

CREATIVE STUPIDITY

(01/19/2025)

“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Mark 1:16-18)

Have you ever done anything stupid? I mean *really* stupid? This is a rhetorical question. You are supposed to answer it in the affirmative, quietly, to yourself, or with a knowing glance at your husband, your wife, or fellow parishioners who know you. You don’t need to begin yelling out some of the stupid things you have done in your life. If we were to go that route, a route that would probably be better reserved for the privacy of the confessional, I have the feeling I would never get around to the rest of my sermon! Some of you (I think you know who you are) would take up a little too much of our time together this morning!

Actually, you’re not the ones I’m worried about. I’m more concerned about those of you who didn’t nod, but rather looked puzzled when I asked the question, suggesting that you were unable to think of any decision you had made or action you had undertaken in your lifetime that would fall into this category. This is a tribute to either the power of denial; to a memory that has begun to deteriorate as you age; or to your more than marginal propensity to rewrite history. Narcissists, in particular, have a lot of difficulty with this question. If you sat there looking and feeling puzzled, I suggest you think about what your parents might say if they were alive. You might also ask some family members or good friends if they can think of anything that falls into this category; they might be able to jog your memory--if, indeed, you wish your memory to be jogged.

For some reason I have been thinking about all the stupid things I have done in my life. Well, perhaps not all of them, but a lot. I don’t know why I got going on this theme. Perhaps it was triggered by my re-reading of a book that I read during the pandemic. It is entitled, *Novice to Master*, and it was written by Zen Master Morinaga Roshi. The subtitle of this book is “*an ongoing lesson in the extent of my own stupidity.*” So, you can see why I was drawn to it! It may also have been triggered by the discovery that we are not that far away from Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Speaking of Ash Wednesday, when I first came to this church, we decided to observe Ash Wednesday with a Service of Repentance. This didn’t turn out well. Virtually no one showed up, and the ones that did attend were probably the ones who needed the service and the distribution of ashes the least. The remaining members of our church family were apparently either living exemplary lives or were in a serious state of denial. I leave it up to you to decide which was which.

My little trip down memory lane this past week was also triggered by stumbling across Edward Rowland Sill's poem, *The Fool's Prayer*. In this poem the court jester offers a prayer that leads the king and his court into a reflection not so much on the actual sins they have committed but on the stupid, unconscious, insensitive things each of them has done. I find that poem both touching and deeply insightful because I believe we cause more damage to ourselves and each other by acting unconsciously, by not being aware of our psychological dynamics and by not understanding each other, i.e., out of ignorance, than we do as a conscious attempt to hurt ourselves or those we love.

This week, as we commemorate the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and celebrate his life, his contribution to history, and the vision he set before us as a nation and a world, and especially in light of national and world events, I would like us to think about stupidity.

There are at least three kinds of stupidity. The first is the things we do and say that are actually stupid by our own admission as well as by the judgment of those whose opinion we trust. This category is comprised of actions undertaken with insufficient forethought, decisions made with inadequate appreciation of the consequences, not only for us, but also for others, and behavior that arises from our own limited or neurotic point of view.

I'm sure most of us can think of decisions we made or actions we undertook when we were young that fall into this category. The belief that we are invincible is a brand of stupidity that is particularly characteristic of adolescents, who sometimes make a point of flirting with death. The psychologist David Elkind calls this the personal fable. It finds expression in the belief that other people might become addicted to heroin, but I won't; other people might get pregnant or contract HIV from unprotected sex, but I won't; other people will die in automobile accidents because they drive drunk, but I won't.

I can think of many examples of this from my youth. Actually, it is little short of a miracle that I am still alive! I can also think of more recent examples. I think of the time a couple of years ago when I stretched too far trying to clean the gutters without moving the ladder and fell off the ladder, fortunately onto the roof of my car. I think of the time I tried to get a pile of wet leaves burning by using gasoline. The leaves got going, but so did my beard and eyebrows. I could easily have blinded myself!

Actually, in both of these examples, my wife would say that I was doubly stupid! I was stupid to take such a risk and also stupid not to listen to my wife when she told me not to do it. She may have a point! Maybe we will have to add a category for double stupidity.

Of course, sometimes we judge decisions and actions to be stupid in hindsight, a judgment that is harsh in terms of the limited information available to us at the time we began the

undertaking. How were we supposed to know that the particular investment that promised such unbelievable returns would turn out to be worthless? It may have been stupid, however, to place our investments in risky undertakings. It may have been stupid to yield to our desire to get rich not only quick but *really* quick. Gambling with money we can't afford to lose is stupid. The lottery is, of course, an activity undertaken by the mathematically challenged. But for most of us, investing in companies whose stock diminishes in value or accepting an employment offer by a company that eventually goes out of business is not really stupid. It is unfortunate, but it is not stupid.

A second or third category of stupid things is comprised of those decisions or actions that are undertaken based on an inadequate worldview. For example, if your father and mother told you when you were a child that Black people were ignorant, lazy, and superstitious, you would probably have believed this. You would have internalized your parents' views, their prejudices, and made them your own. This outlook would remain unchallenged until some bit of insight or some life experience challenged it, leading you to the bifurcation point of having to decide whether to be loyal to your parents' prejudices or to your own evolving experience.

I remember an example of this in my own life. I grew up in a White suburban community on the North Shore of Massachusetts. I had no Black friends and was exposed to no Black teachers or professional people until I got to college. I remember as a junior in college sitting in a class with a Black professor thinking, "This guy is smart! I mean, this guy is *really* smart!" I was amazed at his grasp of the material! You would think the fact that he had received his Ph.D. in economics from Harvard would have been a tip-off that he probably had something on the ball! My amazement at the level of his intelligence led me to become conscious of my prejudice concerning Black people. I hadn't realized I looked down on African Americans or regarded them as intellectually inferior, but my response to this professor was clear evidence that I did.

Once we become conscious of our prejudices, it is *really* stupid not to change them! In fact, it may be more than stupid; it may be sinful because it perpetuates an alienation from our brothers and sisters that can only lead to insensitivity and injustice. Once we realize what we are doing wrong, it is our responsibility to change. This includes addictive behavior that is hurtful to those we love and to ourselves. It includes behavior patterns that are less than loving, less than caring, less than helpful, and may be hurtful to those who are a part of our life. The resources to help us change are available. If we don't avail ourselves of these resources, our decision to cling to our stupidity, our unconscious patterns of behavior, begins to shade over into sin.

The other day I saw an advertisement that spoke to this point. It is an ad for some internet provider. The script tells us,

People used to think the world was flat. It's not that they were stupid, it's just that's what they were told. Then came Magellan, who set sail in one direction and came back around from the other. Now it's your turn. You can settle for someone else's version of the world. Or you can bravely embark on a journey of your own.

I'm not exactly sure what this has to do with the internet, or why I should choose that particular provider, but I like the sentiment expressed in the ad. The ad neglects to note that Magellan didn't complete the trip, that he died and was buried on a South Sea Island. In addition, people knew the earth was round long before Magellan, actually way back in the time of Aristotle. These reservations aside, the ad invites us to question what we have been told, to question someone else's version of the truth or picture of the world.

I believe this includes religion, including our religion. It tells us not to settle for someone else's version of the world or someone else's understanding of God. It tells us that if we bravely embark upon our own journey, as Ferdinand Magellan did, we will experience the world in a different way, a way that may lead us to challenge and revise our outdated, limited, or totally distorted worldview.

Isn't this what Martin Luther King did? He challenged us to look at the number of Black people who were denied the right to vote in a country that claimed to be a democracy. He challenged us to look at the vast disparity between the economic and educational advantages available to Whites and Blacks in a country that claimed to be founded on the principle that all people are created equal. He challenged Black people to adopt a new vision for themselves, a vision of themselves as more than slaves or inferiors. And he called White people to confront their prejudices, to become conscious of and root out the systemic cancer of racism, a cancer that poisons the soul of the White as surely as it limits the personal and professional development of the Black.

The fourth or fifth category of stupidity is comprised of decisions made and actions undertaken that may seem stupid to other people but which, from another point of view, may not be stupid at all. Sometimes we do things that, viewed from the outside, seem ridiculous. We may even agree that the decision or act seems stupid by any rational standard, but we feel we have to do it anyway. I have a hunch that many of these decisions and actions later turn out to be not only wise; they are actually guided by God.

I have done a lot of things in my life that fall into this category. I won't begin to list them all because we don't have enough time. Just trust me—there are many! The decision or the action doesn't make sense from the outside. It may not even be clear from the inside, to you. But it is undertaken in the belief, the conviction that it is something you have to do. All the major decisions of my life, the decisions that have been most powerful in the formation of my personal and professional identity, fall into this category.

One Sunday morning in March of 1965, while sitting in the congregation of the First Congregational Church of Amherst, I decided I needed to make the trip to Selma, Alabama to participate in the protest march from Selma to Montgomery. This seemed like a stupid decision to many people. It did to my friends. It did to my parents. It did to my graduate school professors.

I began to see their point a few weeks later as we gathered together in the basement of a Baptist church in Selma for training in nonviolence, as we were taught how to curl up on the ground with our arms protecting our head so that an Alabama state trooper's night stick wouldn't crush our skull. Even though it seemed ridiculous, it was something I felt I had to do. It was that seemingly irrational undertaking that led to my decision to enter the Christian ministry, a decision that has shaped the rest of my life to the core.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus calls his first four disciples. They are working at their nets, for they are fishermen. He tells them to follow him, that he will make them fishers of people. Peter, Andrew, James, and John leave their nets, leave their father, leave their wives and children and follow him. How stupid is that? But look what came from their decision!

The world needs more of a certain kind of stupidity, what might be called creative stupidity. Many people thought it was stupid of Mahatma Gandhi to believe that nonviolent protest could break the power of the British Empire, could convince England to grant independence to India. Many people think it is stupid of the Dalai Lama to discourage violent resistance to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, to believe that nonviolent Buddhist principles will ultimately triumph. Many people thought it was stupid of Martin Luther King, Jr. to give his life to set people free, not only the Blacks that were oppressed by the degrading conditions of racial inequality, but also those of us Whites who were beginning to become conscious of our prejudice and the terrible effect it has not only on our brothers and sisters but on our own souls.

You could say that Jesus' disciples and the apostle Paul were creatively stupid. Most of my other heroes also fall into this category: Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Martin Luther King, Jr. This is the way the world changes! You could make a strong case for stupidity in each of these people, but it was a creative stupidity, a stupidity that changed first them and then the world.

On March 25, 1965, at the completion of the Selma march, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a crowd of twenty-five thousand at the foot of the state capitol in Montgomery. In this speech he addressed the question of how long we would have to wait and work for both Blacks and Whites to become free. On that day, Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

I know you are asking today, “How long will it take?” I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

When I read this quote, I think of the parallel between my involvement in the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 and my desire to do something for the oppressed people of Tibet. It feels like I have come full circle in a way that is integral to my understanding of ministry, a realization that is especially poignant as I approach the fifty-fifth anniversary of my ordination. What I feel called to do for Tibet, even just witnessing to the genocide by going there, by being there, is the evolution of what I felt called to do in Selma. In both situations I had serious doubts about whether I, as a single individual, would make a discernible difference. I cling to the hope that in Tibet, as in our own country, the lie will not prevail; truth will ultimately triumph. It might not make a lot of sense to some people, but it does to me.

What would it mean for us to live as the disciples lived, as the great prophets of our tradition lived? What would it mean for us as a church in the coming year? It may mean to make certain decisions or to embark on certain undertakings that might appear to the outside observer as stupid.

As long as these decisions or undertakings are characterized by the right kind of stupidity, by creative stupidity, as individuals and as a church we will be in good company, and we may, in our own little way, be a part of God’s evolving creation of life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
January 19, 2025*