

Sermon for First Unitarian Church, Wilmington, DE

October 16, 2012

Gini Courter, Moderator, Unitarian Universalist Association

In the UUA Meditation Manual **We Build Temples in the Heart** *Chicago area Unitarian Universalist layman, carpenter and poet Patrick Murfin writes:*

We have seen the great cathedrals,
stone laid upon stone,
carved and cared for
by centuries of certain hands;

seen the slender minarets
soar from dusty streets
to raise the cry of faith

to the One and Only God;

seen the placid pagodas
where gilded Buddhas squat
amid the temple bells and incense.

We have seen the tumbled temples half-buried in the sands,
choked with verdant tangles,
sunk in corralled seas—
old truths toppled and forgotten.

We have even seen the wattled huts,
the sweat lodge hogans,
the wheeled yurts,
and the Ice Age caverns
where unwritten worship
raised its knowing voices.

But here we build temples in our hearts.
Side by side we gather.

We mix the mortar of the scattered dust
Of the Holy of Holies
With the sacred water
Of the Ganges;

Lay Moorish alabaster
On the blocks of Angkor Wat
And rough-hewn Stonehenge slabs;

Plumb Doric columns for strength of reason,
Square them with stern Protestant planks,

And illuminate all with Chartres' jeweled windows
And the brilliant lamps of science.

Yes, here we build temples in our hearts.
Side by side we come,
Scavenging the ages for wisdom,
Cobbling together as best we may
The stones of a thousand altars, leveling with doubt,
Framing with skepticism,
Measuring by logic,
Sinking firm foundations in the earth
As we reach for the heavens.

Here we build temples in our hearts –
A temple for each heart,
A village of temples,
None shading another,
Connected by well-worn paths,
Built alike on sacred ground.

The Sermon Introduction

I do not know when it began, but you do.

It began with a discontent, a gnawing in the soul, an out-of-placeness. It began with heresy. Or perhaps it began with an expansiveness that drove you to seek, to inquire. It began with thoughtful inquiry.

And it was a friend, an acquaintance, a colleague who was Christian, Jew, Moslem, a Hindu stranger at the dentist's office, an unchurched but discerning woman in a book discussion group who said "You sound like a Unitarian". A member of this congregation or another said "Come visit my church", and it wasn't an intrusion, it was a kindness, a courtesy, for you found your way home.

No -- you are a home bred Unitarian Universalist. Your parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents trusted this faith with what they held most dear in the world: the hearts, the minds, the very souls of their children.

No -- you searched on the web, you answered a survey on belief.net. You entered some magic combination of words, clicked the I Feel Lucky button, and Googled your way to this saving faith.

I do not know when it began, but you do....

Draw that beginning near and hold it close for our time together on this Sunday morning in this annual season of harvest and renewal.

(And the sermon begins...)

I am so happy to be here with you. I'm grateful to Josh for inviting me to spend this weekend with you, and for the time I spent with your board yesterday morning and for last night with the young Unitarian Universalists and others from this congregation who are coming to Justice GA 2012 in Phoenix next June.

I live in northwestern Michigan, in the land of snow and ice, of winter isolation and summer beaches filled with tourists – yet another kind of isolation. I have lived there for many years – long enough that I believe I am an expert on what it is like to keep the faith alive in the hinterlands. And whether I'm in northern Michigan, or southern Louisiana, central Florida, northern California, or here in Delaware, one thing is true: Boston is a long way away. Actually, two things are true: Boston, the headquarters of our faith, is not only a long way away, but in some weird way it is actually the same distance from all of those places. Now in some faith traditions, geographic distance presents huge challenges. If you're a Muslim, it's harder to do the Hajj from Dover than from Dubai. The Vatican is closer to Milan than to Wilmington. But for Unitarian Universalists, we need travel no further than we have traveled this morning to visit our holy of holies.

*Here we build temples in our hearts –
A temple for each heart,
A village of temples,
None shading another,
Connected by well-worn paths,
Built alike on sacred ground.*

This landscape of temples is an image that appeals, an imagination that I've always thought has a Canadian feel. Canadians and mainland Americans handle diversity differently...we have different national myths about how the many become one. America's myth is the "great melting pot", while Canadians often use the imagery of a quilt or a mosaic. The American story is a story of assimilation, a Borg story right out of Star Trek: *resistance is futile...you will be assimilated*. And our self imagining is critical. If our image is a melting pot, we can spend an inordinate amount of time concerned with what the final mix will look like. Am I being melted into some spirituality that feels personally foreign? If you melt me, how will I find myself? What will I have to give up? The melting pot is a container filled with the personal loss required to become part of a recipe not necessarily of our making....

Building temples of the heart is an image of Unitarian Universalism not as a melting pot, but as a feast, a buffet, a work of art, fabric assembled by loving hands. Here in our Unitarian Universalist quilt, there is room for all, each square or triangle or other-shaped piece in its place, a place of meaning for each of us, a place for each of us to find and live a unique ministry in the world.

*Yes, here we build temples in our hearts.
Side by side we come,
A temple for each heart,
A village of temples,
None shading another,
Connected by well-worn paths,
Built alike on sacred ground.*

And we are not alone this morning. This is not the only village of temples. There are similar villages in Orlando and Philadelphia, in Seattle and Boston and Salt Lake City. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations includes member congregations in every state. Reach out and feel the hearts that beat in those other villages, hear the echoes of voices, some singing the same hymns we sing here this morning. Here and elsewhere in the United States, we build temples in our hearts.

But wait, there's more. There are Unitarians or Universalists or Unitarian Universalists in towns and villages in Transylvania and the Khasi Hills of India, in Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand and the Philippines. There are Unitarian Universalists gathering in Kenya, Uganda, and Somalia. Feel the hearts beating in common rhythm. Hear the echoes of hymns in Hungarian and Finnish, in French and Spanish, in Urdu and Tamil, songs that we have not yet learned to sing in languages we do not yet understand. Then move beyond words, beyond language, into our common liturgy – liturgy: literally, *the work of the people*. Here, and elsewhere, we build temples on the sacred grounds of human hearts

and connect those private, personal temples with the well worn paths of community – within a congregation, between congregations, around the world.

Here, and elsewhere, the soul's song, the heart's deepest longing is similar. Here's what's in my heart. Maybe some of what is in my heart is in your heart, too. I want to experience that which moves me to awe and wonder and humility -- what some call "the holy" -- not once, but over and over again. That experience moves me to gratitude, to compassion, to a desire to make at least one corner of the world a better place not only for me and mine, but for every other heart that can be so moved. I want to love life so much that I am compelled to live a life that leaves a mark. The Marge Piercy poem excerpted in our hymnal notes that we, like the Hopi vases and Grecian urns in museums were made to be used, that **the pitcher cries out for water to carry, and a person for work that is real.**

Philosopher and performance poet George David Miller puts it another way:

*The big moments of life are not:
When the walls of Jericho tumble
When Haley's Comet sparkles across the sky
When a knockout punch fells a fighter
Or when Sisyphus' boulder finally goes over the hill.
The big moments of life
Are not when the boulder clears the ridge
But when we tie our shoes
Spit on our hands
Take deep breaths
Flex our muscles
Focus all our energy
And do it all over again*

*Realizing
Each moment is history
Each moment is passion
Each action is meaning*

*With Big Mac breath
Tide scented clothes
And a Wal-Mart fanny pack
We can still raise our arms
To the heavens and scream
"I have lived, I have lived"—
Carving **epic lives**
From ordinary moments.*

Our foremothers and forefathers knew this. Examine the history of any significant social institution in this country, and you'll find it peopled with our people – with Unitarians and Universalists. From public health to public education to election reform to civil rights, they had a commitment to improve public life, to build the common good. We should not be shy about our history. We should name those on whose shoulders we stand.

For example – in 2005 the World Health Organization estimated that basic health care and nutrition for the entire world would cost \$13 billion annually. That same year, Europeans and North Americans spent \$17 billion on pet food and \$21 billion on cosmetics and perfume. We have the resources to create a healthy world. It isn't a question of resources, but of values, of compassion.

When we speak from our values and insist on health care for every child, we stand on the shoulders of Martha May Eliot, a pediatrician who piloted community-wide programs to end rickets, a childhood disease that disproportionately affected poor children. For more than fifty years Martha May Eliot played a pivotal role in the development of health services for mothers and children worldwide.

Each moment is history....Each moment is passion....Each action is meaning

When we stand against racial and ethnic discrimination, when we stand against racism and oppression, we stand on the shoulders of Whitney Young. Young dedicated his life to the struggle for racial justice. We stand on the shoulders of James Reeb, martyred in Selma. We stand on the shoulders of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the 54th Regiment.

When you work for marriage equality, or against racial profiling or religious intolerance, when you demand public policies and practices that reflect our belief in the worth and dignity of each person, you stand on the side of love firmly rooted in our tradition and shoulder to shoulder with our sister and brother Unitarian Universalists across the United States. In over a thousand towns yesterday UU young adults and UU Vietnam vets, UU librarians and UU elders and UU clergy were holding posters and billboards and vespers services and standing on the side of love with the 99%.

Each moment is history....Each moment is passion....Each action is meaning

When we give our money and our time to rebuild churches, communities and nations lost to natural and human-made disasters we stand in the tradition of Unitarians and Universalists who donated to rebuild the churches and communities of burned out Chicago and San Francisco over a century ago. The need for our Unitarian Universalist message is so great that we pick up hammers and trowels and Guest at Our Table boxes and paintbrushes and pots and pans and extra blankets and coats and put them to work with other faithful people in Louisiana and Mississippi, in Haiti and Japan, to create the world that can be *only if we care enough to breathe it into being*.

I've often been one of the people who work on the canvass – the annual giving campaign – in my congregation. Sometimes a person or family, new to our church or not, will ask me “Well, what do I get for the money we contribute?” That's the wrong question, but you've asked the right person. We're not talking about a Costco account or a gym membership here. Giving to our congregation, giving to our faith is never about what we get. **It is about who we are.**

Hear these words from my friend, The Reverend Burton Carley, minister of our church in Memphis:

We did not create or earn or deserve this day. It is a gift to us. We don't own anything. The world and everything in it, whether its source comes from Creation or humanity, is on loan to us, entrusted to our care for our time.

Truly we will take nothing with us when we die. Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. What we enjoy, our homes, our businesses, our cities and towns, art and literature, the rivers and oceans, the mountains and forests and plains, our family and friends, our bodies, our religious tradition, our congregations, are on loan. We do not own them.

Therefore, the only significance of things is our relationship to them.

We are the trustees and stewards of life's gifts, and what this requires of us is to care for everything that outlasts us, in humility and gratitude to nurture and savor what has been given, and to return everything at the end in as good or better condition than we received it.

Giving is a way of saying thank you and the recognition of my dependence, and generosity a way of life that takes seriously my stewardship of the blessings and grace given to me for no reason at all.

...I am profoundly grateful for a religious tradition, for a congregation...that enables me to return such a small proportion of what I have received. So you see that my giving is not about money, it is about being in right relationship to everything that matters most, to life itself, to God in whom I live and move and have my being.

Like Burton, I am grateful for a faith that inspires so many to live lives of passion and meaning, to build the common good, to do the patient, sometimes heartbreaking work that is needed to improve our communities and the world. I am grateful for all those who labor to create loving authentic faith communities where we can learn how to live balanced lives in an unbalanced society.

I am grateful for this congregation. There is a better life in Wilmington and the surrounding communities because you are here. The conversation in Delaware is different because you are here. You have worked hard to create a sanctuary for those with concerns for reason and justice to find sustaining community. Here, you have made a home for the generations where elders and adults and children are valued, where we can that hope each child who enters will be a life-long Unitarian Universalist. You work for justice, equity, compassion in the larger community and last night many of you committed to come to General Assembly in Phoenix in June and work for justice there on the border. Bless you.

You and I are members of a faith that inspires commitment. Ours is the faith of Abigail and John Adams, Paul Revere and Daniel Webster, Ambrose Bierce, Charles Dickens, Florence Buck, Olympia Brown, Albert Schweitzer, Rod Serling, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Carl Sandburg, May Sarton, e e cummings, Pete Seeger, Frank Lloyd Wright, P.T. Barnum, Jane Addams, Clara Barton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Darwin, Maria Mitchell, Joseph Priestly, Tim Berners-Lee, Clarence Darrow, Julia Ward Howe, Dorthea Dix, Forest Church and Christopher Reeve. Your congregation's membership in the Unitarian Universalist Association connects you to this shining history of service.

When your children and their children create lists of Unitarian Universalists whose lives serve as shining examples, Unitarian Universalists who built the common good, don't you hope they will speak your name, tell how you carved an epic life from ordinary moments, how you found and lived a grateful life with the sure knowledge that each moment is history, each moment is passion, each action is meaning?

I want to be remembered in my congregation. I assume you want to be remembered right here in yours. I assume you want to know, need to know, that one hundred years from now, thousands of Unitarian Universalists will gather here, light a chalice, worship in its glow, and take that light out into the world. What other immortality do you know you will find?

Friends, alone each of us is small, frail, mortal, temporal and temporary. Together, though, we are the very stuff of which hope is made. There is endless potential for world-shaking change generated by those well-worn paths from one human heart to the next to the next. Thank you for your faith, for your faithfulness, for walking and building and tending the paths of this community.

*Here – and everywhere -- we build temples in our hearts –
A temple for each heart,
A village of temples,
None shading another,
Connected by well-worn paths,
Built alike on sacred ground.*

Amen