

Preaching to the Preacher 2025

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, once said, “Life is growth. As soon as we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we’re as good as dead.” This principle is fundamental to how I live my life and, I think, is the secret to being a good preacher. I say “preacher” and not “speaker” because I speak to the same audience almost every week, year after year, which means what I say needs to always be fresh, interesting, and relevant. If I were an occasional speaker I could focus on a particular area of interest or expertise and give the same speech to different audiences, tweaking it a little here and there. But as a preacher, what I say would soon become boring and irrelevant if I only delivered what is essentially the same sermon each week.

Of course, there are many religions with preachers and ministers who do exactly that. In fact, “exactly that” is precisely what is expected of them. As a student of the Christian ministry, especially as a Southern Baptist, we were taught to always speak from one source, the Bible, and from that tradition’s particular interpretation of it, always leading to a message praising the greatness of God or the Lord Jesus. Over the years I’ve often had some from other traditions ask, “If you don’t speak from the Bible, what do you speak about?” It’s an odd question when considering the great and countless variety of inspiring sources there are—the writings of all religions, along with poetry, philosophy, psychology, science, and virtually anything else from which I might gain insight worth passing along. When not limited to one set of scriptures or one ideology life becomes vastly more interesting and worth talking about. So much so that I can never run out of new things to say.

Yet, there is another perspective I’ve heard passed around, including among Unitarian ministers, that they learn in their homiletics courses, that “Every minister has but one or two good sermons in them. The secret is learning to say it in different ways.” If this were true for me, occupying my pulpit would be the least favorite part of my job, rather than my favorite. It’s my favorite because for me, as Ueshiba said, “Life is growth,” and I’m always striving to learn more and grow as a person, which means, in the process, I have many new insights to share. Although I return to various themes that hold my interests and have become integral to my life and thinking, my sermons and subjects reflect where I am at this point in my life. They are, in short, my personal reflections, an opportunity to organize my thoughts, and to think aloud about important reminders and matters that are shaping my own growth and evolution. In this sense, I really am up here preaching to the preacher. As I said last week at the start of my sermon on technology, “I’m going to enjoy this even if no one else does.”

So, it’s been beneficial to me and, I hope, to others, to have an annual “Preaching to the Preacher” sermon as a further reminder of those key insights that have proven most important in my own continuing growth and sojourning.

In case you aren’t aware, social psychologist Erich Fromm has long companioned me on my continuing journey of growth, including one of my earliest sermons in 2025, “The Insane

Society: The Pathology of Normalcy and the Necrophilous Orientation in Today's World," delivered on January 12th, in the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump's reelection and inauguration. Like many of you, the greatest question on my mind was how so many of our fellow Americans could have voted for such a scoundrel—to put it mildly. Fromm spent most of his life working to better understand why societies often choose authoritarianism over freedom, destruction over development, death over life. His answer, in short, is because most of us would rather belong than be free. We are terrified of being excluded from society and its benefits, which is why his first book, *Escape from Freedom*, written in 1941, while Hitler was still in power, was originally entitled, *The Fear of Freedom*. Essentially, it says we are willing to give up our freedom in order to fit in.

In this particular sermon, I focused on what Fromm referred to as the “pathology of normalcy” in his 1955 book, *The Sane Society*, in which here argues it is possible for an entire society to go nuts. “This book deals, not with individual pathology,” Fromm writes, “but with the *pathology of normalcy*, particularly with the pathology of contemporary western society.”¹ That pretty much sums up my feelings about the US after the election of Donald Trump. “The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues,” Fromm continues, “the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane.”² He also uses the term “consensual validation” to describe the thinking of those who believe their vices, ideas, and pathologies must be right just because lots of people share them. So, these two terms, “pathology of normalcy” and “consensual validation” have stuck with me this year as useful frames for understanding what’s happening around the world, including in the US.

During the past year I also read one of Fromm’s final books, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, written in 1973, based on his in-depth study of the authoritarian mindset. It was the basis of my June 29 sermon, “How to Survive Rampant and Malignant Narcissism, Death, and Destruction.” In it, he continues to remind us that it is freedom, not submission to the mind and will of an authority, that “is the condition for the full growth of a person, for [one’s] mental health and [one’s] well-being.”³ Yet we have often chosen leaders whom he says, “All too frequently used the slogan that they are leading their people in the battle for freedom, when in reality their aim has been to enslave them.”⁴

This sermon was part of my continuing attempt to understand the mind of Donald Trump and, what remains for me, his unthinkable election to the White House, twice! “Although controversial, many psychologists have publicly labeled Trump a *malignant narcissist*,”⁵ I said, “a condition based on Fromm’s discussion of what he terms ‘malignant forms’ of narcissism and necrophilia that contribute to a ‘syndrome of decay’ that he says, ‘Represents the quintessence of evil; it is at the same time the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity.’”⁶ Without saying more about this today, it is an explanation that has helped me understand Trump and, tragically, one that he seems to confirm anew each day.

But the more troubling question is how could so many American voters, slightly more than not, have chosen to put such a troubled human being in office? To answer this question, Fromm outlines three kinds of social systems, “the **revolutionary-humanistic**” system, which “values life, growth, creativity, and the unfolding of human potential.” The **authoritarian** system, “marked by submission to power, rigid hierarchies, and the suppression of individual freedom.” The authoritarian is obviously a downgrade from the revolutionary-humanistic ideal, but “the most destructive” is what Fromm calls “the **necrophilous** orientation, characterized by a fascination with death, control, and mechanical order,” that was embodied in Nazi Germany, where “destruction and domination were ends in themselves.”

This explanation has helped me understand my fellow Americans who voted for Trump, who were, perhaps, acting from an authoritarian impulse to force others to accept their wills, by unwittingly voting for a man who only knows how to destroy—covering rose gardens with concrete and bulldozing the East Wing of the White House are among the minutest examples. Yet the important point, as I said in that sermon, as Fromm explained, is “that we are not necessarily “ruled by one or the other of the syndromes,” and that “the average person is a blend of both.”⁷ Those who helped elect Trump are not sinister. Like most of us, they recognize things have to change. They just made an authoritarian choice to force such change on others. But, as I said in my November 30th sermon, *Who’s to Say We Have to Lose for Someone Else to Win?*

The same malignancy that’s overtaken much of the world is also sweeping through our Unitarian congregations and communities. In my 31 years as a Unitarian, 26 of them as a Unitarian minister, the hostility I’ve witnessed and experienced within our denomination and churches in recent years is as shocking as it is unprecedented. This virulent epidemic of the mind and heart has seriously weakened our commitment to the very tolerance that once immunized us against it.

This helps me recognizing that the line between many Trump voters and those who voted against him is thin. Those who didn’t cannot hold animosity in their hearts against those who did, especially when too many on the left treat those they disagree with just as dreadfully—condemning, cancelling, and forcing them to go along with the crowd or else! The majority of Americans, as well as most people in the world, need to shift toward the humanistic-revolutionary mindset if we’re going to make a better world.

I do take some hope from the following statement in Fromm’s book on human destructiveness, “The half insane leader is often the most successful one until his lack of objective judgment, his rage reactions and consequence of any setback, his need to keep up the image of omnipotence may provoke him to make mistakes which lead to his destruction.”⁸ In my opinion this is now happening to Trump, as his popularity in the polls continues to fall, even as members of his own party are finally beginning to defy him. To dismiss “affordability” as a “Democrat hoax” while giving himself an A++++++ on the economy, reveals both his narcissism and delusional mind to almost anyone, no matter who

they voted for. The more important question now is will our society begin to truly become prolife by turning toward true freedom, tolerance, and the “growth, creativity, and the unfolding” of every person?

Another important voice in my sermons and my life during the past year has been John H. Dietrich, the father of Religious Humanism who was also the minister of our Spokane congregation over a century ago. In my attempts to promote his relevance to our religion and today’s world by occasionally delivering one of his sermons, he has become increasingly relevant to me.

For example, I’ve long considered myself “cosmopolitan” in my thinking, meaning, I consider myself more a citizen of the world and of humanity than I do an “American.” I have also long believed that nations are false and fictional concoctions meant to divide the human family. But when preparing to give Dietrich’s 1919 sermon on *Nationalism and Internationalism*, in May, my mind shifted. “In spite of the fact that there are those who hope for the day when all international boundaries shall be removed,” Dietrich counters, “when there shall be no more divided humanity, I am inclined to agree with the very ancient saying: ‘boundaries are sacred’ ... Boundaries are practically necessary in every form and phase of existence.”

He admits, “From the idealistic point of view patriotism looks small alongside cosmopolitanism. To love the whole world seems so much nobler than to serve one little country.” He calls this an “anti-internationalist” view, yet says, “to love one’s country should not mean to hate all others, any more than to love one’s home means to despise all others. In fact, a real love of one’s country implies respect for the loves of other peoples.” How, after all, can we not feel closest to the land, people, and culture we are from? Instead of rejecting such sentiments, Dietrich contrasts a “low” understanding of patriotism defined by empire, power, glory, flag-waving, military pageants, and slogans like “Deutschland Uber allies (Germany above all)” “Britannia Rule the Waves,” and “America First;” with a higher notion of patriotism defined by “love of country in terms of literature and art, social progress, and ethical idealism.” To one such as this, he says, one’s “land is the realm of beauty and goodness, it is the place where happy, prosperous, and noble people live. Territory does not interest him, but justice does. Military power leaves him cold, but social improvement exalts him to the stars. If he thinks of empire, it is the empire of ideas: and if he dreams of power, it is the power of righteousness. [This is the] type of patriotism and love of country I believe in.”

This sermon shifted in my thinking on the subject in a way I articulated in the recent and aforementioned sermon, *Who’s to Say We Have to Lose for Someone Else to Win?* “I want the US to succeed. But I also want China, and Russia, and Isreal, and Palestine, and North Korea, and Iran, and Venezuela, and all the people around the world to succeed because I don’t lose just because they win, and I want them to win.” It is okay to take pride in and love the place, people, and culture from which we sprang while also caring about the welfare of

people everywhere, and to understand that we are all part of one human family, and that we all succeed and prosper together, just as we ultimately fail and suffer together.

Dietrich's sermon also influenced my May 18th sermon, *Toward a World of Open Arms and Open Borders*. It was a sermon I had planned to give before working with Dietrich's sermon, which I gave only a week earlier, on May 11th. I'd intended it to be a response to Donald Trump's inhumane, racist, and anti-immigrant policies. In Dietrich's 1919 sermon, given only two months after the end of World War I, rather than calling for the US to tighten its borders, he spoke in anticipation of an international peace conference and the possibility of it establishing "some kind of a league or fraternity of nations which will assure us that fighting on a universal scale will never again blast the earth," making it possible that an "Englishman will not be a foreigner in America any more than a Pennsylvanian is a foreigner in Minnesota." It was a beautiful hope that I further emphasized by summarizing the key points of his visionary sermon into a single paragraph.

There are many who tell us that until we have moved beyond this present resting place of the nation with its borders and boundaries and barriers, we cannot hope to construct the fabric of that ideal internationalism of which the prophets have dreamed ... To love one's country should not mean to hate all others, any more than to love one's home means to despise all others ... We must learn that the interests of the whole are greater than the interest of any one part ... This does not mean that we should not love the nation to which we belong. It means, rather, that when there is a clash between the interests of our nation and the world at large, we must recognize the supremacy of the interests of humanity to those of our nation ... [that] beyond the nation is the world and beyond the people of one country the great circle of humanity, and I believe the day will come when we shall recognize that our first and highest duty is to mankind as a whole and not to any single section of mankind ... And each nation will grant the right of interchangeable citizenship so that no dweller in a new land will need to go through the process called naturalization ...

It's tragic that his vision for us more than a century ago is not the world nor the nation most of us live in today, which is why Dietrich remains as relevant to us now as he did then, and why I remain committed to reviving his voice and significance in today's world. So, you can expect to hear more from John Dietrich in the year ahead.

Dietrich was also inspiration for a couple of fun sermons during the year. His brief 1922 essay, "What to Read and Why," inspired me to talk about some of the most influential books I've read. You can find my book list along with that sermon on our church website. For now, I concluded it with the following statement:

Reading is about moving and growing, which are the very definitions of life. So read, read books, read nonfiction books about things you never knew about, nor thought you'd ever want to know about, written by people you don't know nor ever thought you'd want to know. Read books that agree with you, but also some authors you disagree with. Reading things that you dislike or disagree with won't kill you, but not reading will. So, read. For, as one of my graduate professors, Dr. Joseph Martos, used to say, "Diplomas cost money, but education is free."

I followed this sermon up later with one about my favorite films. I concluded it by saying, “Like all art forms, film can transform our hearts and minds and even our world ... consider some of your own favorite films, then go deeper into their meanings by exploring the reasons *why* they mean so much to you. Sometimes being a couch potato is the best way to get moving.”

Finally, in my commitment to help others cope with our era of exponential change as we move toward the coming technological singularity, I have also spoken frequently about the Singularity, artificial intelligence, and other technologies by reminding us, as the authors of *Superagency* so perfectly say, “*You’ll never get the future you want simply by prohibiting the future you don’t want.*”

But, rather than merely speaking on the topic, I’ve increasingly tried to demonstrate the promise of such technology by including moving and meaningful music I’ve created with it. I want to conclude with an example that’s a first for me, took about two hours to produce, and is an incredible and heartwarming example of what collaborating with AI can lead to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODhOYw824kw&t=1s>

I don’t know what I’ll say in the coming months. Some of it will be reflective. Some responsive. Some fun. Some creative. But whatever I talk about, I’m confident I won’t run out of things to say because I’ll keep searching and growing, and it will remain my greatest privilege to continuing sharing this journey with you.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 6.

² Ibid, p. 15.

³ Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, CT, 1973, p. 225.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-george-conway-anti-psychopath-election-b2634614.html>

⁶ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, NY, 1964, p. 87.