

Stages of Personal and Social Transformation

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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Rev. Paul Beckel

If an egg is broken by an outside force, life ends.

If broken by an inside force, life begins.

WELCOME

All of us have experienced the turmoil that comes as we struggle to advance from one developmental stage to the next. Teething, middle school, maybe a crisis of faith. I think something comparable is happening now in society at large. Our nationalistic ethnocentric consciousness is opening up to global consciousness, and this is incredibly disruptive. It will not be a straight path forward.

Today I'll be sharing some thoughts about stages of psychosocial development, stages of faith, and parallels that we've come through in the evolution of human society.

But first, today is Nie Bomstein's 90th birthday. We'll sing happy birthday to her down at coffee hour, as have cake to celebrate, so please do not all of you delay her with congratulations before she gets downstairs...as we will not cut the cake until she can blow out her candles. We light the chalice now in honor of Nie Bomstein.

GATHERING SONG

We are Not our Own #317

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

In America, by Marissa Moss

Summary: Out on a walk in the city, holding little Walter's hand, Grandfather talks about leaving Lithuania, alone at age 10, to come to America. Grandfather's brother decided to stay behind because he loved the old ways, the things he knew, and the extended family. While Grandfather understood his brother's decision, he explains to Walter that he took the risk to leave, as a Jew, to be free from oppression. When they come to a busy intersection, Walter asks if he can cross by himself.

CHILDREN'S BLESSING

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

ERACISM MINUTE

Heidi Ohana

I want to talk for just a moment about mass incarceration of black people. The 13th amendment freed all slaves but there was a loophole in it — if you were being punished for a crime you could and can be forced to work for little or no pay. So who are these prisons filled with? Disproportionately people of color. If you are a white man you have a 1 in 17 chance of spending some time in prison — if you're a black man it is 1 in 3. In some areas it is much more:

in Washington D.C. it is 3 out of every 4. There are more black people in prison now than there were slaves in 1850. Once you're branded as a felon you lose access to many things: housing, employment, and public assistance. You also lose the right to vote.

Last year 10,000 people — including President Obama — marched in Selma, Alabama to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. What most people don't know is that nearly 30% of black men in that state can't vote.

We used prevent black people from having a voice through slavery, then the KKK, then Jim Crow laws that forced black people to pay poll taxes or pass a writing test. Now it's done through imprisoning them. If you think there's still not a racial caste system in the U.S., you need to think again.

SPECIAL MUSIC

“Everybody We Are One,” revised lyrics by A Schoneberg
based on Eric Bibb, *With My Maker I Am One*

I am the preacher shoutin' out the news
The juke joint stomper playin' the blues
The Holy Roller givin' Jesus my cares
I'm the candy man pushin' my wares
I am the cowboy brandin' my steers
I am the Cherokee brave on the Trail Of Tears
I am the master, whip in my hand, I am the slave from a distant land
After all is said and done, everybody we are one.

I'm a refugee in needy despair
I'm a real American and I just don't care
I am the redneck in a dying town
I'm the Wall Street banker, close their factory down
I'm the ghetto brother 'bout to lose my lease
I am the landlord cuttin' off the heat
I am the prisoner pacin' my cell; I am the guard giving him hell
After all is said and done, everybody we are one.

I'm a state patrolman, routine traffic stop
I'm an innocent black man killed by that cop
I'm the homeless child on streets so mean
I'm the movie star on the digital screen
A politician, I'm bought and I'm sold
Displaced worker, believe the lies I'm told
I am Trump, spewing those lies and hate
I'm the resistance before it's too late
After all is said and done, everybody we are one.

MESSAGE

How is it that we travel so far from our innocent childhood faith in magic, and pots of gold at the end of the rainbow? How do we lose the idealism of youth? We advance in important ways over the years — we can now cross the street by ourselves, critically assess public policy, compassionately care for a dying parent — and yet, we sometimes look back to those days before we reached the age of reason ... as if we'd rather still be there.

Human development occurs on so many parallel paths. Our biological evolution, for example: from single-celled life-form to invertebrate, to aquatic creature, to primate: this transformation that took place over eons, within the womb of mother earth, has occurred again and again in a remarkably similar pattern *for each one of us* as a fetus in-utero. Later, if we developed typically, we grew in many dimensions. At first we were utterly dependent. Then, in our terrible-two's, even while we were still dependent, our brains developed to the point where we gained a will of our own. Soon we began to recognize ourselves as members of a family, and eventually, to understand kindness, and to feel a sense of purpose. Years passed, and we began to form our unique individual identity, even while recognizing strong connections with our peers. We developed loyalty, maybe fierce loyalties that resulted in our rebelling against something else, or someone else. Approaching adulthood, we learned how to reason, and the value of objectivity. Then we set reason aside, at least partially, while we discovered love, sex, caring ... and responsibilities expanding in wider and wider circles from one decade to the next.

Along the way we may have discovered playfulness, ingenuity, passion, connection, contemplation, benevolence.

From what I've heard, somewhere further along we develop wisdom. I'm going to have to ask Nie Bomstien about that.

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We may experience another parallel track called "faith development." Throughout this sermon, of course, I'm making generalizations that won't apply to everyone. Many Unitarian Universalists, for example, will flinch at the suggestion of faith development. Many of us over 50 say that we've rejected the faith tradition in which we were raised, and no longer find that term useful in any sense. Some under 40 may be asking, "Faith? What's that?" ... because you were raised in no faith tradition at all.

Methodist theologian James Fowler suggests that we each have the potential to progress through six stages of faith development. Now, as with all things you hear from this pulpit, I encourage you to translate these ideas into something that makes sense to you, instead of rejecting them outright because you don't find the particular words meaningful.

So, first: There's the stage of Innocence. Fowler suggests that, in terms of faith, we begin in innocence, simply accepting the worldview of our caregivers.

Then, Literalism: we may move on to a second stage of literal acceptance of the family stories, beliefs, and rules ... taking everything at face value.

Then, perhaps, Loyalty: if we move on to the third stage, we'll begin to *integrate the contradictions* within the family stories into the practicalities of real life. Still, in this stage, we'll continue to support the established mythology out of loyalty to the group.

Next comes Critical Inquiry: Some will move on to *critical* reflection upon previously unquestioned traditions, and assert *our own experience* as authoritative.

Then comes, potentially, A Broader Perspective: a fifth stage, in which we recognize that our own experience *is part of the common experience of humanity*. In some ways stage five is a tour back to the beginning — a state of willingness, vulnerability, a loss of conceit (which is why babies, and puppies, can be great spiritual guides).

And finally perhaps, though this is very rare, we might move on to sainthood, or altruism, or the Bodhisattva way — a way of being in which the self is transcended, and we joyfully offer ourselves for the benefit of all humanity.

The stereotypical Unitarian may reside at stage four. Historically, at least, we have been known for our skepticism, defiance, and rationalism.

Our Universalist heritage, on the other hand, might egg us on to stage five. Historically, Universalism has focused on finding what we have in common with others, despite our differences.

There is a danger, of course, in defining stages like this. Our lives naturally embody aspects of *all of these stage every day*. There is also a danger in imagining that we can leap forward as we please, or we can expect others to do so. Because we move on only when we have completed the necessary developmental tasks to do so.

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About 20 years ago I was at an interfaith gathering of ministers in which the topic was postmodernism. I'd heard that word thrown around but felt awkward because I didn't really know what it meant. The rough definition that was presented was that the postmodern viewpoint held that truth is always relative, context dependent, that it's not even useful to speak about truth, since everything is a matter of perspective, and subjective interpretation ... "truth" is constructed by each of us within the frame of our inescapable biases. The postmodernist viewpoint affirmed skepticism, pluralism, and a radical equality of different views. Our conversation, then, was about how religion might play out if the coming decades were dominated by the postmodern mindset.

I confess that I was a little smug. I treasured skepticism, pluralism, and radical equality. I sensed that the more conservative ministers were uncomfortable ... so even though I was behind the

curve a few minutes earlier — because I hadn't known what postmodern meant — it turned out that they were more behind than I was.

And yet, I walked away asking myself, “Is this kind of thinking eventually going to come around to bite us? Is this why people say Unitarians just believe anything they want?”

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Have you ever been criticized, scoffed at by someone saying, “You liberals ... you think all religions are equal? That ethics are relative? That people are inherently good? And that we shouldn't judge people?”

Although these accusations are nonsense factually, logically, and historically, now is not the time to examine them critically. In fact, we may not ever find it helpful to deconstruct the arguments of someone who is using tools of analysis that are incompatible with our own.

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All this came to mind recently as I read an extraordinary article about stages of social consciousness as they have played out on a grand historical scale. The author, Ken Wilber, describes these stages that relate not to individuals but to eons of evolution of cultures and nations and humanity as a whole — stages that parallel everything else we've talked about so far.

Wilber describes how early humans emerged with an ego-centric consciousness, driven by instinct for survival. Then, over many thousands of years, consciousness evolved through stages that might be broadly be described as moving from egocentric to ethnocentric — as we began to see beyond ourselves and to take into account the wellbeing of wider kinship circles ... with the definition of our own circle gradually expanding outward as we began to identify kin as those who shared our language, race, geography, or religion.

Along the way, to bind groups together, culture and mythology developed to support each new era's organizational principles which, in turn, reflected higher levels of human need. For example, tribal culture provided safety, empire provided power, authoritarian structures provided order.

Wilber's insight is that it's ok, even necessary, that we retain some aspects of the consciousness that drove these earlier stages, because we still need safety, belonging, and some forms of power and order.

If we *eradicate everything* from these earlier stages we will not be able to thrive at higher levels of social consciousness.

I need to note that, obviously, we're not talking about moments in time when everyone around the globe thought like (a) ... then we shifted to the next period when everyone thought like (b). We're talking about trends, often marked by tipping points when a significant portion of humanity began to shift to the next level.

So while egocentric and ethnocentric aspects of our identity remain strong even today, we have traveled through some additional stages. The modern period began a few hundred years ago as a critical mass began to grasp the utility of reason and science ... which led to industry, and global trade. Our Unitarian ancestors were at the forefront of these movements to overturn traditions rooted in authoritarian structures. And I'm not just talking about the scholarly types who engaged in the new Biblical criticism, but free trade also emerged *via the liberal ideal* that markets should no longer be dominated by state-sanctioned monopolies. The well-to-do traders of colonial Boston, early funders and founders of Unitarian congregations, promoted, and benefited significantly from, the emerging systems of capitalism.

At about the same time, the growing emphasis on reason and science expanded into the philosophical view that anything which exists can be measured. And therefore the only thing that can matter, is matter, the material, the countable, the bottom line.

Simultaneously, this modern scientism was tempered as the social values of freedom and equality began to emerge on the global stage. Again Unitarians and other liberals thought of this as progress, and they were on its cutting edge.

Finally, in the late 20th century, we shifted to postmodernism, in which anti-authoritarian skepticism has gone so far that the so-called experts with their fancy education are routinely met with scorn. And that modern ideal of equality has now expanded so far as to suggest that there should be *no judgement* that any person is superior to another, no idea is better than another, no value is higher than another, and no truth more objective than another.

The intellectual grounding for this perspective is that all truth is true only within a particular context. And since truth is shaped by the perspective of the observer, if you put forth your truth or value as superior to mine, this is coercive. And when society attempts to hold up any point of view as authoritative, this is inescapably oppressive. It's all a natural outgrowth of the earlier quest for the equality and dignity of every person. It's the authority of every individual, taken to the extreme. And it makes perfect sense as a rebellion against the abusiveness and absurdity of authority which had for so long been held exclusively by wealthy western white men.

So postmodernism liberated the authority to determine what had value — from the clutches of the few to distribute to the many ... and in particular to those long marginalized by hierarchies of race, gender, and culture.

So in the modern period, with our very best intentions taken to extremes, the glories of reason and science began to call into question any values that were not tangible and quantifiable.

And in the postmodern period the idolatry of freedom evolved to mean *freedom from anyone ever telling me what to think, or do*. All of this, fueled by our private internet bubbles, has given us Libertarian Utopia: protected by free access to guns, and guaranteed by our freedom to buy elections ... that is, our God-given Freedom from any responsibility to an increasingly frighteningly diverse and multicultural society ... and therefore freedom to skip down a stage or

two of social consciousness — back to the ethnocentrism that made us feel a lot more comfortable.

Can you see how these trends could push people over the edge? Maybe all the way back down to egocentrism, or even to narcissism, where *my own perspective is the only perspective that exists*? Where, by the way, we're safe from criticism because no one will call us on our narcissism, because that would demonstrate insensitivity to people with mental illness.

Have we come so far from the days when religion was nothing but judgment and damnation ... to the point where judgment of any kind is seen as tantamount to abuse?

For example, there was a full-fledged sit in recently at UCLA because a professor had corrected the spelling and grammar on a graduate level exam, and the students angrily claimed that this created an atmosphere of fear.

In another example, at a feminist meeting, after the first speaker was given a round of applause, one participant noted that this kind of judgment created anxiety for her, so the group decided to stop applauding for the rest of the conference.

Now, I'm a proud feminist. I think applause can ruin a moment when we could be absorbing some profound truth or beauty. And I use creative spelling, punctuation, and grammar all the time. But each of these matters involve choices based in overt judgement. They are not based in the nonsensical judgement that judgement itself is never ok.

Too often the whims of one person can hijack a group, and well-meaning liberals are the most likely to undermine themselves this way. The trouble is, when we define ourselves as always on the side of compassion and victims' rights, then anyone criticizing anything instantly becomes a perpetrator. And that kind of movement can gain unstoppable momentum.

These may be extreme examples, but they represent a real diminishment of any real standards of judgement. And this has undermined our habits of meaningful dialog and decision making.

Wilber's conclusion is that the backslide we are now seeing — the revolt against social diversity and global consciousness — is inevitable. We cannot go forward to a still higher level of integrated consciousness, because the excesses of the left have led to a dead end. The only way

forward, he says, is by first going back, *reimagining but not entirely rejecting* the values of our ancestors, and then trying once again to grow into a more inclusive society.

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This has all been very theoretical. But every day we are seeing extraordinary and frightening consequences of this backslide. It's vital that we resist. It's vital that we respond. But we'd best not mindlessly react out of an unwillingness to understand.

I'm going to mention a couple of seemingly smaller examples now, cases that have impacted Unitarian congregations along with a local mainstream protestant church. These stories haven't made the headlines, but do reflect the larger trends.

Earlier this month our New Orleans UU congregation got a rock thrown through a stained glass window following an event held in support of transgender people in the community. Now a broken window is a small matter compared to the bombing of the New Orleans UU church when my in-laws were members there in the 1960s — supporting another era's fight for civil liberties.

But small things can be the precursor to large things. This week a clergy colleague from a church in Bellingham told me that his insurance company threatened to revoke coverage because the church had Black Lives Matter material on their website. The implications are profound if organizations are to become uninsurable because they risk becoming the targets of hate crime.

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I confess that this sermon has been long on analysis and short on solutions. But I think all of this groundwork is important as we continue to look at ourselves, our prospects, our responsibilities, and our opportunities.

As always, the conclusion is: when we want to change the world, we have to begin with ourselves. That's where we have the most direct influence. I hope that the descriptions of these various growth trajectories can provide some guidance on which way is up ... and how thoughtful we need to be as we travel that path, whether alone or together.

TESTIMONIAL

Pam Graham

In my search to address the chaos of these times i.e., environmental degradation, governmental destabilization, anxiety about the future, I have chosen to redirect all the contributions that I'd normally send other causes/groups exclusively to BUF. Rather than hunt and search and evaluate all the wonderful and much needed organizations and movements that are "out there" (and experiencing increased growth and engagement, which are good things) I find comfort, confidence and hope in my decision to make BUF the center of my giving because I believe BUF is already doing, on a local level, what I believe needs to happen on a global level.

Universal Unitarianism is just one of many positive, progressive organizations, or institutions, or "communities" that I believe profess and practice values that invite healthy, informed, constructive, compassionate and sustainable interactions between the elements and entities that foster life, always building on the evolution of human consciousness and development.

I believe the principles we profess are the foundations for thriving as community. Therefore, I invite you who may have similar feelings to consider joining me in this way, increase your support of BUF without increasing your charitable giving budget, so that BUF thrives, we thrive, and are empowered in our actions to live and serve in a world that truly ‘respects the interdependent web of all existence of which we are only a part.’

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

When the Spirit Says Do #1024

BENEDICTION

Let’s close with a word from Edwin Markham: [He called me] heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. [So] he drew a circle to keep me out. But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a [bigger] circle to take him in.

*I’ve only scraped the surface of Fowler and Wilber today.
I encourage you to dig deeper. Here are some links to relevant sources:*

Brief synopses of Fowler:

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop2/167602.shtml>

<http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html>

The original Wilber article (80 pages), *Trump and a Post-Truth World: An Evolutionary Self-Correction*:

http://integral-life-home.s3.amazonaws.com/Trump%20and%20a%20Post-Truth%20World.pdf?mc_cid=7bc27b87f1&mc_eid=8b762109e6

You can find a lot of short reviews of the original above. Just Google variations of Wilber/Trump/post-truth/reviews.... This one stands out because it’s an appreciative and thoughtful reply by a non-liberal:

<https://libertyblitzkrieg.com/2017/02/06/lost-in-the-political-wilderness/>

A follow-up interview (audio) with Wilber:

<https://soundcloud.com/daily-evolver/pre-truth-post-truth-and-beyond-how-integral-thinking-can-transcend-the-turmoil>