

“Are You an April Fool Like Me?”
The Unitarian Church of Lincoln
April 3, 2016

Foolproof systems do not take into account the ingenuity of fools.
- Gene Brown

Gathering of the Community

Ringling of Bell

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude: “Improvisation #1” – Nick Vaccaro

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

Opening words: from Jelaluddin Rumi

Hymn: “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes”

Time for all ages

Story: “Where Do Babies Come From?”

Children’s Song: “Where Do We Come From?”

Deepening

Reading: The Jester Tradition

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Returning to Community: the work of the people

Sharing of Joys and Sorrows

Meditation

Musical Interlude

Integration and Release

Closing Hymn: “Do Your Ears Hang Low?”

Do your ears hang low? Do they wobble to and fro?
Can you tie them in a knot? Can you tie them in a bow?
Can you throw them over your shoulder
like a continental soldier?
Do your ears hang low?

Closing Words: Faithful Fools Street Ministry

Mission Statement

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

Let us kindle a flame for the fool,
for the fool who cannot avoid speaking truth,
even to the most powerful who wish not to hear;
for the fool who knows what’s within may inform what is
without;
for the fool who loves when all others cannot find it in their
hearts;
Let us kindle a flame for the fools
whose wisdom pricks at us long after they are gone.

Opening words: from Jelaluddin Rumi

Come, come, whoever you are,
wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
ours is no caravan of despair,
though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times,
come, yet again, come.

Hymn: “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes”

Head and shoulders, knees and toes,

knees and toes – 2 X
Eyes and ears and mouth and nose
Head and shoulders, knees and toes,
knees and toes.

Time for all ages

Story: “Where Do Babies Come From?”

Children’s Song: “Where Do We Come From?”

Deepening

Reading: The Jester Tradition

The fool was not a new character on stage. Indeed, a tradition of [jesters](#) had long prevailed in aristocratic courts. The jester, however, was a dynamic and changing part of royal entertainment. Shakespeare both borrowed from the new motif of the jester and contributed to its rethinking. Whereas the jester of old often regaled his audience with forms of clowning – tumbling, juggling, stumbling, and the like – Shakespeare's fool, in sync with Shakespeare's revolutionary ideas about theatre, began to depart from a simple way of representation. Like other characters, the fool began to speak outside of the narrow confines of exemplary morality, to address themes of love, psychic turmoil, and all of the innumerable themes that arise in Shakespeare, and indeed, modern theater.

In literature, the jester is symbolic of common sense and of honesty, notably in [King Lear](#), the court jester is a character used for insight and advice on the part of the monarch, taking advantage of his license to mock and speak freely to dispense frank observations and highlight the folly of his monarch. This presents a clashing irony as a "greater" man could dispense the same advice and find himself being detained in the dungeons or even executed. Only as the lowliest member of the court can the jester be the monarch's

most useful adviser. (Wikipedia, Fools)

Musical Interlude:

Sermon: “Are You an April Fool Like Me?”

Random thought: I sometimes wonder if the manufacturers of foolproof items keep a fool or two on their payroll to test things.

- Alan Coren

So here we are, together, just two days after April Fools’

Day. I have come to confess I *am* an April Fool, in more ways than one, as you will soon find out. I was actually born in April of 1945. My mother told me often that I was late to be born, and I would be late to my own death. Some of you may concur. She also reminded me more than once that the day after I was born Hitler died in his bunker. She never did explain how those two events fit together. I shall get to another way I am an April Fool soon enough.

Still, I love this day, as spring inundates us with sun and blossoms, and we play practical jokes on one another trying to make the “other” out to be a fool. This is a day to lighten

up the mood. It has been a rough year for many of you, and a bit of thoughtful laughter would not hurt any of us.

I hope to fill your minds with a bit more information as well, as we explore the various roles fools play in different cultures, theater, and literature. I also offer an insight into the Unitarian Universalist Faithful Fools and their street ministry in the San Francisco tenderloin. So, I suppose this sermon could be called “filling folly from a faithful fool.”

Let us begin with some descriptions of fools through history and various cultures:

A **jester**, **joker**, **jokester**, **fool**, **wit-cracker**, **prankster**, or **buffoon** was a person employed to tell jokes and provide general entertainment, typically for a European **monarch**. Jesters are stereotypically thought to have worn brightly colored clothes and eccentric hats in a **motley** pattern. Their hats were especially distinctive; typically made of cloth, they were floppy with three points, each of which had a **jingle bell** at the end. The three points of the hat represent donkey's ears and nose and tail worn by jesters in earlier times. Other things distinctive about the jester were his laughter and his mock **sceptre**, known as a "bauble" or **marotte**. The root of the word "fool" is from the Latin *follis*, which means "bag of wind" or that which contains air or breath.

I acknowledge being a wind-bag at times. Do any of you?

Anyway. . .

in [Tarot](#), "[The Fool](#)" is the first card of the [Major Arcana](#). The tarot depiction of the Fool includes a man (or less often, a woman) [juggling](#) unconcernedly or otherwise distracted, with a dog (sometimes cat) at his heels. The fool is in the act of unknowingly walking off the edge of a cliff, precipice or other high place. Another Tarot character is [Death](#). In the Middle Ages, Death is often shown in Jester's garb because "The last laugh is reserved for death." Also, Death humbles everyone just as jesters make fun of everyone regardless of standing.

Laurie R. King introduced me to the depth of insight possible

in the Fool as a character in her mystery novel, *To Play the*

Fool. She sagely observes:

Of course, the Fool is a product of the feudal system. He (usually he) exists to guarantee that an absolute ruler has at least one person offering criticism. The Fool's job is to remind the king that he is not God.

It is, as one might expect, a dangerous position. Kings do not always appreciate the voice of unreason, the introduction of doubt into absolute surety, the presence of chaos injected in a concretized society. Kings tend to become vexed, and to remove the heads of their critics. . .

If the Fool's task of pointing out the tarnish on the crown depends on the presence of a crown, what does he do when all the world is crowned? Who plays the fool in a society of

kings, when none of us have absolute power? That is the question around which I shaped Brother Erasmus. One of the distinct characteristics of my particular Fool is that he speaks in the words of others. When asked a question, Erasmus retrieves a quote from the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare, or a number of other sources and applies it to the situation at hand.

When I first encountered my foster daughter, her most important communications were made in popular song lyrics or poetic images. This communication method is called parataxic communication, as opposed to direct communication, which is syntactic. It is a good way to avoid full responsibility for what one says, which may allow one to keep her head.

Through history, Fools were quite important:

In ancient times courts employed fools and by the Middle Ages the jester was a familiar figure. In Renaissance times, aristocratic households in Britain employed licensed fools or jesters, who sometimes dressed as other servants were dressed, but generally wore a motley (i.e. parti-coloured) coat, hood with ass's (i.e. donkey) ears or a red-flannel coxcomb and bells. Regarded as

pets or mascots, they served not simply to amuse but to criticise their master or mistress and their guests. [Queen Elizabeth](#) (reigned 1558-1603) is said to have rebuked one of her fools for being insufficiently severe with her. Excessive behaviour, however, could lead to a fool being whipped, as Lear threatens to whip his fool.[1]

As already noted by Laurie R. King, being a Fool has its dangerous side.

Various scholars have broken Fools into two types. . .

those of the **natural fool** type and those of the **licensed fool** type. Whereas the natural fool was seen as innately nit-witted, moronic, or mad, the licensed fool was given leeway by permission of the court. In other words, both were excused, to some extent, for their behavior, the first because he "couldn't help it," and the second by decree.

Lest we think that Fools are only found in northern European culture, consider Coyote or the trickster:

In [mythology](#), and in the study of [folklore](#) and [religion](#), a **trickster** is a [god](#), [goddess](#), [spirit](#), [man](#), [woman](#), or [anthropomorphic](#) animal who plays tricks or otherwise disobeys normal rules and conventional behavior. It is suggested by [Hansen \(2001\)](#) that the term "Trickster" was probably first used in this context by [Daniel G. Brinton](#) in 1885.

The trickster deity breaks the rules of the gods or nature,

sometimes maliciously (for example, [Loki](#)) but usually, albeit unintentionally, with ultimately positive effects. Often, the bending/breaking of rules takes the form of tricks (e.g. [Eris](#)) or thievery. Tricksters can be [cunning](#) or foolish or both; they are often funny even when considered sacred or performing important cultural tasks. An example of this is the sacred [Iktomi](#), whose role is to play tricks and games and by doing so raises awareness and acts as an equalizer

In many cultures, (as may be seen in [Greek](#), [Norse](#), or [Slavic](#) folktales, along with [Native American/First Nations](#) lore), the trickster and the [culture hero](#) are often combined. To illustrate: [Prometheus](#), in [Greek mythology](#), stole [fire](#) from the gods to give to humans. He is more of a culture hero than a trickster. In many Native American and First Nations mythologies, the [coyote](#) ([Southwestern United States](#)) or [raven](#) ([Pacific Northwest](#), coastal [British Columbia](#), [Alaska](#) and [Russian Far East](#)) stole fire from the gods ([stars](#), [moon](#), and/or [sun](#)) and are more tricksters than culture heroes. This is primarily because of other stories involving these spirits: Prometheus was a [Titan](#), whereas the [Coyote spirit](#) and [Raven spirit](#) are usually seen as jokesters and pranksters. [Examples of Tricksters in the world mythologies are given by Hansen \(2001\), who lists Mercurius in Roman mythology, Hermes in Greek mythology, Eshu in Yoruba mythology and Wakdjunga in Winnebago mythology as examples of the Trickster archetype. Hansen makes the interesting observation that the Trickster is nearly always a male figure.](#)

Frequently the Trickster figure exhibits gender and [form](#) variability, changing gender roles and even occasionally engaging in [same-sex practices](#). Such figures appear in Native American and First Nations mythologies, where they are said to have a [two-spirit](#) nature. Loki, the Norse trickster, also exhibits gender variability, in one case even becoming

pregnant; interestingly, he shares the ability to change genders with [Odin](#), the chief Norse deity who also possesses many characteristics of the Trickster.

My personal exposure to the whole trickster/Coyote symbol began when I studied Native American cultures and learned about the Heyoka, the Thunderbird archetype. This is a trickster who is required by a dream of a Thunderbird to be a contrarian, often wearing her or his clothes backwards, teasing others unmercifully about their weaknesses, and generally forcing people to view themselves with more awareness. Oddly, I had a vivid dream of a Thunderbird when I was about eleven years old. Naww . . . it couldn't be.

Let me close with a description of the UU Faithful Fools:

Sister Carmen Barsody, a Franciscan Sister of Little Falls, Minnesota who spent several years living among the poor in the barrios of Managua, Nicaragua and The Reverend Kay Jorgensen, a Unitarian Universalist minister who felt called to work among the residents of the Tenderloin as a volunteer with the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, met in 1997 and found that although they came from very different religious backgrounds, their

theology about working with the poor and homeless was very similar. Together, they founded the Faithful Fools street ministry.

The "Fools" in their name refers to the "fool" of medieval times who was the truth teller in the king's court, the one on the edge of society who assists others in crossing the boundaries a society creates. The "fool" was also inspired by the street theater that Rev. Jorgensen and others in the organization use for creative public witness about issues that affect residents of the Tenderloin District and other impoverished areas of the world. Her clown persona, Ocard, once led a procession of homeless residents to City Hall to protest a ban on shopping carts on the city streets. St. Francis of Assisi often is referred to as a "Fool of God," one who challenged and changed the church and society in the feudal system of Italy by living and working with the lepers who were forced to live outside of the city walls.

The Roman Catholic Church at one time was very torn between canonizing him and excommunicating him, as they thought he was decidedly feeble minded and possibly insane. Canonization won by a slim majority, and now we have a pope who has taken his name to signify his humility, but I digress. . .

The "Faithful" part of their name refers to their belief in the spiritual power of experienced relationship between those who are privileged and those who are impoverished. In order to dismantle the oppressions in our society, we need to break through our separateness—whether based on identity, belief, or economic situation—and then discern what connects us. They call their street ministry a "ministry of presence that acknowledges each human's incredible worth."

Well, whether wise or foolish, natural or licensed, I genuinely hope you leave this place today a bit refreshed by these reflections on April Fools. Please, lighten up and enlighten up.

Remember: "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

— William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

At least for today, Let us embrace our fool persona and "enlighten up."

With respect, with responsibility, and with relish for the process.

So Be It! Blessed Be!

Offering and Offertory:

Returning to Community: the work of the people
Sharing of Joys and Sorrows
Meditation

Integration and Release

Closing Hymn: “Do Your Ears Hang Low?”

Do your ears hang low? Do they wobble to and fro?
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Closing Words: Faithful Fools Street Ministry

Mission Statement

We are called to a ministry of presence that acknowledges each human’s incredible worth.

Aware of our judgments, we seek to meet people where they are through the arts, education, advocacy and accompaniment.

We participate in shattering myths about those living in poverty, seeing the light, courage, intelligence, strength and creativity of the people we encounter.

We discover on the streets our common humanity, through which celebration, community, and healing occur.