

Better than This
Are we?
by
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My interest in ventriloquism began with my early childhood affection for Edgar Bergen's famous dummy, Charlie McCarthy. Charlie's long era of fame was already waning when I discovered him in the late 1960s by watching an occasional rerun of his old movies dating back to the 1930s and 40s. After he was fabricated in 1922, Bergen took Charlie on the road and became a successful Vaudeville act, so successful that in 1937 they were invited to join the *Chase & Sandborn Hour*, a popular variety show broadcast during the Golden Age of radio. They remained one of Radio's top programs, often its number one show, for almost twenty years. The pair were among the most famous celebrities in the world, having performed alongside guests as renowned as Groucho Marx, May West, Frank Sinatra, and Liberace. Charlie even had a mock wedding with Marilyn Monroe and met with the Queen of England. He and Bergen also starred in several movies, had their own TV show during television's early years, and eventually received an honorary Oscar, carved out of wood, just like Charlie.

Edgar Bergen died while performing one last time at Ceasars Palace in 1978, and, today, the original Charlie McCarthy puppet is propped up behind glass at the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History, a once famous figure now forgotten by at least a couple of generations. So it is fitting that he has a place at the Smithsonian, honoring a time in American history when Charlie McCarthy was the most famous and beloved household name in the country, a ventriloquist dummy who became an unlikely celebrity on the radio.

The duo's important role in American history was amplified in those *Bergen & McCarthy* programs that aired during World War II. They were packed with patriotic songs, encouragement to buy government bonds, calls for scrap metal collection, conserving limited resources, writing letters to servicemen, and offering inspirational words about America and its great values. At the end of one episode, for example, the program's official host, the talented actor, singer, and dancer, Don Ameche, said the following:

We are a nation founded on freedom; a freedom guaranteed by a document known to the world as the Constitution of the United states ... We of the United States are justly proud of our Constitution. It has been called the most perfect plan of liberty ever devised by man. And yet its power lies in its simplicity, a simplicity that begins with its first three words, *We the People*. Through all our struggles to become a free nation we remain, *We the People*. Tyrants have sought to conquer us before, but we have conquered the tyrants and remained *We the People*. And now, once again, we have set our course. *We the People* have decided that our children, and their children, shall remain free as we were free before them. That, as our enemies must learn to know, is what we mean by *We the People*.

These are inspiring sentiments that must have motivated listeners to remain resolute despite the many difficulties associated with being a nation at war. And there is much truth

to them. Yet, it is difficult for honest people who know this country's history not to remember that it has also been a nation built on the beaten backs of slaves, on the cheap and tireless labor of kidnapped orphans and indentured servants and exploited Chinese immigrants, none of whom were allowed the freedom and dignity *We the People* like to claim our country was founded upon. This is so because they, among others, like women and indigenous persons, simply weren't considered people, not really.

Social Psychologist Erich Fromm offers a possible explanation for what appears to us now as blatant hypocrisy and inhumanity. In his exhaustive study on human aggression, Fromm says, "We have to begin with the consideration that for primitive man the 'stranger,' the person who does not belong to the same group, is often not felt as a fellowman, but as 'something' with which one does not identify."¹ This may be so because, unlike other animals, humans have lost the instinctive ability to recognize other members of own species as such. "[Man] does not recognize or identify conspecies as easily as [other] animals," Fromm says. "For him, different language, customs, dress, and other criteria perceived by the mind rather than by instincts, determine who is a conspecies and who is not, and any group which is slightly different is not supposed to share the same humanity."²

So, we can mistreat and misuse other human beings, even go to war with them, because of their ideological, cultural, national, physical, and any other differences, because we do not accept them as human, not really. This is the entire basis of racism, that there are different races of humankind, which is simply untrue. All humans are more closely related to each other than any other kind of animal on the planet, which is why, over time, as our accepted circles of inclusion are widened, subsequent generations realize how wrong and unjust it was for their predecessors to have mistreated those now accepted with such cruelty and indignity.

In an episode only a week before Don Ameche gave his inspiring speech about, *We the People* and our nation being founded upon freedom, Edgar and Charlie had just returned from entertaining the troops in northern Alaska. In addition to a few corny jokes about bringing back blubber so they could chew the fat, Don Ameche asked, "Charlie, did you by any chance see and Japs up at Dutch Harbor?"

We'll I'll tell you Don," Charlie said "It was very foggy out there. It was oh so foggy up there. It was really too foggy to see them, but I could smell 'em," to which the audience laughed.

Then Ameche said, "They tell me those Japs are pretty hard to find. I hear they're disguising themselves as human beings," to which someone else replied, "Well, they'll never get away with that," which is, again, followed by laughter.

As much as I enjoy listening to these old radio shows, this bit caught my attention. Unlike its original audience, as a contemporary man I found these remarks disturbing and not funny in the least. But I do not look backward and judge those who laughed then by today's

standards, which have evolved, at least partly, because of their mistakes, just as tomorrow's generation shall, hopefully, benefit from ours. Instead, I try to understand their roots to avoid repeating the errors of the past. Again, Fromm, my go-to luminary on the subjects of human psychology and sociology, says, "All governments try, in the case of war, to awaken among their own people the feeling that the enemy is not human³ ... It seems almost a rule, when one wants to make it easier for one's own side to destroy living beings of the other, to indoctrinate one's own soldiers with a feeling that those to be slaughtered are nonpersons."⁴

But it's not just the government that does so. Our entire culture is often involved in the same dehumanizing environment and scheme, whether consciously or not. Case in point: the radio episodes I've mentioned were originally aired in 1942, the same year President Roosevelt issued Order 9066, only two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, authorizing the arrests and detention of Japanese Americans, about 120,000 of them, into internment camps, permanently robbing them of their homes, possessions, wealth, and, more to the point, the very freedom that Don Ameche had bragged America is all about.

America was supposed to be better than this, just as today we are supposed to be better than arresting and deporting legal immigrants who have exercised their freedom of speech in protest of Israel's inhumanity against Palestinians living in Gaza. We're supposed to be better than kidnapping students with legal visas off our streets, placing them in chains, and exiling them from our country. We're supposed to be better than disappearing hundreds based on unproven charges and sending them to foreign hardcore prisons without due process in violation of our own laws. As the leader of the free world, and having benefited the most from our global economy, we are supposed to be better than exploiting the poorest nations on Earth while falsely claiming we're being "ripped off" by the entire world.

As individual Americans, we're supposed to be better than attacking the character and threatening the livelihoods of those we disagree with. We're supposed to be better than electing obvious authoritarians to lead our free nation. We're supposed to be better than denying obvious truths about vital matters like the importance of vaccines and the reality of carbon-based climate change, just because truth doesn't concur with our unfounded, paranoid conspiracy theories. We're supposed to be better than banning books from public schools and libraries. We're supposed to be better than judging people by the color of their skin rather than by the content of their character, including white people for those over-zealous, so-called, social justice warriors out there. We're supposed to be better than re-segregating society based on our identity groups, for those woke liberals out there. We're supposed to be better than demanding freedom for ourselves, while denying it for others, for those who, for whatever reasons, are perceived to be so different than us that they are not really human beings and, thus, don't deserve the same rights that we expect.

The United State of America was founded upon the Enlightenment principles. If you're a Unitarian, you should know them by heart, not just because I've been talking frequently about them for the past half decade, but because they are the principles our liberal religion is also founded upon. The most fundamental principle of them all is *human dignity*, which philosopher Immanuel Kant famously called the "categorical imperative," meaning it is unconditional in any circumstances and is essential to all that we do. Kant defined this imperative as *no person should be treated as means to someone else's ends but should be considered an end within themselves*. This principle was reframed during the French Revolution in the terms we are most familiar with today, as *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, and, as I like to add, *of all peoples*—Japanese people, Mexican people, Palestinian people, Ukrainian people, Chinese people, Russian people, Iranian people, Canadian people, Greenlander people, transgender people, Democrat people, Republican people, liberal people, conservative people, millionaire and billionaire people, poor people, Tesla driving people, and on and on, all people everywhere.

As Tzvetan Todorov says in his book, *In Defense of the Enlightenment*, "Those who felt imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment cherished their belonging to the human species more than their affiliation to their country."⁵ Or, as Montesquieu succinctly said, "I am necessarily a man and I am French by chance."⁶ Our nation, like our liberal religion, was founded upon a belief in our common humanity and the belief that humanity is universal, no matter where we are from. This is why all Americans should stand in opposition to a government that seeks to put our welfare, the welfare of only 4.3 percent of the world's population, above the 95.7 percent of the other human beings living with us on this small blue pearl that is our shared home.

This is why I prefer Erich Fromm's reworking of the categorical imperative as "the principle that 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to [humanity], *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*,"⁷ and "that the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities."⁸ In his book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm details the reasoning behind this imperative, "We need to create the conditions that would make the growth of man[kind], this unfinished and uncompleted being—unique in nature—the supreme goal of all social arrangements. Genuine freedom and independence and the end of all forms of exploitive control are the conditions for mobilizing the love of life which is the only force that can defeat the love for the dead."⁹ The latter, a necrophilous orientation, like war, as we have seen, is dependent upon dehumanizing others. The love of life rather, a biophilous orientation, moves us to truly recognize and care for all human beings, all of whom belong to the totality of life itself.

We create and maintain human dignity by upholding freedom, reason, and tolerance. Freedom is the freedom to speak, to move about, to determine one's own purpose, and to enjoy the benefits of society equally and without prejudice. Reason means more than just thinking well; it means allowing people to think for themselves no matter how much we

might disagree with them. It means they don't need a church or government authority telling them what they must and must not believe. And tolerance means we simply live and let live, and that it is our moral responsibility to protect the welfare and rights of those we may vehemently disagree with. Dignity is our fundamental principle, the basis of our nation and our liberal religion. Freedom, reason, and tolerance are what such dignity looks like when it is upheld.

Today, we are in the midst of our church's annual generosity campaign during which we ask our members and friends to please make a financial commitment to help sustain the efforts of our historic community, which has a 138-year history as a radical and persistent voice of these liberal values in our community and in the world at large. I hope it will continue to have such a presence for as long as is necessary. But the theme of this year's campaign is in the form of a question, "What brings you here?"

It's a challenging question because, on the one hand, it invites us to consider what we like about this church; what we personally get out of being here. But on the other hand, it asks us to consider if we're in the right place, if human dignity really is our greatest value, along with upholding the freedom, reason, and tolerance necessary to create and maintain such dignity. This is what American Unitarianism is supposed to be about, although it's gotten increasingly muddled since its ill-considered entanglement with Universalism in 1961, an error I have made it my mission to correct during these waning years of my role as a Unitarian minister. Since the merger, both traditions have slowly transformed into frail shadows of their former selves. In the process, its adherents have become increasingly unable to articulate what this new hybrid religion, Unitarian Universalism, is about. During the past couple of decades, it has been overtaken by those who don't at all cherish our commitment to human dignity, nor to the freedom, reason, and tolerance that sustains it.

Six years ago, after I wrote and distributed a book about these concerns, I was, within hours, banned and labeled a racist, homo- and transphobic, classist, ableist. Within a month I was publicly censured by the UU Ministers Association. And by the end of the year, I was disfellowshiped by the Unitarian Universalist Association, which went on to label me a noncooperative abusive bully who is ethically unfit for ministry on a new webpage built just for me. All of this occurred without anyone to this day lifting a single sentence from my book to prove these ludicrous *ad hominem* assertions. The UUA's top leaders even secretly colluded with a few upset members of our own congregation to try to force me from my post. Rather than help ease tensions here, they did all of this with no concern for the welfare of our congregation, just so long as they could get rid of their pesky gadfly, no matter who they used or who they hurt or if they split our church apart or not. They didn't care about my dignity, or yours. They didn't value the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance that Unitarianism is founded upon, which they have since eradicated from their bylaws.

Most of us well recall how difficult this was to go through, resulting in about ten percent of our members splintering off, people we knew and loved, people we thought knew and loved us. But they only left after causing even worse havoc in our church than the UUA did. They wrote and distributed letters comparing me to Donald Trump, along with a letter to everyone in our congregation asking them to reduce their contributions to a bare minimum for as long I remain in the pulpit. If I believed it would have helped, I would have left, but I knew if I did, the split would have been far worse. The shock, the stress, the pain, the cruelty, grief, depression, and lies about me that I experienced was often more than I could bear, but I stuck it out because so many of you asked me to please stay. Finally, those who spat on my dignity and tried to deny my freedom to speak and reason for myself, and who proved so utterly intolerant, fled immediately after they lost a board election. And even after they had been so solidly rebuked by the great majority of our congregation, they didn't have the fortitude nor moral courage to stay and work out our differences. Instead, they immediately sent a joint letter of resignation, never to be heard from again.

I have often asked myself the very question we are asking ourselves now, what on Earth brought them here to begin with? If it wasn't human dignity, freedom, reason, and tolerance, then why be part of a Unitarian church? Once again, turning to Fromm helps me gain some insight into what may have happened. "It does not make any difference whether the object of one's aggression is a stranger or a close relative or a friend," Fromm says. "What happens is that the aggressor cuts the other person off emotionally and 'freezes' him. The other ceases to be experienced as a human and becomes a 'thing—over there.' Under these circumstances there are no inhibitions against even the most severe forms of destructiveness."¹⁰ That's what I felt like, like a dehumanized "thing—over there."

When all this turmoil was going on, my late friend, Rev. Happy Watkins, was extremely concerned about my welfare. He even came unannounced to a Sunday service once and asked to speak to our congregation. With tears in his eyes, he said, "Please take care of this man, he's my friend and I need him." Afterward, I reached out to hug him and remember collapsing into his arms momentarily and weeping. He later told me that the next day, one of those wanting me to leave called him, chastised him for coming, and tried unsuccessfully to convince him of what a terrible person I truly am. Sometimes Happy came to the house to check on me and Peggy, who had been just as shocked and traumatized by such cruelty as I was. After expressing her shock at some of those who had been the very worst, Happy told her, "Church people are some of the meanest people in the world."

I guess ministers and faith leaders from any tradition know this is so, that people are the same wherever you go," as the song says, "there is good and bad in everyone." Still, I don't want to settle for this explanation, not in our Unitarian Church, because our first principle, the thing that is supposed to bind us together, is our respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person and all peoples. If this isn't what brings us here, if we, above all, cannot treat each other with respect and dignity, then we're in the wrong place! If this is the

case for you, don't wait to cause a split before you split. I sometimes joke that Unitarians will entertain almost any idea but will argue over where to put the furniture. But, as with Charlie's McCarthy's joke about Japanese people stinking and not being human beings, it isn't funny. Those who have to have their way on every little matter, treating those who think differently with hostility in the process, are in the wrong place. There are plenty of places for disrespect and indignity in the world, but UUCS is not one of them. Indeed, there is no room for such indignity in Unitarianism anywhere, given that it is founded upon this categorical imperative. Human dignity equals freedom, reason, and tolerance. Freedom, reason, and tolerance add up to human dignity. Yet, even now, as I work to restore our venerable tradition, I get pushback for emphasizing the centrality of these principles. Some complain they are not spiritual enough, not inspiring enough, not attractive enough, and the like. But for those of us who are Unitarians, they are more than enough, which is what brings us here.

Just as our nation cannot say it is founded upon and devoted to freedom when it dehumanizes others in order to turn them into enemies and to justify exploiting them, if we can't treat others with dignity, no matter who they are, especially those within our own congregations and religion, then we may be a lot of things, but we cannot claim to be Unitarians, not really.

My hope for our historic congregation is that it will be here for as long as it remains necessary to remind our community and our world of the values that we devote our lives to, values that uplift the humanity and wellbeing of every person and all peoples. But if we're here and not doing this, then we should be asking ourselves, *what brings us here?*

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, CT, 1973, p. p. 145.

² Ibid., p. 148.

³ Ibid., p. 145f.

⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fromm, Erich, *Man For Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

⁸ Ibid., p. 229.

⁹ Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 147.