

“Our Universalist Heritage & the ‘Cathedral of the World’ Metaphor”

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Vashon Island Unitarian Universalists

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Theme for October: “Heritage”

Sermon Title & Description: “Our Universalist Heritage & the ‘Cathedral of the World’ Metaphor”– In concert with VIUU’s October theme of “heritage,” this sermon will summarize our Universalist heritage and then explore theologian Dr. Forrest Church’s “Cathedral of the World” metaphor as a “universalist” theology for the 21st century.

Chalice Lighting

Two weeks ago, your minister, the Rev. Victoria Poling, led the service on the “Soul Matters” theme for October, the theme of “heritage.” I will be working that theme with you this morning as well, and I’ve chosen the words for the Lighting of our Chalice with “heritage” in mind. They are words freely adapted from the 6th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew scriptures:

We are ever bound in community:
We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig.
We profit from persons we did not know.
We light this chalice in thanksgiving
For those who have passed their light to us.

(Adapted by Peter Raible & Bruce Bode from Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

Introduction to Responsive Reading

Beginning, now, to explore this theme of “heritage” with you, let me, in the lead-up to a Responsive Reading, bring forward what, for me, is an important distinction, namely, a distinction between the broader category of “being religious as a species” and the narrower category of “belonging to a religious organization as individuals within that species.”

As I see it, our “heritage” in terms of biological evolution is that we are a “religious species” on this planet – perhaps, *the* “religious species” – in that we are the ones who are compelled to ask what may be called the “religious questions.”

Released from sheer instinct through the evolutionary development of the neo-cortex of the brain, we humans are those creatures who are forced to question the meaning of our

lives in the face of the knowledge of our death. We humans are those creatures who, looking up at the stars in both wonder and worry, are compelled to ask:

Who are we in this vast universe in which we find ourselves, and what sense, if any, are we to make of it?

What meaning and purpose, if any, may be ascribed to our lives, and how should we live our lives? What ought we to be about?

To what or to whom should we ultimately devote ourselves, and what is worthy of our devotion?

To what or to whom should we give our allegiance, and what is worthy of our allegiance?

What inspires our deepest reverence, and what is worthy of our reverence?

These, I would say, are some of the quintessential questions that describe the “religious enterprise,” and these are concerns that we humans *as a species* have to deal with.

This, therefore, is our “heritage” from the “biological, evolutionary perspective.”

Then, we come to another part of our human heritage, namely, “religious organizations.” Such organizations, at bottom, come into being in order to attend to these “religious” questions – these questions of ultimate meaning, value, devotion, commitment, and relatedness. And, of course, organized religion does this in many, many ways and with a great variety of answers.

This brings me, then, in case you were wondering, to our Responsive Reading. It’s written by the Rev. W. Waldemar W. Argow.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar.

CONGREGATION: Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire; ancient as the soldier is the priest.

MINISTER: Older than written language is spoken prayer; older than painting is the thought of the nameless one.

CONGREGATION: Religion is the first and last – the universal language of the human heart.

MINISTER: Differing words describe the outward appearance of things; diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within.

CONGREGATION: Yet every person’s hunger is the same, and heart communicates with heart.

MINISTER: Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one, with a holy land washed by ocean waters, or a holy land within the heart.

CONGREGATION: In temperament we differ, yet we are dedicated to the one august destiny; creeds divide us, but we share a common quest.

MINISTER: Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems.

CONGREGATION: For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family. (W. Waldemar W. Argow)

Reading

In my introduction to the Responsive Reading, I made the distinction between belonging to a “religious species” and belonging to a “religious organization.” As so, now, I turn to “heritage” in terms of this particular religious organization, the Vashon Island Unitarian Universalists, which is a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

The most prominent public theologian within our Association within the last generation or so has been the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, who served for nearly thirty years as the senior minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church of New York City, until his untimely death from esophageal cancer in 2009 at the age of 61.

This morning I want to introduce you to two metaphors from Forrest Church’s very last book – he was the author or co-author of 25 books – and his last book was titled *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*.

In the introduction to this final book, Forrest presents what to me is a stunning illustration of “universalism,” both in terms of its value and importance in our modern world *and* the challenge and difficulty of embracing and living out a “universalist” perspective. Forrest doesn’t give a name to this metaphor, but I’ll name it “Universalism & the Luminous Light of the Moon’s Path over Water.”

Universalism & the Luminous Light of the Moon’s Path over Water

“Universalism speaks with particular eloquence to the challenge of our times. Today our neighbors live not only across the street, but across the world as well. During an age when we share a global economy and communications system in addition to nuclear and environmental threats, universalism addresses our era’s most dangerous dysfunction: theological parochialism. Every denomination, including my own Unitarian Universalist Association, can fall prey to such nearsightedness. To fulfill its promise, modern universalism must witness against fundamentalists on the left as well as those on the right. By definition, “universalism” is not the property of any discrete religious body, including those that include it in their names.

“To illustrate this point, which pivots at the center of my theology, let me take you on a brief initial journey. We shall walk together to the water’s edge and follow the light of the moon wherever it may lead.

“We are standing on the shoreline of a mountain lake, moonlight lapping against our boot tips, mesmerized by the golden carpet laid out over the water as if lowered from the heavens to meet us at the very place we stand. Before us, along the moon’s glorious trail, we can see all the way to the lake’s rocky bottom. Above the sunken branches, we watch the water dance and sparkle, a rack of moonbeams on each ripple’s crest. Across the lake, where the moon is rising, our path turns to liquid gold.

“Standing on the shore some distance to our right, a man contemplates the same view yet appears shrouded in darkness. To our left stands a woman, her silhouette all but obscured by the blackness that envelops her.

“Pondering these two apparently benighted people, we wonder to ourselves, ‘What can they possibly be thinking? Encompassed by darkness, the lake before them flat and lifeless, if only they would join us at the foot of the moon’s luminous path, they, too, could bathe in celestial light.’

“Henry David Thoreau once chastised the Florentine artist and adventurer Benvenuto Cellini for mistaking the aura he saw surrounding his shadow on a dew-drenched day as a special sign of divine recognition. In the moonlight, we experience a like illusion, as do the man and woman to our right and left, who share our vision though we perceive them to be in darkness. Judging only by what they see, they, too, may feel themselves uniquely illumined. To their eyes, it is we who appear to languish in darkness.

“Expressive of both the wonder and danger of religion, on the one hand, the moon’s golden light extends a path across the lake to the feet of everyone who stands under the spell of its supernal glow; on the other, given that each onlooker sees only his or her own golden pathway, all others standing in apparent darkness, we are left with the impression that we walk the one true path alone, whereas those who fail to join us are lost. Here nature can serve as our theological tutor. She reminds us that, in almost every way that matters, we and our most distant neighbor, sprung from a single source and sharing the same destiny, are one. This revelation encapsulates the essence of universalist theology. To perceive things as they are, not merely as they appear, we must view them with parallax vision. We must imagine seeing them [things] through others’ eyes as well as through our own.”

(Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*, pp. xi-xii)

Period of Silence

I invite you, now, into a couple minutes of silence, encouraging you to reflect on what it means for you to attempt to see things through the eyes and life-experience of others.

Part I: “Our Universalist Heritage & the ‘Cathedral of the World’ Metaphor”

Introduction

I’m dividing the sermon portion of this service into two parts. In the first part, I will introduce Dr. Church’s primary metaphor related to his universalist theological perspective; then, in the second part, I will speak about five principles embodied in this metaphor. But let me begin with a little “Universalist” history.

A little history on “Universalism”

Historically, “universalism” is the theological doctrine within the Christian religion of “universal salvation.”

This notion, declared a heresy in 544, goes back to the third century and to the church father, Origen, who, in 225, wrote a book titled *On First Principles* in which he advocated a belief in “universal salvation.”

Much later, this belief in “universal salvation” became the distinguishing and founding doctrine of a religiously liberal Christian denomination in the United States that bore the “Universalist” name; it was first called the “Universalist General Convention.”

Hosea Ballou’s universalist theology

The primary early theologian of this Universalist Church was an impressive, self-educated man with the delightful name of Hosea Ballou (1771 to 1852), who argued that there *must* be universal salvation, for God is love – pure, unadulterated, overwhelming, and everlasting love – and how could such a God of Love condemn the larger part of humanity to an eternity of punishment and torment in the fires of Hell?

Ballou taught that it was not God who needed to be reconciled to humans – God was not so easily provoked by human error nor so easily appeased by blood sacrifice – rather, it was humans who needed to be reconciled to this God of Love.

Indeed, this supremely loving God, this infinite and all-powerful embracing loving Reality, would not/could not be thwarted by human frailty. This loving God would find a way to get everyone through the gate.

Argued Hosea Ballou: One doesn’t have to first be cleansed in order to be saved by God; rather, salvation is grounded in God’s nature, which is love, as in the love of a father for his child.

In the 81st and final year of his life, Hosea Ballou, making his final address to the General Assembly of the Universalists – this was in 1851, just a few months before his death – gave this striking example of divine father-love, saying:

“Your child has fallen into the mire, and its body and its garments are defiled. You cleanse it, and array it in clean robes. The query [question] is, Do you love your child because you have washed it? or, Did you wash it [your child] because you loved it?” (Ernest Cassara, Hosea Ballou: *The Challenge to Orthodoxy*, p. 150)

It was a rhetorical question ... the obvious answer is that you wash your child because you love your child.

Consolidation of Universalists and Unitarians

Moving on. In 1942, the “Universalist General Convention” renamed themselves as “The Universalist Church of America.”

Then, in 1961, the Universalist Church in America consolidated with the American Unitarian Association to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

A major transformation in “theological universalism”

The position of theological universalism in our time and in our Unitarian Universalist Association, however, has undergone a major transformation. No longer does “universalism” typically refer to the specific doctrinal concern of “universal salvation” under the Christian banner; rather, universalism has broken out of its Christian heritage to embrace all religions, not holding one to be pre-eminent over the others.

An eloquent spokesperson for this “new universalism” has been, as I mentioned, the minister and author Dr. Forrest Church, who somewhere in the 1980s came up with a metaphor for his universalist position that he called “the Cathedral of the World” metaphor.

Forrest worked on this metaphor over the years and just a few months before he died in 2009 managed to finish the book from which I read earlier titled: *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*.

So, let me introduce this metaphor to you, reading from the article where I first came across it, namely, in our Association’s publication, the *UU World*. (I could also have read it from his books *A Chosen Faith*, or *Lifecraft*, or *Bringing God Home*, as well as from his last book, *The Cathedral of the World*.)

Here is Forrest Church’s metaphor from this November/December 2001 issue of the *UU World*, an article adapted from a major address he gave to the 2001 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Cleveland, Ohio.

He writes:

“Imagine the world as a vast cathedral. This cathedral is as ancient as humankind; its cornerstone is the first altar, marked with the tincture of blood and blessed by tears. Search for a lifetime – which is all we are given – and we shall never know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with our gaze.

“The builders have labored in this cathedral from time immemorial. Daily, work begins that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who construct it, or the expectant worshipers. Nonetheless, throughout human history, one generation after another has labored lovingly, sometimes fearfully, crafting memorials and consecrating shrines. Untold numbers of these collect dust in long-undisturbed chambers; others, cast centuries or millennia ago from their once respected places, lie shattered on the cathedral floor. Not a moment passes without the dreams of long-dead dreamers being outstripped, crushed, or abandoned, giving way to new visions, each immortal in reach, ephemeral in grasp.

“Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number – some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust; others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational, some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the Light shines through.

“As with all extended metaphors, this one is imperfect. The Light of God (or Truth or Being itself) shines not only upon us, but out from within us as well. Together with the windows, we are part of the cathedral, not apart from it. Together we comprise an interdependent web of being. The cathedral is constructed out of star-stuff and so are we. We are that part (or known part) of creation that contemplates itself. Because the cathedral is so vast, our life so short, and our vision so dim, we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the whole creation. We can explore but a handful of its many chambers. Our allotted span permits us to reflect on the play of darkness and light through remarkably few of its myriad windows. Yet, since the whole is contained in each of its parts, as we ponder and act on insights derived from even a single reflection, we may experience self-illumination. We may also discover or invent meanings that invest both the creation and our lives with coherence and meaning.

“A 21st-century theology based on the concept of one light (Unitarianism) and many windows (Universalism) offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring many different religious approaches, it excludes only the truth-claims of absolutists. This is because fundamentalists – whether on the right or left – claim that the light shines through their window only. Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshipers,

they conclude that there is no Light. But the windows are not the Light, only where the light shines through.

“One cautionary note: Universalism itself can be perverted in two ways. One is to elevate one truth into a universal truth: ‘My church is the one true church.’ The other is to reduce distinctive truths to a lowest common denominator: ‘All religion is merely a set of variations upon the golden rule.’ The Universalism I embrace does neither. It holds that the same Light shines through all our windows, but that each window is different. The windows modify the Light, refracting it in various patterns that suggest discrete meanings. Just as one cannot believe in ‘everything,’ to find meaningful expression Universalism must be modified or refracted through the glass of individual and group experience (which by definition would be less than universal). One can be a Buddhist Universalist, a pagan Universalist, a humanist Universalist, a Jewish Universalist, a Christian Universalist. On the other hand, one cannot in any meaningful sense be a Universalist Universalist; it is impossible to look out every window. Neither can one be, say, a Universalist Christian; when the modifier of one’s faith becomes its nominative, primary allegiance is relegated to but one part of the whole that encompasses it.”

(UU World, November/December 2001, pp. 24-25)

Musical Interlude

Let’s take a short meditative, musical break as we reflect on this “Cathedral of the World” metaphor.

Part II: “Our Universalist Heritage & the ‘Cathedral of the World’ Metaphor”

Five fundamental principles of universalism

Forrest Church finds five fundamental principles of a modern universalist theological perspective in the Cathedral of the World metaphor that I just read.

1. There is one Power, one Truth, one God, one Light.
2. This Light shines through every window in the cathedral.
3. No one can perceive the Light directly, the mystery being forever veiled.
4. Yet, on the cathedral floor and in the eyes of each beholder, refracted and reflected through different windows in differing ways, the Light plays in patterns that suggest meanings, challenging us to interpret and live by these meanings as best we can.
5. Each window illumines Truth in a unique way, leading to various truths, and these in differing measure according to the insight, receptivity, and behavior of the beholder.

(UU World, November/December, 2001, p. 25)

Commentary

And, now, a little commentary on each of these five points of contemporary universalist theology:

1) One light

First, “There is one Power, one Truth, one God, one Light.”

This is really “theological unitarianism,” which “universalist theology” assumes and incorporates.

This perspective holds that ultimately Being is one.

Being/Reality is of one piece. It is one cloth, and even though that cloth may have outer and under sides, as we view it, it is still one cloth.

This perspective holds that we all come from the same Source.

There is but a single creative Power and Source infusing all that is – not a light God and a dark God, not a Yahweh and a Satan.

Rather, we are all born of the same Mother; and, therefore, ultimately, we all belong each to the other.

This perspective holds that our unity is ultimately deeper than our separation. It holds that the boundaries, separations, and divisions between us, though real enough in their own way, are ultimately secondary and therefore illusory, even though at times they may feel to us to be impenetrable. (Note the current conflict in the Middle East.)

2) The Light shines through every window

Secondly, this Light that shines upon this Cathedral of the World shines through *every* window in the Cathedral.

This is “theological universalism.” And here the emphasis is not on the *unity* of the light, but on the *particularity* of the light in each part of the creation. Here our focus is not on the general but the specific; not the abstract, but the concrete.

Every particle of Being is from the same Source and reveals something of that Source. Nothing, therefore, is without value. Each thing is precious in its own way.

Our Universalist forebears, like Hosea Ballou, proclaimed that the Creator does not turn its back on any person or damn any souls. Hell, if there is a Hell, is unpopulated, for a God of Love will surely find a way to redeem and save all.

If you want a quick, short-hand way of explaining to others what modern Unitarian Universalism is about, you can simply say:

One Light: Unitarianism; many windows: Universalism; or,
One Source: Unitarianism; many manifestations: Universalism; or,
One Truth (upper case “T”): Unitarianism; many truths (lower case “t”):
Universalism; or,
One God (upper case “G”): Unitarianism; many gods & goddesses (lower case “g”):
Universalism.

3) The Light can only be seen *indirectly*

A third fundamental principle of a universalist theology illustrated in the Cathedral of the World metaphor is the principle that no can perceive the Light directly, the mystery being forever veiled.

This is the idea that the Light is always *mediated* Light.

The Light shines through the windows of *colored* glass; or, to change the analogy, the Light is *colored* by the structures through which we apprehend it.

“Visible light” in the electromagnetic spectrum

Let me give you an example of the impossibility of grasping the whole of the Light directly, an analogy related to physical and visible light.

“Visible light” is part of the electromagnetic spectrum, which are the electromagnetic waves that flood our earth. The longest waves, radio waves, are at one end of the spectrum; and the shortest waves, the gamma waves, are at the other end.

And, near the middle is a band of waves we call the “visible waves.” These are the waves for which we humans have evolved receptors known as “eyes.” Other creatures have also evolved receptors for these “visible waves,” in some cases quite different than our own.

These “eyes” of ours, these living instruments making use of the “visible” band of waves, are a “form of sensibility” through which and by which we grasp our universe. They open reality to us in certain ways, but *only* in certain ways.

Imagine, for example, that we humans had evolved “eyes” adapted to x-rays. With such x-ray eyes how very different our take on reality would be! And how very different our judgments and sense of beauty would be!

And yet it would be an equally true and valid perspective.

Our “vision” is always limited

Thus, our “vision,” our grasp of God or Being Itself or Ultimate Reality – pick your term – is always mediated by the receiving mechanisms of our particular being. Our grasp is, therefore, always limited, always partial.

Religion at its best has always taught this, as in the famous opening verse of the *Tao Te Ching*:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal Name.

(*Tao Te Ching*, version, Stephen Mitchell)

4) The Light illumines *individual* lives

But now to the fourth fundamental principle of a universalist theology in this Cathedral of the World metaphor, which reads:

“Yet, on the cathedral floor and in the eyes of each beholder, refracted and reflected through different windows in differing ways, the Light plays in patterns that suggest meanings, challenging us to interpret and live by these meanings as best we can.”

The point here is that even though we can’t apprehend or comprehend the Light directly or fully, we are still both apprehending and comprehending it. It *is* light and it *is* truth that we are apprehending and comprehending. And it is enough to see by ... and to live by. It’s just not the only or absolute or final expression of the Light.

Sometimes, as Forrest Church suggests, we may be tempted to conclude that because the truth cannot be grasped directly or completely there is no truth; or, because there are many different expressions of truth, there is no truth.

But that’s not a necessary or useful conclusion to be made. Our physical eyes *do* rightly perceive aspects of reality, just as other mechanisms that we have invented, like x-ray machines, also perceive aspects of reality from other perspectives. So, too, we *do* apprehend the truth, just not the whole or final or absolute or ultimate Truth.

Forrest Church also suggests that the best way to deepen our understanding of the Light, and the best way to deepen our acquaintance with life, is to stick, if we can, to our own window and not try to run around and look through as many windows as possible.

Even though we may draw inspiration and learn many things about our own perspective through acquaintance and in conversation with other perspectives, Forrest does not advocate a “smorgasbord” approach. He refers to this as:

“... reductionistic universalism: a little too much of everything, leaving us with a stomach ache and a confused palate.” (*A Chosen Faith*, p. 88)

So, he suggests –and I agree – stick with your window, your own tradition, your own language, if you can. Don't go jumping around all over the place trying to look through as many windows as you can.

First of all, it's impossible to become acquainted with very many other traditions; and, secondly, it's difficult to go very deep with any particular one, if you are constantly shifting and uprooting yourself.

The universal is known in and through the particular.

So, get to know your place. There's plenty of light to be found at every particular point.

5) The Light illumines our lives in *unique* ways (which universalist theology seeks to embrace)

Principle number four has to do with our given window, our given place and view of Reality; and then we conclude with the fifth and final principle of universalist theology found in the Cathedral of the World metaphor, a principle that has to do with other perspectives, namely:

“Each window illumines Truth in a unique way, leading to various truths, and these in differing measure according to the insight, receptivity, and behavior of the beholder.”

This final point is at the heart of the universalist message, namely, the belief that truth is plural, not singular, that the light shines through all the windows.

And it is, indeed, Light that is shining through the other windows, though it may seem opaque or obscure to us, as in the metaphor from my earlier reading this morning of the moon's luminous path of light over the water.

It's so hard sometimes to imagine that a person who is looking through a very differently-shaped and differently-colored window than our own is connected to the Light.

It's so hard sometimes to imagine that a person who has a very different take on things than you may also have a handle on truth.

But this is the particular task of our age, if we will not destroy ourselves: that is, to become aware in the depth of our souls that Truth is plural, not singular.

So, at the same time that we are deepening our own understanding of the truth of the Light coming through our own window, we must also be aware that others can be deepening their truth by looking through their windows.

No stone-throwing through the windows of others

Let me conclude with a final point related to this fifth principle, namely, that there is one truth-claim that has no place in a universalist theology, namely, the truth-claim of the absolutists who would declare that they have the corner on truth, the final revelation; and even, in some cases, the right or obligation to smash the windows of others.

Thus, Forrest Church speaks of one cardinal rule in the Cathedral of the World metaphor: *no stone-throwing through other people's windows.*

Summary

To summarize the principles of universalist theology embodied in this Cathedral of the World metaphor:

1. There is *one* Light;
2. It shines through *every* window;
3. The Light can only be seen *indirectly*;
4. Nevertheless, the Light still illumines *individual* lives;
5. The Light illumines our lives in *unique* ways (which universalist theology seeks to embrace).

Closing Hymn: "This Is My Song"

The hymn that concludes today's message is, to my mind, a marvelous expression of the "universalist" perspective. It's #159 in your hymnals, titled "This is My Song."

Benediction

May the Love that overcomes all differences,
that heals all wounds,
that puts to flight all fears,
that reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us,
Now and always. (Frederick E. Gillis)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment,
Or the Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at Vashon Island Unitarian Universalists on Sunday, October 15, 2023. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus there.)