

BUILDING WALLS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

I think we all know that today is the 10th anniversary of what is known as ‘the attack on America’ or simply ‘9-11’. September 11th – really the second Sunday in September – is traditionally reserved for Unitarian Universalist congregations to celebrate the start of a new year with a water ceremony. But this year is different. I have been in conversation with many of my colleagues on how to mark this date, and, as you might expect from Unitarian Universalists, the range of opinions vary from recounting the event and attempting to make theological sense of it and ignoring it completely. I have decided to acknowledge the event but to spend most of our time exploring the paradox of building walls to build a community and suggesting a way to hold that paradox.

There are a whole lot of reasons people can’t seem to get along together. Our institutions are filled with people who have devoted their lives to the study – and practice -- of the struggle between Them and Us. Most of us have come to accept that conflict is just a fact of human existence. The Rev. Katy Korb in our Naples congregation offered the opinion that we would only truly see each other as a fellow human being when aliens from a distant planet arrived on earth. At that point our tribal differences would evaporate and we would unite in our identity as homo sapiens – US-- to repel the invaders --THEM. If this scenario sounds familiar it’s because you’re recalling “The Day the Earth Stood Still” or “War of the Worlds”. Or the early Star Trek series where everyone was from earth except Spock. And even he was portrayed in terms of being sort of a higher form of human – the only Unitarian in a ship full of Universalists.

I am inclined to believe that Rev. Korb had it right because I see this tendency to differentiate between us and them in myself and everyone I know. Deep in my bones I understand the yearning to belong to a specific tribe. The comfort and security of being among your own kind is strong. The developers of The Villages understood that. But I also know there’s another, more expansive way to look at human communities. Prophets like Gandhi, Mohammad, Lao Tse, Martin Luther King, Jr., Julian of Norwich, Jesus of Nazareth, Sophia Lyons Fahs, Gene Roddenberry and Bahauallah among others envisioned a world where human differences were a source of delight. Where the differences were retained and complimented other differences: the image of a salad bowl rather than a melting pot. That image more accommodates the reality of our American demographics, where we try to construct communities that are distinctive and reflective of us while welcoming strangers who may eventually wish to join us, and holding all of us fruits and nuts in an ever-expanding salad bowl. How do we develop such communities? To start to answer this question I want to tell you the story of Nehemiah.

About 487 BC, the Babylonians invaded Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, along with Solomon’s temple. This was the third of three campaigns into that region. On all three

BUILDING WALLS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

occasions the Babylonians sacked the temple, burned the city walls to the ground, and took a number of Israelites as captives and resettled them in Babylon. But the Babylonians' fortunes changed and they were conquered by Cyrus, king of Persia. King Cyrus gave the Babylonian Jews permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and some of them did. For awhile it looked like Israel was on the verge of becoming a blessed nation again, but these Jews were fixed only on restoring the building. Without integrating into the social fabric those unique practices and rituals that set the community of Israel apart – in other words, without developing their communal identity, the building effort failed. The political, social, and spiritual conditions of the Jews in Persian-controlled Jerusalem reverted to the time of the conquests.

Meanwhile, back in Persia, a Jewish fellow named Nehemiah heard about the plight of his homeland and it captured his imagination. He had a vision of rebuilding Jerusalem and, over a period of months, negotiated a leave of absence from his position as cupbearer to the king to do just that. Arriving at the city, he found his worst fears realized and set about to building the city walls. It wasn't easy. The building materials consisted of heaps of fire-damaged stone and the workforce had been totally demoralized by the occupiers and mocked and threatened by the local authorities. Nonetheless, bound together by Nehemiah's vision and their common hardship and uncertainty, the Jews rebuilt the wall enclosing their community. This effort laid the groundwork for Ezra to exhort them to reclaim their lost identity as God's chosen, thus re-establishing their Jewish-ness in the midst of a majority of non-Jews.

I like this story for a couple of reasons. First, I like it because it's true, confirmed by historical research and scientific discovery. Based on archeological evidence, the stones showed soot marks from the destruction and the wall itself was of second-rate quality. And the 18 biblical critical commentaries I consulted when I did this research agree that the memoir, attributed to a person known as the Chronicler writing in about 445 B.C.E., is historically reliable, albeit somewhat self-serving.

The second reason I like it is because it shows the results of casting a vision. Leaving aside the source of Nehemiah's vision for a moment, consider the example this provides us in the power of deciding what this tribe is called to do in this time and place, articulating it clearly and succinctly, and broadcasting it in as many ways as possible.

The third reason I like it is because it is the story of how people and groups of people respond to their fear when they or their community is faced with change. Progressive theologian William Sloan Coffin said, "Love seeks the truth, but fear seeks safety." Fear seeks safety. This drive for safety is a core response shared by all living things. We express that protective response differently: in response to a touch tube worms disappear into the sand. Caterpillars curl up in a ball. Some mammals travel in herds or packs. For us humans, building walls have

BUILDING WALLS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

been a popular method of protecting ourselves for millennia. And this has been the dominant narrative about 9-11-2001: Rev. Thomas Schade said, “This event proved the existence of evil in the world, that there is an escalating conflict between the West and some undetermined portion of Islam, and that we are moving toward an apocalyptic catastrophe. Fear and anger were appropriate and rational responses.” In other words, wall-building was the order of the day.

There are three types of walls. Physical barriers include The Great Wall of China, Hadrian’s Wall, the Berlin Wall, the Wall of Famagusta, the Walled City of Lucca, the walls of the Benin Empire in Nigeria, and, of course, Nehemiah’s walls of Jerusalem. Since the beginning of time people have crouched behind physical barriers and hoped that people with agendas different from theirs would be kept out.

Then there are our institutional walls, often called ‘policies’ and ‘programs’. After the attack on the World Trade Centers American threw up a wall called ‘homeland security.’ (How’s that working for us?) After hurricanes we put new building codes into place. We repair the levies. Churches do this all the time – write and re-write policies and by-laws to reflect an event that has threatened the existence or even the status quo of the organization.

Finally there are our psychic walls. We Unitarian Universalists, who suffer disproportionately from our national plague of individualism, are particularly skilled at this sort of wall building. After our personal boundaries have been breached by illness, broken relationships or other kinds of losses we build walls of self-reliance and crouch behind these psychic barriers. Our psychic walls are manifested in phrases like, “it hardly hurts at all”, “thanks, but we’ll manage”, “it’s no bother”, “don’t worry about it”, and my personal favorite, “I’m fine”. These nice phrases we’ve cultivated calm the fear of the listener that he/she will be asked to DO something to address our lack of control or our weakness or – heaven forbid – our need for each other. I hope we can learn that what we are called to “DO” in most situations is nothing more than to simply to listen: to deeply, curiously and openly listen to each other.

I don’t want to give the impression that I think wall building for safety is necessarily negative. The world is a scary place and, as Episcopalian Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori observed, “there is some degree of wariness, or caution, or fear, in most of our relationships with each other.” But I think there is a whole segment of the population that suspects the dominant narrative of 9-11 has been exaggerated and manipulative. They certainly see it as being politicized, and the policy consequences have been disastrous. This is a cautionary tale to us here at UUFMC to craft our covenants and policies in an atmosphere of hope and trust rather than fear.

BUILDING WALLS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

Nehemiah's model of wall building serves a useful purpose. **By defining the parameters, Nehemiah was also defining the community.** The Jewish Reformed Prayerbook expresses our situation this way: "Standing on the parted shores of history we still believe what we were taught before ever we stood at Sinai's foot; that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt - that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together."

So, until we reach that Promised Land where we can meet each other without fear, we need to have boundaries – to know where “I” leaves off and “you” begins. Without boundaries, “the world is too much with us” and we sacrifice our place of safety and calm where we need to retreat so we can recharge ourselves. If we don't feel safe, it's unlikely that we can help anyone else feel safe. Think of it like being on an airplane where the oxygen masks drops and you're told to put yours on first. Why? Because you can't be useful to anyone else when you're gasping for air! So why would you care if you're useful to someone else? Because you may have occasion to desperately need the help of that person sitting next to you. And you're out of luck if she's gasping for air, too! So let's put on our masks – let's examine the kinds of boundaries we have in place to see if they're constructed so they allow us to participate in the often-frightening and confusing world while we're trying to change it. How are we going to use our walls to build the beloved community?

Let's face it: walls are a paradox. They keep people in and they keep people out. We relieve that tension by the use of ... gates. Gates are the mechanism by which people can come into the safety of beloved community and go out to be engaged in the world. Gates are the portals by which strangers enter, signifying their peaceful intentions. Think about it. With whom will you feel more at ease? Someone who comes through your front gate or someone who climbs over your wall?

Let's make a gate with our hands to illustrate the point. First, turn the knuckles of your hands so they're facing each other. Then interlock your fingers. Now move your wrists so that the palms of your hands are facing each other. Your fingers should be on the inside, and your thumbs are parallel. Next, try to wiggle your fingers. It's not easy is it? Imagine them as people inside a small, dark cramped enclosed space. Now move your thumbs – the gates – in opposition. Roll your wrists back so the backs of your hands are facing each other. Now wiggle your fingers. Isn't that easier? The gates are open, exposing the people inside to a wider world of sunlight and space and freedom of movement. You could probably even touch your neighbors in this open position! Go ahead and try it.

BUILDING WALLS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

To me, gates are a metaphor for the way in which you view your relationship with your community. Are your gates of the flat steel variety or the open picket variety? Do you need a key to get through the gate or is it loosely tied with a piece of old rope? Is it tall or can you see over it? Is it hinged so that it easily swings open and shut, or do you have to make a real effort to move it? Does the color of the gate reflect who lives behind the walls? Does your gate say, "Come on in" or does it say "keep out"? I'm not asking you to tear down your boundary walls. I'm asking you to build in some gates with phrases like, "tell me about it", or "I'd like to know how you came to that view", or "would you help me?"

As we think about walls and gates and 9-11 and even the number of cows it will take to make us whole I want to return to the dominant narrative of this date. I would like to join with Rev. Schade to suggest that the policy consequences of the event that so traumatized us on September 11, 2001 may have been politically mistaken but spiritually correct. **Because sometimes the life of the spirit calls a people to a harder and more difficult path than fear and revenge.** It is to that perspective that I summon you this morning. The liberal religious community constructs gates in our boundary walls: we make them wide, make them low, make them easy to open and hard to close. The liberal religious view, which is so rarely heard in the public square, sees 9-11-2001 as one retrograde step in what is otherwise a process by which the religions of the world are accommodating themselves to each other, recognizing in each other the same universal human religious impulses, and building gates in their walled communities. We see a future where our gates will open into a world of peace, cooperation and diversity: To an increase in the number and health of our herd.

The dominant narrative of 9-11-2001 makes it a holiday of anti-Universalism. We, whose whole theology of History points toward Universalism, must speak out today, to testify to our faith in a different and better future. We see that future coming into being right now. All across the country interfaith coalitions including Muslims, Christians and Jews are stronger now than they were ten years ago. The boundary walls are still intact, but gates are being constructed. There's a gate opening in this community this evening, when the Interfaith Alliance of Marion County is holding a service of "remembrance, hope, and light" at 7pm at the First Congregational UCC in Ocala. I'm going through that gate. I hope you'll join me. Shalom, Enshallah, and Amen.