

“Revolt of the Struggling Classes”

A talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION

Well, we at UUs for a Just Economic Community can say to our fellow UUs and to America, “We told you so!” We told you that the smoke-and-mirrors economic policies that both US political parties have employed for years would one day create a monster. Not only a monster such as the financial meltdown of 2008, but the sort of demagogues that appear in times of extreme economic distress.

No, we didn’t know when or how the bubble would burst, but we knew there was a DTE—Donald Trump Event—out there, inevitable if we kept ignoring basic economics. The writer John Steinbeck long ago said that socialism would never take root in America because too many poor people see themselves as “temporarily embarrassed millionaires.” Those with that misguided belief are the rank and file in the DTE.

In his great poem “Make America America Again”—written in 1935, another time of economic distress and demagogues, Langston Hughes wrote,

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?

Surely not me? The millions on relief today?

The millions shot down when we strike?

The millions who have nothing for our pay?

For all the dreams we’ve dreamed

And all the songs we’ve sung

And all the hopes we’ve held

And all the flags we’ve hung,

The millions who have nothing for our pay—

Except the dream that's almost dead today.

Just now in the United States we are experiencing a “Revolt of the Struggling Classes.” And roughly half of America is struggling. We have no time for “I told you so’s.” It’s time to find a civil and communal way out of this disaster because there are too many monsters ready, willing, and able to preach hatred and violence as the ways out of distress.

ONE

Yale philosophy professor Jason Stanley argues that Americans love the language of democracy but not the reality of democracy. He says, “I see an anti-democratic ideology at work, inverting the meaning of democratic vocabulary and transforming it into propaganda.” His latest book is *How Propaganda Works* (2015).

Stanley asks,

Why do citizens who cherish freedom as an ideal vote to constrain their own freedoms by increasing the power of corporations? It’s because free market ideology masks the ways in which corporations deploy undemocratic modes of coercion.

“Free market ideology masks the ways in which corporations deploy undemocratic modes of coercion.”

To paraphrase: corporate capitalism makes people feel free, but they’re not. Furthermore, in DTEs—Donald Trump Events—those with a false sense of freedom are likely to further strip themselves of actual rights as citizens even as they cooperate in further oppressing those struggling for true freedom . . .

I hear a good many UUs in dismay about the rise of Donald Trump. Why? they ask. I come from a poor, white, rural, farming background. I still own a family farm and a shotgun. For me, Trump is easy to comprehend. I understand the siren call of his racist ideology.

I was a kid on the farm when Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, said these words:

adapt or die; resist and perish . . . Agriculture is now big business. Too many people are trying to stay in agriculture that would do better someplace else.

I believed Secretary Butz when he said he was out to destroy my way of life, and I went somewhere else—I went and got an inexpensive state college education and got off the farm.

However, most of my relatives did not. They failed to adapt to Mr. Butz’s corporatist agriculture—or get out when the gettin’ was good. Now, they’re cleaning floors; and changing oil and tires; and flipping burgers. They know they’ve been ripped off and they are angry. When they see what they consider a successful person—a billionaire and a TV star—when they hear him singling out The Other and failed policies, they listen.

They didn’t go to college. They aren’t educated enough to see that Federal agricultural policy—in the pocket of major corporations—is to blame. So they listen to simplistic answers—they hate people of color; they hate immigrants; they hate the cities and the liberals.

I know it sounds as if I’m painting with a large brush, and I am. But look at the polls: there is a broad brush out there—wedge politics creating an ideological chasm between rural and urban communities; a chasm between poor people of color and poor whites.

This isn’t new. The International Workers of the World Union, the Wobblies, decried this behavior a hundred years ago.

Joe Hill and other IWW martyrs would have no trouble recognizing Donald Trump for what he is. “One Big Union” was about unionizing everyone—no matter the gender, race, origin, or language of the people. And One Big Union is still the most frightening vision that corporate executives, corporate boards, or the Republican Party can imagine.

TWO

I've been a socialist most of my life. (Some of you have too.) We remember that every progressive social movement, from peace activism to civil rights, was labeled "communist." I never thought that I'd see a fair discussion of socialism in my lifetime. But polls show that today roughly a third of Americans view socialism favorably.

There has been a shift in this country. Yes, the extreme right has gained a lot of support, but the way out this morass is also gaining support.

Today, 4.3 percent of American households with children report living on less than \$2 per person per day. One in five US children go to bed hungry. At my congregation, we make sandwiches for homeless students attending community college. How many Americans are "faking normal," working multiple jobs, making surreptitious trips to the food shelf, and living off credit cards, amassing crippling loads of debt?

The struggling class is large!

How many people are realizing that in the US, life is a lottery—the random chances of birth lock us into social and economic prisons where we serve a life sentence . . .

The UU Principles are commendable but abstract. How do we work to achieve "the inherent worth and dignity of every person"?

What is a just economic community?

I'm a Humanist, and my theology concerning the economy is very simple. It, too, was stated back during that dark time of the 1930s, in the first Humanist Manifesto. The fourteenth point reads:

The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of

the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.

“A shared life in a shared world.” Many backed away from that fourteenth point during the 1950s when words like “socialism” and “atheist” and “communist” marked progressives as the enemy. But now that one-third of Americans view socialism positively, it’s time for us to be loud and proud.

You don’t have to be a humanist to believe that and sign on. How about rephrasing it:

The goal of Unitarian Universalism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Unitarian Universalists demand a shared life in a shared world.

The ideal is non-negotiable. The means to the goals are multifaceted.

CONCLUSION

Our society is very good at teaching individualism and individualistic behavior. Our society isn’t so good at teaching community. To have any moral validity in the national conversation at all, Unitarian Universalism **MUST** insist that we we believe in the public good. We must insist that we honor both the individual and the web of all existence. We must “demand a shared life in a shared world.”

Yes, we need to “make America great,” remembering all the while that America never has been great for most of the people on this continent. Langston Hughes spoke for so many, past and present, when he wrote,

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?

Surely not me?

America is a dream unfulfilled. But it isn’t an impossible ideal. There are concrete ways to make America great for all Americans. Let’s acknowledge all those intersectional

oppressions and insist that there's a better way. Let's demand that shared life in a shared world, where police departments are not private armies; where courts are not funnels into for-profit prisons; where difference is celebrated, not denigrated.

As the US political prisoner Leonard Peltier says,

We need each other. Each of us is responsible for what happens on this earth. We are each absolutely essential, each totally irreplaceable. Each of us is the swing vote in the bitter election battle now being waged between our best and our worst possibilities.

OK, UUJEC—let's get to voting.