

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
 “This is Madness”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore April 11, 2010

**Meditation** [Prayer is a Form of Madness](#) By [Tzvi Freeman](#)

Prayer is a form of madness. Tell me that it is rational to talk to the Force of Being as though this were your closest confidant. Tell me that it is not absurd to plead with this force to adjust reality more to your liking--as though you know better how to run the universe.

Prayer, like love, is more about losing yourself. A philosopher cannot pray--unless he loses his mind. A pragmatist does not pray until he loses control. Prayer, like love, is more about losing yourself than it is about finding any great truth.

If so, should we not strive to be reasonable people? Why have we institutionalized madness?

This is something vital to know: There is madness and there is madness. There is blind, stupid madness; madness not worth listening to because it has nothing to say. And there is madness that has very much to say, so much the mind cannot listen unless it sits quiet and still.

There is madness that transforms human beings into monsters, imprisoning them within the worst of their own fantasies--and there is madness that lies at the nucleus of being human, a divine spark that makes us free, living beings and not mechanical humanoids. To pray is to find the Essence of Life within your own heart.

It is at that nub of madness that lies beyond reason and intellect, that lies at our very core and essence, it is there that we touch the core and essence of reality, that which we call G-d. And from there we speak with G-d, for there the two of us are one.

**Sermon**

Cervantes wrote in Don Quixote,

When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? To surrender dreams ... this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness and, the maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be.

What is madness? What is sanity? How do we know which is which ... especially when the madness is inside our own heads? And is there anything we can do about it?

Most little children don't ask these questions because they assume everything that happens inside their heads is true. Everyone loves chocolate cake and hates Brussels sprouts,

don't they? It takes a little growing up to begin to recognize that what I think and feel is not the same as what others think and feel. And that's okay ... within limits. Yes, some may like yellow cake, but if they really like escargot and anchovies, there must be something really wrong with their heads.

A book and an article got me pondering this topic. The book, *History of Madness* by Michael Foucault is a fascinating look at how our understanding of madness has changed over the last six hundred years. Foucault argues the big change happened with the rise of Enlightenment rationalism, the thinking that forms a foundation for Unitarian Universalism. Before the Enlightenment, madness had a tragic, cosmic dimension - a precursor of the coming end times. The mad were possessed by divine and demonic forces that were ultimately mysterious, even awesome. With the Enlightenment, the cosmic dimension got stripped out. The mad were reduced to being unreasonable, character flawed, even immoral, and needed to be corrected, cured or removed from society. Foucault writes:

[Enlightenment rationalists argued] Madness is only in each man, as it lies in the attachments that men have to themselves, and the illusions they entertain about themselves...an attachment to oneself is the first sign of madness, and it is through that attachment to oneself that man takes: error for truth, lies for reality, violence and ugliness for beauty and justice...[in this view] madness now opens out onto an entirely moral universe. Evil was no longer a punishment or the end of time, but merely a fault or flaw.

More recently, on January 11, you might have read the New York Times Magazine article, "The Americanization of Mental Illness." (It's on the web.) The article describes how Western ideas of madness, that Foucault examines in excruciating detail, are propagating around the globe redefining the expression of madness. For example:

On Nov. 24, 1994, a teenage anorexic girl named Charlene Hsu Chi-Ying collapsed and died on a busy downtown street in Hong Kong. The death caught the attention of the media and was featured prominently in local papers. "Anorexia Made Her All Skin and Bones: Schoolgirl Falls on Ground Dead," read one headline in a Chinese-language newspaper.

Within days, an area of the world that had never known anorexia suddenly had an epidemic of it. Our beliefs about mental health and mental illness greatly shape how and if we define others ... or ourselves as mad or sane.

Madness has interested me for a long time. During my seminary years, I had the opportunity to work for a summer as a chaplain at the Delaware State Mental Hospital. I saw madness up close, as I worked with patients in the lifers ward, people who were never getting out, the worst of the worst. One woman with a misshapen forehead had had a lobotomy. Another didn't speak and just stared at people. The one who stays with me was a fellow who

asked me over and over again, “Chaplain, chaplain, am I going to heaven or hell?” I spent the summer attempting to figure out how to effectively minister as a Unitarian Universalist to their despair and hopelessness. The madness of these patients seemed like a gaping chasm between us. I was challenged at every level of my being to cross that gap to minister to them.

I've also encountered the beginning of madness. I remember a young Unitarian Universalist woman, I'll call her Claire. Claire fell head over heels in love with a fellow who was very active in a Pentecostal Church. The fellow wouldn't date her unless she started attending and getting involved in his church. So she started intensively reading the Bible and started to speak in tongues. She prayed fervently to be guided by God to be shown God's will for her. Within a couple of months, she started to move away from what most of us experience as reality.

I found this quite disturbing as I'd known Claire before all this started. I helped to get her hospitalized in the midst of her madness, and was relieved to see her snap back. Claire saw it herself. She recognized the change once the psychotropic medication started taking effect. She noticed how she came back to being “herself” ... or rather, what had *been* herself, again.

What happened to her? Was her madness some kind of religious experience? An opening to God? Or did some demonic energy grab hold of her instead? Was this the first sign of a paranoid schizophrenia diagnosis, or a temporary aberration? Was it the result of taking some psychoactive drug? Was it the side effect of not getting enough nutrition or sleep? And how does she sort all this out?

I'm a pretty level headed person who feels very sane and in touch with reality – at least the same one most of the rest of you seem to be experiencing. It takes a lot to rattle me and throw me off my game. I attribute this to my meditation practice that focuses intensively on moment to moment experience, cultivating a state of consciousness called “bare attention.”

So when I encountered a deeply disturbing experience a year ago, I was surprised by how much it disrupted my thinking and emotions. It felt like my mind contracted around the content of that experience as I went over and over it. A cloud covered my normally cheerful self. The things that usually give me pleasure and delight felt flat and stale. I couldn't sleep as waves of thinking crashed through my mind. In the middle of the night, I could feel myself holding on to the rigging of the facts, searching for a new way to understand and deal with the situation that could get me back on course.

I'm grateful that, in the midst of my madness, I didn't completely lose touch with reality. Because this mental storm was so different from my normal mind state, I could see it as delusional. I could recruit my mindfulness tools to help me keep coming back to the bare attention of my breath. After a day, the storm lifted. I marveled at how qualitatively different my inner life was now as the internal seas calmed.

I'm so grateful to be married to a highly skilled psycho-therapist. Philomena is one of the

best (in my not-so-humble opinion). We met through a little ministerial matchmaking during my internship at Unitarian church in Rochester, the fall after my chaplaincy at the mental hospital. How to separate madness from sanity was what we talked about over Pad Thai and drinking Sutter Home White Zinfandel on our first date.

We just celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a weekend trip to Kripalu a month ago. We picked a workshop that we thought would be fun called “Wild Chickens and Petty Tyrants: 108 Metaphors for Mindfulness,” by Dr. Arnie Kozak. His metaphors were both entertaining and effective ways to communicate how to help us separate madness from sanity. I'd like to share three of them with you today that he put in the section of his book (with the same name as the workshop) he titled “ordinary craziness.”

Being a trekkie, I loved this metaphor. It comes from the Star Trek TV series episode called, “The Man Trap:”

In this episode, Dr. McCoy encounters an old girlfriend, Nancy. To him she looks like the young woman he knew years ago. To another crew member she looks like a woman he met once on a pleasure planet. The hapless “red-shirt” goes off with her and, predictably, winds up dead—all the salt sucked out of his body. Later we discover that “Nancy” actually is a being that can change forms and who requires massive amounts of salt to survive, which the shapeshifting creature gets by sucking it out of the blood of humans. At the dramatic peak of the episode, Dr. McCoy must kill “Nancy” in order to save Captain Kirk's life. He knows at an intellectual level that Nancy is a murderous creature, however, something in his heart cannot accept it. He cannot believe something other than his eyes tell him. Fortunately for the Captain, he shakes himself out of his denial, much like coming out of a trance, and he fires his phaser at the creature.

Have any of you been in this kind of trance? I suspect Claire entered this kind of trance as she fell head over heels in love. A very thin line separates love and madness, doesn't it? How about anger. Have you ever been so angry, you couldn't see straight? Our emotions can powerfully overwhelm our rational thought process and loosen our connection to sanity. Which leads to the next of Kozak's metaphors I'd like to share:

Occasionally, there is a story in the news of a tragic industrial accident. A worker gets too close to the machinery and his or her shirt sleeve gets caught in the works. The machine pulls in the sleeve and then grinds up flesh and bone with a grisly outcome.

The mind can work much like this. The mind can latch on to some idea or situation—a momentary difficulty or setback, an unkind remark from colleague or friend—and before you know it, your entire self has been pulled into the works and is being mangled.

That's what was happening to me during that emotional trauma I experienced. The

situation overwhelmed my mind and I was lost. Has that ever happened to you too?

Kozak argues elsewhere in the book that the problem is we are not evolutionarily adapted to live in an urban environment. Our genes haven't had time to adapt to the change. We're emotionally oriented to live in small tribes on the African savannah using simple stone tools to hunt and gather. City living is driving us mad!

The last metaphor I'd like to share he calls "ninety miles an hour is the speed I drive:"

A car driven at high speed is a dangerous object. For this reason, people must be licensed to drive and many laws, such as speed limits, govern their behavior in cars. The mind, speeding at breakneck velocities from place to place, can also be a dangerous force—and unfortunately, there is no license to obtain and no laws governing its private behavior.

This metaphor really hit home with me. Guilty as charged – just ask Philomena. I pile up as many things as I can do and try to fit them all in to my busy ministry. There are so many needs in the world and in my congregation that touch my heart. And I'm so capable too! I only need six hours sleep. I can work for twelve hours straight, day after day without getting tired. But that doesn't mean I always have my priorities straight. And that doesn't mean I don't, on occasion, miss something really important because I'm trying to do too much. This kind of ordinary craziness, a deeply ingrained addiction to being busy, is really hard to shake. And ministry is a perfect fit for this kind of insanity.

At the root of the ordinary craziness that most of us experience are powerful stories we tell ourselves. My busy-ness story tells me my value as a person is measured by what I get done and how many balls I can keep in the air. Claire has a beautiful romantic story in her head of how the fellow she desires is her "soul-mate" and God has put them together for some holy purpose.

What is the story you're telling yourself that supports your madness?

The challenge to our ordinary craziness comes from this wonderful bumper-sticker we should all have on our bathroom mirrors to look at each morning - "Don't believe everything you think" In truth, we can't know for sure just how mad or sane we really are, all by ourselves. No matter how sane we think we are, each of us has at least a little bit of madness in our heads.

Paramahansa Yogananda had these wise words for us on ordinary craziness:

We are, all of us, a little bit crazy, but most of us don't know it, because we mix only with people with the same type of craziness as our own. See, then, what an opportunity you and I have to learn from each other. It is only when differently crazy people come together that they get a chance to find out the errors in their own types of craziness.

The roots of our sanity and madness are deeply intertwined. To completely eliminate one or the other is a hopeless cause. However, in relationship with each other, perhaps, we can help clarify each other's awareness, and, in the process, expand our capacity to respond.

May this congregation be a place that can act as a mirror for us to help us recognize both our sanity and madness. And may we be open to seeing our reflection. And may we, then, be willing to respond with greater self-awareness to what we see.

My commitment to you as your minister is that I will.

I hope you'll join me, too, so that we may grow together in love.

## **Benediction**

Aristotle said, "No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness."

May our madness be in balance with our sanity  
to stimulate our creativity  
in a way that brings good things to life.

As Robin Williams likes to say,

"You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it."

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