



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Sacred Chaos”

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A reflection delivered on July 24, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos.

Mary Shelley

In chaos, there is fertility. Anaïs Nin

You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star. Friedrich Nietzsche

Sermon

Good morning, it has been a long time since I have participated in a religious liturgy but when Karen asks one to do something, no is not an option.

This morning, it is my task to help us reflect on the meaning and importance of recreation which one cannot do without first understanding the meaning and the role of creation. In doing so, I want to challenge us to think beyond the dominant culture’s notion of recreation as something one does in their spare time after the work is done or as retreat from the ‘grind’ of daily living. Rather I suggest that that we look at both creation and recreation as a dialectic practice that deepens our commitment to the construction of a common humanity that is personal, institutional and political. My reference is the Hebrew text, which one can view as revelation, myth, a human liberation story, or a creation story.

In the Hebrew text, while there are actually two creation stories, the one that interests me is that ‘the earth was formless and desolate, the oceans covered everything and all was in darkness.’ The story portrays the creation the world of this nothingness. This myth is not really the story of how the world was created in six days, then a day of rest; rather the creation myth is the articulation of how creation is actually the act by which the human person, with God if you will, or in concert with the universe, brings meaning to our common existence. It is, in the words of Terry Eagleton, the understanding that our distinctive humanity rests in a power to create and inhabit an articulate world of meaning, to shape from natural chaos as a shared order recognizable by us as our order imbued with significance.

The ancient visual was that of a domed firmament surrounded by chaos. Within the dome was the shared order, the oceans, the animals, plants, night and day, and ultimately the human person with language, culture who had dominion over all - the universe in which we live - Creation and all its derivatives.

Human consciousness has evolved and most of us no longer share this primitive world understanding. Yet, before we congratulate ourselves on our evolution, contemporary thinkers, from Sartre, Camus and to some extent Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, in their exploration of the absurd wrestle to find meaning in the face of nothingness. They all arrived at the same conclusion - a fundamental project of human existence is to seek meaning within our shared humanity. Both the primitive and contemporary mind is tossed into the world and seeks meaning.

If we agree that the human person, individually and collectively, establishes meaning in the very creation of our common shared existence, we have come to understand a part of the dialectic. We live in a shared world that makes sense and 'orders' relationship for the common good. But there is more to this the human endeavor that just living within 'order.'

Just as the ancients understood, we come to understand this order is fragile because just beyond its edge is chaos. And the chaos has power because it threatens that which we have created. It is unintelligible; it is the absurd, hidden and shapeless.

Chaos exists in the cracks and the crevices of our institutions, language and common shared experience. It is the unknown - the foreign. Yet, it is powerful. It calls for us to engage it, shape it, give it meaning and bring it into our commonness. I offer this as the dialects of creation and re-creation in which a new 'world', a new consciousness, is formed and shared. A more inclusive world is created in the synthesis.

In the 19th century, different religious and humanitarian groups organized to build prisons, constructed hospitals for the poor, formed labor unions, created credit unions, fashioned an abolitionists, movement, and set up schools for immigrants.

This work was undertaken because the immigrant, the poor, the sick, the exploited worker, and the oppressed lay outside our common cultural and political institution. Whether they lay outside because of poverty, lack of status, oppression, bigotry, or lack of power, they 'threatened' the established order. They were the other, the stranger, and the different. Despite the instinct to build ghettos or walls, none of these efforts reduced the fear and the threat. Ironically, it was only in the engagement of the other, the stranger, and the different that our fears were overcome. (One caution here, in the Hebrew text, this engagement was authentic and transformative when one engaged the otherness, not in an attempt to remake them into us.)

This work is what I identify as re-creation because it stands at the edge of our structures and institutions in order to bring those who have been excluded, who reside at the margin of our shared humanity, into our shared humanity. Historically, - imperfectly, the work and the witness of these groups eventually came to be seen as belonging to all. Labor Unions re-created the world

of work as workers exercised power in the workplace. Political parties organized and re-created power with immigrants on the East Coast, and then again with the farm workers on the West coast. Education became a public enterprise and a common good, although today it remains deeply segregated and unequal. Health care began to be seen as something accessible, even though our country remains deeply divided and is intent on organizing it through market principle rather than as right beyond once ability to pay.

Today, this same dialectic of creation and recreation are seen as cultures wrestle with emerging notions of gender (male, female, transgender), sexuality (do we exist as male or female or are all of us somewhere long the continuum of female and male), and spirituality (emerging understanding of the sacred clash with tradition view). Read the paper any day and one can see how the tension between order and chaos is played out. It is clear how order threatens chaos and vice versa.

This dynamic is at the core of our political process and our nation struggles, as our nation shall I say slogs, how to deal with the changing demographics of our nation, which will be majority minority in the future. How do we deal with the shifting of power from institutions dominated by white men and was competitive with an established hierocracy to once that is inclusive and dare I same cooperative?

The dynamic is part of conflict between Christian and Muslim tension in the world and in our toxic politic? It is also part of the discussion of what it means to live in a post-capitalist or post modern society.

It is in the recreate process, the dialectic of between shared meaning that shapes our commonness and that which is outside and poses a threat.

How do we participate in this most human enterprise?

Do we build a wall to keep people who are unlike us out, in the hopes that we will be safe?

Do we define valid and loving relationships in only traditional ways in the hope of containing those we which we may fear in ourselves?

Do we continue to explore our environment for the now and for profit or do we think beyond today and future generation?

Do we continue to segregate cities and institutions so as to preserve what we perceive to be our power over others?

Do we continue to seek privilege or work for the dignity of all?

My reflection is not that any or all movements got it right, much less perfect, rather the core dialectic of creation and re-creation is the means of deepening humanity as we extend the

boundaries of our understanding. The dialectic of creation and recreation is revolutionary, not reformatory, because each creation, each dissolution, each recreation creates a new synthesis. And the process begins again.

You may be asking yourselves or wanting to ask me – hey, what happened to our theme of recreation!!! It is summer time, the time for harvesting peaches, sailing, and vacation away from the daily grind. What you are asking us involves more energy, more work.

To the contrary, obviously I value both creation and re-creation. I love my time away from work with my camera. I treasure a serene lake, a beautiful vista, the majestic Grand Canyon near my home in Arizona. I crave the silence of the Rappist Monastery in Upstate New York; I miss the long walks in the cold crisp snow now that I live in the desert of Arizona. And yes, because of my work as a union organizer, I miss the solitude necessary for renovation. All these are important and necessary.

Nonetheless, in our commoditized, commercialized and individualized culture. I worry that we do not take time to engage the institutional and political recreation of a common world. Furthermore, I have come to experience the dialectic of creation and recreation described above, to not only be life giving (creation is always life giving) but the action to recreate our common work is profoundly transformational. It renews us and our surroundings; it recreates all of our relationships, including the relationship with self because we touch the core of our humanness. Christians call this redemption. Marxists may call it historical transcendence; humanists may call solidarity. Whatever we chose to call it, it is revolutionary renewal.

We are never more human, nor alive when we embrace it. Shalom

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. How do you re-create yourself? Is the impetus for your re-creating yourself external or internal?
2. A cat is said to have nine lives. How many have you had? Elaborate.
3. Have you experienced order out of chaos? Explain.
4. In your life, how does recreation contribute to re-creation?