

Symbols and Meaning Making

September 26, 2010
Rev. Jim Sherblom
First Parish in Brookline

I feel I should begin with a disclaimer. My daughter Sarah, who grew up UU and is now 28, tells me that when I introduce the latest biblical or archeological research into my sermons, or new understandings about what our ancestors might have intended when choosing the orientation and symbols of this beautiful sanctuary, I should always remember to say that not everyone accepts the newest research findings.

There are Americans who believe Moses wrote the Torah on his deathbed, or God wrote the Old and New Testaments in the 17th Century in the Elizabethan English found in the King James Version of the Bible; and we need to respect and honor those who take these texts literally, even if research suggests such notions are not just improbable, but absurd. So please let nothing I tell you today about what research suggests in any way detract from the validity of their spiritual journeys and their understandings of truth.

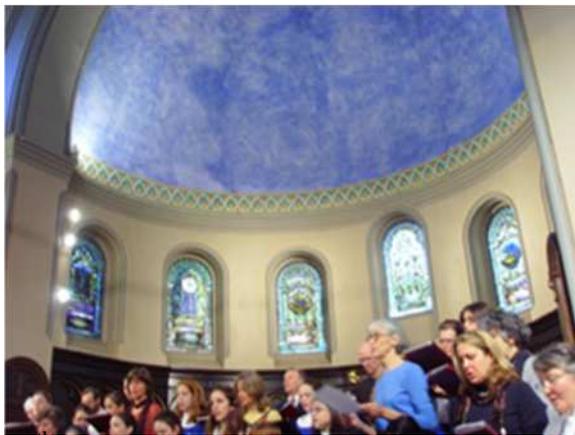
About 2,400 years ago, priests serving in the recently restored Temple in Jerusalem had a problem. After the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and with the introduction of literacy to their tiny kingdom of Judah around that time, scribes and priests saved many of their sacred stories on scrolls called Genesis, Exodus and Numbers. In subsequent generations they added Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings, all of which helped to preserve the story of a people. Then Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587 BCE, and for 50 years their leaders were held in captivity in Babylon. Now Cyrus, king of the Persians, conquered Babylon, and encouraged the captives to go home and rebuild the Temple. But these returnees were not always welcomed by the people left behind, many of whom had intermarried with other local tribes, worshipped many different gods, and even wore wool clothes mixed with cotton, symbolic of the lack of purity of the indigenous religion of the people.

Fortunately, the priests discovered, or perhaps created, a dusty old scroll in the back of the Temple, a holy priestly scroll now called Leviticus, which more than doubled the number of laws to which the people were subject, and represented a significant reformation of the religious beliefs of this ancient people. They placed these laws in the heart of the Torah, and with them began to condemn and eradicate the impure indigenous religion of the common people. This revival marks the first recorded reformation of the Judeo Christian tradition, the first of thousands over the next 2,000 years, and the purity laws in Leviticus would be used by many conservative people over the millennia to condemn and attempt to eradicate those with more heterodox understandings of the nature of the divine mysteries. Such is the nature of history.

Why is this important to us today? Partly because we need to understand why fundamentalist Christians use Leviticus to condemn same sex unions today. This has nothing to do with the intent of those Temple priests 2,400 years ago.

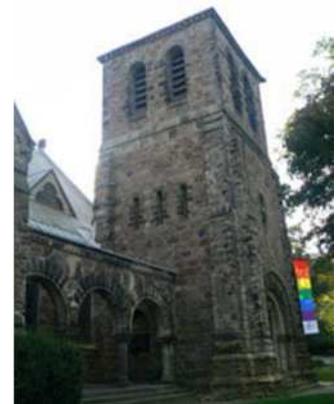
More importantly this congregation was also created as part of a reformation of Judeo Christian tradition, one that sought to reach back to the imagined purity of the early pre-Roman Christian church. This congregation began in early 18th century New England, but wasn't part of the 17th century Puritans and Pilgrims escaping persecution in England. Our founders largely came to America after the restoration of the Anglican Monarchy in 1660, after the 1688 so-called Glorious Revolution that made England a Protestant country again, and during England's hundred year war with the Catholic Monarchs of France and Spain. Hence this congregation was more Anglican than Puritan, deeply anti-Roman Catholic initially, and sought a purity of religious practice reflected in its original humble meetinghouse and clear glass windows to look upon the wonders of divine mysteries and nature surrounding us.

This congregation has enjoyed its own reformations of religious practice, becoming rebels and patriots to throw off the King's Anglicanism in the American Revolution, to embrace 19th Century Transcendentalism, reflected in their late 19th Century decision to build this room as a Victorian neo-Gothic sanctuary complete with airy heights disappearing into mysterious spaces, and glorious stained glass windows capturing religious scenes and symbols for meaning making in our religious practices. We gather in this space week after week, and I wonder which of us notice the rich symbolism in its architecture, our surrounding space, our presence?



The dome of the chancel was originally done in gold leaf, symbolically representing the dome of heaven, but as the gold leaf flaked off in the latter part of the 20th Century, it was redone in blues and whites to represent our recognition of the heights and beauty of the blue sky above us. Our congregation's first meetinghouse was a humble building, a shed really, down across the road. When the minister complained it was an unseemly place to worship God, the deacons tore it down and built a larger meetinghouse on its site. Our first two meetinghouses, like most of the 17th and 18th centuries, were simple, straight rows of pews with clear windows, equally suitable for holding worship and town meetings.

As Brookline and the congregation grew (Brookline had an adult population of 605 people in 1800), Rev. Dr. John Pierce persuaded the congregation to build a larger sanctuary, with a large bell tower, modeled on Anglican churches in England. That meetinghouse was so large and spacious, seating nearly 500 people, that when Teddy Roosevelt decided to marry a young woman from Chestnut Hill, her minister borrowed our sanctuary to conduct the wedding ceremony. It was then that we became Unitarian, but our form of Unitarianism, and our form of UU worship was still evolving. Our next minister, Rev. Dr. Frederick Henry Hedge, was an eminent religion professor at Harvard and a leading transcendentalist. He was followed by Rev. Howard Brown, who introduced the King's Chapel Unitarian Book

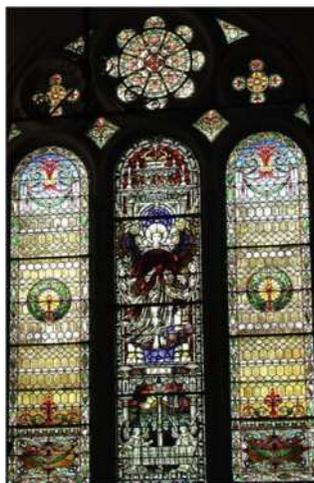


of Common prayer to this congregation, and eventually left to become minister at King's Chapel in Boston. So this congregation ended the 19th C seeking a new minister and a new sense of who we were and the kind of space we wished to worship within.

This 117-year old neo-Gothic cathedral was the result. We enter from the west, facing the chancel (with the dome of heaven) in the east, the angel of peace in our south transept, and a memorial of death represented by the three angels in the north transept. They wished this space to accommodate light, flame, spaciousness, divine mysteries, and eternal life. The seven Tiffany windows in the apse memorialize the congregation's first seven ministers, with appropriate spiritual symbols like a crown, a helmet and breastplate, a shield and sword and Bible, a six-pointed star, an equilateral cross with grapes, a seven stick candelabra, and a flaming lamp to signify spiritual wisdom.

Of all the crosses they could have chosen as our symbol, with the Latin and Calgary crosses being common in America, they chose instead the Canterbury cross, also known as an equilateral, cardinal or pagan cross. This Anglican cross holds echoes of the four cardinal directions, and calls us back to being earth-centered, and seeking balance in our spiritual journeys. They added a few Latin crosses in the 20th century, such as on the minister's chairs, but there are no crucifixes, which are crosses with the dead body of Jesus affixed to them. That never was part of our theology.

While they gave up some visual connection to nature and the earth when they installed these beautiful stained-glass windows, they held onto this deep interconnection with nature in some of the symbols represented in our architecture and windows. They devoted our two largest windows, in the north and south transept, to angelic representations. The Lowell window is dedicated to the pure in heart, in memory of three siblings who died between their 15th and 25th birthdays. The Weld window invokes the angel of peace to bring joy, peace and contentment to this place. Sitting here on a Sunday morning, if your mind begins to wander, go with peace following the subtle play of light as it shines through the chancel, clerestory or transept. I promise not to mind your mental wandering, if I know you are pursuing spiritual matters, and not your to-do lists. In total I count 21 angels large and small in this sanctuary.



Weld Window



Lowell Window



At least seven of our windows present representations and hopes around eternal life; beginning with a classic American window honoring John and Hannah Goddard, heroes of the American Revolution and of this congregation; ending with the Murray and Mary Kay window around the corner next to it, which honors two saintly 20th century members.

Jesus with the little children is a classic motif displaying God's love for the least of these. Dorcas, the Christian disciple in the book of Acts commemorated for her good works and acts of charity, and the only Christian after Jesus mentioned in the Bible as having been resurrected, is seen in this window surrounded by even more happy children than Jesus.

Around the corner from Dorcas is Sir Galahad pursuing the Holy Grail even at the cost of his life. The Moller window at the back of the nave shows a young woman, with the veil of life falling from her face, as she looks gladly into the divine mysteries, represented by angelic messenger Gabriel and a growing radiant light.



But perhaps most powerful of all is the Rose Window in the west, commemorating with joy all those young men who died fighting for their country in the two world wars.



Even if you've contemplated our stained-glass windows, perhaps you've missed the numerical symbolism in them. The unity of this space softens the yin/yang duality often represented as male and female, or the trio represented by the three angels who died too young. Have you ever noticed how often the cardinal points, seen in the four directions, recur in this space; or the six-pointed star, known as the spiritual star, Star of David or Bethlehem, depending upon your

spiritual path. There are plentiful allusions to the sevenfold nature of revelation and the eightfold path of perfection here.

This space creates an environment that can assist our spiritual journeys on our conscious, subconscious, and unconscious levels to the extent that we can sometimes be assisted on our journey just by sitting mindfully in this place. If our forebears wrote the complexity of their faith in the symbols and architecture of this space, this faith appears to have had the multilayered complexity of a good Russian novel, beckoning us ever more deeply, intricately and mysteriously into our faith. I am truly delighted when people come into this space to sit quietly alone and contemplate the nature of God. This is a holy space, consecrated for our use in our worship as a community.

Today this space mostly reflects the late 19th and early 20th century symbols of those who built and furnished this particular sanctuary. In recent years we have added the rainbow flags outside, symbols of our support of GLBT folks and the rights of same sex couples to marry. We have also added this large flaming chalice, with its two circles, representing the Unitarian and Universalist traditions from which we emerge, and our seeking a path which enhances our living in this world as it is today, even as we work for the world that can be.

Our flaming chalice has deep connections to the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee during WWII in saving Jews and others from Nazi atrocities, and grounds our spiritual journeys within traditional symbols for male and female aspects of the divine reflected in a flame safely held within the chalice. We often bring other religious symbolism into this space: the Jewish menorah at Hanukkah, or the baby Jesus crèche before Christmas, a Calvary cross at Easter, and our ancient communion silver used four times a year as part of our nearly 300-year-old celebration of communion following worship.

I suspect as we move deeper into the 21st century we will continue to find ways to honor the symbols of our first 300 years as a congregation even as we add distinctive newer symbols that more reflect the congregation that we are becoming. This ongoing reformation of our religious belief and practices is part of what it is to be Unitarian Universalist.

Rev. Martha Niebanck was the first woman to be called by this congregation as a settled minister. Our Co-Ministry here is another first for this congregation, and one of the first Co-Ministries by ministers not married to each other (we each have wonderful spouses of our own) in our own UU denomination. The success this congregation has had in the first five years of our co-ministry, in deepening its spirituality, strengthening its numbers, and moving toward an engaged sustainability as a faith community, has other UU churches around the country looking at us as a potential model for our UU future. Our congregation seeks to be one that honors our long and distinguished past even while we explore our future. Our future is radically open to us, our revelation is not sealed.

That is a big part of the reason that Rev. Martha and I said yes to your call five and a half years ago. We love this community and all that it is capable of being. Yes, this old building still requires much money to be spent on it if we are to sustain it. Yes, our stained-glass windows all need to be repaired or replaced over the next twenty years at a substantial cost. And our growing

pledges of financial support from members and friends do not cover enough of our program costs, so we are too dependent upon our small endowment in order to sustain this congregation. We have ongoing financial issues, and the great recession made them even more apparent, but we are traversing together into a 21st century faith that offers hope, joy and love for us as we each explore our own spiritual journeys within our community of faith.

Perhaps it is the nature of the spiritual journey that we seldom are what we aspire to be, but we are always becoming our aspiration. These symbols, this meaning making, and this faith community can help us all on this journey of faith, so joy is found in our midst. I love you all dearly. Blessed Be and Amen.