

The Prose (and Cons) of Fandom

August 5, 2018

Welcome

Good morning and welcome to Towson Unitarian Universalist Church.

I am Dominique Hall, a member of the Lay Worship Committee.

The committee plans and delivers services while our minister, Reverend Clare Petersberger is away from the pulpit, including during the summer.

On behalf of Rev Clare, I would like to extend a welcome to any newcomers or visitors in attendance today.

We hope everyone will remain after the service and nerd out over coffee.

Our worship theme for the summer is Creative Connections.

Today we will explore the creative connections established between fans through popular media and how those connections can bring about broader social change.

Let us begin service with a responsive reading and lighting of the chalice. Parts printed in bold represent the congregational response. After the reading, you are invited to form two lines down the center aisle to drop a stone or stones into water to mark the laying down of a burden, the passage of a milestone, to splash up a little joy, or offer a remembrance of a loved one. Please return to your seat using the aisle nearest your stone station.

Chalice Lighting ANNUAL MEETING INVOCATION

adapted from Heather K Janules

From the power of our memory and history,
With high hopes for the days that lie ahead,
We gather to craft the destiny we share with one another.
We gather with faith in the practice of democracy.
We gather with hearts and minds open
To the wisdom in every voice among us.
In our gathering,
May we dream and design a bold future.
[May we imagine a new story that widens the circle]
May we bring our best selves to this service,

And may we dream these dreams
And [light this chalice]
With love.
Amen.

Prelude The Grasshopper's Wedding

Béla Bartók

Opening Words

Thank you, Liz, for the gift of your music. The Grasshopper Waltz is piece number 42 of Bartok's collection *For Children*...for those of you who are not familiar with the British cult classic in all its forms, *The HitchHiker's Guide to the Galaxy* claims that 42 is the ultimate answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything. And no, we never find out what the question was.

The words fan, nerd, geek, etc are used almost synonymously as pejoratives for people of unrestrained enthusiasms. The collective noun for a group of fans is a 'fandom.' 'Fan' is a shortening of 'Fanatic', a word originally used to describe religious dissidents. The suffix '-dom' has two parts. The first is a state of being—like wisdom or boredom. This state is easily identifiable at boy band concerts and movie premieres. The second definition identifies the 'area or domain' over which the prefix rules—like a king rules a kingdom. Both possible meanings emphasize unity and interconnection, which we will explore over the course of this service.

Being enthusiastic and unashamed requires a great deal of openness and a willingness to be vulnerable. The ideal fan community demonstrates loving kindness and helps its members explore and express themselves. In honor of this sentiment, please rise in body or in spirit to sing Hymn #1031.

Hymn #1031 May I Be Filled with Loving Kindness

Time for All Ages The Whisper

Pamela Zagarenski

A shared value, even one as simple as a love of popular culture, provides a common reference for understanding, not fearing the other. The poem, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” is followed by a meditation in music on the nature of legacy and the lingering power of art, even after the death of the artist. As a word of warning, the beginning of the song is a little bombastic.

Prayer/Meditation A Ritual to Read to Each Other William Stafford

Musical Interlude Bright is the Ring of Words

Robert Louis Stevenson,
Arr. R. Vaughan Williams

Thank you, Luke and Liz, for the brilliant ring of your performance.

Reading Late Hours

Lisel Mueller

Learning to empathize with the characters we encounter in fiction empowers us to reach out to those suffering around us. In affirmation of our connection to the wider world, a portion of all undesignated offertory donations are given back to the community, to house the homeless, to heal the addicted, and to ensure the inherent worth and dignity of all life.

Our morning offering will now be given and received.

Offertory Eternity

William Blake
Arr. R. Vaughan Williams

As an independent thinker, it's tempting to look down on ardent fans and the pop culture they revere. At the same time, there's an unspoken expectation that everyone is a fan of something. I still get a strange feeling sometimes when I tell someone that I'm a Star Wars fan—but maybe you don't have those kinds of conversations.

As I researched fandoms and fan activity for this talk, though, I realized that fan culture is much more nuanced and relevant than it appears at first. Fans are actually engaged in a dialogue with mass media, not blindly following it. Their connection impacts our entire culture, and is not restricted to the corners of the Internet.

One of the most solemn duties of fandom is the interpretation of a narrative that is often incoherent or inconsistent---finding sense where there may be none. In that way, it is very similar to most of human existence. Fans share their findings as they search for meaning within popular culture—the shorthand and shared language are a reasonable next step in the formation of a fan community.

When the literate population (and the pool of available literature) was smaller, clever authors included Biblical references in their work to appeal to the intelligence of their readers. Well-crafted mass media now applies those techniques to more modern bodies of work—the BBC series *Sherlock* refers to the other famous adaptations as well as the source material, Doyle's stories. Similarly, Marvel movies address old comics and earlier adaptations, until it's references all the way down.

Critics argue that fandom is a symptom of social decay. They compare fans to cultists, blind followers of the religion of mass media. Part of this is because popular culture's identity depends on its mass appeal and ready availability.

Similarly, the most active members of fan groups tend to be women and minorities, who are traditionally barred from positions of cultural influence or have their contributions diminished.

The gender distribution of the recent winners of the 'literary' Booker Prize—so far, 31 men and 16 women—reveals this disparity. In addition, more than 2/3 of the characters in these highly acclaimed novels were male, and essential to the plot. Male characters tended to be doctors, lawyers, or other high-achieving professions, while women—were not, generally taking the roles of 'teacher,' or 'lover' (and I'm being charitable).

Fans push back against these inaccurate representations in a variety of ways. Young women and people of color find their voices within the fan community, often beginning by retelling familiar stories from their perspectives. Like spoken-word storytellers, they take ownership of iconic heroes of today's popular culture. And it's safer, less threatening, to adjust the default straight white male hero just a little, to make him resonant with another experience.

Sometimes these adaptations go further afield. *The Refrigerator Monologues* by Cathrynne Valente is a series of short essays from the perspectives of superhero girlfriend archetypes who all die tragically, a phenomenon so ingrained in popular culture that it is known as 'fridging'.

In addition, fan pressure can influence existing works. LGBTQ characters make heroic sacrifices on the big screen with depressing regularity, often merely for shock value. A coalition of TV directors recently signed the Lexa Pledge, named for a lesbian character killed off during the narrative of the TV show *The 100*. The pledge affirms LGBTQ characters as more than plot devices.

Fan communities are also a source of emotional and financial support to their members. Many established authors began in fan fiction communities, where

they developed their own artistic voices adapting or embellishing their favorite media. As they began to write and sell original work, they often relied on the connections they had built in fandom to obtain collaborators, proofreaders, and writing support. Seanan {pronounced Shawn in} McGuire writes that she was unable to afford a two-year MFA, but honed the same literary skills over 10 years of writing within the fan community. Since then, she's won the top prizes in both fantasy and science fiction literature for her original works.

In the times of Michelangelo and Frederich Handel, creatives worked with the financial backing of a single wealthy patron. They were often limited to producing art by commission, or forced to market their visionary work to the holder of the purse strings. In this new gig economy, many artists turn to their own fans for financial support. Online resources like Patreon and Drip allow fans to donate specified amounts to the artist of their choice. The single wealthy patron has been replaced by 10,000 fans. It almost makes you believe in the plausibility of socialized healthcare. In turn, the artist can work on projects of their own choosing and offer incentives to various levels of pledge.

Fan communities can also serve as platforms for individual creators. Artists may choose to rally fans to their causes, whether political or personal, like supporting pit bull rescues or urging fans to call their representatives about social issues. They also offer incentives for altruistic behavior, as when Lin-Manuel Miranda produced/released the single "Almost Like Praying" as an incentive for donating to Hurricane Maria relief efforts.

Social justice issues within the canon and culture at the time of its creation also negatively impact the fan community. Self-appointed gatekeepers tend to value the subjective aesthetic purity— any misconceptions and omissions of the original work— over the more accurate though less palatable reality. In this way, the social justice flaws of the original piece propagate through the fan culture at

its innermost layers. Bad behavior also reinforces the stereotype that fans are literal-minded and blind trend-followers.

Recent incidents involving major franchises and poorly-behaved fans have further tarnished the reputations of the communities involved. In the past few years, sexism and racism have dominated fan activities to an unprecedented extent—most notably after the release of the most recent Ghostbusters and Star Wars movies. In both franchises, minority female actors were harassed online until they deleted their social media accounts. This effectively (if only temporarily) silenced their voices.

As nerd culture (often derided for its passion, especially for trivia) has become more mainstream, other possible powers of fandom become apparent. The 2-party political system has increasingly come to resemble a fandom over the past 20 years, with each side increasingly devoted to the image of the party over its substance. If this trend continues, it is possible that all political appointees will exhibit the same zeal as fans of One Direction.

In general, though, fandoms have been just as blindsided by the social possibilities of the internet as everyone else, and struggle to adapt to a world that was never fully imagined. Up until recently, and for the most part, fandoms have very strong ethical and moral codes, so many of them would not be terrible stewards of governmental responsibilities.

In a broader perspective, the creative expression of fandom depends on the landmarks of a free society: free speech and fair use. Fan works test the freedom of ideas beyond almost any other form of creative expression, in that they are frequently created for sheer enjoyment and not for profit, supplement but do not supplant the original work, and can drastically alter or ‘transform’ the meaning of the original. The Organization of Transformative Works recognizes fan lore as a

valuable cultural artifact and dedicates itself to archiving and protecting the existence of fan-made materials.

The influence of popular culture is not unidirectional. Fandom engages with material—television, podcasts, written works, and others—and often rejuvenates the original ideas with new perspectives. Pressure from fans can improve representation and visibility. And visibility and normalization promote acceptance, regardless of the source. In acknowledgement of these truths, please rise in body or in spirit and join in singing Hymn # 1052, the Oneness of Everything, and remain standing for our closing words.

Hymn #1052 The Oneness of Everything

Closing Words

When I wrote this service, I had forgotten this is the season for fandom conventions. GenCon, a convention for game lovers, is going on in Indianapolis this weekend. San Diego Comic Con just wrapped up. There are many more. Bronycon, held in Baltimore every year for fans of the newest incarnation of the 80s franchise, My Little Pony, just announced that next year will be its last. Here is an excerpt from a Facebook post made by the Baltimore Science Fiction Society about the final Bronycon...

“We love our fandoms because it gives us access to a world that is somehow more fulfilling and meaningful than the one in which we live.

When we connect to those who share our passions, we are connecting with people who find the same meanings and fulfill the same needs in the same ways. The coming together of such groups of kindred spirits in a bleak and often uncaring world is something to be embraced and celebrated.

So, if you have a franchise that you love, embrace it. Share that love. Seek out those who share it with you.”

Go now in peace, and as MD state senator emeritus Barbara Mikulski would say:
“May the Force be with us all.”