

2008-1-6 Structure of Praise.

Opening Words

We are here

as the new year begins with odd weather,
to return to this, our common house of praise
with joy and expectation and fresh hope.

Our song, word, art, silence and music

are the windows through which

we can see the world: as it is; as it might be. So,

mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

Outside the clear windows of this house of praise, in Moscow, in Vladivostok, in Helsinki, in San Francisco, wherever the Russian Orthodox live, it's Christmas Eve.

Outside the clear windows of this house of praise, in Detroit and Atlanta and Amsterdam and Cape Town and Tiruvalla and Canberra it's the Feast of the Epiphany in Christian churches of all kinds.

And, outside the windows of this house of praise, human lives both vital and limited, poverty, age and youth, wealth and struggles, sickness, health and denial, beliefs, transcendent experiences and skepticism, differences, and similarities, memories both good and difficult, hopes both vivid and restrained, intelligence, fears, dreams, love and joy.

But on this side of the clear windows in this room, exactly the same thing. Let the first Great Silence of the new year be our own holiday Feast of World Community, binding us to closest neighbor and farthest stranger, binding us to each other in hope and peace. Love, hold us all close.

silence

Outside these clear windows, there are many who also live inside this place, that is, inside our hearts; the loves and losses in our lives, signed by the names of real people living real lives linked to our own. These let us lift up by name as they come to us, that we put a face on our concerns and joys and sorrows.

naming

Love, the river of time flows through this house, the channels of love stream through all the generations which knew this place. Let this house shelter us well, and their memories. Let the streams of love flow through all human hearts in this house of praise, and may the walls be strong to hold love in.

The First Reading consists of the closing verses of the very long poem “For Shoshana Rihn – Pat Swinton” by Marge Piercy. Shoshana Rihn and Pat Swinton were feminist radicals during the nineteen sixties, both falsely accused of all sorts of crimes, all of which accusations were finally proved false.

I grow from what I was,
more, not less, yes,
in me both egg and stone.
no, I am not a soldier in your
history, I live in my own tale
with others I choose to wake me in the morning,
to sit across the table in the evening,
to wipe my forehead, to touch
my hand, to carry in my throat
like a lullaby that murmurs
no, I do not fear you
and yes, I am not for sale.

The Second Reading comes from an architectural study called The New Churches of Europe by a well known critic, George.E. Kidder Smith

...all great churches in history were as “modern” for their time as possible. Their clergy and architects never dreamed of aping the past even when new additions were made onto old churches. Consider the two towers of Chartres, for instance, one emerging from the Romanesque, its neighbor handsomely expressing the full flower of the Gothic...in Italy scores of churches proclaim proudly, and rightly, the different additions which the centuries have bequeathed them.

Sermon

When I was in seminary 30 years ago, I took a course on sacred architecture. You know, the study of buildings which serve religious practices: temples, churches, meeting houses, synagogues, mosques, stupas and pagodas. This course was kid-in-a-candy-store stuff for me, since for reasons I’ve never been very clear on, I’ve always been fascinated by architecture. I notice buildings. I am delighted by cornices, pilasters, balconies and railings. I rejoice in the grain of wood or texture of carpet or frame of glass windows. I especially love the thinking behind floor plans, and can lose myself for hours imagining some buildings of my own.

So, because this course kindled an abiding interest in religious architecture, I set out to study it up close. I visited the electrifying Thorncrown chapel in Arkansas,

and the serene gray and white Louise Nevelson Chapel in New York City. Then, on my very first Sabbatical, back in the mid-eighties, I was lucky enough to study architecture while spending some time in Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad) and Karelia. In Karelia, which is about a nine hour train ride outside of Leningrad, I took an hour's hydrofoil ride to see the amazing wooden Orthodox churches on Kizhi Island in the middle of vast Lake Onega. All those domes and towers, built with fitted wooden pegs instead of nails, 18 stories high and ravishingly beautiful, rising over the green grass and late May dandelions of the island.

Of course, I visited other architectural gems while there too...the Kremlin, St. Basil's, and the monastery of Alyeksandr Nyeveskii. But though I am fascinated by ancient architecture and the twisted circus of Orthodox domes, I also have a penchant for more modern, even austere architecture. I really appreciate the clean line, the expanse of glass, the unexpected patches of color and light.

So, on this same trip, I went to Suomi, which we called in English, Finland, and there I visited modern architectural masterpieces in the Finnish tradition, pioneered by Alvar Aalto.

And it was when I visited one of these sites when I viscerally understood what the great Julia Morgan said so simply, "The building should speak for itself."

The building that spoke for itself was a religious building, the student chapel at the University of Otaniemi. There is a picture of this chapel on your covers, and a book in the back of this room, which you can look at as you leave, which shows this building in easier to decipher detail.

The architecture is austere and very simple. Brick walls. High back windows where sunlight can pour down the walls. A low chancel area...that's the official name of the platform on which I am standing. Behind the chancel, glass. Floor to ceiling, wall-to-wall glass. Outside the glass, a courtyard framed with pine trees on all three sides. In the middle of the courtyard, freestanding, a cross, a simple wooden cross, the chief symbol of the Christian religion. On the chancel inside the glass I found a simple table made of thin black metal...almost like a line drawing of a table hanging in the air, but with a glass top. No cloths. No fancy candles. Same with the pulpit. Thin black lines and glass top. And the baptismal font...a glass bowl suspended in the air on a thin black frame.

I took it all in silently, for a while. And then I understood what the building structure was saying, almost as if it spoke to me.

The communion table, the baptismal bowl, and the pulpit were all transparent. You didn't stop there, you looked through them, from wherever you sat in the chapel. You looked through them to what...to the outside world, the world made of the same stone and pine as the chapel was made from...except in their unfinished, raw form. And in the middle of it all...the cross, the symbol of

suffering and triumph in that tradition. Not in the building, mind you, but outside of it, on the other side of the glass.

The structure of the building was saying this: the purpose of the religious ritual and sermons is not to get some high spiritual experience or emotive satisfaction and then leave without it making any difference. The purpose of worship was to see the world through the clear glass of the rituals and preaching, and to note that the cross is not in the church but outside in the world. The work of social justice is carried out in the world, not hoarded inside the building. It's a clear, simple and brilliant architectural idea.

This is not a Lutheran State Church chapel however. This is a Unitarian Universalist building. And the building is a collection of three distinct buildings, one built in the early sixties, one built in the early 90s and one built just a few years ago. And these buildings speak to me about our spiritual tradition too.

For instance, take the gallery and hallways of this building. They go in different directions. Some are at right angles. Some are on a slant. Some are brighter, some darker. And to the new visitor, they are undeniably confusing. I admit that.

But they speak very elegantly about our way of being religious. We all don't have to take the same path. We can be at right angles to each other and still be authentically Unitarian Universalist. There is no one more "real" path than another. Some come to their religion by critical thought. Others through feelings, intuitions and reflection on personal experience. Some come to it through service in the world, stopping off at the kitchen or garden before entering the Worship Center. Some come to it eclectically, taking alternating paths daily.

The next thing I note is this particular room. The present worship center. That's the official term, although I know some people call it by other names: the sanctuary; the meeting house; the church. That's ok. They all work for me.

But what I note here is that the chairs can be set up any number of ways. Angles. Curves. Straight rows. Circles. Again, there is no set way to establish community. We can make a community by facing each other, sure, but we can also sit side by side and look in the same direction. Or some of us can move up onto the risers and serenade the others. Or, because no one place is really any more holy than any other, we can take out the chairs, bring in tables and feast together. The fluidity and adaptability of this meeting-house expresses quite clearly the fluidity and adaptability of our liberal religious tradition.

I also note that the windows are clear glass. As foursquare, in fact, as the building itself. They look out upon the world, yes, but they are set high. Which says to me, loud and clear, that as Unitarian Universalists, we set our vision high too...our vision for a world made just that seems almost overwrought to some folk because they're convinced that such visions are merely utopian, and thus frivolous. That will never happen they say. Human nature is just too rotten.

To which our building responds, “But if you defeat yourself even before you begin by giving up, what does that make you? Set your visions high, let them be clear, do honest work...and something will happen. Not a miraculous new Jerusalem coming down from the clouds...we never said that in the first place. But at least a few more people will be fed, a few more housed, a few more educated, and a lot more welcomed into the center, not pushed to the edge.

Then I note that the rich and sturdy grey carpet was woven especially for this new worship center. And that the carpet pattern consists of a wheel with eight spokes. With a small circle in the center.

I think of many things when I see the wheel. A stone medicine wheel used by the original inhabitants of this land, for example. Or the Buddhist *aryastanga marga*, or wheel with eight spokes, signifying not inflexible doctrine but everyday religious practice: unclouded speech, clear intention, proper action, focused mindfulness, etc. Like Buddhism, ours is a religious tradition that puts honest practical practice before common theological agreement.

Note that the wheel is inside a square. The original architectural plan insisted on a circular building, but that proved too costly, so the architect came up with a wonderful solution: a building that is at once both a circle and a square. The wheel on the carpet bursts the walls of the actual square, pushing the wall out into shallow apses or bays, there, there, and there. This perfectly reflects another common feature of Unitarian Universalist history. Just as a circle doesn't cancel a square, and vice versa, so a beautiful spirituality and a hard-edged social conscience do not cancel one another. In fact, they belong together, interwoven. And the small circle in the center...the hub of the wheel? Different in color from everything else in the building? Distinct, small yet central? This, the building says to me, is the irreducible core that makes our diverse community possible at all...the covenant or promise we make with each other to be truthful, to be compassionate, to be honest, to be as loving as we can be, to be understanding, to set proper boundaries, to be free to ask any question, to nurture each other, to tolerate much but never an injustice or cruelty. It resembles nothing else in the same way the round bulb of the paper-white does not resemble the sweet flower in any way. But there can be no paper-white save for that little round bulb.

I also note that this particular part of the larger building is aligned with the four cardinal directions: north, south, east and west. Or is that the four seasons... winter, spring, summer, fall? Or the four classic elements of the universe, earth, air, fire and water? Or perhaps the four temperaments? In other words, ours is a religion which addresses the universe around us, not another world, however people define that. Historically we have not made any pronouncements about whether some other plane is indubitably there. We leave that to personal interpretation and yearning. But we share a clear understanding historically that our religion must face the world, engage with the world, love the world, challenge the world, heal the world and live in the world, first and foremost, no matter.

The warm wooden pyramid over our head? With the clear glassed skylight open to the sky? Here is what the building says to me: in every culture across the earth, our brothers and sisters have built pyramids. In Cahokia, here in this country, the natives built an earth pyramid. In Egypt, you know the famous pyramids of Gizeh. There are flat-topped pyramids in China, step-pyramids in Central America and in ancient Mesopotamia, small stone pyramids in Greece and Rome, and elaborate pyramids in India. There are many modern pyramids too, all around the earth...in Kazhakstan, in Prague, in Alberta, in Paris, in San Francisco, in Memphis, in Slovakia, in Las Vegas, in Salt Lake City, in England. Known for their stable shape and strength and stability, they have served many purposes, both wonderful and terrible. Some have been temples where people were killed. Others were merely tombs. Some have been arenas or shopping centers, hotels or temples to consumerism. Some have been art, or have housed music. Some have been places of meditation and life-changing reflection. But all of them were built by human beings.

And that's the point. We Unitarian Universalists of Columbus Ohio do not transcend the rest of humanity. We are part of humanity. And it's we who decide what goes on under this pyramid, good or ill. There is nothing essentially magic about the shape. There is nothing essentially magic about any shape, or pattern or style. We bring meaning and purpose to life...not the other way around. So this pyramid above our heads announces both our participation in humanity's history, at the same time it announces our wonderful and sometimes scary freedom. We have "to decide," in the words of the gospel of Luke, "what the right course is" *so that we might take it*. There are no magic guarantees to save us from ourselves and our own poor judgments. Which is why the pyramid has glass at the top. We are not constrained. We are not buried. We are free to soar beyond the traditions we have acknowledged. Heaven still moves and flows like a river over our head. Nothing is permanently fixed for good. Except, I suppose, for that small round promise of good will at the center of the ground on which we walk.

If you go into the social hall, which we call Fellowship Hall, you will see a different architecture. Pale walls, little color, lots of glass but a far lower ceiling...except for that long un-windowed clerestory along the center.

The congregation was different then. Faces still present were younger then. Faces now gone were present then. Folks who have moved away still came there then. The culture was different, just the architecture was different. Whereas this worship center has no steeple, like churches of old often did, the architect of the other worship center decided to put a horizontal steeple to really stress the this-worldliness of the spiritual emphasis then. The Asian garden there with its statue of Laozi (whom no reputable scholar thinks actually existed as an historical person, but who, as a symbol for the Daoist collection of ethical poems called *Dao Dejing*, has long been revered) speaks eloquently of the Daoist dictum "the way that can be named is not the true way; the name that can be named is not the true

name.” This approach to theology and philosophy...one of doubt and caution...was the hallmark of that era for many.

That was the worship center at one time. Chairs filled the room. The preacher held forth. And sometimes, amazing things happened. For example, the story of the church cat you heard this morning may not seem like it has much to do with this sermon, but it does. You see, there was a cat named Thistle which adopted this church. How those who are deadly allergic to cats dealt with its comings and goings, I’ll never know, but it was beloved, and it was sovereign. Once, while Carl Whittier, the minister then, was preaching, Thistle walked in and found Carol Brody’s lap and jumped into it and purred. Carl noticed the event and made it part of his sermon with warm chuckles all around.

That happened long ago. I never even heard that story until this week. But in this present new year, I want to say something important. And I will use the words of Marge Piercy from the first reading to say it: *I grow from what I was, more, not less. Yes, in me both egg and stone.* That is, there is in me, and in us, a permanent history that changes no more, and also the egg, the curled new day being born. And I say that both of these are the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus. The austere pale worship center of old, and the new color-filled worship center of the present. They form a continuity, not a break. The architect of the new building did not choose to “ape” the older style, in the words of the second reading. Just as in Italy, where, according to Mr. Kidder-Smith, “scores of churches proclaim proudly, and rightly, the different additions which the centuries have bequeathed them,” I think this church can do the same, and just as proudly.

The changes wrought by the years are never easy...austere rectangular room to square pyramid filled with color, warm wood and plants; simpler patterns of worship to the more complex worldly style, with the addition of the flaming chalice and fresh new music and reinterpreted rituals, for example. Never easy, that. Never easy, the procession of the generations, the change of the faces and stories, the church cat disappearing into church history, while the promise of the children’s choir and new social outreach opens the clear window through which we can see the world with a vision born of the future, not history.

Yet both past and future are one. Ancient streams that meet and merge and flow as one into the sea. And no matter whether the architecture is newer or older, both buildings proclaim at least one common message to the world outside our clear windows. In the perfect testimony of Marge Piercy: *“no, I do not fear you and yes, I am not for sale.”*

Offering

Buildings, no matter their architecture, have mortgages. And though we are not for sale, we are also a generous people. Let us give thanks for the right to

determine our congregation's own future with the fruit of our own generosity. Amen. The morning offering will now be given and received.

Architectural Amidah for the New Year

We rise up to speak in your midst, O Love.

*We rise to peer through the window
of these words that we might see
the world as a holy place, precious, worthy.*

We rise to praise.

Bless the earth under the foundation of this place, on whose holy breast the Delaware walked, and the Shawnee, and the Adena peoples before them.

*Bless the foundation of this place, strong
and uplifting, like you, O Love.*

Bless the trees of the wood which frame
our doors and windows, as our living tradition
frames the clear decisions in our lives.

*Bless the designers and builders who joined wood to wood, and brick to
concrete, and glass to frame that vision might have a structure.*

Bless the hours spent under these ceilings
as the sun shines in the east and then in the west.

*Let justice be planned and organized here
without any final fatigue.*

Let all of our traditions and styles move toward mercy, and never self-
congratulation.

*Let us bring each other along, and offer each others shoulders of support. Let us
build a new world together as once this building was built.*

Let us remember these words as we eat, and drink and walk and sleep. Let us be
faithful to our children. Let us be at peace and shed light.