

“Leap Before You Look”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It will come as no surprise that I have a thing for churches.

Truth be told, I’m fascinated by shrines and synagogues,
by mosques, and mandirs, and temples, too.

I’m captivated by the sight of faith
translated into bricks and mortar—
by the sheer determination it took
to raise the classic temples of antiquity
and the vaulted cathedrals of the Middle Ages.

Places like Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, and Hagia Sophia
stand to this day as testaments of faith and the force of will,
symbols of deep devotion carved from stone.

Places with purpose, meant to endure.

But, these sites, of course, are more than mere buildings.
More than the pile of rocks from which they were built.

They are spiritual sites,
hallowed by centuries of human longing
for life’s deepest meaning.

And, that’s why I think so many of us
gravitate to such places, such hallowed ground—
whether these sites be a world away or just around the corner.

Because we sense the quest for the sacred that they hold within.

* * *

A few years ago, I dragged Bob
through many of the major cathedrals in northern France.

To squeeze in a few more stops later in the day,
we set out very early one morning
to arrive at the Cathedral of Amiens
as soon as the doors opened at 8:00 a.m.

Though I've visited countless cathedrals,
I've never had one to myself.

Somehow anything that's almost a thousand years old
just seems like it should be shared.

But that morning,
as soon as the caretaker departs after unlocking the doors,
Bob and I are left with this cavernous cathedral,
to enjoy its vast silence
and the morning sun piercing its stained glass.

There, in the middle of the nave, is Amien's famed labyrinth.

In the deep, still quiet of the moment,
I can't resist the rare opportunity to walk its angled rings,
without having to dodge unthinking tourists
armed with cell phones and camera bags.

So, in the filtered morning light,
I walk my way into a time of meditation,
navigating the black and white marble that marks my path.
I simply and slowly walk,
breathing in the air of the ages.

As I often do, when I have occasion to walk a labyrinth,
I enter with a question,
with some decision weighing on my heart.

Each circuit around the centre deepens my discernment.

And as I reach the centre,
I stand there, for a time, in the vast silence.

Eventually, a handful of chatty worshippers arrive
for the morning mass in one of the small chapels
beyond the high altar.

The silence is broken, and in some ways, the spell, too.
My deep discernment is scrambled by the disruption.

I'm more than a little annoyed
until I ask myself just what right I have to be so selfish—
to somehow think that I deserve to make this place my own,
to forget that the dedication of generations of women and men
had built and rebuilt this magnificent space to be shared—
and at a steep cost not nearly covered
by the few Euros I paid to get in.

* * *

In that moment of insight,
I remember the story of another visitor in France,
one, who, some 800 years ago, enters the town of Chartres,
while the great cathedral there is still under construction.

To his surprise, it seems everyone in town
is engaged with an activity in some way related
to the building of this massive church.

The visitor approaches a man who is busy with some large stones.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“I’m cutting stones, I’m a stonemason.”

Not far from him is another man
working with a board, and a mallet, and chisel.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m carving wood,” says the carpenter.

Several more people from different occupations
offer predictably similar answers:
the glassblower is blowing glass,
the solicitor seeking donations,
the architect planning pillars.

Off in the distance is a woman with a large broom,
sweeping up sawdust and stone chips and shards of glass,
tidying up after the other workers who had finished up for the day.

To her, the question is the same: “What are you doing?”

But this time, something is different.

The woman stops sweeping, stands up straight,
and turns toward the visitor with a big, broad smile.

“Me?” she says proudly?

“Why, I am building a great cathedral to the glory of God!”¹

And so she was.

She saw her small part as a piece of the grand design.
She held a wider vision of the meaning of her work.

* * *

Now, in my selfish desire to keep the cathedral in Amiens
to myself that morning,
I had forgotten that woman and so many like her
who have toiled from the beginning of time
to build enduring monuments to their faith,
places owned not by any one person,
or even by a single generation,
but places that now belong to the ages.

What moved me most, in that moment of clarity—
in thinking of that woman sweeping the corners of her cathedral—
was realising that, across all those centuries: I know her!

¹ I'm not sure of the origin of this story. It's been circulated widely for years, if not longer.

I recognise her in the people who clean up here after coffee hour,
and in the folks that tidy our gardens.

I see her work in those who put away our hymnals every Sunday,
and in the people who volunteer in the office each week.

I hear her voice in the songs of our choir
and the deliberations that go on
around committee tables late into the night.

I know her by many different names.
By your names.

Now, I suspect many of you
wouldn't say you do what you do here for the glory of God,
at least not without a vigorous debate about what God is or isn't.

But I know for certain that so many of you
give of yourselves to serve the greater good,
or to serve the Spirit of Life, or that ineffable mystery
known by many names and yet beyond all naming.

Whatever the ways you define it, in the process,
you help to build up this monument,
this temple to what we hold most sacred,
right here within these walls.

As it turns out, there are many ways to build a cathedral.
Even as Unitarians.

* * *

I have found myself wondering this week
what the congregational meetings to build the great cathedrals must have looked like.

I've wondered about how those meetings must have gone.

And then I remember, of course,
that the congregations almost certainly had no say.

That cathedrals were typically raised

on the orders of monarchs and bishops.

And I've thought how much simpler that must have been compared to what it is that we're trying to do.

It's no simple thing, after all,
to try to bring a nearly 172-year old democratically-run institution,
using a 17th century model of congregational governance,
and moving "at the speed of church"
– which, to be clear, is not very fast—
to a decision that involves negotiating the lightning-speed pace
of the commercial real estate market in 21st century Toronto.

And yet that is the sacred task set before us today.

This afternoon, we will make one of the most important decisions
ever to be made in this congregation's long history.

We must, of course, bring sober judgment to bear.

But we must also bring courage and conviction,
passion and hope, confidence and love.

Conventional wisdom warns us to look before we leap.

To gather all the data possible,
to ensure our bases are covered,
our t's crossed, our i's properly dotted.

To eliminate all risk.
To be "as sure as sure can be."

But, taken to the extreme, in our search for certainty,
we can become frozen with fear.

I don't know about you,
but I find such certainty is hard to come by in this life.

More often than not,
we're required to make a leap of faith,
to go on what we can know,

to cling to whatever we can hold on to, and trust.

Now, this is in no way to suggest when facing a decision that we throw caution to the wind, or ignore the pitfalls that may exist.

It is to say that life fully lived involves managing risk, anticipating disappointment, and accepting consequences— as well as embracing change, exploring life-giving possibilities, and opening ourselves to the creative power of transformation.

Plainly put: it seems that life fully lived involves a lot more leaping than looking.

As we face the decision about our building, I am greatly relieved that we have actually been able to do a great deal of looking.

Years of it, in fact. More than a decade. No less than four real estate task forces, under various names.

Across these many years, we've had countless conversations with consultants and architects, city planners and brokers.

As an institution, we've gained an incredible body of knowledge about zoning and density, and conditional offers.

We now know more than we ever wanted to know about condo development and the old boiler that's buried somewhere beneath our sanctuary.

We know a great deal. And while we can't know everything, we can know enough.

As we reach the precipice,

with this momentous decision to make,
I believe that's the point we've reached: Enough.

By mid-afternoon, I imagine,
we will have leapt, in one direction or the other,
having decided to sell or to stay put.

There will be consequences with whichever decision is made.

That's why, whenever I am faced with a major decision,
in addition to walking through a labyrinth, if at all possible,
I ask myself four questions:

What happens if I do this?
What happens if I don't do this?

What won't happen if I do this?
What won't happen if I don't do this?

Or, reframed for us, as a congregation:

What happens if we do this?
What happens if we don't do this?

What won't happen if we do this?
What won't happen if we don't do this?

This little matrix helps me
to break down my fears and worries,
as well as my hopes and dreams.

And it helps me weigh them against each other.

As you give thought to these calculations,
between now and the meeting,
and in the days and months and years to come,
I hope you'll carry with you through it all
an abiding sense of why our congregation exists.

I hope you will hold a vision of its future promise,
and a deep appreciation for its very present power

in the here and now.

While we will talk about buildings today,
and surely for years still to come,
we must talk about so much more than buildings.

For this congregation is so much more
than the place we call home.

It is an idea, and a dream.
It is a community ever in the process of becoming.
It is a people striving to bring more love into the world.

A living laboratory for the human heart,
stirring us to grow in ways that bring healing, and health, and wholeness
to our own lives and to the lives of others.

The place we call home, our building,
must always be understood as a tool—
a tool for carrying out our purpose as a congregation.

As we decide upon the best tool to serve our mission,
my hope is that that tool will help us to be a true sanctuary—
a house of peace and prayer for all people,
a centre for the work of justice,
a place of healing and reconciliation,
a hub of creativity and artistic expression,
a brightly burning beacon of religious freedom.

A nexus of heart and soul, of conscience and service,
for this great city.

That, I believe, is our high calling,
and it is what inspired me to want to serve as your minister.

I gladly accepted the call to this pulpit,
fully knowing of the decisions we would make
in what I thought would be the coming months and years.

Ten years on, I think we're finally ready to leap!

While the question of where we will live is important,
my guiding concern is ultimately about the health, well-being,
and longevity of this community.

And my singular goal is to call you relentlessly
to make real our vision to build a better world.

It is the debt of gratitude that we of this generation
owe to those who founded this congregation in 1845,
and to those who in every generation since
have worked for its well-being,
by cutting stones, blowing glass, and sweeping the floors.

Friends, there are indeed many ways
to build a cathedral, a temple, of the heart.

May we in this time and place
take up our trades and hone our skills
to fashion from wood and stone,
from dream and from sacrifice,
an enduring monument to our faith
and a testament to the glory of life
that ever-stirs within us.

So may it be.

Amen.