

I delivered (through Zoom) this sermon with the Tri-County Unitarian Universalists in Summerfield, FL. I had planned this sermon for UUFM on January 10, but national events changed my plans. And this sermon is different from what I would have preached had the Capitol not been stormed. RC

Artful Imagination—TriUU

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I must begin with a disclaimer: the events of the last two weeks have changed the direction of this sermon, so it is not entirely as advertised. It is not as I originally imagined giving it.

When my son was young, four, five years old, I began to notice the rise of his intellectual capabilities. You know, the kind of thinking capacity all human beings have, ordinary yet marvelous all the same. It seemed that naturally, as a child of the universe, my son had the power not only to sense, to experience the world but also to *make* sense of it. He could put two and two together. And in these early stages, as he put two and two together, he came up with an answer of three or five or 17 or something. His reasoning was so funny and so outrageous. I had to contain my laughter, and sometimes shock, as he recounted how airplanes took off or how water got into the toilet or how he could see my face when he was inside me, before he was born. My spouse, ever logical, felt firmly perplexed at both our son's reckoning and my delight in it. "Oh, I get it," my son would proclaim. "But he's wrong!" my spouse would exclaim.

Yes, he was wrong. Quite often, as a matter of fact. There is a word for just how wrong he was—apophenia is the word—and I will talk about that later. Now, one example of my little boy putting two and two together has stuck with me, and I have ruminated on it for more than 25 years now. One afternoon, with sliced apples in hand, munching contentedly and chattering intermittently, we watched with attention as Bill Nye the Science Guy explained melanin and the color of skin. How skin color is a spectrum, with more melanin creating darker skin and less melanin creating lighter skin. My son watched and munched and looked at his skin and mine from time to time. He might have been thinking of classmates and neighbors, too. When Bill Nye finished his segment, my son was quiet for a minute. And then, "Oh, I get it. We're all African-American." Wow! Ok. Let's just set that right there for a minute.

Across time and throughout our history, we human beings have not only observed and sensed and thought and imagined as we stared out at the stars and wondered our own place among them. We have tried also to explain why and how we *use* our minds. Within an intellectual history of our human time, we made note of different cognitive faculties, assessing and valuing our human ways of thinking and knowing as we have variously tried to make sense of the reality both inside us and around us. How we think. Why we remember. The value of our narratives about human and non-human reality, as well as the limits and dangers of those narratives. We have been pre-occupied with explaining ourselves and how we know what we know, for at least as long as such pre-occupations could be recorded and preserved on clay and papyrus and velum and paper.

Various peoples in various ages have emphasized particular intellectual capabilities over others, and that categorization is the material of human intellectual history, too. In my former life as an English professor, I was a student of the rise of Romanticism from out of the so-called Age of Enlightenment with *its* focus on reason as the foundation of scientific knowledge. The 18th Century was a fertile time, still understood in some ways as a pinnacle of human development. In the most rudimentary of thumbnail sketches, highest truth was understood to emerge from objective evidence arising out of repeated, observable experimentation, out of which, in turn, came indisputable facts about the true nature of reality. In order to get below the surface of the observable to the reality underpinning our human existence, it was imperative to avoid the fanciful, the imaginative, as that would lead to the indefensible, the unprovable, the non-factual.

Mind you, there was a place in Western Enlightenment life for the fanciful and the imaginative, but not necessarily in the objective pursuit of truth. The world of the imagination, the imaginative mind, had a place in the realm of belief and religion, in the place of the helpfully optimistic and the hopefully socially stabilizing and the expectantly creative articulations of beauty. Still, beauty was only the surface of things, not the thing itself and so not the seat of the true. Always, reason and logic were the meat of reality and thus the means to the true nature of reality.

Interestingly over time, *categorizing* ways of thinking—reason, memory, imagination—led also to ranking the ways of thinking. It will not surprise you that in this period of 18th-century Western Enlightenment, intellectual capacities were not only ranked but they were figured in gendered and racialized ways. White men were positioned as the keepers of reason, logic, and facts, while women and people of color from significantly different cultures were figured as fanciful, illogical, imaginative, colorful, pre-occupied with the surfaces of things. And significantly, *prone* to the emotional. The artful, the imaginative, all that which is oriented toward emotions and feelings and bodies, well, it was humanly necessary for sure, but it was an extra, icing on the cake as it were, not entirely essential to the pursuit of objective truth.

If this way of thinking about how humans think, this ranking and gendering and racializing, if this were simply a quaint, arcane formation of the past, it would not be so interesting and troublesome within our own time in this new and confusing century in which we all now live. If we had solved the problems of inequality and sexism and racism, not to mention heterosexism and cis-genderism and all the myriad other -isms that serve to divide and conquer us, if we had solved those problems, a conversation about the opposition of reason to imagination would be decidedly beside the point. In our own realm, as Unitarian Universalists, we pride ourselves on a living tradition founded upon reason and science, rather than on belief in the supernatural. In one of our Six Sources, we enshrine one particular way of thinking about the realities of the world, calling for inspiration from “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warns us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” That statement sets up quite a binary opposition, doesn’t it—heed the guidance of reason, which does not lead to idolatries like some other ways of thinking might.

Given the insurrection at the US Capitol last week, given all that has been building over time, accelerated in the last four or so years, which made that insurrection possible, I know I feel the pull for objective facts and logical thinking more strongly than ever. In this time of so-called fake news and alternative facts, I am hungry for an arbiter, a higher power of some kind, to swoop in and make completely clear and evident what is real and true and what is drivel and nonsense. I want to re-wind the last 30 years of public education and strengthen the teaching of critical thinking skills and reasonable discourse.

And yet I know about “apophenia.” I knew about apophenia before I knew the word for that mode of thinking, having observed so much evidence of it on Facebook and in the news lately, and beyond. Apophenia, the tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things. The term was coined by Klaus Conrad, a Nazi neurologist and psychiatrist documenting the early stages of schizophrenia. One might like for that provenance alone to disqualify the concept, except that it has proved so applicable to the way humans generally put two and two together. Apophenia can explain why gamblers think that they are going to win with the next hand or roll, why detective stories with their red herrings are so satisfying. Apophenia can explain how so-called “alternative facts” enable logically constructed arguments that posit a reality entirely different from the one I live in.

Human beings seek patterns as a way to know, and we make connections where none may in fact actually be. You might assume that that is an overreliance of fanciful imagination, but rather, it manifests the limits of logic and reason alone. In always trying to connect the dots, in putting two and two together, we end up with narratives that we then inhabit, narratives that take on a life of their own and lead to consequences in real time and space. And so we must ask: How might we rely on the guidance of reason without falling into the idolatries of logic? How might imagination help to uplift us and help us think powerfully and spiritually about our reality, getting to the true nature of the real? Apophenia is troubling and also genuinely intriguing.

Starlings and fish murmurate. Individuals move as one together, for protection and in ways that strike us humans as so deeply beautiful that we want to emulate it. An artist observes, an artist breaks down the movements and translates them into actions that humans can learn to perform. For a short time, we human beings—performing and observing—we are one with a bit of unreasoning nature which in no way answers to our desires. We seek a pattern and create an artful connection through imagination.

A little boy, my white son, envisioned himself in a continuum with Black and Brown people. While his logical leap was incorrect—he can never experience first-hand the history and experience of African Americans—he unknowingly opened himself to imaginatively inhabiting African American experience. This is what we adults all do when we read poetry by Maya Angelou and try to understand the perspective that cries out for recognition of beauty and power in a body and experience that has been so oppressed and pushed down by the powers that be. As she rises, so do we who are connected and not the same as her.

Illogical thinking—thinking organized by imagination rather than by logic and reason—they are not the problem *per se* in a human dance imitating murmuration or a boy thinking himself black like his friends and classmates, though apophenia might be at play. But illogical thinking that results in an insistence that an election is invalid or that a deep state of cannibalistic child molesters is running the government is a problem. Not for the illogic, *per se*, but for the lack of a moral imagination to artfully render human connections that fulfill an empathetic relationship between all beings. Our Unitarian Universalist faith requires, nay it demands, that we unite reason and imagination or a moral purpose and a religious way to live our lives.

To have empathy means to care and connect, even though the experience is not like your own. And a leap of imagination is required here. A merely sympathetic response comes from simile, from metaphor. We feel sympathy when we see experience like our own. Sympathy is critical, **and** only a first step. The next is to move from comparison through the similar to something else—to a respect for differentiation, for the validity of that which is outside our own experience. It is to allow and to enable relationship with the new and different, regardless if it is your experience, your taste, your concern. Hairstyles and clothing fashions aside, grammars and music choices aside, oppression or privilege aside, when it comes to moral decisions, we all **must** call ourselves to care. We **must** care for decency, equity, justice. We **must** seek the truth using our reason, seek in love for what is good and right for human thriving. We all **must** care about individual gifts and flourishing on the web of life, for all of us. When one rises, so we all do. May we learn to weave our lives, to sing of golden mornings, acknowledging a world already beautiful, made more so with courage, with minds in beginner's mode, with undaunted hope, and with kindness as the way. Our imaginations infused with moral purpose temper logical connection and lead us to dream the world we wish to inhabit and strengthen us for the work to make our world so.

I end these musings with a quotation from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on moral imagination, part of his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, including his gender language but including us all:

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. . . . I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. . . . I still believe that *We Shall overcome!*" May we imagine it so, and may it become so. Thank you.