

Goodbye and Good Luck

By Michael A. Schuler

June 10, 2018

Prose and Poetry Apropos From Edward Hays, based on a legend from the early Christian hermits of Egypt.

It seems that a young aspirant to holiness once came to visit the hermitage of an old holy man who was sitting in the doorway of his quarters at sunset. The old man's dog was stretched across the threshold as the young spiritual seeker presented his problem to the holy man. "Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?"

The old man smiled and replied, "Let me tell you a story: "One day as I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog, when he suddenly jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after a big rabbit. He chased that rabbit over the hills with great passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by the barking. What a sight it was, as the pack of dogs ran barking across the creeks, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns!

"Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the rabbit.

"In that story, young man, is the answer to your question."

The young man sat in confused silence. Finally he said, "Abba, I don't understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for holiness?"

You fail to understand, responded the old hermit, "because you failed to ask the obvious question. Why didn't the other dogs continue the chase? And the answer to that question is that they had not *seen* the rabbit. Unless you see your prey, the chase is just too difficult. You will lack the passion and determination necessary to perform all the hard work required by the discipline of your spiritual exercises.

Cathedral Builders

By John Ormond

They climbed on sketchy ladders towards God.
With winch and pulley hoisted hewn rock into heaven,
Inhabited sky with hammers, defied gravity.
Deified stone, took up God's house to meet Him.

And came down to their suppers and small beer,
Every night slept, lay with their smelly wives,
Quarreled and cuffed the children, lied,
Spat, sang, were happy or unhappy.

And every day took to the ladders again,

Impeded the right-of-way of another summer's
Swallows, grew greyer, shakier, became less inclined
To fix a neighbor's roof of a fine evening,

Saw naves sprout arches, clerestories soar,
Cursed the loud, fancy glaziers for their luck,
Somehow escaped the plague, got rheumatism,
Decided it was time to give up,

To leave the spire to others; stood in the crowd
Well back from the vestments, at the consecration,
Envied the fat bishop his warm boots,
Cocked up a squint eye and said, "I bloody did that."

Reflections

Early in 1987, Vice President George H. W. Bush was positioned as Ronald Reagan's heir apparent. At that time—and before the infamous "Willy Horton" ad that submarined his Democratic opponent—Michael Dukakis's—chances, the elder Bush was dealing with his own Achilles Heel. He lacked a sense of "vision" his campaign advisors warned. Bush clearly wanted to serve as President but was having trouble conveying a clear and convincing message of what he hoped to achieve. "It rangles him," a commentator wrote.

Recently Bush asked a friend to help him identify some cutting issues for next year's campaign. Instead, the friend suggested that Bush go alone to Camp David for a few days to figure out where he wanted to take the country. "Oh," said Bush in clear exasperation, "the vision thing." The friend's advice did not impress him.

George H.W. Bush was, generally speaking, a moderate, workmanlike President—never particularly inspiring, never comfortable with catchy slogans or grand plans. And although he ultimately prevailed in the 1988 election, his rather lackluster "Don't change the team in the middle of the stream," message in 1992 failed to kindle much excitement among voters. And so, the president was steam-rolled in his reelection bid by the Clinton campaign's catchy rallying cry: "It's the economy, stupid."

Like candidates for high office, parish ministers are frequently referred to as "vision casters," charged with giving the congregation a sense of possibility and a high purpose to work toward. In our own system of policy governance, it is a function ministers share with the elected lay leadership, but because the "bully pulpit" belongs to us, we have repeated opportunities to give powerful expression to any such vision.

It's an important function, for as the story I told earlier about the old Holy Man and his dog suggests, to continue the pursuit one must have caught a glimpse of one's quarry. Otherwise, the dog might just as well be chasing its own tail. The same is true for human communities, whether they be great nations or humble churches.

To be quite honest, I've never really fancied myself as some sort of visionary. True, the construction of this Atrium Addition after several years of pondering and planning called for a major commitment from hundreds of families. And so I helped conjure up a vision of an expanded facility that would serve the congregation and the larger Madison community in meaningful ways. In many respects, that vision has been fulfilled.

Generally, however, I've always believed that providing high quality worship, religious education, pastoral care, and institutional leadership from week to week and year to year was what really mattered. During my time here, my co-workers and I have striven to be consistently relevant, nurturing, artistic, and efficient. Again, for the most part I think we've performed pretty well.

As I deliver this, my last set of reflections as FUS's senior minister, it may be a little late to be casting any further visions. After all, I won't be the one responsible for seeing them through. Nevertheless, I would feel remiss in not sharing what I believe are important considerations for the future. After all, were it not for Moses's vision of a land of milk and honey, it's unlikely that the newly liberated Hebrews would have kept marching through the desert for 40 years, as the philosopher Michael Walzer reminds us. So, laying aside my own reticence, I'll don the visionary mantle one last time, asking only that you take what I have to offer under advisement.

I first would note that, generally speaking, these are not good times for American faith communities. Almost every mainline denomination is in serious decline—United Methodist, ELCA, UCC, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic. The old guard is dying off while many younger folks, suspicious of institutional commitment to begin with, are finding grist for their ethical and spiritual mills in other places. It doesn't help that, for many, the church has acquired a reputation for intolerance, misogyny, hypocrisy, and irrationality thanks to high profile scandals and the skewed priorities of right-wing Christianity.

Despite a challenging cultural environment, the First Unitarian Society and Unitarian Universalism have been holding their own. And, to the extent that our faith tradition can present itself as a progressive alternative to the general run of churches in America, we should be able to buck the current downward trend. As Parker Palmer recently observed, "Serious seekers want churches that will support them in a lifelong exploration of faith and

action, and help them keep sorting and sifting what they're learning."

So in thinking about what this congregation might become, I'd begin with an observation the church consultant Lyle Schaller made after a visit in 1987 and just as Max Gaebler hung up his spurs. Having taken a close look at the demographics of the society, Schaller said: "Do you want to maintain your present appearance or become a more heterogeneous religious community? If the latter, are you willing to pay the price?"

What Lyle Schaller noticed at the time was a lack of generational diversity and the modest number of families with young children active in the Society. Thirty-one years ago, FUS was what the literature calls an "upstairs-downstairs" congregation in which young people and adults occupied separate, well-defined spheres. Except for a few poorly attended intergenerational services each year, children seldom darkened the door of the adult worship space.

We've done a great deal over the years to create a more welcoming space for parents and kids, and in this sense FUS is more heterogeneous than it was in 1987. Our challenge moving forward is to think about what it would take to become the kind of multi-racial, multi-cultural faith community that our inclusive values would seem to require. But, as Schaller asked three decades ago, "Are we willing to pay the price" for that?

Over the past 10 years, and even more frequently after racial equity became a hot-button issue in Dane County, this is the question I've been asked: "Why is FUS so white?" The congregation's racial homogeneity is clearly a source of concern for a significant number of people. Do I wish it were otherwise? Absolutely. But even with high profile support for the Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing engagement with local communities of color, the de facto Sunday morning segregation that Martin Luther King complained about in 1964 still largely prevails here at FUS.

I can say from experience that this problem is hardly unique to us. The demographics of the vast majority of Protestant and UU congregations resemble our own. For our part, there are very real barriers to greater inclusiveness: we're embedded in an upscale and very "white" part of Madison; stylistically, our ways of worship may not respond to the spiritual expectations and needs of most African Americans and Latinos; theologically, we don't prioritize Christianity. Moreover, in Madison and many other

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places, people of color may risk alienation if they join a majority-white congregation.

I'm not going to argue today that these are insurmountable problems, but they are ones we need to face squarely. It's also neither fair nor realistic to ask the institution itself to solve them. Homogeneity is, rather, largely a reflection of our own social circles, more often than not comprised of folks who share our economic and racial identity. Studies show that 70% or more of people who visit an unfamiliar church do so at the urging of a friend or relative. In other words, diversity starts at home, and until it does we won't see much change in our faith community.

That's not to say that the institution bears no responsibility for fulfilling this vision. We need to "walk our talk," expanding our outreach efforts and demonstrating that we can be reliable and trustworthy allies in the struggle for racial justice, especially in such perilous times as these. Internally, we must continue the discomfiting process of self-examination, identifying the ways in which we unwittingly reinforce America's white supremacy culture. As my colleague Rob Hardies at All Souls Unitarian church in Washington D.C. wrote:

Communities all across this nation—congregations foremost among them—must commit and fortify themselves to make this dream a reality, to serve as laboratories, as incubators, of this dream of a human family, reconciled and whole.

I believe this is a vision with the potential to draw Millennials and Gen-Xers to us, as would my second vision of a society deeply committed to advancing Unitarian Universalism's Seventh Principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." Far too few Americans are giving this issue the attention it deserves, despite dire warnings of planetary disruption. Political and religious conservatives deny the indisputable evidence of climate change, species loss, resource depletion, and over-population, while for the mainstream media they're not newsworthy enough. Like the proverbial frog in a slowly heating caldron, we haven't grasped the gravity of our situation.

Unitarian Universalists are probably more concerned about the state of the environment than most. Here at FUS we built a state-of-the-art "green" addition to the Landmark Meeting House, spending a good deal of extra money to conserve resources, recharge ground water supplies, and prevent run-off. Soon we'll be adding an array of solar panels to further cut utility costs and reduce our carbon footprint.

Nevertheless, apart from a sustainability task force that's been studying the Society's consumption patterns, we don't currently have a ministry team that's actively collaborating with entities such as 350.org, the Sierra Club,

Sustain Dane, A Thousand Friends of Wisconsin, Gathering Waters, the Sand County Foundation, the Audubon Society, and Clean Wisconsin.

It could be argued that many members of FUS already support these environmental groups financially and give time as volunteers. But faith communities are in a unique position to connect people with the natural world at a deeper level, one that may help sustain their commitment.

Back in 1988, the same year that I began serving First Unitarian Society, Thomas Berry's book "The Dream of the Earth" was released. In that book, Berry, a Passionist priest and environmental theologian, wrote: "Our secular, rational, industrial society, with its amazing scientific insight and technological skills,"

... has established the first radically anthropocentric society and has thereby broken the primary law of the universe, the law that ... every constituent member of the universe, especially as realized on the planet earth, should be integral with every other member of the universe.

Berry is talking about our Seventh Principle—the interdependent web of existence—and how much it matters. He then says that it may take "... a quasi-religious transformation of contemporary culture" for us to restore the sensibility we have lost. Another Berry—Wendell Berry—shares his namesake's concerns, and faults the church for largely ignoring the issue. Faith communities, he complains, routinely prioritize the building fund over the fortunes of the "fowls of the air and the lilies of the field." It is high time they began promoting creation-care, Berry writes, spreading a gospel of love and care for:

... the planet's millions of parcels of land, each in its own precious way different from all the rest. ... Only love can do this. Only love can bring intelligence out of institutions and into the presence of the work which must be done.

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Thus far I've cast visions that clearly require the expenditure of time and effort on behalf of two critically important issues. But faith communities have an obligation to address the spiritu-

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al needs and cravings of their members as well. I suggest, then, that we emulate those who subscribe to what is called “Engaged Buddhism.” These are Buddhists who practice active compassion in the world at large, while maintaining a stable contemplative practice in their homes and communities. In short, Engaged Buddhists try to balance the out-breath of service with the in-breath of self-nurture.

Here at FUS, we encourage service to others, and we also offer some in-breath opportunities—a centering prayer circle, movement meditation sessions, monthly Contemplative Gatherings for Healing and Hope, and an Insight Meditation group that’s open to all. One or more of our chalice groups also focus on meditative and spiritual practices. But together these serve only a fraction of our membership, and while attendance at weekend worship can also qualify as spiritual practice, it doesn’t deliver the same goods as a contemplative discipline. The frustration, fear, anxiety, distractedness, and burnout we see around us are, at least in part, symptoms of too little inwardness.

Our faith community needs to provide more opportunities for people not just to “do” but simply to “be,” resting in the moment for a time and putting the future on hold. “If you already have a spiritual practice,” Gail Straube writes,

... treasure it like a beloved ... and make a warrior’s commitment to stay with it for life. If you haven’t found your form, make it your highest priority to do so.

I’ve saved what may be my most pedestrian, but not insignificant, vision for last. In that list of recommendations Lyle Schaller made to the congregation in 1987, he mentioned finances. You need more savings, he said, and you need to start asking members to include the society’s foundation in their wills. At that point, our endowment stood at less than \$300,000. By the end of the millennium it should be six or seven times that, Schaller indicated, so that its earnings can be used for necessary capital improvements.

Schaller would probably be disappointed, because we have not, on a regular basis, encouraged members to leave us bequests. To be sure, our Foundation now boasts \$3 million in assets, but that has mostly to do with a rising stock market. Moreover, unlike in 1987 when the Society was essentially debt free, we are now servicing a \$4 million mortgage with interest and principle payments of \$290,000 per year. I don’t need to remind you that every dollar we spend to satisfy that debt isn’t available for transformational work we are called to do.

Over the last 30 years I’ve seen our members repeatedly rise to the occasion—increasing their annual giving, responding enthusiastically to three capital campaigns, contributing tens of thousands of dollars to local recipients of our outreach offerings. From a culture of scarcity, we’ve moved steadily toward a culture of abundance and generosity; we have this marvelous Atrium addition and a restored Landmark Meeting House to show for it. It took many hands and many open pocketbooks to bring us to this place and, like that stonemason in John Ormond’s poem, I sometimes consider my own modest contribution and say to myself, “I bloody did that!”

Still, bricks and mortar aside, the world we have is not yet the one we would imagine, and that world will remain forever elusive unless we choose to invest in it. May our passion for these visions – a healed planet, a reconciled human family, a sound spirit and a vital faith community – carry us into our next great adventure and beyond.

Benediction

By Maureen Killoran

Endings are also beginnings.

May the spirit of love

Dwelling in this community

Strengthen our hearts, light our way,

And carry us forward

Until we meet again.