

## A HOUSE FOR HOPE

---

A few months ago I was privileged to hear our Unitarian Universalist Association Moderator, Gini Courtier, talk about Unitarian Universalism as the religion for the twenty-first century. She pointed out that during the periods of our greatest growth we were talking about... religion. Yes. While we were at the forefront of social activism in issues such as women's voting rights, racial equality, economic justice, and peace, we were framing our activities in language that embodied reverence for the sacred, nourished community life, and carried forward the aspirations of our forebearers. We discovered, in our growth periods, that although we are grounded in particular streams of religious tradition that are deeply implicated in progressive social movements in America, social activism alone isn't enough. In our periods of greatest growth and influence, Unitarians and especially Universalists were talking to each other and other people about ultimate things using the language of religion. Ms. Courtier, noting our declining membership numbers, proposed we might want to try that again.

So today I want to speak to you of religion, specifically progressive or liberal religion. Last year two of our prominent Unitarian Universalist theologians, Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens, wrote a book entitled "A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century". In it they counter the common notion among liberals that every person must build his or her own theology from scratch. In fact, they say, "liberal and progressive people of faith inherit a communal theological house built by those who lived, labored, and loved before us. "

This morning we're going to look at the structure of that communal house – the garden, the foundation, the walls, the roof, the rooms, and the thresholds. We'll use these architectural components as metaphors for examining the theological components of our chosen faith. We'll talk about appraising the condition of our Marion County House for Hope, and seeing what we might want to consider restoring or renewing. We might even want to plan an addition. Let's start in the garden.

Images of gardens are prominent in eschatology. **Eschatology** is the topic of theology that deals with "final things". The end – of life and of the earth. It asks questions like "Where are we going?" "What is the purpose of existence?" The way in which one frames the answers to these questions have enormous social implications. For example, one such framework embodies what is popularly known as "The Rapture", which imagines a new paradise garden with its river and trees of life – and in some cultures, multitudes of virgins -- that will arrive in a future on the other side of apocalypse. People who subscribe to this eschatology are motivated to drive toward political and social solutions that place hope in destruction: why care about the environment when the droughts, floods, famine and pestilence brought by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the Bible? Why would you wish for peace in the Middle East

## A HOUSE FOR HOPE

---

if the intensification of violence portends Armageddon? The planners of the attack on the World Trade Centers and other U.S. sites subscribed to this theology of destruction.

In contrast, progressive eschatologies come in three major forms, all of which hope for the recognition and realization of paradise on earth, rather than after death or after the end of the world. These three are the Social Gospel eschatology – “We are here to build the kingdom of God on earth”: the Universalist eschatology, “God intends all souls to be saved”: and radically realized eschatology – “Paradise is here and now.” This progressive view is a hopeful one, and is rooted in ancient soil. Irenaeus, a second-century Christian leader, taught that the church has been planted as paradise in this world. This is not to say that the world is perfect or that we should focus on the good and deny the evil and pain around and within us. But, the church is a place where the “hand of comfort can be extended, the deep breath can be taken, and we can live at home in the world, knowing this is enough.”

Let’s move from the garden into the foundations of our house. When we think of foundations we think of immovable, unshakable, never-changing. **Theology** addresses how we can, or do, speak of the ultimate mystery that is the source and sustenance of our lives. It asks Who or what do we most deeply trust? What do we rely on as the foundational given, in relationship to which our lives find their meaning, purpose, and hope? A progressive doctrine of this ultimate mystery – which some call God -- must speak adequately both of ultimate reality as creative process and of the hope for liberation and wholeness of all people, not in the next life, but in the midst of earthly existence.

The foundation of our theological house is a paradox. Our progressive foundation is process theology, which speaks about a God who is no guarantor of the static order of being, but who is profoundly affected and changed by what we human being do to one another and to the creation.

While conservative theology often presents God as immutable, as having formed an unchangeable will for all that occurs, a progressive theology declares that static God of classical theism is dead. Process theology integrates a sense of the changing dynamics of underlying and ultimate Reality with the shaking and changing of the human-built foundations that still oppress so many of our sisters and brothers. A progressive theology declares that there is something solid, if changing, underneath it all. Progressive theology calls for continual evaluation and revision to accommodate the solid, but changing, foundation of our free faith.

**Ecclesiology** form the walls of our house. It means ‘called together’ and speaks about religious community. Because we at UUFMC have been so focused on this aspect of our metaphorical house, you will recognize the questions: “What is the nature and purpose of a religious community? What brings the religious community into being and holds it together?”

## A HOUSE FOR HOPE

---

How does the community define the relationships and roles of its members? What rituals and spiritual practices align the community with what it understands as the sacred, the source of life?"

These questions – these walls -- function to support the survival and thriving of a people... be it a sangha, a church, a mosque, a temple, a forest clearing, or an ashram. Author Rev. Rebecca Parker writes that she suspects that religious conservatism has grown because conservatives in recent decades have been better than liberals at creating and sustaining religious communities that offer people meaningful connection with one another and support in enduring life's trials and tribulations. I agree.

We progressives need to remember three things: First, that congregations can be 'communities of resistance' – countercultural habitations in which people learn ways to survive and thrive that can resist and sometimes even transform an unjust dominant culture. Second, congregations can provide an embodied experience of covenant and commitment among people. The UUFMC community is embodying that experience every time you welcome a new person into your midst, every time you engage in caring for another person, every time you articulate a new or revised policy – which, after all, is only a description of a way of being together. And every time you come into this house to care for the house itself. Finally, you can also ground life in shared rituals that nourish and strengthen people spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually. But please remember that if we focus solely on being a counter-cultural and covenanted and ritualistic community we risk becoming isolated and inbred. To move beyond banal individualism is to come together with others in religious communities.

But how do we protect these religious communities? Given the realities of tragedy, oppression, injustice, evil, failure, and sin in the world, what can protect us from harm? What can repair or restore lives and communities. What constitutes progressive religion's understanding of what we need to be saved from – and how? This is the theological topic of **soteriology**. And the consideration of these questions takes place under the metaphorical roof of our theological house.

The discussion of evil and salvation is not something we Unitarian Universalist spend much time talking about. And I'm not going to delve into any more deeply that to give you a progressive definition of what is meant by these words. Evil is that which exploits the lives of some to benefit the lives of others. Please hear that again. Evil is that which exploits the lives of some to benefit the lives of others. Evil congregates in transpersonal systems, in social structures that run on banal visions of the good life, lacking in wisdom or zest, and beneficial to some while leaving others bereft of life's necessities. It springs from ignorance and denial of the beauty and goodness of life. It can be neither denied nor destroyed. Evil operates in three primary modes: fraud, pomp, and greed. Resisting evil requires advanced wisdom, courage, and

## A HOUSE FOR HOPE

---

skill at unmaking deception, evading being duped or tempted. Resisting evil requires standing grounded in things of greater value than prestige in the eyes of others. Resisting evil requires we recognize abundance, rather than running on an imagined emptiness and seeking to accumulate more than is needed. Next week we will be talking about this imaginary scarcity and asking the question, “how much is enough”?

Salvation in the progressive religious sense is something more than either idealistic commitment to building a better world, or otherworldly escape from punishment. Salvation is fully arriving in this life, turning our faces toward its complex realities and engaging our whole being in creative, compassionate, loving interaction with what is at hand. It is not something one possesses individually; it is something one participates in communally, including in communion with those who have come before.

There are two salvation stories told in Western Christian history in which Unitarian Universalism is rooted. The first – and dominant – is that the source of evil (the devil) and salvation from it (Jesus’ death on the cross) is outside of human control. That is not our story. Our story -- the liberal theological story -- emphasizes that both sin and salvation, evil and the redemption of evil, are in our hands. Our hands. Both sin and salvation involve the exercise of human powers. We do not carry our powers in isolation, however. Resources of healing, resistance, and survival permeate life. By these we are sustained and from these we can draw to use our powers to counter evil with good.

Unitarian Universalists, at our most churlish, ask What do we need to be saved from? My friends, what we need to be saved from is ourselves. We need to be saved from our self-involvement and the mess we make when we forget ‘right relationship’ with one another and with our world. When we ignore the question: how much is enough?

So far we have considered the garden, the foundation, the walls, and the roof of our house for hope. But what about the rooms in our house? Within any house of hope of whatever tradition – the welcoming rooms of the house breathes a sense of the Holy, a response to the Sacred Spirit or Spirits present in life, inspiring creativity, compassion, and social action. **Pneumatology** considers the doctrine of the Spirit. How do we understand the nature of our being human together? Despite the secular hope that religion might simply vanish, humans continue to be religion-making beings. Worship, art, ritual, and music shape religious community, infusing the atmosphere of its environment, making space for people to breathe. The 19<sup>th</sup> century progressives, our own William Ellery Channing among them, understood that human dignity was not automatic. It had to be cultivated and nurtured – you had to grow a soul, and you did that by aiming for zest and joy by engaging in creative expressions through art, music, ritual, and worship.

## A HOUSE FOR HOPE

---

Today many people say, “I am spiritual but not religious”. They want to connect more deeply with the Spirit, but they have little confidence that the Spirit is going to show up at a worship service or religious ritual. They may be right. Too much of what today is called “spirituality” seems more like what a friend calls “bottled fog.” It lacks the full dimensions of a progressive and engaged faith that can shelter the Spirit of Life in all of its depth, breadth, and height. Perhaps this is why music remains so central to sustaining the human spirit: because it alone can express the full range and tempo of our spiritual lives. The spirituality of an engaged and prophetic faith, whether it is being practiced in the rehearsal hall known as a “sanctuary,” or out in the streets in protests, or through online organizing, petitions, or stockholder activism, is always in protection of human dignity, and is always going to require music – all kinds of music -- for sustenance.

Progressive religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be stronger if it can engage not only music but also the visual arts in developing a welcoming room for the Spirit in our house for hope. UUFMC has this knowledge in their bones. The tapestries, and the wood carvings and the videos by Rita animate this yearning. When we consider how much is enough I would like to suggest that there’s never enough arts, ritual, and worship in our progressive House for Hope.

The final architectural component we are going to consider today is the threshold – in the language of systematic theology, **missiology**. What is the mission of a liberal religious community? If it is not to bring others into one’s house to convert them to one’s own way of thinking, how can dialogue and partnership with others advance efforts to promote justice and compassion in this world. What constitutes a progressive missiology today – one that offers an open door to hospitable interchanges as essential to the flourishing of life? What thresholds do we need to cross to establish peace?

Thresholds are sacred places symbolizing the permeable boundary between a community’s inner circle and the wider world. We’ve been talking about this in our consideration of the walls and gates marking a community. The threshold marks the importance of movement between shelter and adventure – of arriving home and of setting out. They invite reflection on the relationship between those inside and those outside a given framework of meaning. In the way of progressive faith, the open door -- the gate -- stands at the threshold of our theological house, its doorsill well-worn by comings and goings.

As we have seen today, people cross the threshold of this Fellowship impelled by life’s joys, injustices, difficulties, and hopes. They come looking for a way to amplify their happiness, solidify their commitments, ease their difficulties, and fulfill their hopes. They come believing that the religious community can do all these things. And it can if we will just live into what we say we believe. We hold a feast of life spread for all – it is ours to share with any who can find nourishment within our walls.

## A HOUSE FOR HOPE

---

What is the mission of this Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County? What will you do with your abundance? What is sacred to you? How will you express it? The answers will provide the furnishings for your house of hope. And, as with most furnishings, they will change to accommodate new and perhaps unforeseen situations. I trust you will have the courage to re-arrange or even replace them as needed.

Within our theological house of progressive faith there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent. Our theological house looks beyond the house we heard about in the word for all ages. Our theological house looks more like the entire farm! But there is also a defining focus: a devotion to the flourishing of life. People of progressive faith care for the sacredness of this world, this life, here and now. We do not look to a world to come that will be more valuable than this world. We cherish our bodies, this earth, this time and place that is within our grasp. We reverence the intimate, intricate, and unshakeable reality that all life is connected. We will do everything in our power to assure that this covenant of life, for life, is honored. And we seek to connect our circle with other circles of life, to expand our circle into every-widening ripples of influence for good. To Nurture our Spirits and Help Heal Our World. May it be so. Enshallah. Shalom. And Amen.