

**PERSONAL CULTIVATION AND RESPONSIBILITY #2: Is Culture For You or Against?**  
Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 03/11/18

**READINGS**

**Invocation:** *The Great Communion*, attributed to Confucius

**Meditation:** *The Finest Qualities of Our Nature*, in Walden, Henry David Thoreau

**Readings:** *The Ten Laws of the Way*, Deuteronomy 5, Exodus 20  
*Writing the Movie Mean Girls*, in Bossypants, Tina Fey  
*Captured, Brother*, in Between the World & Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates

**SERMON**

Melissa DeSa is a saint I think you'd like to know. She's a leader of Grow Gainesville, a group educating the community in sustainable living by teaching it, among other things, how to maintain a small model farm in Alachua County. Besides the farming and educating, she maintains a native seed warehouse that used to be in a church I was serving. In large numbers, she harvests and distributes without charge varieties of seeds able to thrive with Florida's heat and bugs. She's someone aware that American agriculture and culture may not be resilient enough to survive the crises of major change. So she has taken responsibility and is working to change our agriculture and culture. She's about how we grow healthy and happy. An American Unitarian Universalist kind of saint.

Ta-Nehisi Coates might also prove an American UU kind of saint. Certainly by the Roman Catholic scale, he has done enough suffering. In his book Between the World and Me he laments to his 15 year old son, "We are captured, brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America." His lament recalls for me the lament of Henry David Thoreau in Walden: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."  
Coates speaking for African Americans; Thoreau for laboring Americans.

At the women's conference, Tina Fey seems to have drawn the same lesson from the revelations about the insulting and probably threatening male response to new womanhood that so many had received. "The current culture is trying to capture us, sisters, in lives of quiet desperation."

DeSa, Coates, Thoreau, Fey – each seeing that our culture does not always serve the fulfillment of our potentials for understanding, caring, and community; each taking responsibility and responding.

We spoke last Sunday of how Nature within us and around us creates the potentials of our soul, the zygote seed of our being - and then influences how those potentials grow and develop into our spirits, our emergent beings. Now this Sunday we are asking, Are we aware that the culture we create also influences our development – that at certain ages we benefit greatly by becoming aware of that and responding?

A University of Florida graduate student from Zaire, who was a member of my wife's Presbyterian Student Center, once told me that in the separate languages of the two tribes his parents came from, there were no words for religion or culture, but rather just the phrase "our custom" – our way. That fits with my experience of societies – which leads me to define culture in general as the human-created beliefs, expectations, and behavior assumed by custom to be a society's way.

With that working definition, is it fair to say that our families, peers, and communities each enact some holographic representation of American culture that strongly influences who we become? Is it fair to say that our spirits are either captured or nurtured by these influences? And is it fair to say that we can seek to raise consciousness of their influences, so as to have more choice in the matter for the best outcome?

There is our question – our religious question, one might say - about culture and our responsibility and response to it: *Do you see that culture influences the development of the potentials of you personally and of the village that is to raise you? Do you see how? Should you, can you, figure it out? Should you take responsibility to respond?*

When at age 12 or so you come to the age of reason, should you be trained in the art of reason so you can be responsible?

When at age 16 or so you have come to the age of productivity, should you be trained in the arts of labor, leisure and cooperation?

When at age 18 or so you come to the age of mating, should you be educated in the art of caring, commitment, loyalty, and child-rearing?

When by age 40 you are coming to the age of teaching and mentoring others about your culture's requirements and skills, should you have been trained as a mentor?

When by age 60 you are coming to the age of wisdom, should you be trained in long-term reflection, valuing, and transmission of wisdom to others? Should we always be getting a taste of these responsibilities?

I love Salvador Dali's description of his creative practice, which was influenced by relativity and quantum physics. He called it "critical paranoia" – looking at the world of nature and culture with the understanding that there is something below the surface trying to influence your being and your living.

We have need for more of the awareness and examination that critical thinking gives us. At least our comic strips still provide it, and in a most digestible way. For example, the strip "Dilbert," which is about a firm of disenfranchised, disenchanted engineers (one of our peak occupations of technological know-how).

In a recent strip, engineer Dilbert's boss reprimands him for designing a superior durable piece of electronic equipment and orders him to redesign it for rapid obsolescence, plus to write an apology for when the press discovers it. Dilbert says, "You have turned my engineering success into the darkest day of my career." His boss replies, "That's not even close to being true. Your darkest day will be when the press figures out what we did and I fire you for it."

To me that cartoon's perspective is not cynicism. It is a critique of culture and motivation. That is a multi-layered social, corporate, and political commentary on our times. It is what Liberation Theology calls a "hermeneutic of suspicion."

That is critical paranoia – the same spirit displayed by Rosalind Wiseman, leader of the conference Tina Fey attended, asking a question which revealed a shadowy pervasive influence operating under the surface. If one wants to keep growing, will it not require such a spirit as hers to figure out when the culture is for you and when against?

An important underlying question, I think, goes something like this: "How is life supposed to be?" An article in last Monday's Tampa Bay Times asserted "There is no teleology" – that is, no foreordained outcome to humanity's earthly activity. The quote continues: "We make the world we want to live in, and we have a responsibility to do that work."

I would only alter that statement to read, "There are unexamined cultural influences that make the world to be, not the one we all want, but the one wanted by the powers that be."

The article, published originally in the conservative *National Review*, went on to say, "There is no right side of history." But that, I believe, is very wrong and misleading if your view is that widespread well-being is the side on which the mass of men and women stand.

Do we want a culture of values that supports the aspiration and potential of all the people? Then why not the proposal of Confucius, which seems likely to make good on its promise of a great communion or community? In brief:

- Live for the common good;
- Treat all parents and children with honorable caring;
- Insure opportunity to all for safety and happiness;
- Gather and hunt and farm and build, but share;
- Be industrious, but cooperative.

Or why not the covenant proposed by Moses, which seems right in promising blessings to 1000 generations from our good deeds and penalty to three or four generations from our bad deeds. Phrased in the positive, as Confucius did, this covenant reads:

- 1) Draw only on the power of the pure Source, not on misleading, draining powers;
- 2) Channel pure power to others unconditionally;
- 3) Rest from your channeling to remember and restore power;
- 4) Honor your parents;

- 5) Save lives;
- 6) Be faithful;
- 7) Be honest;
- 8) Be truthful;
- 9) Revere relationships;
- 10) Respect just ownerships.

Or maybe we can just strive for the religion of the Dalai Lama and Jesus: Being kind.

Given such values, can we learn to use them in response to the influences of our culture? Can we make them our real culture?

Even as he laments the capture of the African American body by the oppressive side of American culture, Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds his son that there is much to live for and that this world is and can be beautiful and warm, no matter how momentary and fragile. And why not?

Even as she unpacks the burden of sexism, Tina Fey raises up the resilient claim to be one's own judge of what is good and what is likeable. And why not?

Even as he decries the desperation of the masses of laboring people in his culture, Thoreau points to a way up via simplicity, contemplation, and sustainability. And why not?

Melissa DeSa, young woman that she is, was diagnosed five or so years ago, with advanced aggressive cancer. Melissa looked so funny then - rail-thin, bald-headed, farming with friends, tending the earth, distributing seeds, teaching the people like a saint of Mother Earth. And how lucky we are that her cancer has gone into remission. For it seems to me she has a message that we all can be saints or bodhisattvas of Mother Earth. It seems to me she believes we can post FaceBook photos of a giant orange calendula blossom with a butterfly in the middle of its seed bed and that we can add as text,

Why do I grow calendula every year?

In no particular order:

One, Butterflies and bees!

Two, I can eat the petals and make the prettiest salads.

Three, If I have time, I make healing salves and balms for when I stick my hands in stinging nettle, or get too much sun!

Four, Beauty.

And five, Calendula seeds are super easy to save and carry over each year (and I would add, perfect for Melissa to give away).

So, can we learn to be aware of the influences our culture has on us and respond with our own influence? I've seen enough evidence to convince me we can. So I would say, Yes, we can learn to influence our culture – by one value system and another if they speak for the common good – for as good ways rise, they converge and raise our spirits. Yes, we can learn, and since we can, I believe we should – and why not?

## READINGS

**Invocation:** *The Great Communion*, attributed to Confucius

Let us bring forth the age of the Great Communion,

**when all live for the common good:**

Let us love the parents and children of others as our own:

**providing sustenance for the aged,**

**employment for the able-bodied, opportunity for the young,**

**care for the widows, orphans, childless and disabled;**

**for every person purpose; for every person a home.**

Let us select leaders of worth, ability, fidelity,

**and peacemaking.**

Let us not be wasteful of our possessions,

**nor keep them only for ourselves;**

Let us be not inactive for ourselves

**nor industrious for ourselves alone.**

Thus evil devices will cease or fail to prosper,

**robbers and traitors will be out of work,**

our doors will not need to be locked.

**This will be the Great Communion.**

**Meditation:** *The Finest Qualities of Our Nature*, in Walden, Henry David Thoreau

Most people, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them... Actually, laboring people have not leisure for a true integrity day by day; they cannot afford to sustain the most human relations to others; their labor would be depreciated in the market. They have no time to be anything but a machine.... The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.... The mass of humans leads lives of quiet desperation... But it is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

## Readings:

### *The Ten Laws of the Way, Deuteronomy 5, Exodus 20*

This is the covenant with the Being of all beings, understood to be the way out of bondage into blessing:

- 1) Do not let other gods be impediments between the Being of beings and your being;
- 2) Do not be an impediment between the Being of beings and other beings;
- 3) Keep holy the sabbath, for even the Being of beings rests;
- 4) Honor your father and mother so you too may live long and well.
- 5) Do not murder.
- 6) Do not commit adultery.
- 7) Do not steal.
- 8) Do not bear false witness against others
- 9) Do not covet the spouse of others.
- 10) Do not covet any possession belonging to others.

Rejecting this way curses three and four generations of our descendants; devotion to this way blesses a thousand.

### *Writing the Movie Mean Girls, in Bossypants, Tina Fey*

When I was writing the movie Mean Girls... I went ... with women and girls around the country ... to a workshop on self-esteem and bullying ... by Rosalind Wiseman, author of Queen Bees and Wannabes .... She did this particular exercise ... with about two hundred grown women, asking them to write down the moment they first knew they were a grown woman.... The group of women was racially and economically diverse, but the answers had a very similar theme. Almost everyone first realized they were becoming a grown woman when some dude (said or) did something nasty to them.... It was mainly men yelling nasty stuff from cars.

**Later in the book, Tina Fey says more on this theme in what she calls one of a series of love letters to Amy Poehler:** Amy Poehler was new to SNL and we were all crowded into the

seventeenth=floor writers' room, waiting for the Wednesday read-through to start. There were always a lot of noisy "comedy bits" going on in that room. Amy was in the middle of some such nonsense with Seth Meyers across the table, and she did something vulgar as a joke. I can't remember what it was exactly, except it was dirty and loud and "unladylike." Jimmy Fallon, who was arguably the star of the show at the time, turned to her and in a faux-squeamish voice said, "Stop that! It's not cute! I don't like it."

Amy dropped what she was doing, went black in the eyes for a second, and wheeled around on him. "I don't goddam\* care if you like it." Jimmy was visibly startled. Amy went right back to enjoying her ridiculous bit. (I should make it clear that Jimmy and Amy are very good friends).

With that exchange, a cosmic shift took place. Amy made it clear that she wasn't there to be cute. She wasn't there to play wives and girlfriends in the boys' scenes. She was there to do what she wanted to do and she did not goddam care if you like it. I was so happy. Weirdly, I remember thinking, "My friend is here! My friend is here!" Even though things had been going great for me at the show, with Amy there, I felt less alone. I think of this whenever someone says to me, "So and so says women aren't funny. .... Do you have anything to say to that?" Yes. We don't goddam care if you like it.

*Captured, Brother*, in *Between the World & Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates

We are captured, brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America. And this has happened here, in our only home, and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own.... But you cannot arrange your life around them and the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness. Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious. And you are here now, and you must live – and there is so much out there to live for.... The warmth of our particular world is beautiful, no matter how brief and breakable.