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“We Are Freer Than We Think”:
Power/Knowledge & Tools for Resistance—
Foucault for Today

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An important part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage is our tradition of both a **“free pulpit” and a “free pew.”** My *freedom of the pulpit* means that I am encouraged to preach whatever I think will be significant and meaningful for us to consider. Your *freedom of the pew* means that you are not expected to believe or do something simply because it is spoken from this or any other pulpit.

That being said, once a year, members and friends of this congregation contribute all sorts of items, events, and opportunities to our annual auction. And each year, my auction contribution is my pledge to preach a **sermon on a topic of the highest bidder's choice—**“whatever subject you are passionate about or think would be particularly challenging, meaningful, or provocative.” So if there is a sermon topic you’ve been hoping to hear addressed, our upcoming auction could be your chance. (Our next auction will be the 2nd Saturday in May.)

Last year, Bob Ladner won the auctioned sermon, and he chose as the topic, the philosopher, historian of ideas, and political activist “Michel Foucault” (1926 – 1984). Conveniently, although Bob didn’t know this in advance, I’ve been reading Foucault for a long time. As an undergraduate double-major in Religion and Philosophy, one of my senior seminars was on Nietzsche and Foucault. If you like this sermon, thank Bob since the topic was his idea, and likely wouldn’t have happened

otherwise. If you don't like the specifics, blame me because the auction winner only gets to pick the sermon topic, not the sermon content.

When Foucault died in 1984 at the age of 57, he was **"France's most prominent philosopher"** (Macy xi). For almost fifteen years, from 1970 until his death, he was a Professor at the Collège de France, "the most prestigious institution in the French academic world" (*ibid*). His books are dense and not very accessible; nevertheless, they often became bestsellers.

Today, almost four decades after his death, we can safely place him in the vanguard of prescient thinkers who are, in many ways, more relevant than ever. As one historian has written, "Consider the topics that Foucault helped to pioneer as objects of philosophical reflection: mental illness, public health, gender and transgender identities, normalization and abnormality, surveillance, selfhood. Once confined to the margins of political thought, these issues have become major preoccupations with important stakes in everyday life, in the Western world and beyond" (Behrent 2).

And as we seek to explore both Foucault's philosophy and Foucault the philosopher, it is important to be aware that he sought not only to deconstruct categories of knowledge, he also applied those same approaches to himself, making him elusive to pin down.

Sometimes you hear people talk about wanting to "find" themselves, to discover their "true self"—who they really are—as if there is some stable essence inside ourselves waiting to be found. Foucault was highly skeptical of such approaches. He was more interested in *making* meaning than "finding" it—in creating and pushing old boundaries. As he said in an interview in 1982, less than two years before the end of his life: "**I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly who I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning…. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end"** (Macy xiv).

Foucault was always wanting to explore as-yet-unforeseen possibilities. And for him, a key starting point was often deconstruction of the current systems and structures of thought that can limit one's sense of who we might become and what we

might do and experience. As he wrote in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, **"Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same… Let us leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order"** (Gutting 1).

His official academic title was **"Professor of the History of Systems of Thought,"** and his books traced the ways that such systems of thought change over time (Gutting 31).

At the risk of massively oversimplifying an incredibly nuanced thinker, let me give you some specific examples of what I'm talking about:

- In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961), Foucault challenged his readers to notice that the definition of what counts as "mental *illness*" has changed significantly over time, as well as the ways we treat people our society deems mentally ill. Who benefits from those "fixed" categories, and who loses out? In particular, if you or someone you love is the one being locked in an asylum, what system of thought made that possibility seem legitimate?
- *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963): who decides what is "sick" and what is "well," and notice how that "medical gaze" has changed over time. We might, for instance, do a Foucauldian analysis of what counts as a legitimate health insurance claim and what is excluded. Who decides? Who benefits? Who loses out? And why?
- *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975): how have our understandings of what is "legal" and "illegal" evolved and why? We could consider here all the arguments laid out by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*.
- *The History of Sexuality* (1976–1984, 2018): a multi-volume series on how our conceptions of what is sexually normal and what is perverse have changed—and why.

Through these and other studies, Foucault challenges us to notice that the way we categorize and come to think about things are *social constructions* that have changed over time and will continue to change, rather than some stable, essential nature of things. This realization can free us to explore how we might creatively do things differently.

As a shorthand for this perspective, Foucault eventually started writing the words power/knowledge together, to emphasize that our ways of knowing are deeply influenced by systems of power (Foucault 1977: 27). Again: who decides on various definitions, laws, and categories? Who benefits? And who loses out? And, as the saying goes, notice that, when paradigm-shifting decisions are made, **"If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu."**

Now, although there is a lot more to say about all that, I want to invite us to pivot a bit to explore a little more about Foucault's life and some of the stories behind how he came to write his books.

Foucault was born in 1926, the middle of three children, into a family in France with significant connections and resources (Macy 2). From as early as he could remember, he was aware of having same-sex attractions (14-15), but he felt constrained to stay fairly closeted, especially early on. In both his adolescence and early adulthood during the 1940s, there were so-called "morality" laws that made homosexuality illegal in France. Here, you can begin to see the origins of his interest in the history of how our ideas around normality and legality are socially constructed.

At the same time, when Foucault was 20 years old, the combination of his prominent family, academic aptitude, and hard work ethic resulted in his admittance to the highly competitive ENS (Ecole Normale Supérieure). This elite, all-male academic institution gave him access to an academic "old boys network" which helped set the stage for his later successes (Macy 21-22).

I should also underscore that even with such advantages, few people ascend to the heights Foucault achieved. He was also known to work extremely hard (27). The French equivalent of what we would call his doctoral dissertation weighed in at "943 pages (plus a further forty pages of notes and bibliography)—the product of some five years' research and writing" (93).

It is also important to note that Foucault might have ended up just an obscure academic philosopher. His books were not written for a popular audience nor were easily accessible; they were primarily written for other specialists in the ivory tower. But with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, they increasingly attracted the

attention of activists working for reforms within psychiatry, medicine, prisons, and sexual mores, all issues which Foucault's work directly addresses (210-212).

Foucault was not only interested in systemic change, but also in personal experimentation. I'll limit myself to two representative examples. Given the resurgence of interest today in psychedelics—indeed, Michael Pollan spoke a few days ago at the Weinberg Center here in Frederick—it's notable that in 1975, Foucault dropped acid for the first time—in of all places, Death Valley, California. Foucault was a visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley at that time. He described that experience as "an unforgettable evening on LSD, in carefully prepared doses, in the desert night, with delicious music, nice people, and some chartreuse" (a type of French liqueur, aged with more than a hundred different herbs, plants and flowers) (340). He also frequented gay bathhouses as well as S&M and leather clubs (339).

I should add that, tragically, Foucault died of AIDS-related complications. I share his cause of death not in judgment, but in the spirit of transparency. My larger point is that Foucault was about a lot more than theoretical speculation. He was out in the streets personally protesting, as well as experimenting with novel possibilities in his own private life.

To say more, let me share with you a little about the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Although much benefit has come to the LGBT rights movement from a more widespread acceptance of the idea that homosexuality is often a way some people are born (rather than a choice), Foucault, as always, wanted his readers to notice the limitations of such categories as "homosexual" and "heterosexual."

He might have said something like: stop trying to get me to "confess" some inner truth about myself in a way that would allow you to put me in a box. He challenged us to notice the difference between same-sex acts and "being" a homosexual. The former is an action, the latter a permanent identity—one that can limit us, or even make us into objects of study, oppression, or self-repression (Foucault 1978: 43).

In contrast, in what may be the most powerful line in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I,* Foucault wrote: **"The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures"**

(157). That's really worth considering. What if our starting point is not finding what pre-existing box we fit into for our sexual orientation, but rather being open to bodies and pleasures? Now that a growing number of people identify as gender nonbinary, gender fluid, or queer, all this may seem less unusual and radical; but at the time, these ideas were quite transgressive, which is one reason people are still turning to Foucault today.

As I move toward my conclusion, I'll give you one of many poignant examples of how important Foucault's writings have been to a lot of people seeking personal and social change. On the day of Foucault's death in 1984, hundreds of people gathered outside the hospital where his body lay. The crowd fell into a hush as Gilles Deleuze (1925 -1995), one of Foucault's fellow French philosophers, came forward and read—in a voice cracking with grief—a passage from the second volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*:

> What is the point of striving after knowledge if it ensured only the acquisition of knowledges and not, in a certain way and to the greatest extent possible, **the disorientation of he who knows?** … What's philosophy today—I mean philosophical activity—if not the critical work of thought upon thought, if it does not, rather than legitimizing what one already knows, consist of an attempt to know **how and to what extent it is possible to think differently?** (Macy 471)

Foucault dedicated his life to an archaeology of power/knowledge: excavating the history of how our systems of thought have changed over time—in order to make us more conscious of the ways that we too might take part in breaking out of the limitations of the historical contexts in which we find ourselves.

Foucault challenged us to accept that **we are "freer than we think"** (Dean and Zamora 139). He invited us to use his books as "toolboxes" for resistance. Whether *Madness and Civilization*—about the history of what is considered mental illness; *The Birth of the Clinic*—about the Medical-Industrial Complex; *Discipline and Punish*—about the Prison-Industrial Complex and surveillance; or *The History of Sexuality*—about the changing standards of what is deemed normal or perverse, he wrote:

> If people are willing to open them and make use of such and such a sentence or idea, of one analysis or another, as they would a screwdriver or monkey wrench, in order to short-circuit or disqualify systems of power, including even possibly the ones my books come out of, well, all the better (Halperin 52).

Importantly, Foucault did not say precisely how his tools should be used, because that would undercut his point. Rather, he said:

> If I don't ever say what must be done, it isn't because I believe that there's nothing to be done. On the contrary, it is because I think that there are a thousand things to do, to invent, to forge, on the part of those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they're implicated, have decided to resist or escape them. (53)

What needs to be done changes with each new historical moment, each new context, and from various individual perspectives.

In the words of one Foucault scholar, reading with Foucault hopefully leaves us **"knowing a little less than we thought we knew before we began and worrying, thinking, wondering, and reckoning a little more."** Or, in Foucault's own words:

> It would probably not be worth the trouble of making books if…they did not lead to unforeseen places, and if they did not disperse one toward a strange and new relation with oneself." (229)

Like me, perhaps you are coming to see that, from a Unitarian Universalist perspective, we might view Foucault within the second of our Six Sources: "Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love"—even as Foucault might strive to destabilize and subvert any such intransigent characterization.