

## Coming Full Circle

Sermon presented by Carl Tichler on July 3, 2011

Opening words: "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams

so much depends  
upon a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain water  
beside the white  
chickens

Last year, in April, 2010, a volcano in Iceland erupted, spewing such great clouds of ash and smoke that when this ash and smoke travelled over to Europe, it disrupted flights in Western Europe for several days. On the day after the initial eruption, I came in to work thinking of this. Still to come was the gulf oil spill, the abnormally hot summer, floods and rains more extreme than seen in hundreds of years, and of course the earthquake, tsunami, and resulting nuclear meltdown and contamination in Japan.

I came in to the office that day with the volcano at the back of my mind, as I tried to put my thoughts to the tasks I needed to get done for that day. I sat next to a co-worker, Barry, who I work closely with, to this day. Although our personalities are very different, Barry being very energetic and hard-charging, and myself more thoughtful and patient, we get along very well together, particularly since we both share similar experience in the bond markets, and we are both in our late 40's, unlike most of the people we work with at our firm. Barry is a self-described politically conservative, non-religious person, so I was surprised to hear him say to me that morning: --- "Carl, did you hear about the volcano in Iceland, and all those flights cancelled in Europe. You know, I think God is angry with us".

I have thought often about what Barry said since then, in light of all the evidence of global climate change in the years since then, and the lack, so far, of meaningful response from our government, in fact concerted effort by many in the corporate world to question and deny the scientific evidence. Similar skepticism and denial comes out of our political leadership and the mainstream media. But I repeat myself. I think there is something more than just political calculation and protecting of corporate profits. It is also something larger, something cultural and psychological. I spoke about this two years ago in a sermon titled "A Culture of Make Believe". This title is from the book by the same name by the author Derrick Jensen, who is an environmental activist and writer. My sermon today will take ideas from this sermon and other sermons I have done here at UUCD in the past several years, give some perspective and insights that I have gained, and also try to link some common threads and vision for a way forward.

In one of my previous sermons, "A Culture of Make Believe", I started by telling Joan Didion's story about the sudden death of her husband in her book "The Year of Magical Thinking". She tells of how they were sitting in their home eating dinner, when he suddenly has a massive heart attack and collapses on the floor. After she has called the ambulance, and accompanied him to the hospital, where he is soon dead, she spends much of the book describing the time afterwards, how she would not throw out his clothes and jacket, in case he returned home and needed them. How she would wake up morning after morning and go to the kitchen and start to prepare breakfast for

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him, and not realize until she was in the middle of preparation what she was doing. Joan Didion is a self-described practical and realistic person, yet she could not stop from this “magical thinking”, this belief beyond all reason that her husband John would come back.

For Derrick Jensen, the magical thinking extends to our culture as a whole. To paraphrase Jensen, our assumption of the inherent good of economic growth and industrial civilization causes us to ignore or rationalize the destruction that has been done to the environment through our exploitation of it. The science explaining the changes that have occurred in the environment, the increase in CO<sub>2</sub>, global warming, the melting of glaciers, rise in the sea level, these have been widely accepted and understood by science. And at a grassroots level, there have been many groups, such as 350.org, which have gained wide support to lobby for action. Outside the United States and other “developed” countries, there has been recognition and action at the government level --- for example, Bolivian president Evo Morales explicitly said at the Copenhagen climate conference that there must be a respect first for mother earth, that she is more important than any so-called “economic” interest. And Pacific Islands such as Tuvalu, which are seeing their country itself being gradually taken away by the rising sea level, have recognized and acted.

But here in the United States, there is not just an active effort to introduce doubt on the evidence of global climate change, as I have already mentioned, from corporations and politicians. The claims that we will lose jobs or suffer economically from any action are not just meant to appeal to reason. The underlying assumption is that the status quo of consumerism and consumption should continue without change. There has been so much in the past few years that should have to put it bluntly, “whacked us in the head” --- floods beyond any seen in hundreds of years, massive tornadoes, more snow last winter than we have seen in at least 20 years, wildfires in the southwest. Mother earth is not only angry with us, she is screaming at us to stop what we are doing, to change the status quo, and change now.

We are beginning to listen, but it has taken far too much time and direct, visible evidence to get to this point. I think it is important to understand why, and I think the major reason is the psychological power of magical thinking, our culture of make believe. Not just in our lifetimes, but going back several generations, here in the United States we have seen steady increases in our standard of living, that we have grown accustomed to. We have taken this for granted, perhaps as a right, or perhaps as evidence that our government and culture of growth is inherently good and better than all others. The relative comfort of our daily lives allows us to ignore the cost of this growth, the exploitation of not only the environment, but also the genocide of the indigenous peoples of our country, the native americans, and also the exploitation of the african people through the institution of slavery. This devastation was caused by the insatiable need for more. The desire for more economic power required us to import slaves to farm the land. The desire for more land and the resources of that land led us to take it by force from the native americans. The need for faster travel by train, car,

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and airplane led us to exploit the oil and coal and minimize or ignore the devastation that this caused, sacrificing the habitats and life of the other living beings of our world.

This is the broader theme of Derrick Jensen in the culture of make believe, that the implicit expectation of growth in industrial civilization necessitates violence --- violence to the indigenous peoples and to our environment. He spends 100's of pages in his books documenting the extent and pervasiveness of this violence through not only the history of the United States, but in Western Europe going back to the time of Columbus. It is important to acknowledge this history, which has been suppressed and often forgotten. The key point to me is the power of the myth --- in our case the myth of American exceptionalism. It is not enough to recount this history, we should also examine the psychology behind it. I started to explore this myth in my sermon "Stepping Outside the Box", which I presented in 2008. What do I mean by myth? I think of myth as an assumption or belief which is either not provable, or can be proven to be false, but which nevertheless is accepted by a group of people. The power of the myth is to support or reinforce an overall belief system. It is important to say that a myth can be a very good thing, regardless of whether or not it is true or can be proven. Myths can give us comfort, can sustain us, keep us as a community healthy and safe. The myth of a judging god, who will take the measure of our good and bad actions on earth. Or the myth of karma. The myth can sustain us individually and as a community by giving us a reason to work together and treat each other with kindness and respect. Some of us may just come to this through an intrinsic sense of what is moral, just and kind. The myth would give an external reason for this. In that sense, it would sustain and perpetuate the life of the community. But this same myth could be used to justify judgement and punishment --- stifling free thought and instead being a means to maintain a power structure.

The myth of American exceptionalism tells us that our country is unique and uniquely good. This myth dates back to the time of the Puritans, and is embodied in the phrase "shining city on the hill" used by John Winthrop and more famously by Ronald Reagan. The idea behind this phrase is that we are a beacon to "freedom-loving" people around the world, and the associated idea is that we are a special nation blessed by God. It needs to be put this bluntly, because this myth is so embedded in our national identity. Sometimes it is stated outright, but more often it is assumed, and the hidden assumption suppresses honest discussion, and actually changes the language that we use so that ideas or thoughts that challenge this myth are not stated, instead euphemisms are used. In my previous sermon "Stepping Outside the Box", I used the example of the reporting of the killing of Abu Masiq Al-Zarqawi, who was described at the time as the head of "Al Qaeda in Iraq", presumed to be responsible for many of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks in Iraq in the months before his killing. What started me going on this was the military news conference around his death, which featured an enlarged poster, approximately 2 feet high, which was a closeup of the head of his lifeless body. The language used in this news conference described Al Zarqawi as being "brought to justice". Not mentioned was the means of his death, which was effected by having a military aircraft firing several "precision guided" missiles into the house where he was believed to be staying in Baquba. Briefly mentioned was the fact

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that several “associates” of Mr. Zarqawi were also killed during the missile strike. I had to search through several articles to discover that these associates were a family living in the house, and only a single article mentioned that one of these “associates” killed was a girl between 5 and 7 years old.

The myth of the United States as inherently good and just --- “defending our freedoms”, “protecting us against terrorists”, “fighting Al Qaeda over there instead of over here” --- prevent us from speaking plainly about what happened. Instead of assassination we have “bringing to justice”. Instead of terror from the sky we have “precision guided missiles”. And instead of indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians we have some “associates”, or perhaps “collateral damage”. Never were these associates named, as that would invoke their common humanity.

The same perversion of language affects our discussion of torture, or the term uniformly used now, “enhanced interrogation techniques”. This was the topic of my first sermon here at UUCD, “Human Rights in a UU Context”, which I gave 5 years ago, in 2006. In the previous year, 2005, I had participated in the “Call for Justice Weekend”, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, to bring attention to the practice of torture and the damage it had done, and to categorically condemn it. With the recent assassination this year of another “high value” terrorist --- Osama Bin Laden --- in addition to the same language celebrating violence, “bringing to justice”, killing some family members, we also now have the ridiculous and vile debate yet again, over whether torture is justified. In order to have such a debate, you have to deny the humanity of those who would be tortured

Unfortunately, even now there are men still held at Guantanamo, without trial, and our current commander in chief, President Obama, has vowed to continue to keep some of these men there as long as he wishes. The language from the executive order of March 11, 2011 states that the president will “bring detainees to justice in prosecutions in either federal civilian courts or in reformed military commissions ... and ... when neither prosecution nor other legal options are available, to hold these individuals in lawful military detention”. Stripping away the euphemism, if he can’t convict them in a regular trial or a military show trial, he’ll just keep them in Guantanamo or some other military prison anyway.

In my sermon back in 2006, I was able to share some poetry from the men being held in Guantanamo. This poetry was collected by professor of law Marc Falkoff, who has been a pro bono legal representative for seventeen of the men held at Guantanamo. Despite the stringent conditions on receiving documents from the prisoners, and arbitrary confiscation of much of the poetry by the military, he was able to collect several poems and publish a book of them, titled “Poems from Guantanamo --- The Detainees Speak”. Here is one of those poems:

Is it True  
by Osama Abu Kabir

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Is it true that the grass grows again after rain?

Is it true that the flowers will rise up again in the Spring?

Is it true that birds will migrate home again?

Is it true that the salmon swim back up their streams?

It is true. This is true. These are all miracles.

But is it true that one day we'll leave Guantanamo Bay?

Is it true that one day we'll go back to our homes?

I sail in my dreams. I am dreaming of home.

To be with my children, each one part of me;

To be with my wife and the ones that I love;

To be with my parents, my world's tenderest hearts.

I dream to be home, to be free from this cage.

But do you hear me, oh Judge, do you hear me at all?

We are innocent, here, we've committed no crime.

Set me free, set us free, if anywhere still

Justice and compassion remain in this world!

The way past the language of euphemism, of dehumanization, is the language of the heart. We speak the names of these people. We hear their stories. We share their poetry, their music, their art. We find common ground, and feel our own humanity reinforced by experiencing it with others.

I touched on this in my sermon of last year --- Higher Ground: Music and Spirituality. I spoke of my time at a music camp, where one of the musicians leading the camp told us that we should always remember that when we were playing we were doing something very special, both as musicians and listeners. The playing of music creates a sacred space for both the musicians and the audience. Through our art, and the shared experience of it, we have created a bond that transcends language. During the sermon I played selections from some very different musical styles, Bach, Persian classical music, and A Love Supreme by John Coltrane. I was drawing attention not just to my

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diverse musical taste, but also to the ability of music across different times and traditions to still reach us, to transcend their specific time and place.

As we say in our order of service, we welcome all here regardless of differences that would normally separate us in the larger culture. We are enriched by our diversity, and we are more human and stronger together for it. Perhaps you could think of it in the scientific language of evolution, that by cross-pollinating our different perspectives and experiences we form a more resilient community. Rather than the language of the head, I prefer the language of the heart, a belief that through our shared instruments --- be they voices, words, drawings, dance --- by combining our frequencies together we create harmonies and resonances that are more powerful than what we do individually. I can't prove this scientifically, so perhaps you could call it a myth. But it is a myth which sustains me, and which gives me the resilience to move forward in the face of what will clearly be very challenging times in our world. It also gives me a language to express and challenge the destructive myths, without moving to anger and violence. It is important to remember that the destructive myths I have spoken of throughout this service are implicitly based on violence --- against the earth, against the indigenous who defend the earth, against the idea that there is common humanity. If we speak in the language of violence, we reinforce the destructive myth behind it. If we speak and listen in the language of the heart, in song, in dance, in humor, in harmony --- in community --- we reinforce each other and we transcend our differences. Please listen to your heart and your head, and to what mother earth is saying. So may it be.

Closing words:

### **5 simple rules to be happy**

Free your heart from hatred  
Free your mind from worries  
Live simply  
Give more  
Expect less