

Seen, Known, Understood?

A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon and James Gordon

Given to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia

Sunday, January 12, 2014

What's the difference between big data and religion?

One tells you that there is a vast, intangible omniscience in The Cloud that can guide you in all life's decisions...

The other is religion.

So what is big data, and how does it impact our lives?

By way of answer, let me ask you a few questions...

How many of you post regularly on Twitter?

How many of you post regularly on Facebook?

How many of you have bought items on Amazon.com?

How many of you own a cell phone?

How many of you have bought anything at all in the last ten years using a credit card or a checking account?

You are a part of a massive collection of information and a corresponding multi-billion dollar industry called Big Data.

Most of what we do today has some link to the digital realm and leaves some record out there on the web. So now, businesses, researchers, campaigns, and other entities are making it their business to analyze and interpret the data we leave behind. They do this by seeking out patterns and creating consumer profiles used to market to us more effectively.

Simply put, the goal of Big Data is to categorize, predict, and influence human behavior, most often in pursuit of money or power.

Collectively, the American people have assented to this process and even aided in its growth. We have essentially entered into covenant with countless organizations and corporate entities by agreeing to largely unread terms and conditions and volunteering

personal information in exchange for goods and services.

We also contribute to our own consumer profiles by posting on facebook, having and using an email address, and simply searching the web.

The ability to share of ourselves through digital communication and social media has exponentially increased our ability to connect with others across time and across great distance. These interactions exist permanently in the digital record and in connections that Facebook and other companies monetize through corporate sponsorship and consumer-aided advertising.

Big Data in its most fully realized form even makes it possible for retailers to anticipate our needs. Amazon can guess when you'll be needing to reorder toilet paper, and, if you've set it up to do so, they will send you some, automatically.

Famously, Target has developed a formula by which they can accurately predict whether one of their shoppers is pregnant – often before that woman has informed others in her life – and they will adjust their coupons and special offers to her accordingly. (There was a fascinating New York Times article about how they do this in February of last year called “How Do Companies Learn Your Secrets?”)

This kind of targeted advertising seems a bit invasive, but if one will inevitably encounter countless advertisements throughout one's day, wouldn't it be nice if they were for things one was actually looking for? That's the argument of an industry that seeks to convert large amounts of information into behavioral predictions, and behavioral predictions into profit margins.

So why do we throw our lot in with those who seek to understand us mostly in order to sell something to us? Why do we give little pieces of ourselves as data to those who would see it as nothing more?

The simple answer is that it is nearly impossible to opt out of the system that has grown up around the collection and organization of human data. Try living in today's world without an e-mail address or a bank account, both of which leave permanent footprints mapping your communications and purchases.

The longer answer is more complex.

There is something deep within us that longs to be seen, known, and understood; Something in us praying that nothing is lost; Something in us that longs to echo on eternally.

At a macro-level, this is what Big Data promises us in a very literal way. There is someone out there picking up every digital crumb we drop, so that none are lost. In this system we are known. In this system someone at least attempts to understand us. In this system we live on in memory, for as long as there is disk space.

Isn't this the longing of the Psalmist in one of the most beloved pieces of poetry in the Hebrew Bible? "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away." It is a prayer that nothing we do be outside of God's care, nothing outside of the attention of something beyond us, nothing lost in God's eternal sight.

Here, you're known.

There is something deep within us, as well, that longs to know and understand life itself; something in us always seeking meaning; questioning our place and purpose here on earth.

Especially in a fragmented world where coherence and capital T-truth seem so very far from our grasp, we long for understanding. Especially in a global marketplace where our choices seem nearly infinite, we long for certainty and guidance.

Big Data attempts to fulfill this promise as well – it's very existence based on the premise that better decisions are made with more information, and that all will be revealed in time, given enough data and enough computing power to interpret it.

We see this in data-driven study after study claiming just the right way to do "fill in the blank." We see this in common websearch terms about various facts and perceptions of life. When in doubt Google it.

We long to know, to make the right choice, to be sure.

Isn't this what you want?

But, certainty eludes us, thank God, and our lives, not to mention life itself, defy reduction, datafication, searchification, and categorization.

To know our purchases is not to know our innermost selves, and to search on Google is not to pursue a search for meaning.

We who contemplate matters of faith recognize, instead, the impenetrable depth of the human spirit and the vast and ever-changing mystery at the center of life. We recognize the beautiful complexity of the human heart, and we celebrate the humility, wisdom, and imagination that come from the cloud of our unknowing.

We know our longings to know and be known will drive us even on into the search that is spiritual life – longings never fully met, always guiding our steps.

Yet, it is important to our spiritual health that we recognize these longings at play in our daily lives as we interact with our tech-enhanced culture. It is important that we name them for what they are, lest they be subverted into baser pursuits... for there are many

agents in the digital data realm whose sole purpose is to guide our human longings into the market in ever more sophisticated ways – using technological advance to convert our desires into dollars.

It is our job to recall that these longings are powerful and hold the potential to be converted into so much more.

As people who long to be known and understood, we have a powerful capacity and drive to reach out to others in curiosity and compassion – our own longings the very impetus to meet the longings of others in mutual growth and connection.

As people who long to know and understand the heart of mystery, we have a powerful capacity to enter into a humble and lifelong search, our longings driving us, if we will let them, deep into the heart of a spiritual and meaningful life.

Desiring to be known, seen, and understood, and desiring to understand this life we lead, it is in our nature to enter into covenant with each other and with something greater than ourselves. But big data is not big enough. Only the “Love that Will Not Let Us Go,” the center of our faith, is deep and wide enough to hold us all.

That is the covenant we seek here as we focus our hearts on that which is worthy of us – that which transcends, transforms, and makes whole. Here in this church, we seek to loosen our grip on certainty and instead open ourselves to complexity and to one another. That is the only way we will be truly seen. The only way we are truly known.

So this morning, and every morning, may we renew our covenant with that Holy Source, and so doing, renew our deep engagement with a life which sees us in glimpses and knows us still, a life which we may understand but dimly, but which we live and love fully, courageously, and well.

Here, in this community, in this world, you are mysterious, and you are seen clearly, held with love.

Here, in the sight of Love Eternal, you are known.

Amen.