

MY OWN VIEW OF THINGS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
May 6, 2018

Former FBI Director James Comey was fired a year ago by President Trump apparently for refusing to place his loyalty to Trump above his role as FBI Director. Comey begins his newly-published book *A Higher Loyalty: the Truth, Lies, and Leadership* with an author's note. Comey writes:

All people have flaws and I have many. Some of mine, as you'll discover in this book, are that I can be stubborn, prideful, overconfident, and driven by ego. I've struggled with those my whole life. There are plenty of moments I look back on and wish I had done things differently, and a few that I am downright embarrassed by. Most of us have those moments. The important thing is that we learn from them and hopefully do better.

A couple of weeks ago, Michael Barbero of the *New York Times* podcast, *The Daily* began his interview with Comey by citing this passage and asking, "What compels you to open your book by noting your flaws?"

Comey responded by acknowledging that a lot of people view him as — and these are Comey's words — a jerk, a showboater, and an egomaniac. "I wanted to hit that hard at the beginning," Comey said, "and be transparent with people about how I think about it, and then talk about how I've tried to deal with it." He added, "So much of what I've tried to do as a leader is guardrail around what I think my weaknesses are. Really important to me that I avoid the danger — which I think all humans have, but I know I have — of falling in love with my own view of things, my own righteousness."

This danger Comey warns against — falling in love with my own view of things — is the shadow side of the modern approach to life we call liberalism. Over the past 500 years in the West, the source of authority has shifted from the divinely appointed primacy of the church and the divine right of kings to the sovereign individual. The primacy of the individual in the political realm is known as democracy; in the economic realm, as capitalism; and in the religious realm, as Protestantism, which eventually gave birth to Unitarian Universalism, perhaps the purest religious expression of the primacy of the individual.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the freedom of individual expression, the right of individual conscience, and the sanctity of individual choices. Especially in a world where tyrants and thugs continually run roughshod over individual freedoms and rights, our commitment to the dignity of the individual is a signal virtue. It also happens

to be our Achilles heel as people of faith. Because of our singular focus on the individual, we were built from the ground up to fall in love with our own individual view of things.

What's wrong with that, you may ask? The chances are that what we see from our own point of view is either an obstructed view of the truth or a misleading view. It may even be a view that's not true at all. If you look back over the course of human history, people have often fervently believed things that turned out to be wrong. That's true even today, and it's inevitably true about some of your views — and mine as well. You and I can easily fall in love with our own cherry-picked set of facts, something many of us have accused other people of doing.

My goal this morning is not to identify where you and I have wrongly fallen in love, but rather to do what Comey tried to do — put guardrails around this signal weakness. I have two such guardrails in mind, which together can help diminish the risk that our views and convictions will run astray.

The first guardrail is humility. We need to remember that our ignorance of the world around us and of life itself is so profoundly vast that it's virtually complete. We don't even know enough to know what we don't know.

Once in a while, it's worth remembering how insignificant we are. We live near the edge of a galaxy of stars and planets called the Milky Way, located in a metropolis of galaxies known as the Virgo Supercluster. This supercluster is scattered across more than 100 million light years of space and contains nearly 30,000 galaxies and more than 500 trillion stars. There are 80 such superclusters within a billion light years of Earth. This accounts for only one-quarter of one percent of the universe.

Spring is a good time of year to look into the night sky. It reminds us that we are by no means the measure of all things. Remember that our own view of things should be fully ours, but also remember that each of us can view only one fleeting fragment of the truth. We would be wise to leaven our convictions with humility.

The second guardrail is curiosity. Whatever the topic, we would be wise to remember that there are almost certainly other people in the world who know more about it than we do. We should find out who they are, and add their knowledge to ours. Also, we should remember that the only way to view something fully is by looking at it from all possible perspectives. As individuals, we have only one perspective, which is why we need to add the perspectives of others to our own.

My favorite scene in the movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a conversation between a scientist and an alien from outer space. The year is 1951; and a spacecraft lands near the White House. As widespread panic ensues around the craft, out steps Klaatu, a handsome and soft-spoken Messiah figure, along with his companion Gort, a super-sized robot who emits deadly laser beams to confront human violence. After being wounded by an overzealous soldier, Klaatu winds up in the hospital, where he announces that he has a message of utmost importance for humankind, which he will deliver only if the leaders of all nations on earth agree to meet with him.

When Klaatu's request is rebuffed, he escapes from the hospital and eventually gains the confidence of an attractive widow and her resourceful son Billy. Sensing an extraordinary opportunity, Billy seeks out an Einstein-like scientist named Dr. Barnhardt, whom he regards as "the smartest man in the world."

When Klaatu first enters the scientist's empty study, he finds on the blackboard a complex but unsolved equation about time travel. He goes to the blackboard and makes a few revisions. Barnhardt arrives, glances at the equation, and realizes immediately that Klaatu must be the alien who has escaped. Intrigued by Klaatu's obvious intelligence, Barnhardt agrees to speak with him alone. "You have faith, Professor Barnhardt," Klaatu observes. Barnhardt responds, "It isn't faith that makes good science, Mr. Klaatu, it's curiosity. Sit down, please. There are several thousand questions I'd like to ask you."

I spent some time on Monday afternoon of this past week with Dan and Barbara Beshers, who offered the opening words for our service this morning. Dan and his family have been active members of this congregation since 1961, and today is the last Sunday he and Barbara will worship with us before they move to Illinois to live with Dan's son and his family. I hope they will return to All Souls to visit from time to time, but one never knows. Life is uncertain.

Dan is one of the most insatiably curious — and also one of the most brilliant — people I have ever known. He has been a professor of applied mathematics and applied physics at Columbia University for more than 50 years. I've had many in-person and email conversations with Dan over the years, and they always leave me feeling humbled by my ignorance yet deeply curious about this magnificent universe we call home.

I recall one conversation several years ago in which Dan, with typical patience and clarity, attempted to explain to me how and why metals bend. Some metals, like paper clips, stay bent when you bend them. Others, like putty knives, spring back to their original shape after they've been bent. Why does one group of atoms remember — my word, not Dan's — how they were related to all the atoms around them at some point in the past, while others don't remember? If you want to know the answer to this question, ask Dan during Coffee Hour.

Dan's latest scientific paper, by the way, which he published last December at the age of 89 in the journal, *Scientific Reports*, is titled "Re-entrant spin glass transitions: new insights from acoustic absorption by domain walls." I know that the paper describes an important advance in knowledge of crystal structures, because Dan told me it does. Beyond that, you'll need to ask Dan.

On Monday, Dan told me he wanted to discuss how the idea of human imperfection, as described in the biblical account of the fall of humanity, might relate to the scientific idea of emergence. Perhaps, Dan mused, we as human beings are able to grow and develop because, and only because, we are imperfect.

Curiosity makes good science, and it also makes good faith. We are here this morning because we have several thousand questions about the meaning and purpose of

life. We invite our Coming of Age students to present credo statements each year not because they have all the answers, but because they are typically better at asking questions. They have voracious curiosity — the kind that makes good faith.

My hope for them and for all of us is that we will keep asking questions. Our openness to the wisdom of others will help keep us humble; our openness to the insights of others will help keep us curious. With these guardrails in place, we will better be able to avoid falling in love with their own view of things.

James Comey concludes his author's preface by saying, "I learned from those around me and tried to pass on to those I worked with that there is a higher loyalty in all of our lives — not to a person, not to a party, not to a group. The higher loyalty is to lasting values, most important, the truth."