

WIDER THAN THE SKY

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Yesterday in Seoul, South Korea, Google's AlphaGo computer program won a third straight victory over Lee Sedol, the world's second-best player of the Chinese board game Go. AlphaGo has thus won the best-of-five match, though Sedol bounced back today to win game four. This achievement by Google's DeepMind and AlphaGo represents a significant advance in artificial intelligence — and it came much faster than expected.

The 2,500-year-old game of Go, played on a 19 x 19 grid using black and white stones to defend and capture territory, has relatively few rules. But it requires extraordinary strategic intuition and imagination. It's considered a much more complex game than chess, which is why it has proven so difficult for even the world's best programmers to master. After all, how do you program intuition into a computer?

The most astonishing moment in the match, according to people who know about such things, came during the second game. As Gideon Litchfield recounts on the website Quartz, a pivotal move by AlphaGo “was so unexpected, so at odds with 2,500 years of Go history and wisdom, that some thought it must be a glitch.” It wasn't. What observers saw was the computer equivalent of intuition — but an intuition that's not of the human kind. “It's not a human move,” they said.

Litchfield goes on to say: “A classic fear about [artificial intelligence] is that the machines we build to serve us will destroy us instead, not because they become sentient and malicious, but because they devise unforeseen and catastrophic ways to reach the goals we set for them. Worse, if they *do* become sentient and malicious, then — like Ava, the android in the movie *Ex Machina* — we may not even realize it until it's too late, because the way they think will be unrecognizable to us.”

Given the human tendency to create first and ask questions later, it's worth taking seriously what then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once called the unknown unknowns. It's hard to predict what an artificially-intelligent entity will do if it no longer thinks like us. Because we won't be able to foresee its actions, we will be unable to defend ourselves against a potential catastrophe.

The most serious problems we face today, however, aren't unknown unknowns. Some of the problems may be catastrophic, either for individuals, or for communities, or for our planet as a whole, but they are not unforeseen problems. We knew about them in advance. We could have foreseen the catastrophe.

Climate change provides one case in point. It was 2° below zero in Central Park on Valentine's Day, a record low for the date. Less than a month later, it was 79° in

Central Park on Thursday, a record high for the date. Scientists have been telling us for decades that weather patterns would become more variable and more extreme as we pumped more and more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Climate change deniers notwithstanding, these changing weather patterns — shrinking ice packs, rising oceans, expanding droughts, escalating CO2 levels — have long been known unknowns. We didn't know exactly when or how these things would happen, but we could foresee for half a century that they eventually would.

In much the same way, the political unrest that is roiling our nation today also stems from known unknowns. For decades, the economic policies of the New Deal barred communities of color from receiving wealth-building housing benefits that were freely made available to whites. The War on Drugs sent militarized police into communities of color and made the mass incarceration of black men into a highly profitable business. Especially in the South, efforts to suppress voting by people of color continue to marginalize their political influence. We didn't know exactly when or how Black Lives Matter would emerge, or even what it would be called, but we could foresee that it would happen.

Nor did we know exactly when Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders would emerge, or what their names would be, but we could foresee that they would eventually show up. Trump is disproportionately supported by older people who are poorly educated, and Sanders is disproportionately supported by younger people who are well-educated. Among other things, both groups are responding to the consequences of the structural inequality that has been built into our economy for decades.

The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis has calculated that the real income of demographically-defined middle-class households in the US has fallen from \$54,000 in 1989 to \$45,000 in 2013. In different ways, Trump and Sanders both tap into the anger of people whose chances of prosperity have slipped away — or may never come.

For her part, Senator Hillary Clinton's strongest headwinds arguably come from her long-standing and close ties to Wall Street. And the strongest headwinds for Senators Rubio and Cruz arguably come from their anointment by the Republican National Committee as establishment candidates. Both the RNC and Wall Street, while they differ on many social and financial particulars of governance, are part of the same system — the system that has delivered unprecedented wealth to some at the top, while leaving many at the bottom behind. The ones in the middle have been falling, and they know it. They are understandably afraid, and their fear has now metastasized into anger. Enter Donald Trump from stage right and Bernie Sanders from stage left.

Almost everyone, myself included, underestimated the staying power of both Trump and Sanders. We tend to focus on Trump's lack of a coherent political vision. He can move, as Nicholas Kristof has observed, from isolationism to imperialism within the bounds of a single sentence. And we tend to focus on Sanders' idealism — his apparent belief that we can dry-dock the American economy and political system in the middle of the ocean and build a completely different vessel.

Maybe we should have been looking at the French Revolution for clues to our current situation. Maybe we should have been watching the movie *Network*, which won four Academy Awards in 1976. Ostensibly about the television industry, the movie ends up indicting then-contemporary American culture for being, in the words of one character, “indifferent to suffering [and] insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality.”

In response, a network anchor who has been fired because of declining ratings launches into an on-air diatribe. He persuades viewers to open their windows and shout, “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore.”

In our nation today, lots of people are as mad as hell. And they’re hoping against hope that they’re not going to have to take it anymore. If we had been paying attention, we would have seen this coming.

Our current troubles, whether in the realm of environmental justice, racial justice, or economic justice, are not the unintended consequences of unknown unknowns. They are the result of intelligent design — the knowledgeable decisions of clever human beings who, for the most part, had these structural outcomes in mind, and thus could have foreseen the eventual blowback. When it comes to public policy, it turns out that what you have in mind matters a lot.

And that’s the burden I bear as a spiritual leader and the responsibility we share as members of this religious community. Our central task as a congregation isn’t to define the particulars of public policy, though we certainly should call out injustice when we see it. Rather, our central task is to remind each other of what we should have in mind when we seek justice in our community, our nation, and our world. Spiritual practice, whether individual or collective, seeks to ensure that we have the right things in mind.

In my view at least, the spiritual insight that defines our faith tradition is this: my experience as an individual is made possible by my relationships to everyone and everything else. Existence entails relationships. If the relationships that make my life possible, to other people, to the sources of my sustenance, and to the rest of the natural world, are strong and constructive, then life is good — good for me and good for the people and world around me. If these relationships are diminished or destructive, then life is either meaningless or unbearable.

Taken together, the relationships that make up our lives ultimately connect us to everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible. As many of you know, this transcendent experience of everything is what I call the experience of the divine — the experience of God.

The work of staying connected to everyone and everything else, of keeping them in mind, is divine work. The celebrated American poet Emily Dickinson makes this point in her poem that served as our reading for the morning. She writes:

The Brain — is wider than the Sky —
For — put them side by side —
The one the other will contain
With ease — and You — beside —

The Brain is deeper than the sea —
For — hold them — Blue to Blue —
The one the other will absorb --
As Sponges — Buckets — do —

The Brain is just the weight of God —
For — Heft them — Pound for Pound —
And they will differ — if they do —
As Syllable from Sound —

On these terms, Google's AlphaGo computer program may be remarkable for its ability to play Go, but it pales in comparison to the human brain in most other ways. Not only can the human brain contain the vast breadth of the sky, and not only can it absorb the vast depths of the sea, it also has the capacity, at the same time, to hold in its experience the very person who is containing and absorbing everything else. This is a remarkable ability — an astonishing accomplishment. But it pales in comparison with the capability that Dickinson describes next.

In the final stanza of her poem, Dickinson turns to the question of how the human brain is related to the divine. If you hold God in one hand and the brain in the other, she says, you will discover that, pound for pound, they weigh the same. Yet they seem nonetheless to differ — and the form that difference takes has to do with language. While God utters sounds through nature, she says, human beings utter sounds that end up as language, voiced in syllables. Since intelligent syllables can communicate vastly better than unintelligible sounds, Dickinson ends up making the claim that our power in this world as human beings exceeds even the power of God.

In her book about Dickinson's poetry, the Harvard scholar Helen Vendler puts it this way: "This boast — that Syllables are better than Sounds, and that therefore the Brain is superior to God — presumes a Divinity who is exceeded in power by Humanity."

For my part, I would put Dickinson's point somewhat differently, and it's what we need to keep in mind as we work to create justice. The active presence of the divine in this world takes human form. If the vision of the divine is to appear in this world, our eyes must see it. If the voice of the divine is to be heard in this world, our voices must speak it. If the work of the divine is to be done in this world, our hands must do it.

As your minister, I urge you to take not only your own needs and aspirations into account as you decide whom to support for president of the United States, but also the needs and aspirations of everyone and everything else. Keep them in mind.

Along the way, use your mind to learn what is true, and then declare it. Use your mind to assess what is broken, and then repair it. Use your mind to determine who's been left out, and then pull them in. Use your mind to decide who's been left behind, and then help them catch up.

Your mind is wider than the sky, and your sense of connection should be wider than the sky as well. Your mind is deeper than the sea, and your sense of compassion should be deeper than the sea as well. Your calling is to use your divine intuition to foresee what's possible.