

Our Doctrine of Discovery
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wayne Arnason
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
www.fvuuf.org

October 17-18, 2015

CALL TO GATHER by Karen Bruno

He didn't have to say a word. When our son heard about a summertime Irish dance class, that five-year-old face turned to me with such expectation and hope that I couldn't say no. It's only six weeks, we can walk to the studio, it's inexpensive, I don't teach in the summer - what could it possibly hurt?

That decision eight years ago has shaped our family life in more ways than I can count. I had to let go of my expectations to have nightly family dinners, participate in school activities, and continue my career as a public school teacher. Instead, we drive to Milwaukee - and sometimes a Chicago suburb - at least three days per week for dance training.

The first regional competition for which he qualified took place over Thanksgiving, when he was seven years old, in Columbus, OH. It was the first Thanksgiving we had missed with our wider family. Mark had fallen ill, so after we checked into the hotel around 7 pm, Will and I had a "feast" at the hotel restaurant.

It was bleak. This did NOT feel like Thanksgiving. We were exhausted, Will had practice in the morning, the drive had been long in lousy weather, and Mark was sick.

As we attended training Friday and Saturday and competition Saturday and Sunday, we met families just like us. I met parents who were also schoolteachers; they taught me to ALWAYS take my one personal day the Monday after Thanksgiving. We met parents and boys from throughout the region who are still friends today.

It got me to thinking about what I loved about Thanksgiving: food, wider family, and gratitude. Was I finding that at the Oireachtas, the regional Irish dance competition I never even knew existed? I was letting go of the expectations and "shoulds" surrounding the holiday as we built a new community.

Last fall, Will decided to take a break from dance to run cross country. We had the first Thanksgiving meal with our family since 2007, which was lovely - but the three of us were glued to our devices, waiting for texts or posts with Oireachtas results from our friends. We definitely experienced food, family, and gratitude last Thanksgiving, but we missed our dance family. I realized that dance and Thanksgiving had become entwined in a way I had not expected. The

process of supporting our son to discover his passion had led to a new community, and identity, for us.

Late this past winter, Will returned to dance class. The weekly drives for his training can be grueling, but letting go of my expectations of what family time should look like has allowed us to redefine family dinner and cultivate gratitude daily: for the jobs that give us flexibility, for the resources of time and money that allow us to support his passion, for the nights when we can be home together.

We will be on the road again this Thanksgiving Day. Rather than feel as if we are “missing Thanksgiving,” however, now I recognize that we are continuing our Thanksgiving dance tradition. I will relish the time with Mark and Will, visit with our wider family of dance friends from Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, watch the joy on our son’s face as he dances, and feel gratitude for the abundance.

FIRST READING from Frederick and Mary Ann Brussard

Let’s face it. We do feel that we are entitled to be happy. Many times we operate under the assumption that having self-esteem also means thinking that we deserve special treatment and are better than other people. Where does our sense of entitlement come from? What feeds it? Entitlement is encouraged by competition that has become the heartbeat of our society. Since only the winners count, it is okay to do whatever it takes to advance your position and the accompanying rewards. Students are cheating on tests, journalists are plagiarizing others, lawyers are falsifying their billable hours, athletes are using drugs to enhance their performance, and corporations are using every strategy they can find to evade taxes.

Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. The middle-class is vanishing in this winner-take-all world where entitlement among the rich and the powerful is more pronounced than ever before. The ideal of equality has vanished as wealthy individuals and corporations are turning their money into influence and reshaping politics.

Entitlement is also displayed in what Robert Fuller in [*Somebodies and Nobodies*](#) calls “rankism” — the shabby and dehumanizing treatment of others by those in power. Assault on the dignity of others happens every day when a boss humiliates an employee, a coach bullies a player, or a police officer violates the rights of a suspect. This treatment makes many men and woman feel like they are nobodies as they tally up the number of times they have been treated like a zero. Instead of helping a thousand flowers of personhood bloom, the media lionizes celebrities and others who make a habit of exhibiting self-centeredness because they are by their rank entitled to do so.

There is a trickle-down process working here too. All of us, no matter our position, are infected by this egocentric behavior whereby we tell ourselves that we deserve happiness and to always have things go our way. We remember as children the neediness that made us throw a fit when we did not get what we wanted. In our adolescent years we expected our parents to chauffeur us around from one place to another. Were we thankful? No; we expected adults to meet our needs;

we were convinced that they owed us special treatment. And when they didn't do what we wanted, we cried out as demanding youth: "It's not fair!"

Entitlement is pervasive not only in our culture and public life but also in our families and private lives. Can we make changes in our thoughts and behavior to lessen the energy of entitlement?

SERMON PART 1

There are some of you that had a short work week since we last gathered here at the Fellowship. Am I right? Some working folks still have Columbus Day off – mostly federal employees, right? But not many others. Columbus doesn't carry the iconic clout that he once had. Last week Rev. Kathleen was talking about the character of Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and described how when our iconic historical or fictional heroes are knocked off their pedestals by new personal growth, new research and new understandings, we have to let them go.

In the days before we realized how all our Western history was written from a European point of view, I was a big fan growing up of the seafaring explorers. My Icelandic heritage got me interested in the Vikings early on, and that carried over to the European seafaring explorers like Columbus and Magellan. After my public schooling was long past, we began to find more substantial truth telling in our textbooks about the cruelty, greed, illness, slavery, and exploitation that followed the Vikings and the European explorers around the globe like rabid pets, biting everyone that they came into contact with. Columbus seems to have been the iconic explorer hero who has suffered the biggest fall in recent decades, maybe because he was on the highest pedestal – supposedly the discoverer of America, although we Icelanders knew better, and the favorite son of the important Italian American community. Our modern historians have uncovered and recognized the tragic consequences for the indigenous people who lived in the Americas of being “discovered” by Europeans and though many other explorers and settlers contributed to those consequences, Columbus is the symbol who gets to take the blame. These days most of us, even Italian Americans, pass through mid-October only vaguely paying attention to Columbus Day. Cultural heroes are sometimes let go, not by massive controversial rejection, but by fading away as their image no longer holds the same meaning. Yet there are some aspects of European settlement of North America that remain imbedded and hidden in our culture, so that even when cultural heroes are changing, long-standing attitudes that they represent do not. Entitlement is one of those attitudes.

When the Europeans sailed to Africa and to the Americas they carried with them great a deal of baggage, and that baggage wasn't all food and ammunition. They brought spiritual baggage as well, doctrinal baggage, insofar as many of them believed that they were messengers and representatives of the Christian God and of God's divinely appointed rulers on earth, the crowned heads of Europe. During the Age of Exploration, it was the Vatican that helped adjudicate disputes between countries about who would be entitled to land and resources that had been “discovered” on other continents. Even though the people that were already there first were living on that land using those resources, European legal agreements backed by the Church declared that the Europeans who got there first were *entitled* to claim those resources. This legal

“doctrine of discovery” found its way into American law and has been used to reject the claims of North American aboriginal tribes to land and resources that were theirs before European colonization.

I first learned about the Doctrine of Discovery because Unitarian Universalists were encouraged to repudiate this legal standard in American and international jurisprudence through a voted resolution back at our 2012 General Assembly. I thought to myself: Wow- this title sure gives “discovery” a bad name. The Doctrine of Discovery should actually be called the “Doctrine of Entitlement.” “Entitlement” means that you are owed something because of an identity that you carry. We all know now that no one discovered America, but rather a lot of European powers essentially stole it and claimed it as their own.

So here’s the point of this historical excursion: Entitlement has from its earliest beginnings been a powerful attitude shaping the course of this country. The belief that Christian people were divinely entitled and that white people were racially entitled to various privileges, rights, wealth, and power has been a driving force in American identity. We are now in a period of world history in which we are intensely aware that all these imperialist colonial assumptions that influenced both the age of exploration and the industrial age have been overturned. Today’s progressives, wherever they may live in the world, question and challenge assumptions of entitlement by any one religious, racial or cultural group over another, even as various kinds of fundamentalism in religion and politics threaten the multicultural world of mutual respect and co-existence that has been such an important part of liberal idealism.

Today I’d like to contrast these reflections on entitlement, with some thoughts on a different kind of ‘doctrine of discovery,’ a liberal religious doctrine of discovery that can influence our own personal spiritual lives and shape our actions in the world to fight against the fundamentalisms that are destroying civilizations, social contracts, and human decency. I use the word “doctrine” cautiously, knowing it’s a word that we Unitarian Universalists don’t like very much. In fact we claim that we are a religion that doesn’t have doctrines. But if you look the word up, one of the synonyms for “doctrine” is a word we do like and use – the word “principles.” A doctrine is a principle or a teaching that is advocated for acceptance and belief by a body of people, usually a religion, or a government. Our seven principles in Unitarian Universalism are a kind of doctrine. We don’t enforce belief in our principles through threats or punishment and you are not required to sign a statement saying you will believe and uphold them when you join a congregation, but we make sure that when you join a Unitarian Universalist congregation you are aware of where we stand and what we stand for.

The fact that we don’t enforce our principles is where the “discovery” part of our approach to “doctrines” comes in. Our seven principles are a framework for self-discovery in community, rather than a definition of the way the world works. We contend that our way of being religious works best when people have the freedom to realize and practice the truth of our teachings for themselves, without oversight, regulation, and enforcement. We have a doctrine of discovery when it comes to religion, but it is exactly the opposite of the legal doctrine of discovery that has been used as a tool for oppression and exploitation. Our doctrine of discovery is based NOT on entitlement, but on its opposite. It is based on giving.

There's a big difference between living your life with expectations of entitlement as opposed to intentions based in giving, and it's a journey of discovery across our lifetimes to truly unpack that difference between entitlement and giving. Karen is going to read us a poem by David Whyte that speaks to this journey of discovery.

SECOND READING "Journey" a poem by David Whyte

Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again
Painting their black silhouettes
on an open sky.
Sometimes everything
has to be
inscribed across the heavens
so you can find
the one line
already written inside you.
Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that first, bright and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.
Sometimes with
the bones of the black
sticks left when the fire
has gone out
someone has written
something new
in the ashes of your life.
You are not leaving.
Even as the light fades quickly now,
you are arriving

SERMON PART 2

To what are we entitled, as human beings? Our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion has answered this important question in a unique and difficult way, by refusing to presume the existence of a God or any other form of transcendent authority as necessary support for any basic entitlements that come with being human. That's the leap of faith we took when we refused to splinter and dissolve a hundred years ago when enough people in our congregations asked whether belief in God had to be mandatory to be a Unitarian or a Universalist. Unfortunately, people who look in at us today from the outside will sometimes come away with the impression that it's mandatory in Unitarian Universalism NOT to believe in God, but we know that's not true either.

Letting go of “mandatory belief” starting about a hundred years ago in our congregations was the beginning of our doctrine of discovery. We hadn’t articulated our seven principles back then and the Unitarian and Universalist denominations had not merged, but in both traditions when we let go of having a mandatory identity as Christians and a mandatory identity as theists, we were left with a big question hanging over us: Now What? If belief is not compulsory, where are the sources of authority that you turn to for building your own theology?

The answer to “Now What?” then, as now, is that you have to choose and work with sources of authority within your own heart – if you are a person with a Christian theist identity and belief within Unitarian Universalism, you have to claim that, realize it, explore it, affirm it – even if the minister doesn’t, even if you seem to be in a minority. If you’re clear that you’re not a theist, you have to answer to questions like: what does that mean for what you think about why there is something instead of nothing, and where do you derive your ethical commitments, and what does mystical experience mean to you? Being a non-theist is challenging spiritual work if you take it seriously. Being part of a religious community that requires your personal journey of discovery about why and what you believe is demanding for people, wherever they are on a spectrum of understanding. David Whyte says: “Sometimes everything has to be inscribed across the heavens so you can find the one line already inside you.”

There is so much baggage that we too bring into this world as we begin our exploration of life, the baggage of our genetic and cultural lineage, our racial heritage, the circumstances of history into which we were born, the people that surrounded us. We can feel entitled by all of those givens. If we were born with white skin, we unconsciously expect the privileges that come with whiteness. If we were born into a particular ethnic or cultural tradition we are told that we can expect to carry the traits of that group. All the assumptions we grew up with about the way the world is seem to be inscribed across the heavens, and finding the personal truth that is inside you and daring to speak it out loud against all the givens written in the sky is not an easy thing. “Sometimes, the poet says “it takes a great sky to find that first bright and indescribable wedge of freedom in your own heart.” That’s what we try to create in this Fellowship – a great sky that invites you to discover and speak the lines that emerge from your own heart. It’s a journey of discovery. It’s finding your own way to say “yes” to life.

Here’s one of the hardest parts about my own experience of Unitarian Universalist faithful living – I’ve come to the conclusion that life itself doesn’t offer me any entitlements, guarantees, or interventions. If I use the word “God” in prayer or poetry or proclamation, as I did today, I am not speaking of a reality I experience that gives me anything – rather it is a reality that asks me to do the giving. Rather than extend comfort in a hostile and uncertain world, my relationship to ultimate reality makes demands on me. It invites me to give my best.

This is especially true when it comes to our first principle in Unitarian Universalism that still says “We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” I wish that language was stronger and made no presumptions that the Spirit of Life gives us anything that we don’t create for ourselves and with each other. I wish our first principle read: “We **create** and promote the worth and dignity of every person,” because that’s what I believe really happens. Worth and dignity of human beings exists in the world because we create and sustain it by our own beliefs and attitudes and behaviors. If there is one thing I would have us let go of in

Unitarian Universalism, it would be the idea that worth and dignity are inherent within us, apart from the ways that human community affirms them. Worth and dignity is not an entitlement, not inherent in the way of the world, but rather it is a gift that we make and give to each other every day, and it is a gift that can be set aside or taken away or forgotten.

The social contract that we have in this country that says that we will share our collective resources to sustain a decent standard of living for those who lack the resources to create it for themselves is one of the ways that we create worth and dignity in the world. It is so ironic and maddening that the popular media and social conservatives call the programs created by government as gifts that enhance worth and dignity “entitlement programs.” The real entitlement programs in this country are actually low taxation rates on inherited wealth and capital gains, and de-regulation of Super PACs, and built-in access to lawyers and politicians that comes with wealth.

There is a relationship between the “rankism” that the Brussards described in our first reading today that is wearing away the fabric of our common life and our political process in this country, and the fundamentalism that we see expressed globally through ideological military warfare – both are based on a belief that one group of people is entitled over another, whether that is one group of believers, one racial group, or one social class. The consequences of people acting out of these entitlement beliefs are devastating.

Unitarian Universalism has a different answer. We have each and all been given the indescribably valuable gift of being alive, at a time in human history when the resources and wisdom available to us are more extensive than any we have ever known. It is we who must take up the challenge of using this gift we have been given wisely by returning it to each other in service of the common good.

In the age of exploration, when seafarers set sail across uncharted waters, they had every reason to believe that they would encounter unknown and unpredictable challenges. Wind and weather were all beyond their control. The only thing that they could count on in their journey of discovery was what they carried with them inside. Most of them expressed what hope and confidence and trust in the value of their quest in the language of Christian theology, and yet despite this common authoritative foundation of belief they shared, I suspect that few of them were able to sustain an unshakeable confidence that the success of their voyage was guaranteed.

We are in that same boat. Our congregations may seem sometimes like tiny vessels on a great and indifferent ocean of human cruelty, self-absorption, and fundamentalist entitlement. But those oceans have been crossed before, and will be again.

Our faith in the value of our journey must come from the doctrine of discovery in which we believe, a principled belief that this vessel we have built is sound, that the crew that shares our life is trustworthy, and that together we have the ability to rise to any challenge within a creative community of mutual regard and respect for human worth, dignity, and value.