

The World Outside Our Windows

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

September 22, 2019

Opening Words

Gathering in Faith

On the call to new beginnings and the season of hopeful expectations

Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

We gather in community once again
to rekindle the bonds and the love of community
to nourish ourselves with music, song, and story
to challenge ourselves with deep questions

...

In this season of beginnings and hopeful expectation,
we hold faith in the seasons and the cycles of life
knowing that every season has its place
and the turning continues.

We gather in community
to build up hope within ourselves
and to share it with one another.

Let us worship together.

Reading **The Cat at the Window** **David Anderson, *Breakfast Epiphanies***
(Beacon Press, 2002)

At summer's end I put up two bird feeders in our backyard. For a long time nothing flew in. Then we got a foot of snow and word got out that the Andersons had opened a kind of aviary soup kitchen. Boy, they came. We sat at the breakfast table in front of the big sliding glass door, eating our breakfast and watching the birds peck at theirs.

After the kids went off to school, I'd sit there with the newspaper and a fifth cup of coffee just watching them fight for a perch on the feeder. The big guys ate and the little guys waited their turn on the fence. One day, staring at the flurry of wings and the shower of sunflower shells falling black on the snow, I heard a little cry of pain. I looked down at the cat crouched beside the glass door. Oliver? That was no cat I'd heard. Like a soldier on his belly he was low on his hunting haunches. Then his body rose slightly and strained toward the glass as he let out a little cry, a whimper of anguish. Now I could see. It *was* Oliver. He wanted to do a cat's business with those birds.

A few days later I found myself watching Oliver again and not the birds. We were alone, the two of us on this side of the glass, and the boy in me sided with the cat. I know about trying to catch birds – and rabbits and little lizards. All the tantalizing prey of luckless boys. Oliver is just a regular house cat, but something in his sinews was still hardwired to hunt. All the birds within striking distance, though, were behind glass.

Very quietly then I went to the door. I slid it open. “Okay, boy,” I whispered. Oliver slipped outside. The birds took one look and flew away, trailing ridiculous high-pitched laughter. It was cold and Oliver turned quickly back inside. I felt bad for him. He’s not a very good hunter, feeding daily on Kibbles ‘n Bits, but I knew what it was like to want to hunt. To want to go after something – something you feel born to pursue. To be behind a glass door looking out and afraid, really, that the door may open.

SERMON The World Outside Our Windows

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

with Beth Black, Chair of the Community Engagement Team

Beth Black: (sharing text of the proposal submitted by Theodore Parker Church to the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program)

Three years ago, our Standing Committee created a Vision Task Force whose charge was to do strategic planning focused on ways to strengthen and sustain the church for the future. The group concluded that a major priority is to deepen the church’s connection with the local community, thereby broadening the base of support for Unitarian Universalist values and for activities related to spiritual exploration, justice work and artistic expression – three existing priority areas and strong-suits of our congregational life.

Anne: *We sat at the breakfast table in front of the big sliding glass door, eating our breakfast and watching the birds peck at theirs.*

Beth: Like many congregations, we are aware of the need for adaptive responses to a changing membership landscape. Instead of concern, we see a compelling opportunity to become more than a church, though not least a church.

Anne: *Very quietly then I went to the door. I slid it open. “Okay, boy,” I whispered.*

Beth: We firmly believe that Unitarian Universalist congregations, particularly smaller, local congregations like ours, need to become community centers for the population that surrounds them. We need to be progressive voices for the values of inclusion and love that are so definitional to our faith. It is not enough to be a church, although that is our primary task; still, we must be able to offer opportunities for learning and growth that is not contingent on Sunday morning attendance.

Anne: It's a funny thing about windows, especially big tall windows with doors in them. They expose us to everything outside, making it all feel just a step away, yet they also protect us from the inevitable elements. We see the world outside, expansive and inviting, while we are quietly assured that nothing will bother us unless we want it to – the window shows us the possibilities while it guards us against unwanted trespassers or challenges we may not be quite ready for. And, like our friend the cat, we might sit *“behind a glass door looking out and afraid, really, that the door may open.”*

Does that feel at all familiar to you? *I knew what it was like to want to hunt,*” Rev. Anderson writes, *“to want to go after something – something you feel born to pursue.”* Is there a part of you that recognizes that urge in your personal life? Is there a part of you that recognizes the feeling of caution that is more comfortable with being on the inside of the window?

I wonder if you remember the story of the Buddha as the child, Siddhartha Gautama? He is said to have been born to very wealthy parents, a young prince, in fact. His mother died when he was young and his father, in an effort to protect him, kept him in the palace grounds, seeing only a lovely landscape outside his proverbial window, safe from the awareness of the three realities of illness, old age, and death. It was not until a trip through the city exposed him to first one, then the other, then the final reality of life that he became aware of what he had been protected from.

For each of us, for all of us it seems, an insular life is possible, and can feel a better choice, safer, even when it may feel somewhat counter to our natures as curious beings.

Beth: Our goal at Theodore Parker Church is to develop a detailed community engagement plan that would help us to transform our physical space into an active hub for local individuals and groups committed to spiritual exploration, justice work and artistic expression, while still preserving its flexible use as a congregational gathering place. This is an ongoing project of the church, contingent with our efforts to become fully accessible and welcoming to the greater Boston community.

Anne: It looks like an egg . . . I think it's an egg. It looks like an egg has always looked. I thought it would behave that way . . . which begs a question for us. What does a church look like these days? What SHOULD a church look like?

Traditionally, of course, many people think of the church, a church, as a building, when actually, the church – a translation of the Greek “ekklesia,” does not mean a building but an assembly, a people called together, a congregation. What should that look like these days?

I was talking to several colleagues the other day – one from California, and one from the Midwest. The one from California was remarking on the stained-glass windows. We were meeting in the Winchester UU church, which has very classical, Bible-story windows. You never see windows like that in California, he commented. Forget windows, our colleague from the Midwest commented. she never saw a pew, she told us, until she came to the East Coast! To her, church was new construction and folding chairs! I remember going to a service just north of Chicago, in Evanston, with my daughter – it was a big new building with a huge glass wall (talk about windows!) – a pulpit at floor level, and yes, folding chairs, and my daughter, who spent her young church years in a Gothic Revivalist building in West Newton, said, “this just doesn't feel like church,” though we sang familiar hymns from a familiar hymnal and the liturgy followed a similar style.

All of which reminds us of how traditional our “churches” seem here in New England, in congregations like ours that date back more than 300 years. After all these centuries of traditional practice and presence, we look fairly similar to what we have always looked. It may be that we are far more the house cat than the hunter!

Nonetheless, the nature of congregational life IS changing, along with so many things. Countless articles and statistics speak of reduced numbers in religious affiliation. Studies on giving suggest that younger generations are less inclined to commit resources anywhere in particular, let alone to religious institutions. Despite the phenomenal commitment to this congregation and its history and structures, we know the face of “church” needs to change if we are to remain robust and relevant.

The question is how? How do we get to the place where opening the door feels less of a risk and more of an adventure? How do we get to the place where we can do nothing else because we know it's right, and what might that look like?

You have all received a postcard in your Order of Service today, inviting you to imagine five years hence. You are visiting, and are aware of what has changed, AND what has not changed.

We need you to participate in this invitation. The grant we received was referenced as a project of the church, and we need all of you to be a part of that project.

In the climate march this past Friday, I heard the familiar protest chant: “tell me what democracy looks like. THIS is what democracy looks like.” Democracy looks like every voice speaking up and being heard, right? Showing up! It’s one of our principles . . . the right of the democratic process. Your leadership, here, needs to hear from you. PLEASE, tell us what you need from this church. Please, tell us what you can give. Tell us what you think we COULD be all together. It is really a very exciting invitation.

I was listening to a TED talk by political scientist and journalist David Rothkopf. I think it was filmed as far back as 2015, and even then he was bemoaning the way we have become distracted from the critical issues of the day, the ways in which we have stopped being in conversation with each other about really important concerns. He questioned where the conversations about values are happening. Hello? Faith communities?

And then Molly Schen sent me an article by Jonathan Franzen, from *The New Yorker*, and I’m really hoping the next one she sends me is more upbeat, or maybe she’ll just send one of the cartoons, but I must say this article, entitled “What if We Stopped Pretending the Climate Apocalypse Can Be Stopped?” (September 8, 2019) was actually fairly constructive in that it put aside the focus on preventing to a focus on managing the outcome of what science assures us is happening.

“In times of increasing chaos,” Franzen writes, “people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law, and our best defense against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, functioning communities. In this respect, any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action. Securing fair elections is a climate action. Combatting extreme wealth inequality is a climate action. Shutting down the hate machines on social media is a climate action. Instituting humane immigration policy, advocating for racial and gender equality, promoting respect for laws and their enforcement, supporting a free and independent press, ridding the country of assault weapons—these are all meaningful climate actions. To survive rising temperatures, every system, whether of the natural world or of the human world, will need to be as strong and healthy as we can make it.”

I would argue that that includes faith communities, which means that keeping Theodore Parker Church robust and relevant is a form of climate action!

Franzen continues: “Keep doing the right thing for the planet, yes, but also keep trying to save what you love *specifically*—a community, an institution . . . and take heart in your . . . successes. Any good thing you do now is arguably a hedge against the hotter future. . . . As long as you have something to love,” he assures us, “you have something to hope for.”

Okay, Molly, I take it back.

Did you know that this church, this ekklesia, this gathering of people of which you are – today, right now, a part – has bigger numbers now than in the past century? We have more capacity now, arguably, than we have ever had to open our glass door to the world around us, to serve that world and to invite it in.

This is not a time for bashful, friends. Our world needs us to be bold and creative. Take your cards, talk to each other, sit and imagine – and let us know what we can build together: our very own climate action, our very own sustaining hope, just outside the window.

Closing Story

Once there was a king and a wise old man. One day, the king – hoping to catch the wise man as a fool – asks, “O wise man, tell me this. I have the tiniest of birds cupped between my hands. I command you to tell me if the bird is alive or dead.” The wise man immediately realizes he’s in a dilemma, for if he says, “Alive,” the king will surely snuff out the little bird’s life with one squeeze of his hand; and if he says, “Dead,” the king will simply open his hand and the bird will be released into the air. Either answer will be used to discredit him. The old man ponders his decision. The king grows impatient. “Well, is the bird alive or dead?” he demands. And the wise man replies, “It is as you wish, your Majesty. The choice is in your hands.”

Benediction

The blessing of truth be upon us,
The power of love direct us and sustain us,
And may the peace of this community
Preserve our going out and our coming in
From this time forth, until we meet again.

- Duke T. Gray