

In the Shadows of Cathedrals
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

From *The Cathedral* by Rainer Maria Rilke

In those small cities you can see
how far those cathedrals had outgrown
the impulse that engendered them. Their arising
left everything behind ...made into stone
and meant for enduring,
not what down below in the darkened streets
takes whatever name it can from chance
and uses it, the way children wear red and green
and whatever happens to be in stock.
There was birth in all this upward surging,
and love everywhere like wine and bread,
and the portals echoing with love's laments.

The Angel with the Sundial is a figure carved into the façade of Chartres Cathedral. She or he stands serene holding a sundial so that the sun causes the shadow of the dial to move across it all day marking the passage of time and at night, when the shadow is faint or none existent, the angel continues to smile serenely – untouched by the passages of time.

L'Ange du Meridien is a poem written by Rainer Maria Rilke as a reflection on that statue when he spent time traveling in there around 1906.

As the storm swirls around the strong cathedral
like a disbeliever who thinks and thinks,
one suddenly feels more tenderly
drawn to you by your smile:

beguiling angel, beatific statue,
your smile fashioned from a thousand smiles;
are you at all aware of how our hours
slide off your full sundial.

On which the day's whole sum, arrayed,
Unelapsing, remains in deep equilibrium,
As if all moments were ripe and rich?

What do you know, O stone one, of our life?
And do you smile even more blissfully
When you hold your slate out into the night.

Sermon

Well, this was one wild summer. I'll be astonished and awed for years into the future, by all that I got to do and see, and where I was able to go.

For one thing I literally got to stand in the shadows of cathedrals. It was a blazing, sunny day, when Mark and I walked through the actual streets of Paris and found our way to Notre Dame. It's an imposing building. As a lover of architecture, I was blown away by my first sight of real, in the stone, flying buttresses – the open work double level stone supports that held up the walls of tall cathedrals and allowed the ancient builders to fill the walls with stained glass and light while stretching higher and higher toward heaven.

Still, I spent even more time studying the saints and figures carved into the arched doorways and all around. The figures that really captured me were the gargoyles. The most famous one is la stryge – the winged creature that sits high up on Notre Dame and looks down – tongue sticking out – watching the comings and goings of Paris. Right down on the front of the cathedral were wild, writhing, even demonic creatures.

Just as the saints and angels carved into the stone were intended to remind believers of the virtues – just as the saints and angels kept a piercing eye on human life – calling all who pass to their better selves – so the gargoyles were meant to show the ugliness of sin, the misery and torment of the sinful. The gargoyles -- their mouths sometimes vomiting water, sometimes open in stony, silent screams, haunted the faithful and warned of the danger of falling into sin and damnation.

Over every surface played the drama of human existence – in three dimensions – so that no matter where the eye would light – notions and stories of existential meaning would come to mind.

As we stood looking at the complex carvings Mark asked if they were all carved to be unique. I answered – as far as I know – yes. In part, that's why the Cathedral begun in the mid 12th century took nearly two hundred years to build. The Cathedral stood gradually, growing to dominate the ile de la cite – as cathedrals do grow to dominate – physically, economically, spiritually – their surrounding neighborhoods and cities. Impossibly tall, massive, the labor of lifetimes carved into their faces – cathedrals overshadow the space around them.

Notre Dame – it's intricate carvings laying out the dramas of the human psyche: the fear of death, the yearning for solace, the need for love – and the great heights rising always as hope rises – far above the people who move and suffer, are born and die on more humble streets in shadows of the cathedral.

Yesterday, I stood with Linda Berry in the potluck line before the Retreats for the Religious Education Council and the Choir. She spoke of her experiences in cathedrals and she made a keen observation. That in the shadows of cathedrals people's lives were and often still are – full of struggle. In the Middle Ages life was drab and often dirty, disease was widespread and life was short. Homes were dark and bright color was out of the reach of most people. She said, it was no wonder that people were religious – the cathedral itself was a kind of wonder. It would have been – a sort of otherworldly miracle of beauty and relative peace.

In the Cathedrals life soared, all was cloaked in ornament, color poured through the stained glass windows creating pools rare and spectacular, and everywhere sound – divine and transformative swelled.

Of course, that's not only why people are religious – it's not simply the hunger for beauty in an ugly world –but it is also the hunger for meaning amid the awesome and awe-ful challenges of life.

Of course, the cathedrals, particularly to a person of the 13th, 14th, 16th, 17th centuries – even now really – conveyed a kind of timeless endurance – something strong and eternal in a fragile, mortal world.

As the poet wrote: *Their arising/left everything behind/made into stone and meant for enduring,/ not what down below in the darkened streets/takes whatever name it can from chance*

The poet knew that we live on the streets of chance.

And the age of cathedrals has past – our technology has given us the ability to weave solidity out of dreams far more quickly, though it has taken from us the patience to pour lifetimes of meaning into a shared endeavor. And, while their greatness awes us – we have different yearnings and those figures. Those saints and angels often seem far from so many of us, though in Orthodox Christian churches, the fervor with which believers whisper in prayer to and kiss the icons speaks of a deeply intimate relationship today.

What would we build today if given such resources? What would the lasting symbol be of our spiritual journeys and hungers? Unitarian Universalism is one of the dissenting religions – both Unitarianism and Universalism worked to strip away the manufactured fears of earlier faiths – Unitarianism by applying the hard light of reason, and Universalism by applying the ultimate good, the rigorous action of love.

This left us with the kind of simplicity we see around us in our sanctuary today. Spare lines and plain surfaces adorned sparingly. Our houses of worship often simply frame nature and make space for human life and the diversity of experiences and understandings that each person brings. What is it that captures our human experience and our human yearnings here, today? – what brings alive our sorrows, our stories and holds their meaning sacred as the noble cathedrals once did? Or is the heart of our faith as barren as the walls around us – a mere screen for the projections of each person who enters our houses of worship?

In the recent issue of the Unitarian Universalist World Magazine – my dear teacher, the Reverend David Bumbaugh explored those very questions. He came up with an answer that was both unsettling and challenging.

He wrote: “Our message, our vision, have become confused and unclear. Institutional survival, tinkering with styles of governance, schemes for growth have replaced any definitive gospel, and a hunger for diversity has blinded us to the reality that true diversity would require that we be clear about who we are and what we believe so that there is some center around which to be diverse.”

In other words – as we swept away the demons and superstitions of earlier times – and tried to construct an embracing faith that would not repeat the errors of prejudice and divisiveness that have destroyed so much we were left not with a core of burning meaning – but with the very lowest common denominator.

It reminds me a bit of the character Spock in the early series of Star Trek whose people – the Vulcans – had seen the destruction of war and passion and schooled themselves into pure reason – and an absence of feeling. In fact, long ago the Reverend Ralph Waldo Emerson complained that Unitarianism was “corpse cold” and urged hearers to rekindle a dying fire. Truly, we must apply our reason to our faith otherwise we may be lead into grave danger. I wouldn't have a Unitarian Universalism without reason – but we have more and richer fare than pure reason. We've matured faith since Emerson's time. There'll always be those faithful to reason to the exclusion of all else and we'll welcome them because their voices are lifesaving. But they're not sufficient for our tradition to endure, they won't inspire a great cathedral nor will they fill unnumbered followers with awe, comfort, joy, and sustenance. Once reason has done it's job clearing out ghosts and demons, there must be something of meaning left beside intellectual practice. As Rilke asked – “What do you know, O stone one, of our life?”

Rev. Bumbaugh is right – as he often is. No one is truly drawn to religion that is merely cogitation and a bid for the lowest common denominator. He rightly points out that our principles – though lovely – are

vague – and, in truth, no faith can thrive on vague principles and an insubstantial identity. And he is right that we too often come perilously close to this vague ad insubstantial character.

He also points out that when Unitarianism and Universalism joined, Universalism took a quiet backseat and stayed there steadily slouching down. The theology of an embracing love, which is at the heart of Universalism, was an unpopular challenge to a world suffering in two world wars, the scourge of racism, social violence, institutionalized injustice, and rampant greed. So love went quiet.

He writes:

Universalism was centered on an abiding conviction that we are all children of the same great love, that we are all fated to a common destiny, that nothing any of us might do will serve to sever us from that great community, and, therefore, there can be no division of the human race into sheep and goats. It was not a popular theology in a world shattered by depression and world war, divided by cold-war ideology, and in a nation bent on becoming an empire. But, even though we had diverse ways of expressing it, that was our theology. Embedded deep in that vision was a deep embrace of a more profound diversity, which was a consequence of a theological vision, not a pragmatic desire for growth.

So reason lost its purpose since all the idols were gone from the altar – all the gargoyles chiseled from the walls. And love was lost because it sounded too sweet in a world gone bitter. We need a faith that knows us in our lives, understands our weaknesses, and calls us to our strengths, not a faith afraid to take a stand for fear of excluding anyone and therefore claiming the hearts of no one.

He writes: *I long for the day when we boldly address three central questions: What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or what are we responsible?*

I believe that we have been growing to answer those questions. I, for one, have never shrunk from them. I'm sure that those of you who've taken our Path to Membership Class have heard me say that while we claim that we're a religion without a creed – I believe that we do have one – it is, in part hidden in our principles – in the first principle – in which we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person – that is a claim about the soul if ever I heard one. And in our last principle where we affirm the interdependent web of all being of which we are a part. Those are bones but they're real – and they're powerful and I believe that among the vast number of Unitarian Universalists these two principles are not simply shimmery vagueness but hold the power of a real claim on our faith and our loyalty. We believe in the value of every person – of every being. We believe in the beauty, worth, and sacredness of the world in which we live and move and have our being and in which our fates are entirely united. Dependent upon one another. And I believe that I have watched this religious movement growing bolder and bolder and bolder in claiming these things. And I believe that there is flesh on those bones – and that flesh is the power, presence, challenge, command and reality of love.

Quiet though it's been – love has been patiently waiting for us to let it lead us all as it once led Universalism. In fact, as I've watched our people willing to stand with immigrants, speak up for health care, to stand for marriage equality – willing to stand on the side of love – I have recognized that we are, increasingly, being led by love. I believe that we have – if we're honest -- answers to the key questions that Bumbaugh asks: What do we believe? We believe in an all embracing love, guided by reason that holds every living thing and lives in us and that while science proves that our fates are joined, this love gives us the power to shape this fate for the good. Whom do we serve? We serve the power of love in all ways possible, for it makes claims upon us that are denied at the peril of all life. To whom or what are we responsible? We are responsible to every life that comes into being now and in the future, hungry for thriving and love, and we are responsible to the task of supporting and helping to shape a world worthy of that vulnerable and worthy life.

This is a fulfilling and awesome theological stance. It doesn't require that we all believe the same thing about death or about the reality or nature of one deity or another – except that we will refuse to hold beliefs that stifle the work of love in the world. It doesn't require that we spend two hundred years building an edifice that will act as a metaphor for our faith. It doesn't require that we live in fear. It does require that we face the gargoyles within us and tame them with love. It doesn't require that we be stony saints and angels or fear a fall into hell – but that we work into the reality of our best selves and that we shape our world with that same will.

In this simple, yet beautiful space – unique in many ways – and yet akin to so many other Unitarian Universalist houses of worship – we revere art but the simplicity of our sanctuary bears witness to this faith: that we tell the sacred story with our own lives – we share our spiritual journeys, we see ourselves in nature – through these windows and in one another's faces, in similarity and difference. Just as the 14th century person might be challenged by the distorted face of a gargoyle – we are awed by the profound and even heroic struggles of our lives and our souls – our wrestling with histories of abuse, injustice, brokenness, illness, loss. The lives of saints and angels can be a source of inspiration but even more helpful are the noble stories carved into our faith by ordinary human lives that we can emulate. Like Ellery Schemp who fought throughout high school all the way to the supreme court to uphold the division of church and state by keeping prayer out of the public schools. Or like Mar Cardenas whom I met last summer at a protest in Arizona against SB 1070 the racial profiling anti-immigrant law that would allow anyone to be arrested with impunity. As we walked by the Phoenix Police Headquarters – she left the crowd and quietly walked through the police line up to the door where she was arrested with her face gentle and strong. Or a UU I know whose childhood had been deeply scarred by abuse and who grew up to become an advocate for the protection of the rights of children.

I had a professor in college who used to say that some people's lives are fallen arches but that we should live like flying buttresses. In this faith I can understand that. Our faith builds us – the individuals and the community as a great cathedral rising tall and strong – able to support our faith and our world toward the best aspirations of humanity. Our sanctuary may be stark in comparison with a Gothic Cathedral – but it is richly adorned with nature and all life. Instead of the sharp wind that whistles around the great cathedrals moved by the angles and spires – we hear the breath and life of one another – we attend to the lives of all creatures and all people and the winds rise within us and carry us forth. Instead of this place being the only spot of color in an otherwise bleak world – our refuge away from life – this sanctuary is our place to be called back to the light secretly drenching our souls and to be both comforted and then called to turn again and bring the light and color – reason, beauty, love, justice, healing, and peace back into the world.