Preaching to the Preacher

My Personal Responses to Some of Last Year's Sermons

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

October 2, 2022

It's become my habit to give a "Preaching to the Preacher" sermon at the start of each new year. I missed doing so at the start of this year, so I've decided to do so today, before 2021 is no longer last year, but the year before. I spoke about a variety of matters last year, too many to even briefly touch upon in a single sermon, so I'll stick to those that were most meaningful to me. As you may have heard me say a couple of weeks ago during my freedom of the pulpit sermon, my sermons usually reflect who I am and where I am at in my own journey, so it's good for me to look back and remind myself of where I've been and where I'm coming from. This is why I call this sermon, "Preaching to the Preacher," because I'm not up here to tell you what I already think I know, but what I am discovering and reflecting upon.

Obviously, the takeover and dismantling of our liberal religion is a major concern in my life these days, and has been for a number of years, but it is not even close to being all I ever talk about. Of nearly forty sermons I gave in 2021, only one was specifically about the UUA, my October 17th sermon entitled, "Correction: Ours is a Liberal Religion, Not a 'Covenantal' One." That year I also gave two sermons about liberalism in general, about its history and values, in which, I mentioned the Unitarian Universalist Association. These were titled, "How the West Was Lost," about the forces eroding liberalism throughout western society, and "The Good Facebook," about how what is said on social media has erroneously become like a Bible for many, an authority, that is, upon which to determine what is true. That was it, just three sermons in 2021 mentioning the UUA.

If I had realized this at the time, I would have spoken more about this matter that is so crucial to the survival or liberal religion, including to the survival of our own historic congregation. But, as always, I have many things on my mind that I'm learning and wondering about. So, as usual, my 2021 sermons were all over the place. In January alone, I gave sermons on "How and Atheist Prays," on welcoming whistle blowers, and on the January 6th insurrection. In the following months, I spoke about rewiring the brain to better see the positive in the world, followed by a sermon on many of the good things that had occurred the year before, in 2020, despite COVID-19 and so many other problems in the world. I gave sermons about the importance of having humor in our society, about the costs of higher education, about the social significance of *Star Trek*, about how genuine love overcomes the sadomasochistic tendency, about maintaining a healthy community, about *neoteny*—the biological tendency of some species, including humans, to maintain juvenile characteristics throughout their lives—about becoming better through life's challenges, about the historical evolution of tolerance, about Restorative Justice, the nature of Unity, and about the tension between Freedom and Equality. One sermon focused on a Sufi parable, another about the historic significance of female computer programmers, another about the philosophy of Abundance versus the mindset of scarcity, another about the history and vital success of vaccine science, another about Jesus's connection to nature, and another about stopping and reversing global warming, to name just some of what I talked about in 2021.

Again, I couldn't possibly go into much detail about the variety of subjects I discussed last year, but in looking back at all I had discussed, I was reminded that at the start of 2021 we were still under lockdown because of the pandemic. Only key personnel and volunteers were allowed in our building during services, about five of us. Live streaming our services or watching their recordings were the only options for everyone. For the first quarter of the year, we weren't even allowing guest speakers into the building, so we'd recommend recorded services from our archive on my Sunday's off. It wasn't until May of 2021 that we first began having guest speakers again, well after the mandates were lifted and everyone who wanted to be vaccinated had an opportunity to do so, only a year and a half ago.

Although things are a lot better now than they were then, the pandemic hasn't ended, we're still being asked to get new booster shots, the global supply chain still has major kinks in it, inflation is on the rise, and the global economy remains unstable. Additionally, our use of technologies allowing us to meet, work, learn, and visit remotely has skyrocketed and has permanently changed how we will continue to do these things and more. At our church, more people still choose to attend services on Zoom or by watching our livestream than to come in person. This is unlikely to change, especially as the technology improves and we're better able to engage and interact with each other in virtual meeting spaces.

The takeaway, whether everyone likes it or not, is that this is the new way of doing things and will continue even when the pandemic finally ends. From this point onward, the continued success of most organizations, including churches, is going to involve how well they embrace, use, and keep up with this transformative technology. When I first started in Unitarian Universalist ministry only 23 years ago, many organizations, especially churches, still didn't have websites. They required professional coders to construct, which could be costly for small nonprofits, and weren't yet absolutely necessary. But within just a couple more years, the yellow pages became obsolete and everyone looking for information expected to find it on the Internet.

Today, we would not think about existing without an adequate website. Likewise, the churches of tomorrow, by which I mean within the next couple of years, will not be able to exists without the adequate use of remote technologies, and without developing rich experiences for distance and online members. Things will not be going back to how they were before the pandemic. It has forever changed how we engage with each other and, at the same time, has empowered us to create community well beyond the confines of our brick-and-mortar buildings.

Fortunately, I pride myself on being at the cutting edge of technology, which is why our congregation had already been streaming our services years before the COVID-19 pandemic. And I am aware enough of the coming trends to help prepare us for what must come next, which is why several of my sermons in 2021 were about technology, and why they were among my favorite and the most meaningful to me.

I particularly enjoyed learning about "Pink Collared Hackers," which I discussed in a sermon subtitled, "The Surprising History of Female Programmers in the Computer Age." Computational thinking is ancient and the first people to use it in modern times were called "computers." When machines eventually came along that could make use of its principles, they were called

"mechanical computers," to distinguish them from ordinary computers, which were humans who used math to make complex calculations, and women were among the very first of them, some of whom turned out to be the most important in the field.

During World War II, the military utilized their skills to help break coded messages. According to MIT's book on *Computational Thinking*, "The Army commissioned teams of human computers to work out firing tables for [their big] guns… One of the most well known of these teams comprised women working at Aberdeen Proving Grounds around 1940."[1] The Best Picture of 2016, *Hidden Figures* is also about three historic women and their previously unknown and central role in the success of NASA's early space program. Among them was Dorothy Vaughan, acting supervisor of the West Area Computers, a group of African American female mathematicians at NASA from 1943 to 1958, which was just one subset of hundreds of female computers working for NASA since World War II.

The first mechanical computer was designed by Charles Babbage in the 1830s, but it was his female partner Ada Lovelace, a brilliant mathematician, who figured out how to program the Analytical Engine by using punch cards, which became the standard method for programming computers for many years, including during the War. So, the very first computer programmer in history was female. Lovelace also coined the term, "the science of operations,"[2] and is known to this day for having helped established the features that distinguish computational thinking from other kinds of thinking.

I gave that sermon, as I said then, "to celebrate the extraordinary contributions of thousands of brilliant women during the past century who made our nation safer and modern life better for all of us in significant ways. And, as the father of a wonderful young woman whom I am extremely proud of, I want to inspire everyone, but especially the women and girls among us, by reminding you that you are as brilliant and as capable as anyone of accomplishing your dreams and doing great things for humanity."

I love technology, as you know, and put many of my hopes for our future in our ability to use it to help overcome our greatest challenges. Technology is but an advanced form of toolmaking and toolmaking is what our species does best. As inventor/futurist Ray Kurzweil has said, "No other tool-using animal on Earth has demonstrated the ability to create and retain innovations in their use of tools."[3] Thus, as a humanist who, by definition, believes in the goodness, potential, and agency of humanity, I see technology, as destructive as it can also be, as a force for good in the world, especially when it is driven by the humanistic ethic, which requires everything that we do to be in service of human welfare and individual unfolding.

I even gave a sermon last November about the most transformative technologies of the year, including the gene editing tech known as CRISPR, which was used to cure a particular form of blindness, as a means of treating arthritis, to block the corona virus, and was approved for human trials testing a cure for HIV. I talked about the tremendous improvements in AI technologies, especially those involving the deployment of autonomous vehicles. Starship Technologies used them to make over a million deliveries. Singapore became the first city to charge passengers to

ride an autonomous bus, and China became the first country to allow driverless robotaxis. In the States, FedEx began using driverless delivery vehicles, and Dominos pizza did so in Houston, Texas. And it was in 2021 that major automakers, like Toyota, Hyundai, and Honda began investing big in autonomous vehicles.

But the technology of the year had to be the vaccine technology that allowed science to deliver COVID-19 vaccines at breakneck speeds. In fact, I ended up giving an entire sermon on vaccines entitled, "Vaccination Nation," about the history of vaccinations, the science behind it, and how much it has done to improve our lives, child mortality rates, and our own lifespans. In the past, we would not have been able to develop a vaccine for COVID-19 for many years, but, as I said in my sermon, in less than a year of the outbreak, we have had several vaccines developed, not by rushing, but by using modern genomics to sequence the virus, modern communications to share information instantly with other scientists across the globe, machine learning that can quickly search articles for potential new drug combinations, computer data bases that can predict outbreaks and helps us respond before they worsen, along with new techniques to signal our own messenger RNA to create immune responses."

As impressive as this is, my favorite technology sermon of 2021 was "Cool It," about the mounting number of new tools we can use to stop and even reverse global warming. Some that most excite me are those that can pull cold water up from the lower depths of the ocean to weaken hurricanes and to act as a buffer between glaciers and the warming seas. I also liked the artificial lightning maker that can cause clouds to condense and make rain, along with artificial trees that can each capture a ton of carbon dioxide per day, an amount living trees would take a lifetime to sequester. I also talked about the nonprofit, *Ocean Clean Up's* technology that is successfully keeping plastic out of the ocean and cleaning up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and the announcement of Elon Musk's $100,000,000 XPrize to the team that comes up with the best carbon sequestering technology that demonstrates "a working solution at a scale of at least 1000 tonnes removed per year; model their costs at a scale of 1 million tonnes per year; and show a pathway to achieving a scale of gigatonnes per year in the future."[4] That's a four year contest that will conclude 2025, and with the largest incentive prize in history, is guaranteed to get results.

People often ask me how I can maintain such a positive view of the future, given all that's going on in the world and the many challenges before us. My belief in humanity, and the extension of our humanity through our creation and use of tools, is a major reason I stay so optimistic, which is also why I talk a lot about technology in my sermons. But I'm also an amateur student of brain science and have come to understand that our outlook is normally negative because our species is neurologically wired to be on the lookout for danger. That's the channel our ancient biology is natively tuned into. There are other channels we can watch that might give us a broader perspective of reality, but the negative news channel is the one our bodies and minds are naturally stuck on.

But, as I said in my February 21, 2021 sermon, "Mindset: Rewiring Your Brain to See the Positive things Happening Around You," we can train our minds to become less fearful by actively looking for the good in the world and in others. We can read books, magazines, and news journals that

intentionally report on the positive things happening in the world. Our biology takes eons to evolve, but, as I say in this sermon, "we can compensate for this by readily transforming our mindsets to see the world in bigger, brighter, and truer ways than we can otherwise imagine. This power is a gift and a marvel of our existence that is too often squandered for fear of change." In other words, we are a species that has the power to evolve our minds within our own individual lifetimes, if we are intentional about doing so.

This is why several of my sermons last year were also philosophical in nature, to help us look at the world, at truth and meaning, from new angles, especially those that help us flip the fear channel to better programming. These sermons were too many and their principles too deep to get into now, especially as I start wrapping up. Instead, I'll mention the few principles that are recurring in many of my sermons, principles you will hear again in the coming weeks and months, and that, by now, many of you may already recognize.

- The humanistic ethic requires that the sole criterion of all we do—technology, science, politics, legislation, education, criminal justice, economics, and so on—must be for human welfare and individual unfolding.
- That the truth of the world is much larger and better than our pessimistic and fearful natures allow us to see, so don't let fear obscure your view.
- That human beings are naturally good and have the desire and potential to do good.
- That our species can and will overcome our greatest challenges because there are already plenty of good people working on them.
- All of us are at our best when we adhere to the Enlightenment principles that our society and our liberal religion is founded upon: Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance.
- Don't be a pushover because some things are worth fighting for and fighting over.
- Finally, establish strong roots, then spread out everywhere while reaching for the sky.

As for what my sermons will cover in the coming months, I'm not sure yet, but I do know that you can look forward to more of the same.

[1] Denning, Peter J., and Tedre, Matti, *Computational Thinking*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2019, p. 32f.

[2] Ibid., p. 51.

[3] Kurzweil, Ray, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, Viking Press, New York, NY, 1999, p. 23.

[4] https://www.xprize.org/prizes/elonmusk