

“WE WAIT FOR YOUR KIND WARMTH”
 Building Dedication for the UU Congregation of South County
 Richard S. Gilbert – Peace Dale, RI – March 29, 2009

Among the many experiences I have had at our Unitarian Universalist Association General Assemblies, one stands out. It was a skit entitled, “The Saga of Global Pagan Airlines.” The flight attendant announced: “We are now making our final descent. Please return to your place in time, bring your hearts forward and put your cynicism away in its upright and locked position.”¹

I congratulate you as you make your “final descent” in the long process of procuring a religious home. I am pleased to be with you at this “place in time,” and I ask you to “bring your hearts forward” to this celebration and “put your cynicism away” in this tumultuous time when there are people-created tsunamis everywhere.

However much this may seem like a unique moment in history, I think of a favorite cartoon which gives us perspective. Adam and Eve are walking in the Garden of Eden. He says, “My dear, we live in an age of transition.” She says, “So what else is new?”

So what else is new? History – the history of a congregation – does not stand still. History is transition. Caught up as you are in the present celebration, it is important to realize that you are part of that history – what you did yesterday helped create today; what you do today shapes tomorrow. You shape history or it shapes you.

I recall at a church council retreat one fall our District Executive involved us in an exercise to re-create the history of our congregation. We were tested for our knowledge of dates and personalities. Mercifully, we were not given grades. However, we did experience an incredible pride in who we had been, who we were and who we could yet become. Today, then, we come to celebrate your past, but more, to express confidence in your future in this, your new home.

There are some unique aspects to what you have done as you have moved from an American Legion Hall to a Roman Catholic chapel – a mind-stretching thought. For example, what do you do with the confessionals? While confession is no doubt good for the soul, I suspect those booths would be uncomfortable for most of us. The transformation of this chapel from Roman Catholic to Unitarian Universalist reminds me of two stories – one fictional, one factual.

There is the possibly apocryphal story of an Episcopalian congregation which sold their building to a Unitarian Universalist fellowship. The fellowship hung a curtain over an open space behind the altar in order to increase a feeling of intimacy in their meetings. At the same time, they found a need to put a new floor on the social hall, so they moved their coffee urn into the space in back of the curtain. A few days later, an Episcopalian work party returned to pick up some furniture and equipment which they had left. As the party was working, one person looked behind the curtain and immediately called his friends over and said. “Look, it’s true! They do worship a coffee pot!”

As one who is addicted to chocolate rather than coffee, I can emphatically say, “NO!” Even if you love your coffee and your coffee hour, I suspect you will agree. Communal worship is the central act in the life of this congregation. In fact, I will go so far as to say that when Unitarian Universalists meet like this on a Sunday, I believe we create something that is holy. God, for me, is not an entity with length and breadth and substance. God might be more properly spoken of as a verb. The divine comes into being as we connect with one another in Beloved Community - in which our care for one another overflows the boundaries of this community and flows into the wider world. A community is created in which we say not “they!” but “we!” All of us came from

the same beginning; our destinations are ultimately identical. But on the way our lives are inexorably, inescapably, inevitably intertwined with others. They are our nutrient. They are chocolate for the soul.

Another parallel. During my ministry there, the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, acquired a pipe organ in a most intriguing way. When it became known that St. Bernard's Roman Catholic Seminary would close, our Music Director heard through the grapevine that the school would sell its Baroque organ at a bargain basement price. To make a long story short, 18 members of the church, including the Gilberts, bought the organ and subsequently sold it to the church. The following summer scores of volunteers disassembled that organ pipe by pipe, wrapped every one lovingly in a blanket and moved it to its current home across town. It was then painstakingly re-assembled by volunteers, with a moving company hired to transport the console. I will never forget one board meeting which was interrupted by a cacophonous wheezing and groaning as the organ was being voiced. The organ dedication was a magnificent celebration, much as you are having today. We called our collective congregational experience "the great organ transplant."

I find parallels in your experience as you dedicate a former Roman Catholic chapel as a Unitarian Universalist Church. Keeping that in mind, along with a popular TV program, we might call it "the extreme theological makeover." As you recreate the spirit of this space, you do well to recognize the historical importance of this building in the spiritual lives of others. They were spiritual seekers who took another path – not our path – but a sincere and honest path. I call upon you to honor that past and that path even as you embark on a distinctly Unitarian Universalist pilgrimage.

While respecting the religious traditions of those who have occupied this place, you need to create a space that will, in Theodore Parker's words, "have the smell of our own ground."

There is a fascinating relationship between a congregation and the space it holds sacred. It's difficult to have a communal spiritual center without a geographical center. We need anchoring in a particular place in which we feel religiously comfortable. It is good to be among those who know and love us. It is the caring community of this congregation that beckons to us – friend and stranger – to come in and feel at home. At this particularly perilous time in our nation's history, you will gather here to heal the wounds of an economic culture gone slightly mad; you will come here for solace and for hope because none among you will be immune to what is happening during this cultural crisis.

In our Unitarian Universalist religious education materials there is a curriculum called "Being at Home" – formerly "The Haunting House." I rather prefer the latter term – it is far more poetic, even though somewhat confusing. The introduction reads: "Pause now, look back on your years of living in homes. Unlock your memory and imagination. Close your eyes ... remember ... remember a curtain blowing at a window ... car headlights moving across a dark wall ... the worn hollow of a favorite chair ... the smell of sizzling bacon ... the creak of a swing. Remember a hiding place, a crying place, a place with friendly people. How did you feel there? What did you do?"

A church can be a home, too, a spiritual center which helps us orient ourselves in a seemingly rudderless world. It is no substitute for the family, but it can be a second home where we try to find ourselves and our place in the scheme of things.

Pause now, look back on your years in houses of worship. Unlock your memory and imagination. Close your eyes ... remember ... remember the majestic sound of an organ that told you this was a special place ... remember candles at Christmas ... remember the Menorah being lit, lights flickering against a dark wall ... remember the hush of expectancy ... remember children being brought into their new world ... remember lovers exchanging vows ... remember the times of growing up when people, once children, occupied pew and pulpit ... remember the touch of hands when you were hurt ... remember voices of encouragement that sustained you through the dark night of suffering ... remember the glorious sound of choral music and the congregation fully engaged in singing a favorite hymn – remember the joy of reunion – remember being challenged to go out and repair a broken world. Remember? How did you feel there? What did you do?

I remember – I remember the Bristol Universalist Church – a second home in my childhood, a place where I was valued and nourished – forget that it is now the United Church of Christ. I loved the people then and I love them now. I remember the New England meeting house innes of the First Unitarian Church in Cleveland, scene of my first ministry – remember my bumbling and stumbling ... and their forgiveness. I remember the ivy-covered Unitarian Church in downtown Ithaca, a scene of tumultuous times during the late 1960's. Remember? How did I feel? What did I do?

As your eyes survey this sacred space what do they see? What do you look for? What about this space moves you? Of course you will gaze upon form and color and space that will endear itself to you as you worship here. I suspect, however, as your eyes take in this festive occasion it is seeing the people among whom you are sitting that will that etch itself in your memory. Without them this space will never become a sanctuary.

One of members of the Rochester church penned a poem that beautifully captures the relationship of a building and a congregation. He writes from the perspective of the bricks that constitute the walls enclosing and embracing one spiritual home.

“We are the bricks
 pedigreed, masterly aligned,
 staunch but quite impersonal:
 cold and mute on steel and molded sand
 we wait for your kind warmth to prove us beautiful.
 We will disregard your wealth -
 we will disregard your poverty -
 we will heed nothing but your pulsing hearts
 your minds in quest of truth
 your outstretched hands:
 With these attending we will glow
 as no simple bricks of straw and clay,
 but as the proud particles of a God's house
 you have contrived to hope for.
 Bring hate, deceit, smugness
 and a hundred other ancient illnesses within this house
 but for excoriation and not for use.
 Bring love, bring faith, bring youth, bring age,
 bring memories and new visions,
 bring wisdom incomplete -
 your dreams will stir the magic of the hearth within.

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 mute and cold on steel and moulded sand
 we wait for your kind warmth to prove us beautiful.”²

The late David Rhys Williams, one of my predecessors in the Rochester pulpit, summed up that spirit when he wrote: "To me, this church is no dead pile of stone and timber - but a living thing filled with the voices and the faces of those who have worshipped here over the years." What would the bricks here say to you? What will they say to you as you live within the spiritual home they enclose?

The message is clear. A congregation is more than a particular building, more than a specific minister, more even than a single group of people. In Biblical language, it is a “great cloud of witnesses” committed to the liberal way in religion. It has maintained a laser-like view of the importance of its presence in the lives of its people and in the life of the wider community. This church is a living organism that transcends any particular time and any particular people.

At the risk of heresy, then, I must take issue with one of our great forebears, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, "Men are less together than they are alone," and "Men descend to meet." Quite the opposite. We are more when we are together than when we are alone – alone we are individuals, and we honor our uniqueness. But together we are members, one of another. We rise to meet, to encounter one another, because no one of us has enough wisdom, enough energy, enough courage to face our fate alone. We are meant to be companions. Our lives are embedded in the community. Theologically speaking, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This church is a place carved out of time and material and hope in which people can live and learn, love and serve; a sacred space where you are free to be who you are and to do what you can for others, holy ground where matters of consequence are considered. Here is a space in which one finds comfort in time of stress, celebration in time of depression, hope in time of fear, people in time of loneliness, healing in time of brokenness, a passion for peace and justice in a time of war and economic turmoil.

As much time, talent and treasure as you have invested in this sanctuary, it remains to be seen what you will do with the opportunity you have created for yourselves. Much has been done to beautify the aesthetics of this space; it remains to be seen what you will do to enhance the lives of those who worship here and the lives beyond these graceful walls. Here you are surrounded by walls that will guard your grief; hold your happiness; shelter your prophecies of justice; contain your common commitments. I wish you well in this, your new spiritual home.

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¹ “The Sage of Global Pagan Airlines,” by Fred Wooden, UUA General Assembly, June 25, 1998.

² *Invitation* by Lorran Latham