

Stone by Stone
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, March 5, 2017

It all started out innocently. Everyone involved had the best of intentions. One of the neighborhood children invited me to a Bible study class that her mother was teaching in their home every Wednesday afternoon. I asked my parents and they said yes. My friend's home was larger and fancier than ours. I could walk there. The Smith family was known in the community to be fine and upstanding. It would be a good thing.

Every week we were given a Bible verse to take home and memorize. The next week, if we could recite the verse, we were given a prize: a piece of candy or a small toy. Recitation of the 23rd psalm earned a large, plastic, glow-in-the-dark cross. I took mine home and put it on the dresser in my bedroom and took some comfort from its small but reassuring light during the long dark night.

One week, Mrs. Smith didn't have Bible verses for us to memorize, but she did have a story to tell us. The story went something like this. Imagine coming home from school one day and your parents are nowhere to be found, nor your brothers and sisters. You go to the neighbor's house and there is no one there either. You walk back to the school

looking for your teacher. The hallways and classrooms are all empty. No one is there. You go next to the police station, just as you've been taught to do. No one. The gist of the story was that Jesus came back, just as the Bible said he would, and took everyone back to heaven, except for you. The moral of the story was that you better be good and believe in Jesus or you'll be left behind.

I went home that day and threw the plastic, glow-in-the-dark cross into the trash. Had my 10-year-old self possessed the words and the courage, she might have said, "You remember that Bible verse you made me memorize? 'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me.' God is either with me or god will leave me behind. It can't be both." I never went back to Mrs. Smith's Bible study class.

Though I didn't have the language to articulate my thoughts and feelings that day, something in me knew I could not be faithful to a god who would not be faithful to me. I knew I couldn't put my trust in a god who would leave a small child abandoned over matters of belief or for any other reason.

By that defiant act, my 10-year-old self laid the first stone in what would become an enduring temple of faith. I was a Universalist even then, and didn't know it.

An old story tells of three stonecutters who were asked what they were doing. The first replied, 'I am making a living.' The second kept on hammering while he said, 'I am doing the best job of stonecutting in the entire country.' The third one looked up with a visionary gleam in his eyes and said, 'I am building a cathedral.'

The great cathedrals of Europe took centuries to build. You get the sense from this story that each of the stonecutters knew they would not live long enough to see their labor come to complete fruition. Still each man had skin in the game. There was something in it for each of them. They were invested, but not equally. The first saw his work only as a means to earn a wage to put a roof over his head and food on his table. The second saw his work as a way to gain respect and a reputation as the best stonecutter in the entire country. He likely puts more of himself into his work because he sees himself getting more out of it in return. The third man has the most skin in the game of all three. He's the most invested because he understands that he is contributing to something

larger than himself. He's building a cathedral! – after all. Who of the three do you think goes home at the end of the day feeling more energized, more inspired, and more full of hope?

There's a story that's told about why Unitarian Universalists don't give as much to their churches as, say, Catholics and Baptists do, even though on average Unitarian Universalists earn middle to upper-middle class incomes and are capable of giving more. The story is that without the promise of a future reward or the fear of punishment and retribution in the afterlife, there's nothing to motivate generous giving. Of course, every time I hear this story, I assume the person telling the story is speaking not of themselves, but of *other* Unitarian Universalists. Within any given congregation, there are always those who give generously.

While there's some truth in this story, mostly I think it sells us short as individual people and as a community of faith. Ours is a message of hope, not hell, love, not fear. The implication of the story we tell is that our message somehow makes us lazy and complacent when it comes to our own faith tradition, our own sacred home. The implication is that our message somehow makes us less willing to put skin in the game of building the institution, the home that will shelter our faith now and for

generations to come. I think the story has less to do with Unitarian Universalists than it has to do with the larger American culture.

Does anyone here watch or listen to TED talks? Did anyone see the one done a few years back by Dan Pallotta, who is best known for creating the multi-day event charitable fundraising model, raising \$581 million dollars in 10 years? Pallotta says that charitable giving has remained stuck at 2% of the GDP since the 1970's.

Turns out that Americans in general aren't all that generous. Pallotta's goal as a social entrepreneur is to transform the way society thinks about charity and giving and change. He says that everything the donating public has been taught about giving is dysfunctional. He asks why it is that it's common for a person with Stanford MBA 10 years out of business school, working in the for-profit sector to earn \$400,000 annually. Compare that to CEO of a medical charity earning \$232,000 and the CEO of a hunger charity earning \$84,000 a year.

Pallotta says we tend to have a visceral reaction to people making very much money helping people, but, we don't have a visceral reaction to people making lots of money not helping people.

How is it that we've come to this dichotomy of having to choose between doing well for your family or doing good for the world?

Pallotta blames it on the Puritans. The Unitarian Universalism we know and enjoy in our country today is the direct result of the rejection of the Calvinist doctrines of the Puritans. The Puritans taught a doctrine of total human depravity, that the human condition was beyond redemption, except for the elect, those God had pre-ordained for salvation. This left the Puritans with a certain amount of existential anxiety, not knowing if they were among the elect or not. Wealth and prosperity were seen as signs that one was among the elect, but one could not be too prosperous, because that would be seen as ostentatious, and the Puritans were a pious people.

We are who we are today because Unitarians and Universalists rejected these notions, saying that we are not born into original sin and depravity, but born with original blessing, with inherent goodness and that salvation is not just for a few but for all. All are chosen, all are saved.

Thomas Starr King was ordained as both a Unitarian and a Universalist in the early 19th century. He summed it up by saying, "The

Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them and the Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned.”

The Puritans supported the church through the purchase of pews, or a pew tax. We don't do that anymore because the practice was directly tied to the doctrine of the elect. The Puritans gave to their churches *and* they gave to charity, partly as an act of piety, partly as an act of penitence, but they did give to both the church and to charity.

If you, like me, are trying to figure out where your resources of time, energy, and money can do the most good, please give serious consideration to the church! Strengthening your congregation -- your faith community -- is an act of resistance. It is here that you will find shelter from the storm, comfort when you are weary, encouragement when you feel you cannot go on, and spiritual nourishment to sustain you for the long haul. It is here that we can discern which actions align with our faith values.

The mistake we make today is that we too often think of the church as just another non-profit doing good work instead of a religious and spiritual institution with a mission and message – a mission to humanize

the world, to make the world a more humane place through our message of hope and love. We're schooled in a certain way of evaluating the charities we give to, examining their budgets to make sure they aren't spending too much on administrative costs and overhead

Dan Pallotta who helped found the Women's Walk for Breast Cancer, asking women to walk not 5 or 10 miles, but 60, says "The next time you're looking at a charity, don't ask about the rate of their overhead. Ask about the scale of their dreams." He says we make the mistake of asking people for the minimum they can give when people yearn to be challenged, to be asked for the most and best they can give.

"What is the scale of your dreams for this church?"

Are you merely providing spiritual services to consumers? Or, are you building a cathedral? – a sacred home that transcends your individual lives, a place that nurtures and sustains people with its message of hope and love and calls them into the world to be of use.

When I think of my ten-year-old self, the girl on a search for a god worthy of her faithfulness, I can't help but wonder how things would have

been different if I had been invited to a Unitarian Universalist religious education class instead of a backyard Bible class.

My dream is that no girl, no boy, no man, woman, or child is left in the valley of despair, living in the fear of hell, or living in the hell of believing themselves unworthy. Building a cathedral to house dreams such as these takes the vision to see what is possible and it requires putting skin into the game. During the month of March, you will have the opportunity to share your dreams in small groups with other members and friends, knowing that dreams alone will not get the job done if you are to build the church of tomorrow. It will take time, energy, and financial resources. As a symbol of your commitment to be a builder of this sacred home you are invited to come forward, to lay a stone, and to make a reservation for a small group conversation by talking with someone who is wearing a hard hat. Building the church of tomorrow will take your dreams and your commitments.