

# FROM THE CAGE OF DESIRE, A PROPHECY OF SATISFACTION

A sermon by Jason Seymour,  
delivered at Unity Church-Unitarian (St. Paul), 10/24/10

What is desire? Are all desires the same? Are some more basic -- more natural -- than others? Does it matter? I believe it does matter. And I will tell you why I think it matters, to individuals and to religious communities.

But first, I want to introduce some terminology, with the hope that these three concepts might echo and reverberate beneath the many notes of history and theory that will sound today. In music, we speak of pedal tones. Pedal tones are low, sustained notes that lie beneath the delicate dance of melody and harmonies. Such is my hope for these three ideas in the course of our discussion this morning, that they may ground our conversation and give us a common structure.

The first pedal tone is the idea of a cage. Surely, all of us know what a cage is: a prison, a container in which things that would be free are locked away. This is usually done to protect some thing, or some way of living, that exists outside of the cage, to protect it from the dangerous disruption trapped within. In the social sciences, the most famous use of the image of a cage is found in the work of German sociologist Max Weber. In his seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber described as an "iron cage" those problems that he saw as endemic to modern capitalism: a lack of personal autonomy, an over-valuing of rational, calculative thought (as opposed to emotion or morality), and an increasing reliance on bureaucracy.

Considered at the level of the individual, Weber's thesis implies that a cage of ideology is always to some extent self-imposed, or at least self-approved. As individuals, we must *become* caged; caged is not our natural state. And to varying degrees, we are each usually somewhat complicit in the design of our own cages. Modern capitalism, therefore, shapes and limits our imaginations as consumers; this limitation is what I mean by a cage.<sup>1</sup>

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The second pedal tone is that of desire. In 1906, a merchant named John Wanamaker described this country as a "Land of Desire."<sup>2</sup> He was pre-figuring what would be a century-long infatuation with desire, a search for the latent, primal urges that motivate and compel the behavior of individuals in society. Business leaders, political figures, celebrities, academics, even military

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<sup>1</sup> Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams considers Weber in "The Protestant Ethic and Society: Max Weber," in: *On Being Human Religiously* (1976), p. 181. Also, "From Cage to Covenant," available in: Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers* (1986), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire* (1993), p. 3

strategists and dictators... everyone was fascinated with desire -- still is! -- especially with its predictive and manipulative promises. One Lehman Brothers executive in the 1930s remarked:

"We must shift America from a needs- to a desires-culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. [...] Man's desires must overshadow his needs."<sup>3</sup>

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The third and final pedal tone was first sounded in a reading earlier in this service: "a prophecy of satisfaction." This idea comes from an 1853 sermon by Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker. You have already heard the reading, but I would like to again emphasize the last two lines. They are:

"..it is a part of the Divine plan for the world, for each natural desire has the means to satisfy it put somewhere in the universe, and there is a mutual attraction between the two, which at last must meet. Natural desire is the prophecy of satisfaction."<sup>4</sup>

This statement is radical, and it requires some unpacking. Many of us know of Parker's famous line about the arc of the universe bending toward justice;<sup>5</sup> it was used by Martin Luther King, Jr.,<sup>6</sup> and it gets considerable airtime in our congregations. Well, the prophecy of satisfaction fits right into the arc. Parker's ethic suggests that there are some transcendental desires placed deep within each individual humans, natural desires that are in keeping with the design and arc of the universe. To speak of these natural desires, and to work for their fruition, is to cry out a prophecy that will eventually be satisfied: a prophecy of satisfaction.

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So, with our pedal tones sounding, our foundation laid beneath us, let us continue with the melody..

I can think of no task more important for organized religion than that of encouraging and supporting the pursuit of an authentic life. Of course, the concept of authenticity has myriad interpretations, and the still small voice within speaks differently to each individual. *But is is the speaking for which we stand*, not what is said. This is the essence of liberal religion, and the core of Universalism. Consider Universalist minister Forrest Church's suggestion of the cathedral of the world, that each of us is a brilliant and colorful pane illuminated, backlit, by a glowing and divine Love.<sup>7</sup> Well, if we accept Church's theological poetry, then it follows that polishing our panes (and here I mean the both P-A-N-E and P-A-I-N), that polishing our panes is the surest way to let the light of Truth, the light of Love, shine through us unfettered, casting the world in a beautiful mosaic

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Mazer, quoted in: *Century of the Self* (BBC documentary, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Parker, Theodore. "Of Conscious Religion as a Source of Joy", available in: Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion* (2009), p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Parker. "Of Justice and the Conscience" (1853), available in: Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion* (2009), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther. From a 1961 speech to the AFL-CIO, reproduced in: King, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

<sup>7</sup> See Church's *Cathedral of the World* (2008)

of personality and light. And so, in my mind, there is no theological task more important, more primary -- and here the Transcendentalists would certainly agree! -- than that of discerning, and acting from, one's authentic self. Our selves are each unique and necessary -- the mosaic is incomplete without any one -- and we share a basic animating power from which we discern purpose and direction.

This discernment is not a one-time phenomenon, to be sure; it must happen with every breath. A constant return to the questions that motivate us, a constant interrogation of the fears that keep us divided, a constant vigilance of our own complicity in designing our cage. This is what is required for our own radiance.

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But the cultural forces of desire are marshaled against the development of personal authenticity, of independence and of free thought. It has been this way as long as humans have craved power over one another. And it continues this way today. (I'm going to continue with a brief history of marketed desire, and I encourage you to mark those threads in your mind that you see in effect today.)

The flood of marketed desire that we experience daily -- in advertising, in the press, in political messages -- began in this country at the turn of the twentieth century. The new machinery of the industrial revolution had dramatically increased productive capacity, and for the first time, producers of goods were consistently able to out-produce demand. One *New York Times* article at the time called it "need saturation;" industry could now produce in a few months what would satisfy demand over a full year.

This worried the captains of industry, who saw idle capacity as wasted money and feared a radicalized working class. They sought new ways to entice people's needs and spending. Political leaders feared the mob of a dissatisfied public, and sought new ways to pacify and defang the masses, and entrench their own appeal.

Academic institutions reflected what was to be a cultural shift. At Harvard, in 1914, a business course called "Economic Resources in the United States" was renamed simply, "Marketing."

Concurrently, the field of psychoanalysis was experiencing its formation in the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud's main thrust was his suggestion that there are hidden, unconscious desires that drive individuals. His work would be used to explain the discontent of the masses of the Russian Revolution and the frenzied stock crash of 1929. The implied warning: satisfy the public's desires or face certain instability, violence and chaos.

Freud's American nephew, Edward Bernays, is today often referred to as the progenitor of the public relations industry. Using his uncle's discovery of the unconscious, Bernays began crafting new marketing messages based not upon functionality or product attributes, but upon how whatever he was selling could indulge a person's ego, or make them feel good about themselves. For example, he would sell a screwdriver not by talking about its effectiveness at driving screws but by showing or describing how a person could feel by using it. For example: helpful, productive, handy, or "more of a man".

By the late 1920's, thanks largely to the work of Bernays and company, the demand problem was nearly solved. People were wanting things; they yearned for products that expressed their personality. Industry was kept busy and the masses were pacified by the consistent manufacture and delivery of consumer desires. In 1927, one journalist wrote: "A change has come over our democracy. It is called Consumptionism. The American citizens' first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer." One year later, President Hoover addressed leaders of industry: "You have taken over the job of creating desire and have transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines, machines which have become the key to economic progress." "By advertising and other promotional devices... we have a boundless field before us; that there are new wants which will make way endlessly for newer wants, as fast as they are satisfied."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the cage of desire, in its crude initial form, was constructed... with the willing, often eager participation of the American consuming public.

Freud was dead by the time of World War II, but his theories about the ego and the unconscious had taken hold in the halls of power. In the 1950's, the CIA dumped millions of dollars into psychology departments at universities across the nation, and Bernays was called in to advise Eisenhower (not the first time he had advised a President). His suggestion about the rising Communist threat: do not to reduce the public's fear; instead, encourage and manipulate it. An example: Bernays provided the communications strategy that allowed the U.S. to protect its economic interests in Guatemala by deposing a legally elected president in the name of democracy and anti-Communism. Bernays sincerely believed in this process, too; he legitimated it, calling it "the engineering of consent." His daughter spoke of him years later: "What my father understood about groups is that they are malleable. And that you can tap into their deepest desires or their deepest fears and use that to your own purposes. I don't think he felt that all those publics out there had reliable judgment; that they very easily might vote for the wrong man or want the wrong thing, so that they had to be guided from above."<sup>9</sup>

Marketing and public relations continued in this vain largely until the mid-1960's, when things began to change. The 1962 suicide of Marilyn Monroe cast public doubt upon a social order, and a psychological treatment, that demanded conformity to a "normal" American life. In the academies, cultural critics were establishing strongholds. The Frankfurt School used Marx's theories to examine the production of culture, in particular how the intentional production of false consciousness could contribute to a society's ongoing domination. Freud's theories evolved into, and were criticized by, subjectivist and expressionist theories like those of Abraham Maslow, Karen Horney, and Wilhelm Reich. Counter-cultural student movements swelled. The sexual revolution reminded people of the sensuality of their bodies, while bebop and rock-n-roll music shook people, stirred them from their assigned seats. The Vietnam War, the anti-war movement and the Civil Rights Movement challenged preferential assumptions and questioned society's moral stance.

Martin Luther King, in 1967, said: "Modern psychology has a word that is used probably more than any other word in psychology; it is the word maladjusted. It is the ringing cry of modern child

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<sup>8</sup> *Century of the Self*; for more on Hoover and consumer capitalism, see Leach, p. 352-358.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Bernays, interviewed for *Century of the Self*

psychology, maladjusted. Now of course we all want to live the well adjusted life... But... I would like to say to you today in a very honest manner that there are some things in our society, and some things in our world, to which I am proud to be maladjusted and I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted to these things until the good society is realized."<sup>10</sup>

Marketed desire was far from defeated, but the game was definitely changing. People had become critical of the establishment, of any establishment. They no longer saw conformity as therapeutic; conformity repressed exactly what needed to be set free. Unhappiness did not arise out of an inability to repress one's inner urges; unhappiness was, in fact, caused, and made worse, by the repression that was being pushed as the cure.

Thus, the marketing atmosphere that emerged from the 60's had become one of feeding and indulging desires; the era of merely repressing or controlling desires was at an end. New production efficiencies, brought on by computerized machinery, embraced the challenge posed by indulging spontaneous desires. No longer would demand need to be twisted and adapted to fit large production runs of static goods. Instead, smaller runs were possible, enabling the indulgence of nearly any desire, no matter how temporary or fleeting or unique. Focus groups, another legacy of Freud, became all the rage as market researchers who once sought consumers' interest in pre-existing products now probed the inner depths of consumers to find out just what they thought they needed to make them feel more like themselves.

This gave the illusion of greater liberation, of greater personal expression, through a diverse multitude of products. But I ask you, is it truly freedom? Or is it the same passive reactivity, with simply more choices to choose from? Our modern productive capacity delivers the illusion of limitless choices, but they are never truly our own, are they? Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor and current professor at the University of California at Berkeley, suggests that the real effect of this turn toward individualism is that everything in the world, all moral judgement, can now be viewed legitimately through a lens of personal satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

This individualist turn infects political races today like some form of ideological kudzu: lifestyle concerns achieving priority over legislative issues. A now-famous example: Dick Morris, working for Bill Clinton, specifically targeted suburban swing voters, polling them on issues of identity and personal preference. The result was a series of brief appearances by Clinton that reflected constituents' identities back to them via clothing and catch phrases. The strategy worked. Robert Reich's take: "[T]he people who ultimately got to the president, shared the president's mind, were those who viewed the voters as just a collection of individual desires that had to be catered to and pandered to. It suggests that democracy is nothing more, and should be nothing, more than pandering to these un-thought-about, very primitive desires. Primitive in the sense that they are not even necessarily conscious, just what people want in terms of satisfying themselves."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther. Speech given at Western Michigan University (12/8/63), available online: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/archives/mlk/transcription.html>

<sup>11</sup> Robert Reich, interviewed for *Century of the Self*

<sup>12</sup> Robert Reich, interviewed for *Century of the Self*

This emphasis on shallow personal satisfaction is foolish at best, criminal and manipulative at worst, in that it rarely ever makes even an effort to plumb the depths of our true longing, giving us instead a multitude of false gods to follow home. Sometimes we are hoodwinked by false pretenses. Other times, however, we know false gods for what they are, and yet we are simply too scared or too comfortable to disrupt this system, this expansive history that informs our identity; we stand frozen in view of our investments, despite our ongoing pain. We unwittingly rationalize the consistent denial of compassion in the name of personal satisfaction. We grant permission for selfishness because someone somewhere told us that it this is the way it has always been done; it is inherent in the original design, in *our* original design.

Weber and so many others were right; this question of “what is valuable,” is a question with both economic and religious dimensions. Why religious? Because it speaks of human nature. Because it speaks of what constitutes a good life. Because it effects the growth of healthy, grounded individuals. Because selfishness does not deliver the kind of relationships which are the deep yearnings, the longings, of the human heart. Because false consciousness is just that. Because “that which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character.” And because, quite simply, discernment hurts.

The darkness around us is deep indeed, and the practice of living authentically can be a painful and tiring process. This is especially true in a society in which so many voices clamor for your attention, for your desire. There are voices about appearances, about vocation, about race and gender and sexuality; there are voices who would pretend to know what you need based upon the toothpaste you prefer, or the person who received your last gubernatorial vote, or the color of your skin, or how long you have been out of work. The chorus of identity -- of consumption of identity -- grows steadily louder; the noise, at times, can be deafening. And the time and space for healing, for discernment, for listening to our inner voice, always seems most fleeting when we need it most.

What I am proposing this morning, in light of the historical and present forms of marketed desire, is that religious community -- our religious community -- is a place where we are called to explore our natural desires as individuals, to organize for their common pursuit, and to find mutual support in our daily struggles for authenticity.

The prevalence of marketed desire simply makes more valuable, and more necessary, a kind of relationship that is free of coercion, that elevates compassion beyond personal identity and common good above individualism. A kind of bond that discerns natural desires from marketed desires, a kind of company that will stand with you, maladjusted still to the cages that remain. We can be a crucible for one another's endless formation, if only we are brave enough to remain awake ourselves.

Rob spoke last week about the paradox of giving up ideas of the self in order to develop an enduring sense of self. This is spot on, and of paramount importance in an age of marketed desire. The message of the life of Jesus was to find life, to lose life, and to find life again. We need not die to accomplish the truth of this teaching, the renewal of an uncaged self, capable of deep compassion in the face of darkness and Great Mystery. As we move slowly into our next monthly worship theme of “covenant”, I hope that you will wonder with me: “What kind of bond helps

people find and maintain not only their balance, but also their authenticity? How can we be of help to one another, and to the world, in the face of marketed desire and coercion?"

My wish for each of you this day is to be ever so much more than a happiness machine. Find a stillness, and hold a stillness. Yes, a stillness away from marketed desire and the noisy parade of products and people who claim that you need them to be truly you. But even more. Find a stillness within. Hold it. If not for yourself -- if you've already got it all figured out -- then hold a stillness for your neighbor, for someone who needs that space. There are many among us.

Conjure a stillness that knows no path. A stillness that knows no desire. A stillness that cannot ever be caged.

That stillness, your stillness, our stillness, is a natural desire, one of the few of which I am myself certain. That stillness is itself both prophecy and deliverance. (Satisfaction... is guaranteed.)

May you each find and hold stillness, and just as often may you be found and held.

May it be so... and Amen.