

This City Is Sacred Space

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The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of
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Readings:

Isaiah 58: 6-8, 9b-12; 60:11

“Ministers Split Up Over ‘Liberalism’”, The New York Times, January 29, 1950

Sermon: This City Is Sacred Space

In 1845, 23 years after the founding the First Universalist Society of Danbury, Connecticut, Henry David Thoreau went to the woods to live. Two years later he returned to live in town again, writing, “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spend any more time for that one.” Like many other urban Universalist and Unitarian churches in the 1960s and 70s, in 1970 this church went to the woods of West Redding and had a life there. Unlike most of the others, you have now returned to the city, with several more lives to live. I applaud your decision to return to the City of Danbury.

I was pleased to join your celebration held in the auditorium of the old high school on White Street when you dedicated this Fellowship Hall. Although I was born in New York City and lived in the Bronx until I was about five, I lived most of my childhood in a house at the end of a dirt road on a hilltop in Mill Plain. In 1963, when I began high school, it was on White Street, on double sessions. There was a still older high school on Main Street, where the police station now stands. (The Rev. Dr. Raymond Hopkins, the first executive vice president of the Unitarian Universalist Association (following the consolidation of the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association), graduated from the old, old Danbury High

School, worked in a hat factory for some years, and then went to Tufts where he earned his undergraduate and seminary degrees.)

I was luckier than most children of the 1950s whose parents left New York or another major city. We did not move to the suburbs. My family moved to the rural outskirts of a small industrial city. This city. After commuting to the factory in the East 20s where he had worked for many years, my father got a job in a factory on Triangle Street, where he worked until he died at age 60, just months after I became the first member of my family to receive a high school diploma and days after I became the first to enter college. My father was Lutheran; my mother was and still is Catholic (though she did sometimes go to Hebrew school on release time). We kids got both religions at home. But I had teachers and friends who were members of this Universalist church, which was then not far from St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church where I attended catechism classes. My older brother went to St. Paul's Lutheran Church on Spring Street.

It was in the schools that I benefited most from being in this small city. Like many of New England's industrial cities, Danbury was touched by every wave of immigration to reach this nation's shores. My friends included descendants of the various waves of European immigration, descendants of founders of the colonies, and descendants of slaves who had been kidnapped and sold here. Some of my high school classmates were themselves immigrants. My brother, who unlike me is of 100% Scandinavian ancestry, played trombone in the Sons of Portugal marching band. There was in the 1950s and is today residential segregation, but the schools mixed us up. Of my three best friends growing up, one was the son of a warehouse worker, one the son of a business owner and janitor, one the son of a bank vice president. Two of the three were white and two of three lived in Mill Plain. And all three went to the First Congregational Church.

I cannot tell you when I first realized that a city as such is a sacred space. Or to realize that it is just as natural to live in a tenement in the Bronx as in a cabin on Walden Pond. Today I can make the simple argument that a city is sacred because all of nature is sacred. And that the city is just as much a part of nature – just as

natural -- as any other environment on this planet. The city is a human creation and humans are part of nature. Tell me, if you can, why an anthill is more natural than the Empire State Building or why a spider's web is more natural than Interstate 84. Neal deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium, posed a similar question to mine in his memoir, *The Sky Is Not the Limit*. Reflecting on the eerie silence downtown after the destruction of the World Trade center – Tyson grew up in the Bronx and now lives downtown -- Why are bird songs considered natural sounds by many, but not the sounds of city traffic?

The city is sacred because it is part of nature.

But it is also sacred because people make it sacred. I take seriously the words of Felix Adler, “The place when men seek the most high is holy ground”, although I have long amended this to read “men and women” and the New York Society for Ethical Culture has changed the gold lettering over the platform to read “people”.

Wherever there are men and women, wherever there are people, there is an effort to seek the Most High, the Holy, the Truth – call it what you will. This quest is sacred and it is the quest of churches, synagogues, mosques, universities, art galleries, concert halls, clubs, libraries, and all the other venues in which persons try to make sense of life and discover its meaning. Cities have been largely built for commerce; however, once there is surplus capital and reasonable living conditions, there is a wide-open quest for the Most High. In European cities, cathedrals are often at the center. With the proliferation of dissenters in this country, there are often multiple churches, temples, mosques, etc. at or near the center. In 1802, when churches were still tax supported, the Baptists in Danbury wrote to Thomas Jefferson. His response in early 1802 introduced into civic discourse the concept of the wall between church and state. In 1821, there were numerous Universalist congregations in New York City – a city built for commerce like few others. (The Second Unitarian Congregational Society would be organized in 1825.) A Universalist layman, Thomas King, was an orator on behalf of both religious liberty and worker's rights. New York City's population had reached 123,706 the year before. Danbury's population was less

than 4,000, but it was a growing center not only for farmers in this part of Connecticut, but also for manufacturing. The First Universalist Society was founded in 1822. One of the most famous entrepreneurs of the first half of the 19th century – Phineas Taylor Barnum – was born in what was then Danbury’s second parish – now Bethel - in 1801, and was a newspaper publisher in Danbury and an officer of this church while in his 20s. Earlier Danbury had been the site of one of the half dozen or so congregations of the Sandemanian movement. Already Danbury was becoming a place where people sought the Most High in diverse ways

By coming to this place to seek the Most High, you make this sacred ground. By bringing theological diversity to this city, I would argue that you make the city – already a sacred place – even more sacred.

This city – like many others, especially larger cities – is a cosmopolis. This is the third reason that his city is sacred space. In a metaphorical sense – to be sure – and in a real sense, the city manifests the diversity of creation. Especially in industrial cities with their welcoming of immigrants, all of humanity can come together in a natural if not always easy solidarity. When a city is planned, its layout represents the cosmos as understood by its designer: Washington with its grand esplanades and avenues connecting the branches of government and neighborhoods; Brasilia shaped like an airplane with no provision for working class or poor people; New York City’s grid above Houston Street, to facilitate real estate development. Smaller cities grew up with less planning, often spreading out along highways and waterways, connecting sources of energy and materials.

Religious buildings are to be found at center of the Cosmopolis and along its main streets. Coming back to the city, you chose to locate on a main thoroughfare. I take that to mean that you want the people of this city and its surrounding towns to find you easily. That you want that natural if not easy solidarity that comes with urban life.

I began by talking about going to school in Danbury and the diversity I knew in the schools: Park Avenue was the least diverse. Then Mill Ridge opened as I began fourth grade and that school drew students from the high-income Kohanza Avenue

area as well as from the public housing at Mill Ridge and the still largely rural Mill Plain. The high school drew from throughout the city and from New Fairfield (which then did not have its own high school). So it wasn't as racially diverse as Mill Ridge.

Now let me go back to family. My father left school in Sweden at age 13 to go to sea. My mother attended high school in the Bronx, but left without graduating. Her father was born in Italy. Her mother (who was Italian) was born in Harlem. My mother used to tell us how when she had release time for religious education, she often went with her Jewish friends to Hebrew school, rather than to catechism at the Catholic church. Mom recently had to give up her apartment – to which she had moved from the house in Mill Plain – to go into an assisted living situation. As we were cleaning the apartment out, I found her eighth-grade class picture. There were obviously a lot of faces readily categorized as white ethnics, but also several black faces.

Sort of like my eighth grade class at Mill Ridge School.

Before the Second World War, America was much less racially segregated than it became after the war. The entire post-war building boom – that gave us the suburbs as we know them – was structurally racist public policy that lured the white working and middle classes out of our great cities and left the cities to rot.

The diversity of the population is one of the factors that make the city sacred space.

Diversity is a kind of necessary and holy disorder

The Cosmopolis, replicates the complexity and variety of the cosmos in human organization and creation: good and evil, life and death, artistic imagination and mundane management, conflict and cooperation.

The sociologist Richard Sennett sums up the sacred potential of the city in these words: *The great promise of city life is a new kind of confusion possible within its borders; an anarchy that will not destroy men [or women], but make them richer and more mature.* The city, as Sennett says elsewhere, is where you must meet and learn to live with people who are different from you. Mayor Boughton's claim that

there are fifteen to twenty thousand undocumented aliens here in Danbury is a powerful statement of Danbury's vitality as a city, of its complexity, of its sacredness....

My impression, however, is that he does not see it the same way as I do.

But, of course, what Sennett called anarchy does destroy some people. Racism, poverty, and environmental degradation exist in the city – and can be fatal. Structural racism has created neighborhoods more segregated than those our parents and grandparents knew. New York City has the nation's highest childhood asthma rate and in East Harlem is the highest concentration. Infectious diseases do spread in overcrowded living conditions, which exist because of a badly distorted housing market that is disconnected from the real abilities of working and middle class families to pay for housing. Any industrial city, large or small, has serious pollution. Generations of hat factory workers in Danbury were poisoned by the mercury used to process beaver pelts. I remember going to the factory where my father worked. The Still River ran behind it and was at times a distinctly unexpected and industrial green. All human creations may be part of nature, but they are not all benign. In Orange, New Jersey, the small industrial city where I now live, there used to be 36 hat factories, as well as a plant where watch dials were hand painted with radium. Radium dissolved in water leached into the ground. When the original Stetson hat factory burned a few years ago, the flames were more colorful than any conjured up by my friends and me with our chemistry sets.

In spite of industrial pollution, which we now minimize compared to earlier generations -- there are few if any new cases of Hatter's Shakes – cities have ecological advantaged due to their density and efficiency. By several important measures, New York City is the greenest city in the United States. [David Owen, "Green Manhattan", The New Yorker, October 18, 2004] New York City residents use less energy per person than the residents of the remainder of New York State or any other state. Energy use is low because New Yorkers use mass transit (81% of Manhattan residents go to work on mass transit, a lower percentage in the outer boroughs), including the single most energy efficient conveyance: the elevator. New

Yorkers on average are less obese than most Americans because New Yorkers walk more than most Americans.

The Conde´ Nast Building (4 Times Square) is a masterpiece of ecological and economic efficiency: 6,000 employees work in 1.6 million square feet of office space on one acre of land with no parking lot. According to Bruce Fowle (a partner in the architectural firm that designed it), providing the same amount of space in one-story suburban office buildings would consume more than 150 acres of land and require major new infrastructure. The workers' cars would clog miles of highways and spew hydrocarbons in all directions. Frighteningly, suburb to suburb commuting has become steadily more common over the past 20 years and this has further isolated working class individuals and members of minorities from both entry level and well paying service jobs.

Danbury is not as dense as New York City. Few places are. It is, however, dense enough that, with improved mass transit, Danbury and its suburbs could reap some of these ecological advantages while continuing to thrive as a commercial, service, and -- though to a lesser degree than in the past -- industrial center.

Danbury is sacred space because of

...the diversity of people...

...and

...the confrontation that demands growth.

Those who thrive in the city and make it what it can be are people who can tolerate -- and even revel in -- diversity and conflict. This is not the place for people whose lives and surroundings must be neat, orderly, and predictable. New York City is disorderly in spite of having been built on a grid. Suburbs are diverse in spite of developers' and even many residents' preferences. When Levitt and Sons developed the first large-scale factory-built suburb on Long Island, they wrote restrictive covenants into the deeds to keep the population all white. While those who initially moved in were white working and middle class families from New York City neighborhoods, some of these residents immediately challenged the covenants and tried

to integrate Levittown. For this both Levitt and the then-new Long Island newspaper *Newsday* attacked these residents as Communists.

The suburbs were initially bland and uniform and they still tend to be less diverse than the city as a whole. They were initially built to be something cities cannot be. But the older and closer in suburbs increasingly resemble city neighborhoods. The City of Orange, New Jersey, where Jody and I live, has long been an industrial city surrounded by more typically suburban towns and the once-wealthy City of East Orange. I cannot walk more than a couple of blocks anywhere in Orange without hearing at least one and sometimes three languages in addition to English: most often Italian, Spanish, and Haitian French. But even in neighboring South Orange -- the very model of the middle to upper middle class integrated suburb --, there are long-empty storefronts on South Orange Avenue, its main business street.

As Richard Sennett writes in *The Uses of Disorder*, it is a sign of maturity to be able to live with difference, ambiguity, and the inevitable conflict that comes with difference. Urban communities do not have the quiet comfort of places where everyone is alike; urban communities are noisy, busy, conflictual places -- and all this is part of their richness and their power to nurture people into emotional, ethical, and spiritual maturity. These factors help make a city a sacred space.

Those who cannot stand difference, conflict, and ambiguity do not thrive in the Cosmopolis. Those who are here to try to make it into something it cannot be and they will inevitably fail: fail to change the city and fail to reap the truth wealth of its possibilities.

Here is an example of this diversity and anarchy at its starkest and best in New York City, 2002.

Less than a year after 9-11, while the World Trade Center Site was still being cleaned up, I was on Dey Street, between Church Street and Broadway. There, within site of the ruins of what had been New York City's two tallest structures, were men and women taking breaks on the sidewalk across from Century 21 (a discount department store). One young woman, dressed for business, was seated on a part of the building and eating her lunch. Others were smoking. Shoppers were chatting

and comparing their bargains. A young man took off his jacket, spread it on the sidewalk as a prayer rug, and bowed toward Mecca in prayer. At a time when the government was sweeping up South Asians in Brooklyn, on this one day, no one of the hundreds of New Yorkers bothered this young Muslim.

The wealth of nations is not only gold and silver. It is people and ideas, in all their diversity and differences and conflicts.

The city heeds the words of Isaiah:

*Your gates shall always be open;
day and night they shall not be shut.* [Is. 60.11.b]

This Church in This City

You can tell, I may have left this city 39 years ago but I treasure it as a great place. It's a small city, but it's a fine city. Coming up in Danbury in the 1950s and 60s enabled me to live in an America that would be less white than it then was. It enabled me to grow into an adult who could thrive in a multicultural America. It also enabled me to embrace Unitarian Universalism when I found it, while yet seeing and being critical of its limitations.

I am an evangelical Universalist, I want to see UU churches grow and thrive and seek the Most High in ways to which they may not be accustomed. I was for nine years minister of one of the few multiracial congregations in this denomination. I still live in the community where it is located, whose population is less than 25% white and about 70% are people of African ancestry. I could not function there as I did as a minister in suburban East Brunswick in an earlier lifetime. Nor could that church function like the UU congregations in mostly white suburbs like Montclair and Summit. That I came up here and not, say, Westport, was a major factor in preparing me for urban ministry in settings where, in the words of Andy Merrifield, "life is lived without rubber gloves."

What about an urban vision for this church in this city?

According to the 2005 American Community Survey, Danbury is 6.2% Black. I would not expect you to have a future as a multiracial congregation. Integrated,

yes. But not multiracial. However, the official population is 16% Hispanic and 10.6% Asian. A multicultural future for this church is possible. If Mayor Boughton is right and there are 15-20,000 uncounted immigrants, there is an immense field here for church outreach – i.e., evangelizing UUism – and for social justice work. I know of two bilingual (English/ Spanish) UU congregations in California, and a third moving in a truly multicultural direction.

A church in a city must be deeply involved in the life of the city. First UU of Essex County grew more diverse and more numerous – though never large – as its members and ministers became more visibly involved in the life of the community. I know that you are already involved with ARC and the Dorothy Day Hospitality House. A church member is on the Common Council. A church must be deeply connected to the issues of its community – this is true wherever it is located.

Religious tolerance continues to be a big issue in this nation. The Baptists led the way in 1802. In 1950 they fell away when they rejected “liberalism” and a Jewish colleague. I don’t know where the Baptists in Danbury are today on these issues. Jody and I go once a month to one of the Baptist churches in Newark and here sermons that sound a lot like Biblical Universalism. This city and this church have a good history on this and this history needs to continue.

Immigration, affordable housing, police-community relations, public education – these are all issues that demand the attention of any liberal congregation. My congregation in Orange, New Jersey, was involved in all of these. Immigration and the rights of workers – documented and undocumented – are highly contested in the current political environment.

I encourage you to think as broadly as possible about what the church’s ministry is and to whom it is directed.

For me, thinking broadly means getting specific. Who lives in the neighborhood of the church? I suggest you go door-to-door and introduce yourselves. Invite your neighbors to church. But define your neighborhood widely. Danbury is a large space. However, the census bureau sorts median income into five categories – leaving out the poorest and the richest – and four of the five categories are repre-

sented within 1.4 miles or less of this church. If you want upper middle class people, go West of Clapboard Ridge Road; if you want middle class, go East; if you want lower middle class and working class, go South of I-84. Find out what you have in common with your neighbors – it may be more than you think – and what you might work on together for the sake of the community.

Unitarian Universalist congregations tend to be small, self-selected groups of people who identify as well educated, liberal, and middle class. Because of how we do church, we tend to be very white. It doesn't have to be that way. Just by moving back to Danbury and to a highly visible location, the UU Congregation of Danbury has chosen to live a new life that is ambitious and open to change.

I told you I am an evangelical Universalist. If we want this congregation and this religious movement to grow and if we want to grow as individuals, we need to be ready to be changed.

I again encourage you to think about to whom the ministry of this church is to be addressed.

Which brings me back to Rabbi Malino.

My mother – the Italian Catholic who went to Hebrew school classes -- showed me a story about the Rabbi a few years ago. I forget whether it was when he turned 90 or when he died. In any event, he had been pegged as a liberal in the New York Times in 1950 and the Universalist pastor had stood with him.

I was struck by something he was quoted as saying. It went something like this. *If I had stayed in New York, I would have been the rabbi to a congregation. In Danbury I was able to be rabbi to the entire community.*

And he was.

As bearers of the Universalist faith in this time and place – the gospel of love so great it leaves no one out and cannot be denied forever -- the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury has the potential to minister to the entire community.

May it be said of you, in the words of Isaiah:

You will raise up the foundations of many generations;

*you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

Amen!