The Spiritual Legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright

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Musings of a Master Builder
"Why I Believe in Advancing Unitarianism"
by Frank Lloyd Wright (1946)

The Unitarian church, always a leader in the ethical thought of humanity, is leading again. ... The Church will find that Organic Religion should be allied to Organic Architecture in order to lead the way. That is how the First Unitarian Society of Madison sees our situation. That little society is courageously going away from the deadly power-clinch, pig-piling, and logrolling, going out to adjacent country to build a ... modern "church" that is truly free.

If what we call the Church can't wake our people to the fact that they need be economic slaves no longer, it dies of their own fault. The Church must lead in teaching the why and wherefore of their new freedom to the people, now learning to practice what it preaches. If the Church does not, then Organic Architecture must....

The Unitarian Church at Madison has already taken the first courageous step over the threshold of the atomic era. Perhaps the Unitarian Church is the only church able to see clearly the implications of this new light that makes the promised land of democracy easier for all to see....

The architecture we are calling Organic Architecture could serve the adventure of the church ... at this critical juncture of the life of our civilization.... No effort we may make to civilize ourselves now will succeed if the Church does not again assume ethical leadership and, at whatever cost, really begin to practice what it preaches.

Reflections

On this, the occasion of Frank Lloyd Wright's 141st birthday, it seems appropriate to reflect for a few minutes on the man who designed the inspiring space our congregation has been privileged to occupy for over half a century.

Much has been written about how our meeting house functions from a symbolic or spiritual standpoint. The choice of a triangular geometry seems ironic to some, since that form is often associated with the Holy Trinity—a very un-Unitarian idea. Apparently the proposal originally came from Olgivanna, Wright's wife, for whom the shape suggested "aspiration."

And then there is the famous prow, which has been likened to both a plow carving the prairie soil and a ship's prow. On at least one occasion, Mr. Wright described it as two hands clasped in prayer. Given that the meeting house was built for a congregation unaccustomed to prayer and other pietistic practices, that suggestion is also tinged with irony.

On the other hand, several outstanding features of the Meeting House *do* clearly and unambiguously reflect Unitarian sensibilities. The manner in which the building marries the transcendent to the immanent, heaven to earth, the human to the divine is fully in keeping with our values. This is how Kenneth Patton, who served as minister at the time Wright was commissioned for the project, explained the overall concept:

> As he looked upon traditional church architecture, Wright found it to be composed of three units: the steeple which pointed toward the heavens; the sanctuary for worship ... and the secular parts of the church. ... In a "Unit-arian" church there should be organic unity of function as well as structure, so all three of these previously disunited parts of the building are gathered into one unit, which serves as spire, sanctuary, and general purpose parish "living room" in one.

To accomplish this feat, Wright created a V-shaped tower that brought the steeple *under* the roof where those sitting below could sense "the upsweeping and indomitable hope of humankind." The simply adorned Auditorium, created from sturdy, native materials and furnished with moveable benches reinforced the idea that religion is a way of life; the social and educational activities of the parish were no less "spiritual" than the Sunday services. According to Patton, the crowning glory of the Meeting House is its ability to express the "full genius of humanistic religion."

Wright himself offered a similar assessment. "Cannot religion be brought into a human scale?" he complained in 1946.

> Can it not be humanized and natural? Must churches be starched and stiff as a hard collar...? What is a church? Isn't it a gratifying home for the spirit of human love and kind-

> ness...? I say we ought to relax the whole thing. Why must a church ... crucify the congregation just because Jesus himself was crucified?

Frank Lloyd Wright loved this building and, when cost overruns threatened the project, he did what was necessary to ensure its completion. He rarely attended Sunday services, but would occasionally stop by during the week to enjoy the airy, light-filled Auditorium and admire what was then a stunning view of Lake Mendota through the front windows. Wright felt the open prow was a real asset: "If you are basically bored by the preacher," he commented, "you can at least look at nature surrounding him."

The Meeting House provides some inkling of Frank Lloyd Wright's spiritual sensibilities. But let us delve deeper into the soul of the man who was undoubtedly this congregation's most famous member.

Wright's father was an ordained Baptist minister who converted to Unitarianism in mid-life and is listed among the "Founders" of First Unitarian Society. His mother hailed from a family of fiercely independent Welsh Unitarians who proudly bore the motto "Truth Against the World." Wright inherited traits from both parents. He shared his father's artistic temperament and his taste for transcendentalist literature, particularly Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The supreme self-confidence and willfulness of the Lloyd Jones clan was prominently displayed in his personality as well.

Wright's own spirituality was an eclectic affair, and one would be hard-pressed to attach a label to it. Brendan Gill described Wright as a "sentimental deist." One could also argue that he was an classical Idealist. Two other terms that he invoked often and to which he ascribed spiritual significance were "organic" and "democracy." These were some of the major strands of his spiritual tapestry, but what did they mean and how were the woven together?

Wright declared that everything was imbued with "spirit," but he didn't see much point in worshipping or praying to God in any formal way. Like the 18th century Deists, he rejected a personal God who meddled in human affairs. But in other respects, Wright resembled a transcendentalist more than a Deist. He felt that "The Kingdom of God is within you" was the most profound statement Jesus ever made.

"I don't think God is outside of yourselves, a mystery that some day you're going to inherit," he told his apprentices in 1958. "I think that all you'll see of it, you've got right now."

Such comments seem to echo Emerson and other members of the Transcendentalist Club. Individual self-expression, self-actualization—the full flowering of the "inner" man or woman—was the aim of existence. "Wouldn't it be a greater harmony ... a greater becoming of everything we are and everything that we do?" he wrote late in life.

> We must make ourselves an expression of this light within we call the spirit, and to the extent that we do, we are beneficial to humankind. If they can say, "Well, he's a great human being," no greater compliment can be paid to you.

Interestingly, Wright denied that the "inner God" was the same for everyone. "It is one, it *is* the light," he said, but each person perceives and manifests it differently—a position also taken by many Buddhists who hold that our innate Buddha nature is in some sense universal, yet unique to ourselves.

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Gill also characterized Wright as a spiritual "sentimentalist," and an episode that took place in this very room helps us see why.

One day, while the finishing touches were being put on this meeting house, Mr. Wright entered the building with an old lavishly illustrated Bible of gigantic proportions. He set it up on these stones, and while his apprentices were hammering and sawing away, Wright turned the pages, exclaiming now and then over the illustrations.

"Look boys," he would call out to us, "here is Samson pulling apart the columns of the Temple," or "The Queen of Sheba, there she is in all her glory. What a splendid old volume this is!"

While Wright was still declaiming, Fred Cairns, the minister at that time, wandered in. Frowning, he addressed the architect: "Mr. Wright," he said, "We don't use the Bible in this congregation."

Wright looked him straight in the eye and said, "I am a Unitarian, descended from Unitarian ministers on both my mother's and father's side of the family. The Bible has always been part of our background, and I went out and bought this bible myself, for the church. And while we are on the

subject of this church, reverend, it appears to me that you are about as appropriate to this building as a cigarette stub in a flower pot."

Needless to say Fred Cairns' tenure at First Unitarian Society ended shortly thereafter.

Wright was sentimentally attached not just to the Bible, but to its hero—Jesus of Nazareth—whom he regarded less as a savior than as a kindred spirit. "I believe Jesus was himself an architect." Wright declared.

> The carpenter in those days *was* an architect, wasn't he? Jesus thought as an architect would think. If an architect were the prophet of organic architecture, he would have said and acted and believed *precisely* as Jesus preached by his own word.

Wright clearly saw himself as a legitimate heir to Jesus and a faithful promoter of his teachings. On one occasion he warned his apprentices that in order to be "true to themselves" that must also be prepared—short of crucifixion—to endure what Jesus endured. "I don't know why it is so," he told them,

> but you will have to struggle and suffer and sweat and toil and be thrown down and beaten for your lofty and high ambitions. There's some good reason for it. You figure it out. You'll have to.

Idealism represents a second element of Wright's spiritual thought. *Real* ideas are not so much thought up or created as they are "discovered." We do not "invent" but rather "perceive" them, and as such an Idea never really belongs to us. Ideas are eternal, universal and always of the essence. Geniuses—like Wright himself—unveil ideas and make them visible to others.

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"All of us are full of *notions*," he said, "but not many of us have *ideas*. . . . My difference between a common and an uncommon man is that the first can see, love, and respect the idea." Here Wright appears to be standing squarely in the Platonic tradition.

Architecture, Wright believed, was the art form best suited for the expression of bona fide Ideas, and this is what made him so passionately evangelical about his discipline. "Architecture is the natural home of all the arts," he declared.

And again, "Great architecture is civilization. Without it? No civilization."

And even more dramatically: "The soul of humanity is in the architect's charge. . . . Don't let it bother you if they say you are making a religion out of architecture, because you are and you should."

Spirituality and architecture were indissolubly connected in Frank Lloyd Wright's mind and he viewed himself as much more than a skilled craftsman—a designer of buildings. He was a reformer, a prophet calling out to the cultural heathen to heed his message of salvation. Wright readily accepted invitations to speak before audiences large and small and would often describe himself not as a lecturer, but as a "journeyman preacher." "He could command an auditorium with an ease that approached witchcraft," Brendan Gill remarks.

Wright accorded special significance to one particular "Idea" that he believed was central to the ancient teachings of Lao Tse and Heraclitus, among others. "Its principles were also inherent in the simplicities of Jesus of Nazareth," he wrote. Wright attached the label "organic" to this Idea and said that it found expression in his own architectural designs.

Unfortunately, Wright's handling of the concept didn't always lend itself to clear understanding. He could be vague and aphoristic: "What is true is organic and what is organic is natural," he wrote. Not much practical direction there.

More helpful but still somewhat mysterious was this comment: "the reality of the building does not consist of walls and roof, but in the space within to be lived in." In other words, the organic approach begins with a vision of the empty interior, rather than the physical structure that encloses it.

For a clearer idea of how organic principles are applied we might look to our own Meeting House, which "is consistently one thing, especially for the purpose for which it was designed." In an organic structure, Wright argues, everything is interrelated, and a recognizable harmony is achieved.

And even more specifically, an organic building belongs to its milieu, so that the occupant feels a seamless connection between the "built" and "unbuilt" environment. It is composed of native elements and is constructed in a way that it feels like an extension of its surroundings.

But as frequently as Wright invoked organicism, many of his buildings blatantly violated his own stated rules (Fallingwater being a notable

example). Ultimately, Wright was just too creative, too much of a free spirit to be hemmed in by any single "Idea," even one like organicism that he fervently believed in.

A few words, finally, about democracy. Invited to speak at Sarah Lawrence College Wright once complained, "You know, we have no religion to go with the Declaration of Independence, to go with the sovereignty of the individual. None!"

The democratic ideal appealed strongly to Frank Lloyd Wright and once again he pictured the architect in a redemptive role. What would a "democratic" building look like? As many walls, doors, and other barriers as possible would be eliminated. Open spaces for free mingling and mixing would be provided. Such measures would serve to eliminate hierarchy and place the members of families, congregations and corporations on a more-or-less equal footing. How better to promote the egalitarian ideal than through architecture?

For Wright, however, architecture was one thing and politics quite another. He insisted that every individual should have the opportunity fully to develop their spiritual nature, and he touted organic design as a means to that end. But Wright didn't believe in "rule by the people," which is the way democracy is typically defined. He derisively described popular rule as "mobocracy" and preferred that important decisions be made by the enlightened few. To a visiting friend he once remarked with a wink, "You know Carleton, a perfect democracy flourishes here at the Taliesin Fellowship. When I get hungry, we all eat."

In summing up the spirituality of Frank Lloyd Wright, we are presented with two problems. The first, as Brendan Gill remarks, is that Wright was neither a systematic nor a very careful thinker. An entertaining speaker, his soaring rhetoric often disguised a lack of substance. Terms like "spirit," "organic," "democracy" were seldom satisfactorily defined and were used inconsistently. One does best to let Wright's buildings speak for themselves, for his prose wasn't always intelligible.

And then, at last, there is the thorny issue of Wright's personal life. Here is a man who invoked democracy but failed to practice it. Who spoke movingly of "love" but was an unfaithful husband, a detached father, and a notoriously difficult man to deal with.

He extolled self-sacrifice yet freely indulged his own taste for designer clothes, fast cars, and gourmet meals. His privileged life-style depended on doting Apprentices who held him in awe. As a "genius," Wright always felt entitled.

Frank Lloyd Wright was undoubtedly a great architect—endlessly imaginative and prodigiously productive. Many of his buildings—like this one—are ingenious in their conception and timeless in their appeal. Herein lies the artist's greatness and here Wright's spiritual legacy resides.

But a legacy can be calculated in yet another way. The Master himself once said, "No higher compliment can be paid to a person than to be told that he or she is a great *human being*." Using that yardstick, how does Mr. Wright measure up? It is a question to be taken seriously, but we must leave it for your own consideration.