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“Since What We Choose Is What We Are”
Why do churches have buildings, anyway? The arguments against it are well known. Owning property is expensive, and inconvenient. The law of entropy decrees that something is always breaking, leaking, coming apart, needing repair. The comforts of one generation are the inadequacies of the next; buildings are inflexible, forcing the constituency of the congregation, as well as its programs, to revolve around where and what the facilities are. Being responsible for maintaining a building takes energy and money away from what is ostensibly the actual purpose of a church, which is to do ministry in the world. Buildings *generate* conflict in the church community, over how they should be arranged, who should be allowed to use them, what color the carpet ought to be, how much money needs to be spent on them.

One of the charges frequently leveled against the Roman Catholic hegemony during the first millennium in western Europe denounces the existence of vast, ornate cathedrals, built by the labor of generations of workers, funded by the sacrificial contributions of peasants, elaborately carved, gilded, and furnished in marble, while most people lived out their lives in wretched hovels. In our American Unitarian tradition, some of the most influential preachers have chosen not to entangle themselves with real estate; Theodore Parker’s transcendentalist gospel of radical social justice was preached in the rented Melodeon theater in Boston. Years after his death, the remnant of the congregation decided to erect a building of their own. John Edward Roberts, minister of our own congregation during the last decade of the 19th century, left the Unitarians to start his own Humanist congregation, “The Church of This World,” which gathered in a succession of local theaters, and for the 30 years of its existence never undertook to own property.

It can be done – sort of. It can be done if the whole essence of the church is, as Rev. Roberts expressed it at the end of his career, “just a group of people gathered to hear me speak.” Because as soon as you want some place to host parties, or share meals together; as soon as you want a place where you can be sure that children are safe; as soon as you have meetings, or archives, or staff, or libraries, to house, then you start to wish that you had some space of your own. It is part of human nature – indeed, it is probably part of our mammalian
genetic heritage – to seek a home. It is hard for family to happen, it is hard for community to happen, in constantly random space. And so, I would suggest, it is hard for religious community to happen without a sense of place, an identity that is located somewhere in the three dimensions of this earth. Even traditions that claim this world is not their home, that their true resting place will be elsewhere, in heaven, still find they need temporary quarters here and now in order to gather around that message. There is a longing we have for a place that is ours – not just individually, though we have that too, for private space – but also for public, communal spaces, that bring us together with others of our kind, in groups.

But more than just space that functions to enable us to assemble, I think we also long for public places that communicate a message about what we think it means to be human. There are certain qualities of space that are what brain scientists call ‘releasers’ of feeling response in the mind; proportions, sight lines, color and light, textures, that we interpret as ugly or beautiful, that create reactions, and influence how we feel and think and act in those spaces. As with any form of aesthetic perception, there are many options for arranging the elements of space in satisfying ways; no art has only one archetype of beauty. Our mental systems are always seeking a dynamic balance between order and complexity; between what allures us to the intimate, and inspires us toward the ultimate. Some of these widely varying alternatives can be seen in the great temples of many ages around the globe – from the Taj Mahal to Chartres cathedral; from the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan to the Toji temple in Kyoto; from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Unity Temple in Oak Park to the Sagrada Famiglia in Spain. Nor are all noble public spaces necessarily designed as churches, and yet there is something in us that recognizes when our humanity has been taken seriously in its potential for dignity, awareness, and more abundant life. The space that a church community chooses to make a home in says more than we are aware, about what they hope to become together. It speaks of who is welcome, and who is not; of what is safe, and what is not; it speaks of the people’s aspirations and longings; their fears and their tragedies; what gives them comfort, and what they are committed to.
Which is why, I think, there is something after all to be said for those gothic cathedrals of the middle ages. Yes, the common people, the vast majority, lived in what we would call squalor, and even the elites were not all that much better off. But each of them was also part of the community that had its collective home in the grandeur and beauty of the house of god. The expansive, and expensive, structure that none of them could have remotely created as an individual, was available for all of them to enjoy and take pride in collectively. It offered them not individual vanity, but a common celebration of awe and wonder through the magnificence of architecture. Churches make buildings not just to keep the rain off their gatherings, but to give shared form to their highest aspirations, and their vision of ultimate good.

The Humanist philosopher and poet Kenneth Patton put it this way:

Our breath vanishes among the winds; our words are lost in a tempest named Yesterday.
We try to make our words endure by loud shouting, but this only shoves the echoes back a moment longer.

Speak softly; your words will be recalled for their melodies and proportions. If you would speak for the hearing of children in ages to come, train your words to rhythm and resonance.

Age is the end of a wild wandering; if you carve figures for mileposts and heap stone cairns into temples, their beauty will lure others to follow your likely path.

Would you make a mark on the face of the world, beauty is your only implement. Would you make yesterday worth remembering, only songs will equip time with immortality.

Leave your journeying to build temples, and adorn them with intimations of longer journeys you cannot take, and images of countries you may never enter.
In far-off times, others will put their carvings beside yours, and light candles where long ago yours burned away.

In their celebrations there will be a lingering of your questions and solicitations. The rafters and pillars will remember your dreams, and your children will discover the ancient beauty of your hands.

Churches create buildings because beauty is the only mark we can make on the face of the world that others will seek to preserve; because it announces our human existence against the tempest named Yesterday, and invites our children in ages to come, to discover the ancient work of our hands. By the structures that we choose to build and maintain, we make real what we are as a community, because inescapably, our buildings do two things, and we cannot stop them. First, they represent us to the larger world; by what other people see, driving past our location, or when they step inside for some event held here, they come to understand something about who we are, just as the gothic cathedrals told a story about god’s stunning glory. Whether we like it or not, our building tells the people around us a story of what we believe in, and cherish; what we have to offer, and what we want. And at the same time, that same building also structures what we become each time we enter it. Its logic becomes the logic of our community; what it offers space for, we will do, and what it does not facilitate, won’t happen for us.

This is why the parable of the seaside rescue station is important; because a building is a social structure, and social structures create the collective reality of the people who inhabit them. This is why the art of architecture begins with an understanding of mission; you can’t design a building until you know what it is for, because it won’t work if it doesn’t express the purpose it was meant to serve. The best homes, the best churches, the best courthouses, the best hospitals, the best airports, the best offices, both serve and elevate the purpose for which they are intended. They allow us to live into the work we need to do together in supportive, intuitive ways, and at the same time, they give us inspiration and pleasure; they uplift us with beauty and summon us to thought.
In a world that has been de-humanized by corporate commercialism and crass
greed, churches may be one of the few remaining institutions that are able to
look beyond the cheap and disposable to build what is intelligent, creative,
enduring, and profoundly beautiful. Any church will eventually construct a
private clubhouse, if its congregation degenerates into a private club, but by the
same token, if we are faithful to our mission as a voice of witness in the larger
world, then our buildings will be public spaces that offer inspiration to all
holders. One of the functions of religion is to re-connect us to our
aspirations and ideals, both as individuals and as communities. Structures that
expand our thoughts and awaken our imaginations, that make us take a deeper
breath and long for a more noble future, are part of that work.

In the end, of course, any building, any home, any structure, is also a
form of separation from the world, a closing off from the interdependent web
that we know the universe to be. Our spaces can either reinforce this turning
away, or they can serve to remind us of it, and point beyond it. In the
tumultuous years just before the start of the civil war, the Transcendentalist
Unitarian poet Oliver Wendell Holmes considered the dynamic tension
between enclosed structures and spiritual freedom when he contemplated a sea
shell. The chambered nautilus is a Pacific sea creature that builds a spiral-
shaped shell, enlarging it segment by segment as its living body grows. When
the nautilus dies, the shell can be broken or cut, revealing the series of
iridescent chambers that have been its successive dwellings; both shape and
color are quite fascinating and beautiful. Observing one such shell, Holmes
wrote:

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sails the unshadowed main,—
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,—
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year’s dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!

So long as we are alive, we need our dwellings, our structures; we need to build our homes, here in this world. We need both the solitude of our private places, and also the houses of fellowship, where we assemble, to be reminded of the faces and voices of our neighbors and friends; to enlarge our
individuality into the common life of humanity. We have seen, I think, in recent months, how that assembly can sometimes degenerate into the unreasoning vitriol of a mob, defined by common enemies, that has only shared passion to guide it, without dignity or decency or any shared commitment to moral principles. We have a task as communities of faith, to demonstrate that the human spirit is capable of better connections than that. Let us choose to make that announcement in more durable material than just words; let us build it into the ‘more stately mansions’ that the poets call for; let us build temples, where in far-off times, others will put their carvings beside ours, and light new candles where long ago ours burned away. If what we choose is what we are, and if what we love is what guides our becoming and shapes our future, then it matters what we build – it matters to ourselves and to our legacy, it matters to our neighbors, and to the world that will be made by what we do or leave undone.