

Theodore Parker Church
Invited Anew and Accountable
September 20, 2020

This year we'll join the efforts of our Association and sibling congregations to address the ideas presented in Widening the Circle of Concern, the report of the Commission on Institutional Change that was published this summer regarding issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. What might that look like for us during this pivotal year? How has Theodore Parker inspired us to continue this too-elusive goal; and, how will we hold ourselves accountable?

Opening Words

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Barbara Penzner, who serves Temple Hillel B'nai Torah on Corey Street, shared a prayer with me when I sent her wishes for a Happy New Year on the first night of Rosh Hashanah Friday evening.

"This new year, 5781 in the Jewish calendar has a Hebrew acronym (since every number corresponds to a letter of the alphabet). This year it forms the word meaning either "to breathe" or to "aspire." Our prayer is for all those who are gasping for air, whether COVID sufferers, Black men under the weight of the police, or those who live on the West Coast in the midst of thick smoke. We aspire to breathe easier in the coming year."

As we gather in worship this morning, we join their prayer for the new year, and also take a moment to aspire together to the heights of strength and justice sought by the recently deceased Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Come, in breath and aspiration, let us worship together. Life moves in mystery, and we are gathered in gratitude to be renewed.

Reading

In a moment we'll be sharing a reading from the Rev. David Bumbaugh called the *Back-Scratcher*. It offers a slightly different take on one of the origin stories in the Bible: the story of Adam and Eve. In the Bible, the Garden of Eden was where these first humans lived in harmony in a place of abundance and innocence, before being tempted by the snake to eat the forbidden fruit, often represented in art and stories as an apple. Eating the apple that God had told them

not to eat caused Adam and Eve to be cast out of this place of abundance, a part of the story that's often called their "fall from grace."

For those who know that ancient story well, this morning's reading opens with a twist: what if it was something other than a snake that caused these humans - and maybe us - to be cut off from abundance?

But here's a small disclaimer: even as we share this reading as a different take on a traditional story, it's important to remember that the language used here is not necessarily universal: "original sin," and "fall from grace" may be common phrases in the Western world where biblical text has shaped a lot of our dominant culture, but we can't forget that "western" is often code for "colonial" — and that there are many peoples in the world who do not see the Bible as having any place in their origin stories. As Unitarian Universalists, we take wisdom from our Judeo-Christian heritage, but also know it has cast a particular slant on how we perceive the world.

Part of the work of becoming a truly multicultural beloved community is to interrupt assumptions about what cultural traditions and stories are "shared," and even how those of us who know them well might interpret them differently.

BACK-SCRATCHER

- *David Bumbaugh* (How We Are Called, a Meditation Anthology)

The fall from grace,
the great disruption of primordial order
the original sin, had nothing to do
with eating apples or talking with snakes.
The instrument of our fall was a wooden back-scratcher, . . .

. . . that piece of wood, bent at the end
so one can reach the unreachable spot –
there, between the shoulder blades,
down just a little bit lower,
now up a bit,
there where the most persistent itch
always takes up residence.

Before the back-scratcher
before that simple infernal device,

we, like all our primate kin, depended on others to do for us
what we could not do for ourselves:
“You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

Before the back-scratcher,
before that simple, infernal tool,
we needed each other to scratch the unreachable itch.
The wooden back-scratcher dissolved the bonds of reciprocity,
unloosed the ties of community,
and tempted us to believe in our own godlike self-sufficiency.

And God walked in the cool of the garden,
and saw a primate standing alone.
“What have you done,” God asked, “that you stand alone?”
“I have found a back-scratcher,” said the beast,
“and now I need no one.”
“Poor beast,” said God, “now you must leave this garden:
“In Eden, no one stands alone; each depends on the others.”

And thus began our wandering, our pacing up and down the earth,
scratching our own itches, pretending self-sufficiency,
trying to ignore the persistent sense of loss,
the vague yearning for a primordial order,
a world where you scratched my back and I
scratched yours.

A wooden back-scratcher is poor compensation
for the gentle touch of a living hand.

Meditation

Come, let us share some quiet together - some reflection, some prayer. We’ve had a loss this weekend, friends - on top of other losses we are still struggling with. Yes, pandemic. Yes, political angst. Yes, fires and floods. Yes, our individual worries. And now a giant in petite clothing has left us with a legacy of courage, a legacy of she who spoke truth to power in bold and relentless ways. Ruth Bader Ginsburg. This morning, let us be mindful, and grateful for her service, her gifts and inspiration. Just that, just now. Let us marvel at an amazing life. How a collection of cells became a child, became a woman, a citizen, a servant to our democracy. Mindful, and grateful. Let’s not jump to fear just yet, or anxiety, or anticipation of what is to

come. Let us pause, listen, and marvel at the gift of a life that was touched by the spirit of love and determination - a warrior for justice.

Homily the Reverend Anne Bancroft

Are you sad today? Are you worried for our future? I find myself there a bit - and I'm guessing, or maybe hoping, that I'm not alone. These days lately have been so beautiful - the fall light has been spectacular, and our air crisp and clear - made more obvious by comparison, of course - and I try to spend time appreciating that; and, I wake in the night and realize I'm worried. I kept hearing that song last night in particular . . . "I'm listening, I am listening . . . spirit come to me."

I heard a podcast the other day - a Ted RadioHour thing where they interviewed European Union Executive Vice President Margrethe Vestager. What a powerhouse. She was talking about regulation and competition, and coincident to our reading this morning, she said, "there's no such thing as Paradise without a snake." (I'm listening . . . I am listening . . . spirit come to me.)

So I've had these competing influences on my heart: the snake and the spirit . . . there's a cultural assumption - a tension - informed by a "shared" story, right?!

It's a classic juxtaposition that's keeping me up at nights - what frightens us, and what comforts us; and, I'm aware that I want and need the grounding of a tradition that helps me manage my sleeplessness and sometimes I find myself wondering if ours is up to the task.

When Rose and I were talking about the reading the other day, considering the ways in which knowing the biblical reference was tied to a history of colonialism - I wondered: what happens to a faith that starts to break down its own understandings and assumptions?

The reading from this morning, about the Backscratcher, was written by the Rev. David Bumbaugh - who served, not unlike our own David Parke - for a full 50+ years of Unitarian Universalist ministry, 40 or so in the parish, and then ten years or more as a professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School. He is well-known still as a Unitarian Universalist humanist, so it's kind of fun and ironic that he uses the story of Adam and Eve to remind us of how we are inextricably bound: and that sometimes, maybe often, we - the big WE - forget that. In this culture (and this tradition, to be honest) that encourages and celebrates individuality, where we delight in the tools of independence like the backscratcher, in the pleasure of our own cleverness, we forget how much we are bound to each other.

Eden, Bumbaugh suggests, was the place where we remembered and valued that interdependence.

“Poor beast,” said God, “now you must leave this garden:

“In Eden, no one stands alone; each depends on the others.”

(those are Bumbaugh’s words, btw . . . you won’t find that exact text in Genesis!)

We live in a colonial culture where success and superiority are measured by one’s ability to acquire things or power or influence - a culture of independence and self-sufficiency. I think Bumbaugh is right: we wander . . . pacing up and down the earth, ignoring our sense of loss . . . searching for the primordial connection.

Maybe that’s a theme common to all traditions, but if our religious tradition does not remind us of our need for each and our responsibility to each other, it’s not doing its job.

I put a notice in the e-news for a number of weeks about the report that was published this summer called, Widening the Circle of Concern. It shares the findings of the three-year old Commission on Institutional Change that was charged by the UUA Board to conduct an audit of the power structures and analyze systemic racism and white supremacy within the Unitarian Universalist Association. What is at stake, they determined, *is nothing less than the future of our faith*. AND, “if it is received as nothing more than a document, that will be a travesty and fresh source of injury to all who participated in offering and compiling the wisdom found here.

Talk about coincident - that this book gets published the same summer that our country is being called to root out its own systemic biases. I would remind us all of the ways in which our tradition shares a profile with our democracy. Regardless of the separation of church and state, our faith and our country are both radical human experiments, neither of which is guaranteed for survival.

This report invites us to look at ourselves, our systems, our institutions - and to be honest about how we have the same bad habits within that we rail against in the larger culture.

It’s hard work to look critically at oneself, one’s faith, critically - it’s painful. I’d rather go for a walk and ignore it, wouldn’t you? We see snakes where we hoped we would never find them . . . but we can hardly hold others accountable if we’re not willing to do the work ourselves, right?

Bumbaugh posited three questions as foundational to our survival as a religious tradition - not necessarily the answers, but engagement with the questions themselves. Who are we as a people? Whom do we serve? And to whom or what are we responsible?

Prior commissions that have engaged with looking inwardly gave what he said was “short shrift to questions of faith, and (focused) much more attention on questions of structure and process.” <https://www.meadville.edu/files/resources/the-marketing-of-liberal-religion.pdf>

So I am grateful that the first chapter in this Commission’s report is entitled Theology. I suspect many of you would agree it is an area of our tradition somewhat ironically missing or misunderstood, right?

In 2005, the Rev. Earl Holt - who served King’s Chapel in downtown Boston for a number of years - wrote, “. . . ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what we are about religiously is presently perhaps our greatest liability . . . The fear that any such articulation somehow threatens the integrity or right of conscience of any individual is institutionally disabling . . .”

The Commission suggests, “. . . we need to articulate a theology of liberation, experimentation, and innovation . . . (one that) will also call us to be accountable to the legacies of our past deeds and to work for an equitable future.”

There are countless findings and recommendations in this text. One suggests that “because of the historical expansion of the UU religious expression, followed by the eventual neglect of theological work within the UUA in the twentieth century,” - a concern that Bumbaugh expressed when he suggested that post-merger, the Universalist focus on a shared and redeeming spirit of love was superseded by a Unitarian focus on growth - “our congregations often have the characteristics of elite social clubs rather than of religious institutions.”

The Commission suggests, therefore, that “. . . congregations must center themselves in the communal and covenantal and not primarily . . . comfort and familiarity . . .”

I don’t think of Theodore Parker Church as a social club, but we do have a loosely shared demographic of class, and education that speaks to the ways in which we are comfortable with, and familiar to each other, even in our diversity.

It is my hope that we will take the time to engage with the findings of this Commission over the course of this year, to renew our commitment to each other and to the work of continuing a sustaining faith for generations to come; a faith that grounds us in a primordial order of connection.

In yet another article on our history, Bumbaugh says, *“Strange as it may seem to us, the fear of defining ourselves has not always dominated Unitarianism or Universalism. There have been moments of clarity in our history.”* He points to William Ellery Channing’s Baltimore Sermon as a defining point in Unitarianism.

But then he reminds us that it was, *“Later in the same century, (that) Unitarianism was grappling with the dissent generated by the radicalism of Theodore Parker and his followers . . .”*

Ah, Teddy - you rogue. Let that be an inspiration to us, as well - was he the snake of temptation among us? A challenge to an overabundance of certainty?

In the theology of liberation to which we are being exposed and encouraged, we are reminded that “ . . . it is crucial that we remember how easily structures of (kinship) are obliterated.”
(Widening the Circle)

This morning, in our sadness and our anxiety, AND in our gratitude for the mystery that is our living, let us set aside our proverbial backscratchers and renew our commitment to this curious experiment of faith and to each other; and, to an ever-widening circle. I am hoping we can set an example of capacity to look courageously at our failings in order to amend them as we move forward.

Go away for now, snake . . . we are busy listening, instead, for the spirit of love that calls us anew.

So may it be.

Benediction

Our closing words come to us once more from the Rev. Bumbaugh: Life is more than our understanding of it, but the level of our comprehension demands that we act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and that we seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole.

Peace and well-being to you all as we reach for a vision renewed. Amen