugh, because we know they aren't getting hurt. At the same time, the old chicken crossing the road joke makes us boo because it doesn't violate any kind of norm. It's just not that that funny. McGraw says, the trick is "trying

to find this sweet spot between being too tame and boring people and being too risqué and offending people.”⁴

The thing is, the line between these two extremes is always changing, and as each generation become more accepting and more aware and sensitive toward those who have been marginalized, it becomes impossible to have a laugh at their expense. Today old comedians like Bill Maher and Jerry Seinfeld are complaining that young people are too politically correct to have a sense of humor, but they don't understand that the line has shifted and it may really be that Maher and Seinfeld themselves just aren't that funny anymore.

But the point here is that in opening myself to the conundrum I was able to see that our sense of humor is a culturally shifting phenomenon, different for each generation. Had I stayed in my righteous mind, believing I ought to have the right to joke about anything I wish without being repressed by an overbearing and politically correct generation, I could not have discovered this important truth about humor, or come to understand that in order to maintain my sense of humor I have to allow myself to evolve.

Another sermon born of this mindset was *Grandfather Fire: Thoughtfulness, Courage, and Remembering Who We Are*, which I gave in March. It was based upon an old Huichol origin story about gods who came through a celestial tunnel of light to be born into this world, which was dark and lonely. Their only source of light was carried by Tatawari, Grandfather Fire, who led them to the center of the world. Once there, the Sun rose for the first time and they were able to see the world is a warm and beautiful place. It reminded me of how easily our species is willing to be led by those who know how to take advantage of our fears and ignorance—by those, that is, who take advantage of the darkness. And it reminded me, that as your minister, I must be more like Grandfather fire, helping us all to realize the warmth and beauty of this world.

The final sermon I'll mention is, *Tilting at Windmills: Why We Invent Make Believe Enemies*, which I gave just last month. This again, was about the tendency in all of us, not just conservatives, to see those with whom we disagree as our enemies, by deluding ourselves into believing we are not only right, but righteous, on a holy quest like Don Quixote, who it turns out is only lashing out as his own projections. I gave this sermon, ultimately, for the same reason as so many others, because I no longer accept that ideology is the underlying cause of hostility and injustice among us. Rather, it is our fear. We fight and hate because we are afraid of each other. Thus, to counter the violence and anger in the world, we must first become more peaceful within ourselves by embracing our own uncertainty and learning to see the beauty and the light and to feel the warmth all around us.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgiX7CjV910>