

Scenarios of Spiritual Spaciousness

A sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — Sept. 16, 2007

READING — From “A Temple of the Heart” — *by The Rev. Dr. Patrick T. O’Neill*

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In Jewish history, Talmudic legend tells the story of how the great temple site in Jerusalem was established.

“Time before time,” the story goes, “when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill, each night dividing evenly the grain they had ground together. One brother lived alone, the other had a large family. Now the single brother thought to himself one day, ‘It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed.’ So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother’s granary.

“But the married brother said to himself one day, ‘It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, and my brother has none.’ So, he began every night to take some of his grain to his brother’s granary.

“Then one night they met each other half way between their two houses. Suddenly they realized what had been happening, and they embraced each other in love. The legend has it that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, ‘This is a holy place, and here it is that my Temple shall be built.’ And so it came to be that the first Temple was constructed in Jerusalem. For God is known where human beings meet each other, and discover each other, in love.”

The implication of the legend is clear, no matter the theology: love is the only sure

foundation upon which any temple worthy of the name must be built. No other foundation is strong enough to support a house of faith.

The great temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was the literal center of faith and culture for the flowering of the Jewish people. It contained in its Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, the central symbol of Yahweh's Covenant with his Chosen People. That physical temple was the indispensable center of ancient Judaism.

We moderns, living at a distance of four millennia, can only imagine what it must have meant for the Jewish people when the great temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Chaldean army, and the Jews were led off into their years of bitter captivity in Babylon.

Up until that devastating experience, the Jewish religion was predicated upon the physical dependence of having the great Temple as its literal high altar. With the destruction of their temple, Judaism itself would have perished as a religion except for one great religious insight, which the Jews never forgot from that experience. They learned how to carry their Great Temple with them in their hearts.

By learning to do so, the Jewish faith survived the Babylonian Captivity. It survived to rebuild the physical temple in Jerusalem again. And when that temple was also destroyed centuries later by the Roman army, the Jewish faith once again survived in the hearts of its people.

And it survived the Great Diaspora of another two thousand years beyond that. It survived centuries of persecution, even genocide, and every manner of destruction visited upon its people, because, you see, the Temple carried in the heart—faith constructed on the sure foundation of love—is not subject to captivity or destruction, not by all the armies on earth.

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SERMON — Scenarios of Spiritual Spaciousness by Jaco B. ten Hove

I'd venture to say that building bridges—both metaphorically and with solid materials—is a pretty *positive* activity. Bridges link diverse aspects of our world, often over obstacles, usually for productive purposes—harmony, even. We generally honor and admire the active bridge-builders among us and are inclined toward this idea, even if we're not as willing to do the actual work ourselves. (Although I could be wrong about this. All those *against* building bridges raise your hand!)

The ancient Hebrews are a good model here, as described in the reading. First, two brothers were each secretly building half of a metaphorical bridge out of concern for the other. They finally met up and discovered that they should connect their bridge halves in love, and this place became so holy that the Great Temple of Jerusalem was built on that spot.

After many years of deep centering in that Temple, it was destroyed by a powerful foe and the Jews were exiled from their land. They were forced into a future *without* their beloved temple. So they, in turn, discovered how to build a metaphorical bridge back to the temple, which they now held in their hearts—hearts that *expanded* to contain so much more than they had before. They learned that their holy place could also live in their hearts.

To my eye, the locations where metaphorical bridges are built can become sacred, yes, but they are often at least flourishing in some way. So it would seem prudent for us to become ever better at this craft, and my topic today—what I call “Spiritual Spaciousness”—can be thought of as a prerequisite to bridge-building.

Reaching out to others—a common aspect of metaphorical bridge-building—is still not an easy task. It often requires of us an inner openness that we might not feel or recognize or welcome. We might be too tight inside, maybe, with little metaphorical room to take in more perspective than we already contain.

We'd rather resist making the kinds changes that bridges encourage, believing we're just not ready, *never* quite ready enough. You may recognize that inner resistance to change, to active bridge-building; I certainly do. You may feel too tight inside to add any more of anything to your life; I know that feeling, as well.

So I try to hold out before me the inspirational declaration of poet Walt Whitman: "I am large, I contain multitudes" [from "Song of Myself"].

I believe that encountering and accommodating difference—ideally even *embracing* difference—is one of the prime challenges before us in an already crowded 21st century. It's a spiritual challenge, really, and this is where one's religion, one's worldview comes in.

How does our religious life help us face the almost certain reality that it's going to get even a whole lot *more* crowded around here, and soon, with increasing breakdowns of systemic elements that can't handle—aren't *designed* to handle the stresses of such crowding? So some things have to change or we're just rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic, as the pointed saying goes.

One's religious perspective matters in this. Some spiritual angles encourage an embrace of difference and change, some do not. It matters what we believe, and how we prepare ourselves for the task of "building bridges between our divisions" [from Song #1008]. What do we hold in our hearts as we face the demanding struggles of our age? What do we believe about the world and its diversity? Is there a metaphorical temple *we* carry within that will sustain *us* in these demanding times, let alone the ones ahead?

And finally, the inquiry that drives my topic today: How much room is there inside any of us—inside you—to hold change, difference and diversity, to hold conflict, contradictions and paradox? Is your heart in a holy place?

In this summer's edition of our UU Association's magazine, *UU World*, my colleague from All Souls Church in the District, Rob Hardies, has a very helpful article called "Love the Contradictions" (<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/23672.shtml>), excerpted from a book chapter he wrote on the 3rd UU Principle, which promotes "encouragement to spiritual growth."

He wrote this about the evolution of his own understanding:

I used to think of spiritual growth as a process of growing closer to God in a vertical kind of way. I took the image from 'Jack and the Beanstalk': We're here on the earth, God is up in heaven, and spiritual growth means growing like that beanstalk, higher and higher, ever closer to God. But in that model, we end up with our head in the clouds.

Then he discovered UUism, and soon entered our ministry. Along the way he also discovered that:

Spiritual growth isn't about a vertical ascent to heaven but about growth in every dimension at once. It's spirituality in 3-D.

And his next sentence makes my point for me:

Growth in spirit doesn't measure one's proximity to a God above, but rather the spaciousness of one's own soul...

"I am large. I contain multitudes."

You can grow with each breath you take, by expanding your capacities. You can grow by becoming MORE: more appreciative of the manifold ways Life and Creativity swirl around

you; more deeply involved in your loving relationships; more able to bring a balanced intention to your fulfilling activities. You can grow by becoming more.

You can also grow by becoming LESS: by releasing toxins, by discarding worn out patterns, by letting go of unhealthy behaviors. You grow by becoming LESS of what constrains you and MORE of what liberates you. This is a way to be most fully, authentically who you are, and each deep breath can remind you to touch that core of inherent worth and dignity that is your birthright.

In being most fully authentic, you can embrace and share in a lot of beauty and value and love, even if they show up in forms not familiar to you. But in order to embrace goodness in its myriad appearances, in order to take in MORE of these liberating connections, there must be room enough inside you to include them in your inner activity, in your identity, in the breath paths that create and recreate you. How spacious are you inside?

As you exhale, send out the blockages that take up too much room inside you, and inhale expansive ideas that breed spiritual spaciousness. There's really no limit to the space that can grow inside you, to help you meet the diversities of your life with honor and clarity. To promote togetherness, you *can* hold and consider a great many different notions, *and* be increasingly sensitive to authentic expressions of who you really are.

Like a building that grows from cramped, limiting quarters into a more open palace of possibilities, you can exhale the tightness that might constrict your heart, and breathe in the power of a more open life journey. Imagine and remember how spacious you are inside, with room for all kinds of love, lots of liberating connections, many channels of healing and helping, even amid the inevitable struggles that accompany an active life.

Your open heart will flourish as you cultivate spiritual spaciousness. Bring your big heart into engagement with the universe and you can dance ever more gracefully with difference, diversity and change, with conflict, contradictions and paradox. You can live with your heart in a holy place, a big heart, your big heart...

“I am large. I contain multitudes.”

What do you think of when you hear about or experience someone who has “a big heart”? It usually means there’s lots of room *inside* them that enables them to be outwardly generous toward others. They seem to be able to hold onto their centered sense of self *and* include others—even in moments of upset or upheaval—without losing their inner balance.

Well, within some small degree of inches, our actual hearts are all about the same size, physically. But through our spiritual practice we can grow metaphorical hearts of expanded size and roominess, so that we might enter challenging scenarios with strength and compassion, to be creative agents of beneficent change and healing.

This is a path I aim myself toward, even as I fall short regularly. It seems like the most uprightly religious way to go, if I am to contribute more to solutions than to the problems of our age. I try to increase my spiritual spaciousness when I encounter scenarios such as the following three examples:

- 1. In considering my tiny place in the huge universe, I try to breathe deeply and expand the room inside me to at least metaphorically match the expanse I see above me each clear night, say. For we are, each and every one of us, a connected reflection of the greater universe that surrounds us and extends as far as we can imagine.

There was a moment late one night this past July, while I was in the Adirondack Mountains of NY State (at the UU summer camp called Unirondack), when I sat on the balcony of a lodge hanging out over the edge of Beaver Lake. The night was so dark and clear and still that the brilliant starry sky—a spectacle in itself—was *also* quite visible on the surface of the quiet lake. Not something I get to experience very often.

As I tried to actually identify the constellations rearranged below me on the watery canvass

of that temple under the stars, I also began to inhale the whole natural scene, taking it inside into my soul, wanting to hold onto and retain these moments of merging external and internal universes. My heart was in a holy place that I now can recall frequently, exquisitely.

- Scenario #2: In human community, religious or otherwise, I try to increase my spiritual spaciousness to hold *both* the joys *and* the frictions that emerge when any group is ambitious enough to try to build something greater than the sum of the parts, such as in a thriving nation, village, or congregation.

I was practicing this spiritual discipline yesterday as I marched with thousands of anti-war protesters and we passed slowly by a line of pro-war counter-demonstrators, many of whom were aggressively and expressively angry, inspiring similar responses from some on my side of the thin barricades. It was a distressingly polarized atmosphere, so I sought to hold the friction in some sort of emotional balance.

Meanwhile, here at Paint Branch, we are just now entering a new chapter in our collective life, one which will very intentionally provide increasing opportunities for any or all of us to consider how we might grow in racial understanding and diversity. (If any of you did not receive the important early September letter on this subject from our Trustees, you can find it at <http://www.pbuuc.org/socact/dartt/darttletter091107.pdf>)

Through this initiative we will hopefully build stronger bridges among us in at least three ways: by examining our own personal assumptions and tendencies; by adjusting our congregational culture to be ever more welcoming of a wider range of people; and by looking for ways to engage and impact the society in which we are embedded.

I expect that one of the dynamics that will accompany our walking this exciting but challenging path of anti-racism together will be moments in conversation where any of us might get, shall we say, energized—even polarized—for one reason or another, sometimes in reaction to the insights or comments of others. This is particularly where a practice of

spiritual spaciousness comes in.

In conversations that matter, I try to breathe deeply and expand the room inside me, to find the strength to not bolt for the door when the going gets tough. It's often difficult emotionally, to be sure, but my goal would be to take in and hold safely any perspectives that sound threatening to me. So I try to stay at the table, in ongoing relationship with what might trouble me.

This past August, for instance, I spent the better part of two Sundays learning about the ins and outs of another ambitious, but worthy realm: interfaith dialogue. I participated in a couple of long workshops sponsored by the Interfaith Conference of Metro Washington. There were some touchy moments during those hours, as 40 of us from umpteen different religious traditions crammed into a small room together and tried to improve the odds that the very varied religious communities of this large metro area might better know and understand each other.

And in fact, since the sessions were led by two Unitarian Universalists, it was sometimes our religion, as embodied and referred to by our leaders, that came under some scrutiny and made me feel defensive. More than once people from other religions voiced, usually in pointed jest, what I felt were narrow and unfair stereotypes about UUs, such as that we didn't really stand for anything because we had no dogma, ha ha ha. Grrr.

I had to find, inside me, room enough for a greater patience than is my natural tendency, so I would not over-react to joking disparagement of my religion. I did "stay at the table" and looked for moments when I could hopefully counteract such shallow understandings. But I also might have just walked out and dealt with it that way, although that probably would have nurtured the stereotype where it was already rooted. I'm not convinced I converted anyone in those sessions, but our UU presence in that room mattered, so we kept at it and ultimately grew from the experience.

One other technique I've been trying hard to incorporate when facing different perspectives

is to *not assign motives* to others. Making harsh and often quick assumptions about another's motives is a seductive trap that can escalate alienation and destroy bridges. Think of the holiest people you know, who embody the most universal values and move with the most elegant equanimity; chances are, they specialize in accepting others at face value, or at least not assigning motives to them, even when threatened.

There are a whole lot of other aspects to the noble work of building bridges in community, but a key seems to be ever expanding our openness within. As my colleague, Roberta Nelson, writes in the latest, Fall edition of the *UU World* magazine, "To raise children in the midst of 'stunning diversity,' we must educate for empathy, for a deep understanding of our shared humanity." And I would remind us that we are *all* children in this class.

- And finally, Scenario #3: In both intimate *and* momentary relationships, which are often beyond the bounds of any identified community, I try to breathe deeply and expand the room inside me to hold, even in passing, the powerful awareness of another's rich authenticity.

There is much written about our spiritual relationship to the "other," the stranger, the one we do not know or sometimes don't even want to know, but who nonetheless shares our world. In the crowded metro zone of our region, many of us pass by perhaps hundreds of such people each day, and those are just the ones nearby. Across the globe are so many others so similar to us and yet so different.

We can't have room for all of them in our hearts, can we? I really don't know. Perhaps the Dalai Lama can, but I only have so much inner energy and capacity. What I *do* know and what I *can* consider is how I feel and react when I am directly addressed by a stranger, or when I am moved to express something out of the blue to someone else I don't know from Adam, as it were.

When, for instance, a stranger I'm passing by asks me for money, I have often felt

uncomfortable, and I have mostly just kept moving without responding at all. But that discomfort usually lingered in my tightened heart, and continued to bounce around within me, reflecting some jarring angles—enough so that lately I have been intentionally adopting a new approach to such situations, as I'm able.

When asked for money, and if I'm not prepared to provide any, I now try to look at the person directly for a moment and say something like this: "I can't give you anything today, but I wish you well." I don't kid myself that I have done anything extraordinary, but I hope my response at least honors their humanity, certainly more so than when I was trying so hard to ignore them.

This is a small thing, I suppose, but it points to a bigger thing: Do I have any room at all in me for the Stranger, the Other? Safety concerns and limited resources notwithstanding, I hope I do, but I often have to rededicate myself to this value, because it slips down my priority list very easily.

On the other end of the relational spectrum are the deep, strong, often long-term connections we have with one or more people who steadily animate our lives in very vivid ways, whether they be a partner, relatives, close friends, etc. These relationships can, of course, create some of the most fulfilling dimensions of our lives.

We might eagerly make room in our hearts for this kind of connection, and hunger for more if there is a paucity of such intimate human contact in our world. It can feel like the very crux of being alive: perhaps more than anything our most personal relationships bring meaning to our existence.

But as many of us can testify, closeness with even one other person can also be demanding, as we attempt to negotiate the rigors of honesty and difference, magnified by proximity or kinship. There are regular struggles that require mutual reflection, compromise and/or healing.

And such activities, I think, benefit from as much spiritual spaciousness as we can muster—not to become just a doormat or passively accept whatever comes our way, but to engage with someone we care about from a fully authentic place that also inspires generosity of spirit. In fact, “generosity of spirit” is much like having a “big heart”—both are external expressions of inner, 3-D spiritual growth.

Ultimately, we strive to live rich lives of balance that will hold us steady as we contribute our gifts to a world in need of creative solutions to pressing issues. Who you are matters in this; what you offer the world matters; as does your sense of connection to the wider natural universe, to your communities and to your close relationships.

Wherever “human beings meet each other and discover each other in love” is a holy place, one that begins with an inner spaciousness and then spreads out to “give us eyes that see, hearts that loves, and hands that are willing to serve” [quote from earlier unison affirmation of children’s chalice lighting].

Let us rededicate ourselves to the tasks of our times, for which we are called to build bridges. Let us grow spiritually, in all directions at once, as we take our next steps toward a more peaceful and just future. So may it be.

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