

## ***Words of the Year***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

January 8, 2017

Rev. Paul Beckel

*Various media outlets in recent weeks have mentioned the following as "Words of the Year" for 2016: Fake News, Post-Truth, Xenophobia, Alt-Right, Surreal...and even Normal.*

*Since "normal" can mean a lot of different things (average, optimal, natural, unimpaired, acceptable) do you or others use these meanings interchangeably...or switch meanings mid-argument? Would it be more useful to focus on "a normal process," and, "what is normal within the given context?"*

**GATHERING SONG**      *Come, Come Whoever You Are*      #188

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS**      *Dogzilla*, by Dav Pilkey

Summary: The enormous Dogzilla emerges from a volcano outside Mousopolis and begins to do the things that doggies do, plaguing the city by chasing cars right off the freeway, and chewing up furniture stores. The mice eventually figure out that they can drive the beast away by threatening to give it a bath...whereupon it retreats forever. But when the mice gather to celebrate they realize that there was one thing they didn't count on: Puppies!

**RESPONSIVE READING**      #469

**MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)**

### **MESSAGE**

I confess: When I wrote the title and advertised the short description of today's service, I had no idea what I was going to talk about. I was intrigued by reports I'd heard at the end of December about the "2016 words of the year". Now I've heard of these before and found them intriguing, but given that so many people have been saying that 2016 was *not just another year*, I wondered if what made it *special* might be revealed within the words that had been identified as particularly significant: fake-news, post-truth, alt-right, xenophobia, surreal, and normal.

To me, that was the most surprising word on the list: "normal." It was chosen by Geoff Nunberg on *Fresh Air*, who commented that the phrase "NOT normal" had been attached to Donald Trump by *both* those who celebrated *and* those who despaired his victory. Also "normalize" has come into use a lot by those worrying about bigoted and obscene expressions which were becoming part of the foul air we breathe...as if they were no big deal any more.

So I thought I'd begin today by exploring in some depth the interesting concept of normality, and its varied meanings, and the sleight of hand that we and others often perform when we intentionally or unintentionally use the different meanings of "normal" inconsistently. I went so far as to prepare the cover of the order of service with some of these ideas.

But I woke up in the middle of the night, Friday night/Saturday morning with my mind buzzing across dozens of intersecting tangents. And I found myself scratching out 12 pages of handwritten notes on the different directions I could take this sermon. Now, my sermon writing process is not—and need not be—important to you. But perhaps this is what many people are experiencing these days. So maybe it is appropriate to acknowledge how mind-blowing it is to have some of our fundamental assumptions about what is possible, what is acceptable, what is normal...how unsettling it is to have established norms turned on their heads.

So what I will share today is a bit of a rant. I flatter myself to think that I generally bring you a well-considered examination of an ageless theme from a variety of perspectives. And I propose to do that again in the coming weeks. But first, I think, there is value in simply laying out all of the tangents that are juggling in my mind (so I'm guessing in some of yours too) and say briefly why they're important or troubling or exciting...and thereby outline where our conversations could go in the weeks ahead.

Our overall theme at BUF this year, which I've attempted to employ to some degree regularly, has been, "Relationship Matters: Within and Beyond these Walls." So placing that broad theme alongside the various words-of-the-year, it seems important that we talk about words and how we communicate, and also about truth and how we discover it, and about normality or propriety and how we agree or disagree about these things. So all of these are on the table now, not as tomes that I'm going to drop on you Sunday after Sunday, but as topics for discussion that I invite you to explore with me—as I mentioned during the announcements [copied at the bottom of this document].

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So what *is* a word of the year? It's a word or a concept that came into public consciousness either as something new, or as an old word taking on significantly different connotations.

Some words of the year pass away quickly, others become so engrained in our social, cultural, and political identity that we take them for granted as if they'd been here since the beginning of time. Here, for example are some words from previous years:

WMD, Y2K, chad, YOLO, waterboarding, death panel, fracking, and vape.

Some of these words are just pop culture memes. So even if you aren't hip, you'll be ok. But in other cases it matters a great deal that we are aware of new words and the shifting meanings of old words...if we care about expressing ourselves effectively, understanding others, and reconciling differences. We need to be with-it as my generation used to say, or "woke" as apparently they say now, to understand choices we will need to make just to function effectively day-to-day...and to be responsible participants in a democratic society.

Also, if we don't keep up today, we'll be even further behind tomorrow—when even more outlandish concepts will become more than concepts. Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, nanotechnology, and gene therapy will become normal, but by no means simple. They'll present us incredibly difficult ethical conundrums, and if we fail to understand the rapid evolution of

these words as they develop, we will soon be unable to think effectively about the differences between right and wrong.

I heard last week that plans are underway for a surgeon to perform the first total head transplant. Will that appear someday on the Beloit College Mindset List? The Mindset List is published annually to explain the perspective of incoming college freshmen: 18 year olds who, of course, perceive the world largely within the framework of their own experience. For example, the current crop take these things for granted:

- The United States has always been at war.
- They have never had to watch or listen to programs at a scheduled time.
- NFL coaches have always had the opportunity to throw a red flag and question the referee.
- Citizens have always been able to register to vote when they get their driver's license.
- They have never seen billboard ads for cigarettes.
- Outstanding women basketball players have always had their own Hall of Fame.

Going back to last year's incoming freshmen, for them:

- Hybrid automobiles have always been mass produced.
- Google has always been there to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible.
- They have never licked a postage stamp.
- And Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have always been members of NATO.

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Kennedy's assassination took place about 6 months before I was born. I understand that it was a big deal to many of you. Sorry, I don't mean to minimize it...but I'm not kidding, somehow to me it seems like something that happened before history began. It is genuinely difficult for a young person to understand what life was like before their time; kids these days are not just being obstinate.

And in the same way, it's a genuine function of aging that we have difficulty keeping up with new words. We oldsters are not being obstinate either. It's especially hard, I think, to get it through our heads that an old word can take on new meaning. (My biggest pet peeve is that the word "literally" has come to mean "figuratively," essentially its own antonym. And that would be a great sermon too—I've been wanting to skewer religious literalists who aren't really literalists for a very long time—but I still need a few more years to calm down about this.)

So back to getting old, which also involves being flabbergasted that it could have been *that long ago* that x or y came into being. For example, along with the newish term *alt-right* and the newly renewed reality of *xenophobia*, the related topic of *political correctness* has made a comeback this past year. It's hard for me to believe that it was about 25 years ago that PC came into popular consciousness. I bring up political correctness today because it raises an interesting side question to today's topic—that is: are there also words each year that we're no longer allowed to use? But I also bring this up because I preached about PC a long time ago and my conclusion then was that PC was BS (I think that's a word that still means what it has always meant). That

is, I said, political correctness is a myth, a bogeyman, a cherry picking of rare incidents to further an anti-liberal, anti-multicultural political agenda.

But in 2016 I encountered the word “safety” used in such an unfamiliar way that it was discomfiting. And I heard and read arguments about safe zones, trigger warnings, and cultural appropriation...intelligent arguments presenting a range of perspectives. So at this moment I am flummoxed, and, since our world has changed, I think it’s a topic worth looking at again.

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Now back to the topic of normalizing bad behavior, and then saying that this is not happening. A couple of fancy words come to mind: disingenuous, and specious. These are two of my favorite words, but I try to avoid words like these because I want to speak in the most accessible way I can. I think, with care, that we can usually explore complex ideas, and convey beautiful experiences, in plain language. Thus another spin off sermon, I propose, will be on the topic of *gobbledygook*, which has to do with distancing ourselves from one another, or using complex language to bury the truth...which is not what we do when relationship matters.

Or perhaps we should go further than to satirize, with expressions like gobbledygook. Maybe we need to go straight to that word we heard a lot this past year: liar. Also prevaricator when said by an accuser...and “I misspoke” when said in quasi-apology. The topic of lying probably comes up whenever there is an election, but since I am a borderline boomer/gen-xer, for me the awareness of the nearly unlimited variations on this theme came with Bill Clinton’s euphemisms for lying...and everyone else’s efforts to negotiate the line between making too weak a criticism by using the understatement “insincere” versus using the sometimes too provocative and therefore unproductive term, “dishonest.” So you’ll be hearing more about this too. No lie.

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Which brings me to another complaint about 2016 which is definitely bleeding into 2017: the inability of journalists to call nonsense nonsense. Day after day we’ve been hearing extraordinary claims that are not only not based in evidence, but with the very notion of evidence simply dismissed. And in these reports the newscasters just take on the tone of “gee... isn’t that interesting?” The new secretary of education wants to dismantle public education. Huh, interesting...but let’s turn to Jerry in the weather-room—yeeees Tom this past year was the hottest year on record for the 15<sup>th</sup> straight year, hmmm that’s a funny coincidence...and now back to you Bob, how about them Seahawks?

Did you read the paper this morning? No, of course not. The paper is no longer a medium of shared community discourse. If you had, you’d have seen a half page article about eelgrass...and you’d know that while every other indicator of the health of the Salish Sea is tanking, there is one indicator that is not tanking. It’s not getting better, but hey it’s big news when ONE thing is not getting worse. You’d also have read that the new top level government appointees will not be going through screening for conflicts of interest.

If this is the new normal in a post-truth era, it’s understandable that many of us are paralyzed and at a loss as to how to respond. There seems to be no point in shouting louder, or using more

superlative superlatives to describe the terribility of the situation, or the extreme terribility of the person responsible for the situation. Can we find harsher terms than fascist, criminal, despicable? Where can we go when we've used up the most derogatory words...when garden-variety mistakes are called crimes, and when you want to point to something unprecedentedly bad, but you've used up all of the baddest words. Even if we invent some new words to convey worseness, they won't really get us anywhere...they won't help us to say what we mean, communicate ideas, or collaborate on vital decision-making.

And I worry too: when we lambaste or mock nonsense and evil, to some degree do we normalize it, make it ordinary and easier to accept?

So do we resist all of this or adapt? Does it even matter what we say and do? Do *we* even matter at all? Hey at least there's another great sermon topic!

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Which brings us to tonight's word, truthiness, which was born on one of Stephen Colbert's first shows, and rose to be declared the word of the year by Merriam-Webster Dictionary way back in 2006. Can you believe that was ten years ago? No, now it's eleven!

And there's a related word that I didn't see on any lists, but might be remembered for how it was used in 2016. The word is "wrong." As in, I say it didn't happen so it didn't happen. You heard me brag about sexual assault but you cannot use that against me. It's not that you misheard, and it's not that I didn't mean it, but I simply did not say that. That was locker room talk and therefore it's not only off the record but you are wrong to say that I said it. It's Unfair to act as if I said it when I literally did not do so.

Are we on a de-escalator now...on the way toward collective mesmerization, where "reality" becomes a word of the year? I hope not, because I am not prepared to speak about something as abstract as reality without being really boring. But fortunately, two weeks from today Michael Dowd will do so and he is not boring. He is the greatest preacher of all time. Bigly. I guarantee it. There's more about Michael in the order of service, and more to come in the Midweek Update.

His message is that everything evolves: reality, history, even God—if you do use that word, at least know that the word God not only means something different but in fact IS something different every new year.

Which I understand is a very difficult idea to those who have believed all their life that since God is perfect, that necessarily means that God is unchanging.

Well it's not just a difficult idea, it's threatening. Many of us feel that way right now about fundamental truths or values that we assumed would never change. And this is not just surreal

like a twilight zone episode that we can turn off...this is probably not something that we'll look back upon later and laugh, like "ha ha, remember disco? What were we thinking?"

No, the threats to what we think we know can be genuinely traumatic...to the point that some refuse to go on, refuse to engage, or deny reality—not just by burying their heads in the sand but also by making things up. And we see it becoming increasingly normal to believe in fake news and outlandish conspiracy theories. And then we spiral from believing irrational things to doing irrational things. Of course there can be deep psychological implications when we perceive uncertainty about the terms of our baseline reality.

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I said a couple of minutes ago that we might not be able to function at our highest potential if we haven't kept up with the times and the words that reflect these times. But let's not take that too far. We definitely need in our lives people who are not caught up in the angst of change. We need people who remain above all the fret and fever of the day...who simply live to exude calm, wonder, and gratitude.

I often turn to Annie Dillard's quote in the back of the grey hymnal for words to refresh my understanding of the purpose of life. She wrote: *We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.*

That is, we are here to help and to enjoy. And of course we don't have to be up on the latest lingo and controversy in order to enjoy...and to find the world an awesome and inspiring place.

Because alongside the truth that the only constant is change...is the parallel truth that there is nothing really new under the sun. The same issues, the same challenges are presented to every generation...they just keep coming back. So we know we can forge ahead with confidence and even a sense of humor. All we have to do is to reframe our anxieties: by seeing them as...puppies.

**CHALICE CHOIR**                      *We Rise Again*                      by Leon Dubinsky

**SOCIAL and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION** for Lydia Place

**SENDING SONG**                      *O Liberating Rose*                      #130

**BENEDICTION**                      #670

**CIRCLE 'ROUND FOR FREEDOM**

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

To see what might be happening on Sundays for the next few months, see below. I say "might be" because we need to continue to brainstorm together to develop each of these topics. This coming Wednesday at 6 pm and then on Sundays about once a month after that, we'll meet to bandy about various perspectives on these themes, throw out ideas for stories, poetry, and songs,

and see who is interested in examining their soul in preparation to speak on these topics. The Sunday dates will probably be juggled around, so keep watching your Midweek Update.

### **BUF Sunday Services - Tentative Themes - Winter/Spring 2017**

January 15	Growing Up Lummi / Dedication of Stone Marker
January 22	Right Relationship with Reality – Michael Dowd
January 29	Political Correctness: Myth and/or Reality
February 5	What is Normal?
February 12	Resilience, and Making Relationships Last
February 19	Guest: Rev Mark Gallagher
February 26	Love is the Spirit of the Fellowship
March 5	Truthiness
March 12	Lying
March 19	Gobbledygook
March 26	Celebrating Cesar Chavez Birthday – C2C
April 2	Inclusion
April 9	Comfort the Afflicted, Afflict the Comfortable
April 16	Choir Finale
April 23	Led by High School Youth
April 30	Pilgrimage
May 7	OPEN (Paul away)
May 14	Mothers Day: topic to be determined
May 21	Middle School Coming of Age Group / Annual Meeting
May 28	Memorial Day: topic to be determined
June 4	Topic to be determined
June 11	Transylvania Touring Choir Program
June 18	Flower Communion

*June 25 thru September 3: Lay leaders & Guest Speakers*  
~ We're also seeking **guest musicians** for summer services ~

#### **Brainstorm about Topics and Resources**

Volunteer to lead, or partner with others to lead a service

Come to one or all of our Collaboration Sessions:

**This Wednesday, Jan 11, 6 pm (bring your own dinner)**

All of the following Sundays at noon (byo lunch): **Feb 5, Mar 5, Apr 2, Apr 30, Jun 4**

Also go to <http://www.buf.org/resources> for an updated calendar, best practices guides, templates, summer service options, and additional resources to help you think about how you might contribute to BUF Sunday services. And contact Paul Beckel ([paul@buf.org](mailto:paul@buf.org)) for resources about specific topics...to find a partner who is interested in the same topic you are...or to volunteer for *small or large roles* in worship leadership.



## Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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***We, the member congregations***  
of the Unitarian Universalist Association,  
*covenant to affirm and promote:*

The inherent worth and  
dignity of every person

Justice, equity  
and compassion  
in human relations

Acceptance of one another  
and encouragement to  
spiritual growth  
in our congregations

A free and responsible  
search for truth  
and meaning

The right of conscience  
and the use of the  
democratic process  
within our congregations  
and in society at large

The goal of world  
community with peace,  
liberty, and justice for all

Respect for the  
interdependent web  
of all existence  
of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share  
draws from many sources:

*Direct experience of that  
transcending mystery and wonder,  
affirmed in all cultures, which  
moves us to a renewal of the spirit  
and an openness to the forces which  
create and uphold life*

*Words and deeds of prophetic  
women and men which challenge  
us to confront powers & structures  
of evil with justice, compassion, and  
the transforming power of love*

*Wisdom from the world's religions  
which inspires us in our ethical and  
spiritual life*

*Jewish and Christian teachings  
which call us to respond to God's  
love by loving our neighbors  
as ourselves*

*Humanist teachings which counsel  
us to heed the guidance of reason  
and the results of science, and warn  
us against idolatries of the mind  
and spirit*

*Spiritual teachings of Earth-  
centered traditions which celebrate  
the sacred circle of life and instruct  
us to live in harmony with the  
rhythms of nature*

