Thinking Outside the Boat

In 1997, during a business trip to Bavaria, I stood in the Altstadt, or City Center, of Munich. Surrounded by some of the most incredible architecture of the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries, I said to myself, "Wow! This looks just like the inside of Sleeping Beauty's Castle!" And that, my friends, is when I realized that growing up an hour from Disneyland had warped me for life.

My friends and I grew up with the weekly TV show, "The Wonderful World of Disney," where we watched Disneyland continuously being created, including the audioanimatronic Pirates, from electronic guts out to scurvy skin and red bandanas. By the time we were in high school, we knew all the ins and outs of Disneyland, like how to cut from Tomorrowland to Adventureland, and just where Walt's unmarked apartment was, above the perfumery in New Orleans Square. Six or eight times a year, a bunch of us would pile into a car early on a Saturday morning, drive up the coast to Anaheim, stay until the last firework had flared out over the castle, and drive back home to San Diego.

The Pirates ride was always my favorite. For those who have not been there, the Pirates is a boat ride that begins on a sleepy bayou and carries you through a series of tableaux: from a cannon battle between a pirate ship and a ship of the Royal Navy, to a pirate attack on a coastal town, and on to the town jail where a group of sorry Pirates in a cell beckon a mangy dog with the jail key in its mouth.

1

Walt Disney was a guy who thought outside the boat. He went bankrupt seven times while building Disneyland. Obviously that didn't stop him. The Haunted Mansion and the Pirates were the last two rides completed in Walt's lifetime, so it is no surprise the message of the Pirates ride is: "Be authentic, follow your dreams, and, Arr! Question Authority, mateys! Every act of <u>creation</u> has a little act of <u>destruction</u> at its core." Heady stuff for teenagers building new adult identities on the ashes of childhood. The Pirates was definitely the ride we identified with in high school.

Even so, thirty years later, when I heard they were making the Pirates into a movie, I was skeptical. They had tried it with Haunted Mansion, which was a big flop. And as fun as the Pirates ride was, it had no plot and no real characters.

But I gamely bought a ticket for opening night and joined a rowdy group of Pirates fans. A big woman in full pirate gear stood under the marquis of the Grand Lake Theater, waving an enormous Jolly Roger flag. Inside the theater were many more fans in pirate regalia, and the organist played sea shanties on the Mighty Wurlitzer. And there onscreen was Captain Jack, stepping off his sinking dinghy and staggering around like Pinocchio with his strings cut, which of course is pretty much what he was.

And so the quest was launched for Jack to recapture, by many creative means including death and rebirth, the Black Pearl, the ship he had loved and lost. And so too was launched the blockbuster Pirates of the Caribbean movie franchise.

2

The writers of the first Pirates movie had made a deep dive, far below the surface glamour of the seventeenth century pirates, to discover what it was that made them appealing.

The Pirates' Code that figures prominently in the plot of "The Black Pearl" has a real basis in the pirate experience. Seventeenth century pirates were a diverse group who lived outside the law, wrote their own rules for simple democracies that laid out the duties of Captain and crew, the methods for settling conflicts, and even included disability payments for pirates who lost limbs on the job. These primitive democracies included limits on the authority of the Captain, such as quartermaster control of pay and plunder, and juries composed of crewmen. Many of the pirates had fled service in the autocratic Royal Navy, where captains were allowed to beat and starve their crews, and to treat any dissent as mutiny. On pirate ships, authority was limited, and captains served at the pleasure of the crew. And the crew was fully within its rights to maroon the captain on a spit of an island with nothing but a jug of rum and a gun with one shot. Which, by the way, is how Captain Jack lost the Black Pearl.

While the pirates were busy inventing democracy and tyrannizing the Spanish Main, our Unitarian forebears were also busy questioning authority. In the seventeenth century, the heyday of the Pirates of the Caribbean, Unitarians were being burned at the stake for asserting that God is one rather than a trinity. Unitarianism has changed a lot over time, yet has always been characterized by a large degree of tolerance for persons and a low degree of tolerance for rules. From questioning the divinity of Jesus through our recognition of the universality of religion, as well as our refusal to believe in original sin

and, later, our embrace of original blessing, Unitarian-Universalism has always been about personal authenticity and creative expression. With that emphasis on freedom, it is no surprise that many Unitarian-Universalist congregations, including our own and several others in the Pacific Central District, have formed when a single congregation divides into two groups, each following its own authentic path. As new churches such as ours grow and prosper, it is important to keep our spirit of freedom and shared leadership alive. Personally I'm more than happy to share the pulpit – you don't even have to maroon me with a jug of rum.

I wanted to speak with you about Pirates today because in three week's time, on May 20, is the opening night of the fourth Pirates, "On Stranger Tides." I don't know about you, but I've had my share of strange tides in this lifetime. I would love it if all of us could share this event. I invite all of us to put on our eyeliner and celebrate together. The theater and time are not available yet, but we will be in touch with you all, so keep your bandanas at the ready. Let us gather in that other American temple, the movie theater, to celebrate our freedom of spirit.

Question Authority, mateys! Arr and amen.