

**Congregations as Faith Outfitters – by Jim Coakley  
Preached at First UU Wausau – November 17, 2013**

**ORDER OF SERVICE**

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PRELUDE

LIGHTING THE CHALICE      Responsive Reading    #657 “It Matters What We Believe”

GATHERING SONG    #188 “Come, Come Whoever You Are”

RE MINUTE/CHILDREN’S STORY

CHILDREN’S BLESSING

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

OUR PRAYERS of JOY and SORROW

SHARING OUR GIFTS

READING      Excerpt from “The Cathedral of the World” by Forrest Church (pp. xvi-xvii)

CHOIR      *I Dream a World*                      by Andre J. Thomas

MESSAGE

CHOIR      *Through the Eyes of a Child*                      by Mark Burrows and Greg Gilpin

DIALOGUE

SENDING SONG      #193 “Our Faith Is but a Single Gem”

BENEDICTION / POSTLUDE

**Reading: Excerpt from “The Cathedral of the World” by Forrest Church (pp. xvi-xvii)**

Welcome to the Cathedral of the World.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of grime, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

Because the cathedral is so vast, our life so short, and our vision so dim, over the course of our pilgrimage we are able to contemplate only a bit of the cathedral, explore a few apses, reflect on the play of light and darkness through a few of its myriad windows. Yet, by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning.

A twenty-first-century theology based on the concept of one light and many windows offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring multiple religious approaches, it only excludes the truth-claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the light shines through their window only. Some, as we know from painful recent experience, go so far as to beseech their followers to throw stones through other people’s windows.

Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshippers, they conclude that there is no light. But the windows are not the light. They are where the light shines through.

We shall never see the light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the cathedral.

## Sermon

Grandma had a hard life. She was at the domestic abuse shelter because she had nowhere to turn after the truck driver she was living with on the road beat her badly. She escaped from him while they were at a rest stop near Appleton. She wasn't really anyone's grandma at the shelter, it was just a term of endearment she gave herself mostly because she looked and acted like one to all the young mothers and their children living there. Grandma was probably far younger than her appearance suggested. She was quite wrinkled, had thinning hair, and was missing many of her teeth. She had a very slight build and moved slowly with a limp.

One evening when I entered the kitchen at the shelter, Grandma was beside herself. She had everyone running around looking for the hand held electric mixer. She announced to me in her distinctive accent, "I'z makin' taters fer them babies 'n we can't fand the mixer ta mash 'em! Sumbody dun walkt off with it!" Because I'm tall, I started looking in the higher up cupboards the others couldn't reach, but had no luck. Grandma was getting more and more agitated so I finally turned to her and said, "Why don't you just do it with a potato masher?" Grandma stopped suddenly, turned towards me with her hands on her hips and said "whaduya think I am, a hillbilly?" I was stunned speechless. I'd never thought of using a hand mixer to mash potatoes as a status symbol. In my family, getting out a mixer for the job was viewed as a waste of energy and too much fuss when a potato masher did the job just as well. Grandma's declaration reminded me once again to be careful about making assumptions and the need to

really truly understand where someone is coming from if I intend to have a meaningful connection with them.

I believe in a theology of connectedness. Because humans are hard wired as relational beings, I believe the sacred lies in the relationships that connect us. Each of us at our core is a very vulnerable spirit which can be heavily influenced by others. At this core we each tend to our capacity to love or be loved, to hate or feel despised, to forgive or let ourselves be forgiven. I believe hope and joy spring from these connections. Perhaps a more poetic term for this core is soul. The connectedness between our souls is often fragile and invisible. But just because the connection may be guarded or hard to observe, doesn't negate its existence. Our souls are always present.

My experience with Grandma that evening, and with many others at the domestic abuse shelter, opened me up to embrace the reality that to truly seek the divine in connectedness means I need to be open to another's truth. Dogmatism doesn't work in a theology of connectedness. Without openness, I will only be open to those who are willing to accept my truth. Grandma's truth about mashing potatoes was not my truth and it was a barrier to deeper connection. While volunteering at the shelter, I witnessed firsthand the damage done to a victim's soul when an extreme form of someone's truth is overpowering and violent. I wondered what kind of subtle violence I did to someone's soul every time I assumed my truth should dominate over someone else's. I believe our covenant of ministry has to do with helping us each foster hope in our souls. Fostering hope begins by understanding another's truth well enough to become connected down to our souls.

From a purely religious perspective, one's truth probably stems from a combination of how we view the ultimate questions in life mixed with our cultural heritage. My experience at the shelter made me ponder if I really understood what truth I bring to my connectedness. When you interact with others, do you know what truth you bring? What role should our congregation play in helping us to be open to a broader perspective of truth? Isn't "the free and open search for truth" our tagline? As our world becomes increasingly diverse maybe we should alter our tagline slightly. How about "a free and open search for truths" – as in plural? Maybe we should be just as enthusiastic about understanding one another's truth as we are about finding our own? Who knows, we may even alter our own truth along the way.

In Unitarian Universalism our congregations have agreed on sources to search for truth. Are you familiar with the list of our six sources? They actually are published following our 7 principles. Let me read them to you.

1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
2. Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

How can we possibly have such diversity among our sources? Do we use them? Think of the diversity and spiritual richness we would have if we truly embraced all of these equally.

A few years ago my seminary class was debating the topic “Are We Climbing the Same Mountain?” The source of our discussion was an excerpt from a book by the well-known religion professor and author Stephen Prothero titled *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter*. Our discussion started by considering all the points of view on religion throughout history and representing them visually as a climb up the mountain of Truth – with a capital T. Each theologian felt they had found the highest mountain and the correct path to Truth.

We talked about the modern concept of all religions really being one when they were all boiled down to their essence. In the opening of the essay Prothero summarizes the thoughts of Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and others with this quote, “...what the world’s religions share is not so much God as the Good – the sweet harmony of peace, love and understanding ...”. I think this has been very much a normative thought within Unitarianism and Universalism throughout much of the 20th Century. This could be described as alternate paths up the mountain to get to the common Truth. But Prothero argues that by claiming that all religions point to the same Truth, it dismisses the nuances and depth of understanding from each. We may have a tendency to dismiss them as not worthy of our effort to really understand, if we don’t value their distinctiveness.

A post-modern metaphor that works for me is something like Zion National Park. The mountains in Zion are old. They have been worn down over the millennia to the point where many of them are topped by plateaus rather than peaks. I like to think of the sources we claim

in Unitarian Universalism as being represented by the mountains in the park. In order to limit the appearance of any one source being Truth with a capital T, I prefer the flat tops. To me it gives a sense of equality instead of superiority.

We each wander on the mountainsides and may never reach the top. The point is to discover the meaning of the mountain which may or may not lead us to a higher understanding of our own ultimate meaning. This isn't one of those adventure race competitions we hear about in which you try to scale all the highest peaks on Earth in one year. This is about having the mountains available to you for exploration. In fact, you may often sit on the mountain where you feel most comfortable and look across the valley to the next mountain from a distance.

This is what I feel like we do in our congregations today. Most of our congregations, especially in this part of the country have evolved with a strong Religious Humanist tradition. We sit on that Humanist mountain and look over at the Buddhist mountain, or the Jewish mountain, or the mystic mountain, or the Pagan mountain, or the prophetic men and women mountain. We say they are important mountains to us and we claim them as sources but give them only occasional lip service as references in our services.

To continue with my metaphor, the parkland around the base of the mountains represents our lives in society. The mountains exist in society and are part of it, but their special characteristic – their height – suggests the possibility of transcendence. I think the role of our congregations is to function as the outfitter in the park.

So what does that look like practically speaking? Our Sunday services reside in the outfitter lodge and function as the place where the whole community gathers to support each

other. This is the common ground where we learn what mountain paths might be out there and find others who may want to explore with us. Here at UU Wausau, we are going to be very intentional about this in the coming weeks. This year our intergenerational services in late November and December are going to honor multi-faith and multi-cultural traditions and celebrations. As a faith community we will explore the richness specific holidays provide our search for truth and spiritual enrichment. We will explore expressions of Native American gratefulness, a Jewish celebration of light out of darkness, the Buddha's day of enlightenment, a Mexican style celebration of life's miracles, a Pagan marking of the return of the sun, a traditional Christian celebration of Jesus' birth, and a Religious Humanist acknowledgement of the turning of the year.

We will explore parts of these mountains as gentle visitors to truths which may or may not currently reside in us. We do not come to the mountains as cultural misappropriators. We are not arriving with our Truth held high with the intent to absorb another's tradition into it. Rather we arrive as true explorers, with the openness required to better understand another's truth so we can ultimately connect with another's soul.

For example, next week my friend and fellow Unitarian Universalist Debra Morningstar will be leading our service. Debra is a professional Oneida story teller and provides wonderful examples of how she and her tribe express gratefulness and thanksgiving every moment of their lives, not just one day a year. We will listen to her with hearts and minds open to what it would be like if we also lived a life of such gratitude. We are not coming to gain "the native experience" as if it were just another Disney World ride. For an hour next Sunday, Debra will

use her gift of storytelling to let us accompany her along her mountain path of truth to discover what meaning it may hold for us and to gain a deeper connection to Debra's soul.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, we will use shadow puppet theater to tell the story of "Herschel and the Chanukah Goblins". It is a wonderful metaphor for everyone's struggle to rid ourselves of the goblins of greed and abuse of power and come into the light of loving and sustainable community. For me the story provides a glimpse into the Jewish truth of trusting that hope will always triumph when surrounded by darkness and despair.

I hope you'll join us each week for these special services. We are striving very hard to make them intergenerational. There will be a lot of involvement by all of you and especially our children. I promise you, many of them will be unlike anything we've tried before.

Let me close with more about Grandma. Once I opened myself up to her truth, we enjoyed a rich and wonderful relationship. She would often sit on the covered patio and watch me play with the children on the playground. We both enjoyed our interaction with the children from all walks of life. Grandma was especially in tune with the children and they were always her focus. She seemed to understand their truth. Although they came from very different backgrounds, that didn't seem to matter at the shelter. There they all came seeking safety, warm loving embraces and laughter from people they could trust – like Grandma and me. They didn't seem to get hung up on the differences. Through the eyes of a child, the path to truth can be so uncomplicated. May we also enter our exploration in the coming weeks with the openness of a child. Blessed be.