

It's a Spade... And when it's Okay To Say So

By

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Imagine walking down the street and suddenly encountering someone, perhaps a teenager, in an uncontrollable rage growling like a wild animal, attacking people and trying to bite them. You would probably try to get away as quickly as you can, or, possibly, help others safely subdue the assailant before anyone gets hurt and the authorities can arrive. However you might respond, it is doubtful you would pass such a person without noticing, or that you would regard the encounter as perfectly normal. Like any sane person in our society, you would likely consider this individual to be out of his or her mind, presuming his or her actions are the likely result of drugs or mental illness, and would probably tell your friends about the peculiar event for days and weeks to come.

But there are cultures in which going berserk is regarded as perfectly normal, especially if it's happening in a religious context. In fact, the word *berserk* comes from the Norse word, "berserker," which refers to men who had trained themselves to go completely out of their minds in order to act like bears. *Berserk* literally means "bear shirt." During the Berserkers' ritual initiation of young males, the initiate would attack and bite people while growling like a bear. Such a state was not only encouraged, but was considered the highest state of spiritual consciousness in which one had tapped into the mind of God. In this society, the most enlightened of men were considered those who could regain this ecstatic state of mind with ease.

This word *ecstasy* is also an interesting word that's worth looking into. It literally means "out-of-state," or "out-of-stasis," and refers, like *berserk*, to going out of one's mind, to being "beside one's self." Some religious rituals evoke the ecstatic state through excessive dance or drumming, as in voodoo, or through whirling in dizzying circles like the Sufi mystics. Nowadays there's even a psychoactive drug called *ecstasy*.

My point is that there are certain behaviors we ought to normally consider bizarre, if not completely insane, that, among certain cultures, especially in relation to their religious beliefs and rituals, are often encouraged and taken as perfectly normal. In short, when it comes to religion, it's often perfectly fine for us to go out of our minds, that is, for us to act crazy.

This presents a particular dilemma for us Unitarian Universalists because we pride ourselves on being both a rational lot and tolerant of other religions. But what happens when truth and tolerance conflict? What happens when we are expected, as a matter of political correctness, to silently accept what we know is false? Is such silence, as Martin Luther King suggested, a betrayal? What happens when madness is happening before us and we're expected to walk down the street as if nothing is going on, as if people aren't going berserk right before our eyes? To use a couple of aphorisms, when is

it okay to call a spade a spade, and when are we better off beating around the bush?

The temptation of many, after all, is to attack the messenger, rather than to rationally refute the message. Plato's analogy of the cave makes the point. You will recall that Plato asks us to imagine a group of people raised entirely in a cave, chained and bound, so they can only see the dark wall in front of them. A fire is behind them and several others walking to and fro carrying various objects. The prisoners, seeing only the shadows of these figures against the cave wall, assume the shadows to be the only reality. When they hear sounds and voices echoing against the walls they assume they are coming from the shadows themselves.

But let's say one of these prisoners is set free and forced to turn around and see the world as it really is. He would, more than likely, be confused and frightened by the strange new world and the firelight would hurt his eyes. Those carrying objects back and forth would seem like blurry meaningless blobs. The prisoner might even try to turn away and return to the world of shadows. But imagine one of his keepers notices that he's seen the light and quickly drags him away from the other prisoners before he spills the beans. He then throws him out of the cave into the world of light. Although the bright and colorful world is painful and confusing to live in at first, the prisoner eventually adjusts and is enlightened to a new perception of reality. Eventually he returns to the cave to liberate his old friends with his new knowledge of the world. But, to his dismay, the cave now seems dark to his brightened eyes, and he stumbles around for a while until he finds them. He tells them all that he has seen and experienced, but, to his surprise, they only laugh and take him for madman, a blind fool stumbling around in the world as they know it.

A contemporary example of what can happen when we try to awaken our delusional society to a deeper reality regards the efforts of Al Gore to make us all more aware of global warming. During the 1992 Presidential campaign, George Bush senior mocked Al Gore, Clinton's running mate, by calling him "ozone man," and saying, "This guy is so far out in the environmental extreme we'll be up to our necks in owls and outta work for every American." In more recent years, conservative propagandists like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson have respectively called Al Gore "unhinged" and a "wild-eyed religious nut" for expressing his "inconvenient truth" about the impact of climate change. Far too many of us, it seems, would rather see the shadows on the wall, than face the writing on the walls.

So there is rightfully a tremendous fear factor associated with telling the truth. Jesus said, "the truth will set you free," and, indeed, as in Plato's analogy, sometimes it even gets you thrown out of prison. But, as Erich Fromm has noted in his book, *Escape from Freedom*, there is a terrible fear in us of being abandoned by society, of being left completely isolated and alone. In order to avoid such a fate we hide our truth in order to blend in with others, like camouflaging animals. "The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton," Fromm says, "identical with millions of other

automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious anymore.”¹ Few of us can stomach being left completely out of the society of others, even if that society is a type of prison and the only entertainment allowed is a show of shadow puppets.

As Unitarian Universalists, as rational as we like to be, we too have this anxiety within us, and fear being left out, ostracized, ridiculed, and, perhaps, even punished for our less than mainstream ideas. I have personally been called crazy, accused of being intolerant, and fired from a job for expressing my not-so-popular ideas. Living in a society of berserkers, in which going crazy is considered normal and right, means those who speak out against going berserk become the ones who are considered crazy.

So, the question remains, when do we stop beating around the bush and call a spade a spade? When do we start calling insanity, insanity? If part of the answer is “only when it’s safe to do so,” then society may forever be condemned to watching shadow puppets. With his book, *How We Know What Isn’t So*, psychologist Thomas Gilovich attempts, in his own way, to awaken us to the shadows on the wall by pointing out certain fallacies that ordinarily cloud our judgment, because, in his view, “we should be less accepting of superstition and sloppy thinking, and should strive to develop those ‘habits of mind’ that promote a more accurate view of the world.”² Yet, though he readily discusses the kinds of fallacies that often prevent us from seeing reality, he does not take on any of the serious falsehoods our culture embraces as truth. The reason, I’m sure, is that he hopes to provide his readers with the tools to find the truth for themselves, without putting himself at too much risk. And how we think is important, for we are as capable of reacting as much to thoughts as to physical objects. Was William James once noted, “the reaction due to things of thought is notoriously in many cases as strong as that due to sensible presences. It may be even stronger.”³

The shadows on the cave wall, the apparitions of our minds, are often more real to us than what is right before our eyes, than the world we grapple with our senses; and our interpretation of reality, more sacred than reality itself. A couple of years ago, Bill Moyers complained that, “the delusional is no longer marginal but has come in from the fringe to influence the seats of power.” He was referring to the theologues and ideologues who make it difficult for us to deal with the very real crises our world is facing because our delusional thoughts prevent us from recognizing them. This is precisely why some of us must be daring enough, and selfless enough, to challenge the false and destructive paradigms that abound in our society, regardless of the personal risk we face. This is why some of us must be prophetic voices in the wilderness, even if it means being called crazy, ostracized, or worse.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 209.

² Gilovich, Thomas, *How We Know What Isn’t So*, The Free Press, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 1991, 1993, p. 6.

³ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New American Library, A Mentor Book, 1958, p. 58.

Reality, the rarest gift in the Universe, precisely because it is so difficult to grasp, has too often been sacrificed upon the alter of religious ideology. Like the Berserkers of old, who ritualized and sanctified their own destructiveness, there is much in our society today that ought to seem crazy, yet is accepted as normal, even divine. Yet just as in the past, when the reality of science, that is, of the senses, expressed by people like Copernicus and Galileo, was rejected in favor of fallacy, it is necessary for some to remain vigilant devotees of reason and truth. Today the sanctification of our destructive paradigms continues to cause the pointless deaths of thousands of innocent victims around the globe, not to mention the havoc they're wrecking on the environment, on the real world. Caught in the delusion of hatred, anger, and self-righteousness, we cannot see the real lives we destroy. Caught in the delusion of our ideal worlds, we cannot see what we're doing to the only world we really have.

Yes, as Unitarian Universalists, we value tolerance, but must remember not to make an idol of tolerance. Ours is but a tolerant religion, not a religion of tolerance. To paraphrase, *there comes a time when tolerance is a betrayal*. There comes a time when truth is necessary. Gandhi said, "Truth is God,"⁴ and our devotion ought to be to truth, not to tolerance. Yet truth is illusive, it is *apophatic*, meaning the best we can do is say what truth is not. We may not ever know the truth with certainty, but we can easily recognize its absence. And when we see a falsehood before us, like shadow puppets held up as truth and reality, it's up to us to name them for what they are—spades!

⁴ Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, ed., Krishna Kripalani, Continuum Publishing Corp., New York, NY, 1980, p. 61.