

Pillow and Pillar

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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On June 26, 1951, the Universalist Church in Chatham gave its annual report to the Universalist headquarters. Its minister was Charles deVries, who had been settled two years before. They gave their membership as follows: of families, they listed 69 in constituency, 41 in membership. Of individuals, they listed 107 in constituency, 57 in the church book. No I don't know what they meant by constituency. I might venture a guess, knowing something of their history, that constituency might have included summer worshipers.

They listed their last canvass as November 1950, which resulted in 33 subscribers and the amount pledged and/or paid was listed as \$715 for the period January through December 1951. I don't think that was per member, I think that was \$715 in total. The minister was listed as having a total cash salary of \$1500.

The assets of the church were listed as a building and land worth \$20,000. The ceremonies performed were listed as Christenings, one, funerals eleven, and weddings, none.

Maybe you can recognize in these statistics some kinship with these mid-century Universalists. Like them we struggle with deficits, struggle with raising enough to pay for a minister and other staff, like them we do a lot more funerals than weddings or child dedications.

What I want to do this morning is to offer some reflections on what it is we are doing here as a church. First I want to hold up the wonderful image that Kim Crawford Harvie gave us at my installation a year and a half ago, of the pillar and the pillow. Then I want to offer a few ideas of my own and some given by John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker in their recent book, "A House for Hope." Along the way, I might pull in a little more of the history of the Universalist Church in Chatham.

Now this obviously impinges on the vote you are about to take on domesticating the windows from that church, but I am not advocating any particular vote on them. It's my feeling that we have a spiritual connection with that church in that they were part of liberal religion in his town, but there clearly is no institutional connection – they went out of business a good fifteen years before the fellowship which became this church got up and running. But if we knew what they thought they were doing here, that might help us think about what we are doing here.

Start with Pillow and Pillar. At my installation, Kim Crawford Harvie reminded us of the story of Jacob and how his pillow became the first shrine, the story I read a few minutes ago. On his journey to Haran to get a wife, Jacob lay down and put a rock under his head for a pillow. As he slept he had a dream in which a ladder ascended to heaven, and angels were going up and down on it, and he looked around and there was God standing beside him, saying that he was God and would give the land on which Jacob was lying to Jacob's descendants, who would spread to the four directions and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and your offspring. God promised to stay with Jacob wherever he would go. Jacob then woke up and said, "surely the Lord is in the place, and I did not know it."

So he took the stone on which he had been sleeping and anointed it with oil, and made it from a pillow into a pillar. He called the place Bethel, which is House of God. And he made a vow that if God should keep with him and feed him and clothe him, God would be his God and the stone should be God's house and of all that Jacob had been given, he would give back one-tenth to God.

This is the foundation of our concept of church. It is both pillow and pillar. Like a

pillow, a church is a place of comfort, a place of refuge, a place where we can take strength from one another to face threats to our well-being, both public and private. Perhaps this was the place you gathered to regroup after the attacks of September 11. Perhaps it was the place you gathered when our country decide to invade Iraq. But our Meeting House here has been much more in the business of private comfort, for it is the place we share news of each other's illnesses, misfortunes and deaths. It is the place that rallies us to come to the assistance of one of us in need. It is the place through which we offer care for one another.

Pillows are a place for talking, between people who are sharing a life together, between a person who is facing death and the loved ones rallying around her. Pillow talk is intimate talk, talk that goes directly to the heart of the matter. We hope that what is said in church, whether from the pulpit or in small groups or around the Thrift shop, is direct and real.

Now let me shift to the pillar aspect. In the Jacob story, the stone which had been his pillow became the pillar which, consecrated by oil, came to stand for the covenant he made with God. Later, in the Exodus, God would be manifest to the Israelites wandering in the Sinai as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The ancient Jews believed that there was a realm under the earth, a realm in the sky, and the realm of the earth, and after King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, the three levels of existence were all tied together by the Temple, which was the axis mundi, the axis of the world. The pillar, church in the vertical dimension, is the connection of the worshiper to the sacred.

In a way, the later Christian tradition incorporates Jacob's pillar as foundation for the church; in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciple who do people say that I am. Simon, called Peter, says that he is the Messiah, and Jesus responds that he must have this answer from God rather than from an earthly source, and then goes on to make a little pun in Greek: "and you are Peter (which in Greek is Petros) and on this rock (which in Greek is Petra) I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18) For the Roman Catholic Church, this rock passage is the foundation for the authority of the Pope, but it was foreshadowed by Jacob and his pillar.

Now when I say the sacred, many of you will think I said the supernatural, and you will resist thinking about the vertical dimension in church. But I want you to consider this: the story of Jacob is the story of a dream. There are plenty of miracles and plenty of times in the Bible when God suspends the laws of nature, but the Jacob story isn't one of them. This vision of the ladder to heaven and the covenant between Jacob and God all arose out of Jacob's dream.

Our UU churches are founded on covenant, which can be conceived by the tradition-minded as a covenant with God, but can also be seen as a covenant with one another. The pillar is the witness to the covenant.

So here's one definition of a church: an institution built on a dream. This church we inhabit was built on a dream of reviving liberal religion in a conservative but affluent town where the light seemed to have sputtered. It was Jim Robinson's dream and it became Peter and Ruth Fleck's dream and it became the dream of a lot of you founding mothers and fathers who are still with us today. When you walked down Crowell Road behind Ed Hardy to this sanctuary in 1996, you were fulfilling a dream. You were making your covenant concrete. You were anointing your pillar.

The Universalist church in Chatham was also built on a dream. The early records are lost, but the story which has been handed down is that a Chatham man went to Boston to hear the great Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou and came back convinced that what he had heard was the truth, that God was too loving to condemn any people to Hell. This may have been Salathiel Nickerson; he was certainly in the first group. A small group was gathered, reportedly in the Bow Roof House which is two doors up Queen Anne Road from where we sit now and some money was tithed and land was bought in what is now Peoples Cemetery and the first meeting-house was erected and dedicated in 1824. An article in a Universalist paper at the time

says that there were many orthodox citizens and clergy who were expecting for God to intervene and prevent the building from being erected, but it was erected.

A decade or two later, the congregation outgrew the original meeting house and a second building was built on Queen Anne Road but the congregation outgrew that as well. A third building was built on Main Street and was just completed when a big hurricane came along and destroyed most of the buildings in the vicinity, but left the new Universalist structure standing. The church's stationary ever after proclaimed it as the "church the hurricane opened."

One of the early ministers of the Universalist Church in Chatham was Charles Spear; though he only served here briefly, he went on an exemplary career in prison reform and founded the Massachusetts Society for the abolition of Capital Punishment in 1845.

In 1847, a quarter-century after its founding, the church got around to writing some by-laws, and in the process, they incorporated the statement of faith known as the Winchester profession, adopted by Universalist convention at Winchester, NH. 1803:
Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.
Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.
Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.
Now these articles obviously would not pass muster with today's UUs, but I want to point out one thing: the first article says that the Bible contains "a" revelation of God, not "the" revelation, which leaves the field of revelation open to a God made manifest by nature, as the residents of Chatham have around them in abundance.

Contrast this early Universalist statement with the Affirmation we say in this church every Sunday. You can see there are similarities and large differences. We state Love as the spirit of the church; the Universalists said love was the nature of God. Maybe we're both witnessing to the same thing.

James Luther Adams says, "I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made by human hands." This is a broad statement of the vertical dimension of church, that which distinguishes a church from a political party or yacht club or music appreciation society. A church has an aboutness, a mission, a reason for being.

But all the mission in the world will not guarantee that the spirit is present. As John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker point out in their new book, "A House For Hope," the spirit goes where it will:

"Today many people say 'I am spiritual but not religious.' They want to connect more deeply with the Spirit, but they have little confidence that the Spirit is going to show up at a worship service or religious ritual. They may be right. Even in the Bible, the Spirit shows up on mountaintops, along roadsides and in humble homes and rooms more often than it does in designated places of worship, ritual and assembly. Both Biblical languages use the same word for spirit and for the wind. 'The pneuma (spirit) blows where it chooses,' says the Gospel of John. But if we are going to more fully realize the commonwealth of God, we need a pneumatology that goes beyond the highly individualistic, narcissistic 'spirituality' of contemporary culture. We need one that helps to identify how we can cultivate collective responsiveness to the Spirit that truly makes for holiness and wholeness. Human beings often need sanctuary. But so does the

Spirit.¹”

Why did the Universalist Church in Chatham fail? It may have been that the spirit moved on, or that the message of Universal salvation did not have as much appeal when the doctrine of hell was downplayed by the orthodox Protestant faiths. Whatever the reason, it appears that from 1906 to 1944, the church was only holding services during July and August. In 1944, a hurricane did major damage, which occasioned much soul-searching in the Universalist congregation. They considered selling the building then, but decided to rebuild, apparently with some help from the denomination. The steeple was never repaired, so pictures of the church without the steeple can be dated to after 1944. They went to year-round services with a year-round minister from 1946 until sometime in the 1950's, and ultimately sold the building to the Episcopal church, at about the time that the Universalists were merging with the Unitarians. The church that the hurricane opened rebuilt after a hurricane 70 years later, but faltered thereafter.

Church is pillow and pillar. It is a place of comfort and refuge, and a place to stand for something and transform ourselves and the world. One of the most spirit-filled moments of this past year was undoubtedly the Concert for Haiti in February. Every seat was taken and the walls were festooned with photographs on strings, and some of the best talent on the Cape volunteered their performances to keep the place rocking for three solid hours. Though this was not our regular congregation, and this was not a worship service, the spirit was here, it was a church standing for something and everyone who attended left as a different person.

Our thrift shop is a pillar; it is ministry of recycling to the people of all economic levels in town. It is also a pillow, a place where we connect with one another, catch up on the news, plot strategies of caring.

The pillow is a repose of memory. One of the important things this church does, as the Universalist church did, was to memorialize and celebrate the lives of those among us who have passed on. In the short time I have been here, I've heard many people say that they are learning things about people through their memorial services that they never knew when they were alive. The skein of caring, the spirit of love, holds through death, as it does through illness and misfortune.

The stuffing of the pillow is human need. In the great words of George Odell,

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success,
when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when, with encouragement, we might endure,
and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for
the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.²

¹Buehrens, John and Parker, Rebecca Ann, *A House for Hope* (Boston: Beacon Press 2010) p. 148

² George E. Odell, “We Need One Another,” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #468

Pillow and pillar. In her sermon at the installation, Kim Crawford Harvie talked about what the church had meant to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., how he had launched his civil rights campaigns from the churches and come back to them time and again for refuge:

"Jacob dreamed, and anointed pillow and pillar as the first shrine; Dr. King dreamed, and returned to the church for his deepest nourishment, for strength; we dream, and over and over again, we come to mourn and to celebrate, to gather in love and service for justice and peace. We come, and we return to dream."

In Jacob's dream, God promises him that his descendants will cover the earth and bless it. Let us in ways both large and small try to bless the world in which we find ourselves. Amen.

Reading:

Genesis 28:

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15 Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!" 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."