

Sermon: For All That Is Our Life

Building Dedication,

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh, NC

[as drafted, not exactly as delivered]

January 9, 2005

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Good afternoon. I'm delighted to be here representing the Unitarian Universalist Association, a wondrous, rich network of congregations over eleven hundred strong in which the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh is an important member. I'm honored that I was asked to share this day, this celebration, with you.

What will you do with your communal life in this remarkable space? How will you build the common good and make your own days glad? How will you use this building to further the Kingdom of God on earth, to incarnate liberal religion in this part of North Carolina, to light a beacon for those in the valley trying to find their way home?

You know some of the answers to these questions already. You have created a new vision statement to bind this building to your intent. This community knows it must not rest for too long, because Unitarian Universalism is not an inert faith. Our faith is deep thinking and big hearted and most of all, it is restless. But today is a day of rest, a day of dedication. A building dedication is an important occasion in the life of a religious community. Today we pause, if only for an hour, to reflect on the ordinary and epic moments which brought you here, to dedicate this building and this congregation to a future of service.

It's fitting to dedicate a church building on the Sabbath, a day set aside to reflect on work recently completed and judge its fitness, its feel, and to prepare ourselves for the work ahead.

In Genesis the seventh-day Sabbath is scheduled at the end of an atypical week's work: creating the universe from scratch. The Biblical story of the six-day creation project is even more awe-inspiring after you've built a church building. We can already abstract one truth: it takes less time to create a universe than to construct a church building. For a church, the

permits alone take more than six days. I speak from experience. Twenty years ago I served on the building committee of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Flint, Michigan. I'd grown up not far from the church and was acquainted with local politicians so I spent many evenings at township meetings discussing easements, abutments, zoning, parking spots, and drainage on all of the aforementioned items. I know church building. Or, more accurately, I know a church building. But I don't yet know *this* building. I do not know how it began. But you do.

You must forgive me because I was not here when someone pondered aloud what others had been wondering and wonderment became public discussion. I wasn't in the social hall or meeting room when some small group of people realized that this was a worthy discussion, a spiritual discussion, when the possibility seemed more close, more real in an intangible yet some irrevocable way. I was not here as the discussion continued, when the vision took firm root in some hearts, but not in others as is too often the way of vision.

I was not here as the possibility took on mass and inertia of its own, as members and friends and staff jotted notes, wrote newsletter articles, researched, called UUA headquarters for information, coordinated a Thomas Jefferson District chalice lighter call, sent emails, created forecasts and budgets, held hearings and meetings, formulated a plan...as you debated and cajoled, listened and listened harder, discussed and argued and exclaimed and laughed and wept and stood your ground and compromised and voted to set up committees, interview architects, and hire a builder. I was not waiting at home – patiently, most of the time -- for my partner or parent to come home from yet another building council meeting. I was not here when you struggled mightily to live our principles, when it seemed that “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process” were in some kind of fundamental disagreement, when you paid close attention to the inherent worth and dignity of all who passed within these walls, and yet sometimes it simply was not enough.

And you must forgive me for I was elsewhere when you sat at home by yourself or with your spouse or partner, children, parents or friends talking frankly about how much financial support you could provide, when you chose to cut back on Starbucks or make your own lunch more often or work extra hours every week so you could invest in this home for your faith community. I didn't break ground, or choose building materials, or write

newsletter articles, or drive by just to see how things were going (well, actually I tried once but that's another story). I didn't put on my hiking boots after Sunday service to stroll around in the shell with a foolish grin on my face. I wasn't here, but you were. Thank you for your care for your determination, for your faithfulness. Anyone who knows churches, anyone who knows buildings, knows that this was not built by the faint of heart.

We sang one of my favorite hymns [For All That Is Our Life] when the younger Unitarian Universalists left to dedicate their hall. A glance at the order of service reveals that this was probably not a coincidence: my sermon title was cribbed directly from the hymn. I think of the second verse of the hymn as the hymn for the overcommitted. It reminds us that giving and receiving are the same in some essential way...that we must be able to receive as well as give to have balance in our lives...and that hours of rest and love should follow close on the heels of work and that we should separate the two to create at least some small space every day or every week where we rest and renew apart from the cares of our work, even of our volunteer work.

For All That Is Our Life is a quintessential Unitarian Universalist hymn. Is there suffering in the world, in our lives? Is there fear and trepidation? You bet there is. We encountered it in the middle of verse three. And yet fear and suffering are not noble in and of themselves. We suffer, but we were not created to suffer. We're afraid, but we were not created to live in fear. We were created to make creation itself a less fearful place, to ease suffering wherever we encounter it. We are here to work, to reconstitute the broken pieces of creation into a more just, more compassionate, less scary and more inclusive world. I like the message of this third verse, too.

But it is the simple first verse repeated again at the end of the hymn that catches my heart.

*For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise
For all life is a gift that we are called to use
To build the common good and make our own days glad*

For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise...because as my friend the Reverend Burton Carley surely noted in this morning's service at First Unitarian Church in Memphis, we did nothing to deserve this day. We did not earn it, we did not create it. But we can choose to be grateful within it, to

live our lives in thanks, praise, and service. We can choose to build the common good, to serve justice, to show mercy, to live epic lives of service, exemplary lives of compassion. And if our own days are brightened as a result, well, that's not an accident. The gladness keeps us in the game, keeps us coming back for more day after day, year after year. You know that because you built this building. You know that because this building continues to build you.

The slam poet George David Miller writes

The big moments of life are not:
 When the walls of Jericho tumble
 When Haley's Comet sparkles across the sky
 When a knockout punch fells a fighter
 Or when Sisyphus' boulder finally goes over the hill.
 The big moments of life
 Are not when the boulder clears the ridge
 But when we tie our shoes
 Spit on our hands
 Take deep breaths
 Flex our muscles
 Focus all our energy
 And do it all over again

Realizing
 Each moment is history
 Each moment is passion
 Each action is meaning

You must forgive me, for I was not here for the decisions, ordinary and epic, that created this sacred space. **But you were.** You were. Pause now and remember the moments, the actions large and small that brought you to this place....Pause for a moment in gratitude for leadership, for challenge, for every conversation and act that culminated in this day... And Pause yet again for the work you never saw but which contributed to this potential for great good. Pause a moment simply to be glad in this day.

On behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association, over eleven hundred congregations who celebrate with you today, thank you for your vision, for your hours and days and years of work. Thank you for your financial commitments large and small. Thank you for your wisdom and your courage. You have done so much already. You will do so much more in the days and years ahead. May you always enter this space in thanks and praise. May it help you live your mission and principles in the service of that which is holy.