

“Surviving Fantasyland”  
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THE READING  
from Fantasyland by Kurt Andersen

[The ideas in this book] really started crystallizing in 2004 and 2005. President George W. Bush’s political mastermind Karl Rove introduced the remarkable phrase *reality-based community*. “People ‘in the reality-based community,’ he told a reporter, “believe that solutions emerge from judicious study of discernable reality. That’s not the way the world really works any more.” He said it with a sense of humor, but he was deadly serious. A year later, the Colbert Report went on the air. In the first few minutes of his first episode, Steven Colbert, playing his right wing populist character, performed a feature called The Word in which he riffed on a phrase. “Truthiness,” he said:

Now I’m sure some of the “word police,” the “wordinistas” over at Webster’s are gonna say, “Hey, that’s not a word!” Well, anybody who knows me knows that I’m no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They’re elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn’t true. Or what did or didn’t happen. Who’s Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I wanna say it happened in 1941, that’s my right. I don’t trust books – they’re all fact, no heart . . . Face it, folks, we are a divided nation. . . Divided between those who think with their head and those who *know* with their heart . . . Because that’s where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen – the gut.

Andersen goes on to observe:

Little by little for centuries, and then more and more and faster and faster during the last half-century, Americans have given us over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanations, small and large fantasies that control or thrill or terrify us. And most of us haven’t realized how far-reaching our stranger new normal has become. . . .

Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that steep and simmer for a few centuries; run it through the anything-goes 1960s and the Internet age; the result is the America we inhabit today, where reality and fantasy are weirdly and dangerously commingled.

## THE SERMON

Two decades ago, when I was researching for my manuscript on the Ten Commandments, I came upon the assertion by a Roman Catholic priest, that most of what was wrong with the world today was due to the emergence of Protestantism, which destroyed reliance on the authority of the church and left us in moral chaos.

A year ago, at an election party, which turned into a wake, at the home of our doctor, who is a liberal Irish Catholic, I was startled when his brother, also a physician, but apparently not quite so liberal, asserted that what we were experiencing as the tragic outcome of the evening, could be laid at the hands of Martin Luther and the rise of Protestantism.

Last Sunday, Sam shared with you a portion of a Chautauqua Lecture by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in which the rabbi suggested that Western Civilization is facing an impending collapse because of the Enlightenment and the spread of secularism, essentially the same as the charge against Protestantism.

I am fascinated by Kurt Andersen's new book, **Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire**, further subtitled, **A 500 Year History**, where I found support for that assertion about the destructive fruits of Protestantism and the Enlightenment. Andersen, host of public radio's "Studio 360" is a magna cum laude graduate of Harvard where he edited the Lampoon. He was co-founder of Spy Magazine and a columnist for the New Yorker, Time Magazine, and New York. He is the author of three novels and a collection of humorous essays. I found his book very helpful in understanding what we are experiencing today.

It was five hundred years ago that the Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, reportedly nailed his 95 charges against many of the contemporary Catholic practices to the door of the church in Wittenberg. Among his complaints was opposition to the selling of indulgences by which the way into heaven could be purchased; he was offended by the profligate lifestyles of many of the clergy; and he insisted that common people did not need the intervention of ordained clergy between them and their deity. That last was interpreted as a belief in "the priesthood of all believers." As Anderson summarizes it:

*Millions of ordinary people decided that they, each of them, had the right to decide what was true or untrue, regardless of what fancy experts said. And furthermore, they believed, passionate fantastical belief was the key to everything. The footings for Fantasyland had been cast.*

[Andersen does not address the historical reality that it didn't take very long for Luther to back away from this principle when people asserted the right to believe things he did not believe, and to deny things he did believe. But the die had been cast.]

It is Andersen's thesis that the right of individual conscience, stemming from Luther and the Protestant Revolution, has been central to the development of the American psyche throughout our history and has resulted in the Fantasyland in which we now live.

The Pilgrims who settled in Massachusetts sought to create a religious community that was in keeping with their religious beliefs, which were out of step with the dominant religion in England. Andersen says, "In other words, America was founded by a nutty religious cult."

Religion played a major role in the early days of European settlers in the New World. There were repeated "Awakenings" [periods of renewed enthusiasm] when the clergy felt

people had become too lackadaisical about their religion. Various preachers decided that **they** had the keys to the kingdom and knew what was true. Andersen says:

*As we let a hundred dogmatic iterations of reality bloom, the eventual result was an anything-goes-relativism that extends beyond religion to almost every kind of passionate belief: If I think it's true, no matter why or how I think it's true, then it's true, and nobody can tell me otherwise. That's the real-life reductio ad absurdum of American individualism. And it would become a credo of Fantasyland.*

Of course, we know that when it came to the creation of a new nation, the leaders were largely people who were committed to religious freedom, having seen what trouble contention among religions had caused in the old world. While few called themselves "atheists," many of them had been impacted by Enlightenment thinking and were far from orthodox believers.

Among those benefitting from that freedom were the Unitarians and the Universalists who were, to varying degrees, religious dissenters. Andersen details the development of religious thinking in America, interestingly not mentioning the Unitarians and Universalists, although he does report in passing that at one point that, as a child, he had, for a time, attended a Unitarian Sunday School.

Andersen sees the Gold Rush as an indication of how enthusiasms could spread and how far Americans would go in following the dream of riches. He suggests:

*A propensity to dream impossible dreams is like other powerful tendencies, okay when kept in check by common sense, at least in the aggregate and over the long run . . . [However] societies and cultures can lurch out of balance. As ours would eventually do.*

Andersen does spend a number of pages talking about the great Universalist, P.T. Barnum (although he does not mention Barnum's religion.) Barnum is central to the theme of the book in that he was a pre-eminent marketer of fantasy. Says Andersen:

*[Barnum's] extremely successful pre-circus career derived from and fed a fundamental Fantasyland mindset: If some imaginary proposition is exciting and nobody can prove it's untrue, then it's my right as an American to believe it's true.*

The development of movies and radio helped feed the American hunger for fantasy. Plays required what theatre folk refer to as the "willing suspension of disbelief," but that suspension became easier with film, and then talkies, and then color films. Andersen believes that as we spent more and more time suspending disbelief, "we became more habituated to suspending disbelief unconsciously and involuntarily."

The 1950's saw the development of Disneyland and Las Vegas, Playboy magazine, Scientology, the Beatniks, McCarthyism, and the rebirth of Evangelical Christianity. All of these fed the development of America as a Fantasyland. Andersen suggests that the message of Playboy was:

*You are not a scared, lonely chump with dreary domestic responsibility and a crappy job, . . . You are masculine and sophisticated and suave and well dressed and cool, with good taste, in a fun America full of women eager to have no-strings sex with you.*

It was an appealing fantasy

I get uneasy when Andersen moves into the 60's and 70's, which were the early years of my ministry. He cites what he sees as the problems with books like Charles Reich's **Greening of America**, Thomas Szasz's **Myth of Mental Illness**, Ken Kesey's **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, and Theodore Rozack's **The Making of a Counter Culture**. All of these

were books that I celebrated in sermons as pointing to the coming of a great new age - "The Age of Aquarius!" What I realized with Margaret Mead's **Culture and Commitment**, which Andersen does not mention but is of a piece with the books he does, is that something was being overdone. Mead asserted that while, in the olden days, the older generation had been understood to have something to teach the young about living in the world, the time had come when the older generation knew almost nothing about the new, modern world and needed to shut up and listen to the young. Wait a minute! Suddenly, reason and experience were misleading and needed to be tossed out? That was a step too far for me, and that whole trend in thinking was a step too far for Andersen. What he observed was that we were throwing out science and reason in favor of a fantasy life. "Facts" became passe.

It was a problem that even academia was falling into the trap! According to Andersen, there seemed to be a growing consensus on campuses that:

*In a nutshell, all beliefs and approximations of truth, science as much as any fable or religion, are mere stories devised by people to serve their own needs or interests. Reality itself is a social construction, a tableau of useful or wishful myths that members of a society or tribe have been persuaded to believe. The borders between fiction and nonfiction are permeable, maybe nonexistent. Superstitions, magical thinking, and delusions – any of these may be as legitimate as the supposed truths contrived by Western reason and science. The takeaway: Believe whatever you want, because it's pretty much all equally true and false.*

Two of the toughest courses I took as an undergraduate at St. Lawrence were in Music - understanding and appreciating it, not performing. It so happened that I was dating the daughter of the chair of the music department, who was one of the most rigorous professors on campus. I sweated blood to do well in his courses. I learned later from a faculty friend that when that professor had a sabbatical on which he went to California, he came back a changed man and he gave everyone A's. He had come to the "realization" that the academic standards for which he had stood were no longer relevant in the new world. He no longer believed he knew much that students needed to learn from him.

Andersen asserts that:

*the anything-goes relativism of the campuses wasn't sequestered there, but when it flowed out across America, it helped enable extreme Christianities and consequential lunacies on the right – gun rights hysteria, black helicopter conspiracism, climate change denial, and more. The term "useful idiot" was originally used to accuse liberals of serving the interests of true believers further left. In this instance, however, postmodern intellectuals – postpositivists, poststructuralists, social constructivists, post empiricists, epistemic relativists, cognitive relativists, descriptive relativists – turned out to be useful idiots for the American right. "Reality has a well-known liberal bias," Stephen Colbert said, in character in 2006, mocking the "beliefs trump facts" impulse of today's right.*

Andersen shares a great many more details of how Fantasyland, the belief that whatever we want to be true must be true, became so dominant in America. The end of the fairness doctrine in broadcasting, the rise of talk radio and the 24 hour a day cable "news" channels [news is in quotation marks] added significantly to the Fantasyland. He notes:

*For most of the twentieth century, national news media had felt obliged to pursue and present some rough approximation of the truth rather than to promote a truth, let alone fictions.*

Of course, the invention and spread of the internet was a major contributor. Andersen observes:

*After the 1960's and 70's happened as they happened, it may be that America's long-standing dynamic balance – between thinking and magical thinking, reason and wishfulness, reality and fiction, sanity and lunacy – was broken for good. But once the internet came along, we were definitely on a superhighway to a certain destination with no likely looking exits.*

*Before the web, cockamamie ideas and outright falsehoods could not spread nearly as fast or so widely, so it was much easier for reason and reasonableness to prevail . . .*

*In the digital age, every tribe and fiefdom and principality and region of Fantasyland – every screwball with a computer and a telecom connection – suddenly had an unprecedented way to instruct and rile up and mobilize believers, and to recruit more.*

Because his book just came out in September, although Andersen had been working on it for two years, you can just imagine where this all leads: to a time when fact checkers are going crazy with the challenges they face daily. It no longer matters what the evidence clearly shows – it does not matter. Certain people feel that they have the right to insist that any news reports that do not reflect what they wish to be true, are therefore “fake news.” I don't think you need me to spell that out in detail.

There is so much more worth sharing, but I want to say something about how this relates to us as Unitarian Universalists. I squirmed a lot as I read Andersen's thorough development of the growth of Fantasyland in America. There is a sense in which we lie at the heart of it. Who more than us has stood up, historically, for individualism and the right for people to make their own decisions about religious beliefs? We are haunted by the assertion by some people that as Unitarian Universalists we can “believe whatever we want to believe.” We pride ourselves on our diversity, but we have always, or at least generally, insisted that we have to exercise disciplined reason. We affirm our commitment to “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” [The principle originally said “Free and disciplined” but in 1985, the General Assembly voted to modify that “disciplined” to “responsible.” To some, “disciplined” seemed too harsh.]

I am concerned that the Unitarian Universalist Association has moved in directions that make me feel less at home than I was when I committed myself to its ministry. That concern first came home to me back in 1995. In 1841, the great Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered a momentous sermon on “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” in which he asserted that much of the dogma of the Christian Church was, in fact transient, and the important permanent parts were the teachings of Jesus. That sermon is considered one of the historic documents of our movement.

In 1995, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association held a continental convocation in Hot Springs, Arkansas, at which we were to explore what modern Unitarian Universalists saw as “The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion.” It was the original goal to refine a consensus document from that gathering. It proved impossible. The major sticking point was on the centrality of our use of reason in religion. A sizeable segment of our ministers, particularly the younger generation, was unwilling to submit religion to being tested by reason – they held out for being open to the irrational. It seems to me that this is an illustration of the rise of Andersen's Fantasyland. Ultimately there was no consensus. I despaired as to where

we were going as a liberal religious movement if we could not longer agree on the importance of reason. It has only gotten worse.

The point of all this is, as Andersen makes very clear:

*The fantasy industrial complex invented and dominated by Americans [has] continued to spread exponentially, taking over parts of every conceivable realm, – politics, real estate, retail, “hospitality,” life. We have encased ourselves in a wall-to-wall 24/7 collage of fantasy and fantastic reality . . . A lot of American reality is now virtual. We’re often unaware whether we’re inside or outside of Fantasyland.*

Here comes the key to his thesis and that of this sermon:

[Anderson writes] *For three centuries, in culture and religion as well as in politics and economics, the fantasist and realist impulses existed in rough balance, with a powerful animating tension between the two tendencies. That dynamic balance was key. We were like an internal combustion engine, a great machine powered by endless little explosions – every idiosyncratic vision and dreamy ambition permitted to ignite – but with control mechanisms and gaskets and a sturdy engine block, all keeping the contraption from blasting apart. . . .*

Andersen asserts:

*As life became easier, however, the easier climate was more conducive to the loosey-goosier parts of the American psyche. A tipping point came in the 1960's when our Yin began to be overwhelmed by our Yang. We discarded the good residue of our founding Puritan ethos – discipline, austerity, hyperliteracy – and doubled down on the old Puritan beliefs in magic and an imminent apocalypse and utopia.*

Andersen is not a Jeremiah, foretelling certain doom. Nor does he have any simple remedies. The hope he offers is this:

*If we’re splitting into two different cultures, we in reality-based America must try to keep our zone as large and robust and attractive as possible for ourselves and the next generations . . . We need to become less squishy. We must call out the dangerously untrue and unreal . . .*

*Cultural predispositions and national characters are real, and societies do come to crossroads and make important choices. But while our Fantasyland tendencies were present from the beginning, the current situation was not inevitable, because history and evolution never are. Nor now is any particular future. We could regain our national balance and composure. These last decades may turn out to have been a phase, one strange act of our ongoing epic, an unfortunate episode in the American experiment that we will finally move past and chalk up to experience. Nations and societies have survived and recovered from far more terrible swerves, eras that felt cataclysmic as they were happening. The good news, in other words, is that America may now be at peak Fantasyland. We can hope.*

I want to go back to Rabbi Sack’s Chautauqua lecture to which Sam referred in last week’s sermon. The rabbi did, indeed, attack secularism. He pointed out:

*“Those religious traditions that have tried to accommodate to reason and science are in decline. The ultra-orthodox, evangelical and fundamentalist religious movements that reject enlightenment values, however, are growing.”*

Later in his lecture, however, Rabbi Sacks acknowledged that the fastest growing religious group is the “nones” [N O N E S] – those who check the “none” box when surveyed about religion. While the religious right is growing, it is not a net growth of believers because many are fleeing the fantasy-based religions because reason and science have led them to feel frustrated or hypocritical in those institutions.

In an article in Psychology today, Phil Zuckerman pointed out that:

*For every American who was raised without religion but has since joined a religious group as an adult, four Americans who were raised with religion have dropped out as adults: thus secularism is clearly winning the joining/leaving game by a ratio of 4 to 1.*

He considers this good news. He says:

*. . . it means that more and more Americans are choosing not to believe creeds, doctrines, and teachings that are manifestly untrue. . . . So the fact that millions of Americans are acknowledging this and living their lives without such falsities is reassuring. . . . Faith is fine, but not when it comes to solving social problems or figuring out how to make the world a better place.*

Elsewhere, Zimmerman has cited studies that show that it is the more secular states in America that have less murder, fewer divorces, and less domestic violence. The most secular nations are those which are both the happiest and most altruistic. [It seems to me that it is our institutional death-wish that has Unitarian Universalism moving away from reason at the very time that millions are seeking a rational religion.]

It is interesting that Rabbi Sacks suggested that what really matters is being in a religious community – not what one believes. He thinks it is fine that there are atheists in the pews, so long as they are there, so he may not really be all that concerned with teleology.

Most interesting to me was the rabbi’s assertion, near the end of his lecture, that religion is not a substitute for science nor in opposition to a free society, but should be seen as a consecration of the bonds that connect people, stressing loyalty and love, altruism and compassion, covenant and commitment, “renewing the torn fabric of society.” He asserted that religious groups should be content to be a minority, to be “the light that will vanquish the darkness.”

Earlier this month we celebrated the anniversary of the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King. The values for which Dr. King stood are the antithesis of the values of the Fantasyland culture and are congruent with those espoused by Rabbi Sacks.

People in Kurt Andersen’s Fantasyland are focused on the supreme ME. Everything is about me and my truth, my family, my nation, my race. If I believe my event was the largest, it does not matter what the photos show. If I believe I am the smartest, what my transcript shows does not matter. If I prefer not to believe I said something, the videotape of my saying it does not matter. If I want to benefit financially from an elected office, the tradition, the laws regarding my office do not matter. If I believe my race is superior, it does not matter how this impacts others. You get the point.

Dr. King, in contrast, was committed to an understanding of the importance and reality of community, of the human family, of the family of nations. Wherever there was inequality, it needed to be addressed. No nation had a right to exploit other nations to “make it great.” People of one race had no right to demean or subjugate other races. No person had a right to exploit others for her or his economic benefit.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm:

*The inherent worth and dignity of every person;  
Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;  
Acceptance of one another. . . .  
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;  
The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process . . . ;  
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;  
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

These values, which some might call secular but I believe are truly religious, are congruent with the dream that Dr. King articulated so powerfully and that led to his death. They are the antithesis of the values of the powerful Fantasyland that now surrounds us and is impacting our lives.

I believe that our Unitarian Universalist religious tradition is well equipped to help us, and therefore our nation, through this wilderness Andersen described, “where reality and fantasy are weirdly and dangerously commingled” by restoring the balance between fantasy and reality. But, as I said earlier, we are not immune from the virus that seduces us away from reason and human community. We need to be aware of the temptation to surrender reason for the appeal of a happy-ever-after and feelgood Fantasyland and instead seek the courage and perspective and strength and commitment that will enable us to be warriors for greater balance between reality and fantasy, for community over the dominant ME.

As Thurber suggested in the fable I shared with the children, “you can fool too many of the people too much of the time.” We need to support one another as we commit to shining that “light that will vanquish the darkness.”

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul afire,  
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way,  
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,  
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

Not coincidentally, that is the message of hymn # 1028 in the teal hymnal, which I invite you to join in singing.