

# **Building Paradise**

Delivered by Roland Moy September 8, 2019  
Boone UU Fellowship

The Unitarian Universalist tradition as it has come to exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provides a home for many who come from a variety of religious backgrounds. We come together “Seeking Knowledge in Freedom” for broader spiritual awareness and intellectual growth. Part of that intellectual growth can be an appreciation for aspects of the historical development of Christianity that helped to shape the current Unitarian Universalist commitment to promote the seven UU principles.

Two of the Principles that we covenant to promote are: #2 “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” and #6 “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” These outward looking statements have several implications. One is that it is a work in progress; that we are working toward a goal of improved conditions within which we and others live. Another implication is that there are some elements of the final goal already in place and we need to build on the elements of peace, liberty, and justice already in evidence around us. A third implication is that we are in it together. That it is a process that involves shared effort within and beyond our religious community.

It is with this understanding of our second and sixth Principles that it is appropriate to discuss Unitarian Universalism as an undertaking of “Building Paradise.” Such an undertaking should not be confused with building a “utopia” which strictly speaking would be an alternate society. We are not starting from scratch. We are building on the best that we see around us. This understanding of paradise should not be confused with the Christian or Islamic imagining of paradise as the abode of the virtuous dead. These eschatological views or beliefs were narrower constructs added to an earlier use of the term that had a broader and still useful meaning. Likewise the religious depiction of the “Garden Of Eden” as a paradise to describe the world before it was tainted by evil is a narrowed use of the term that was used to provide an explanatory cosmological context to the origin of worldly things.

For our purposes we need to note that the word “paradise” evolved from the Old Iranian word “*pardesu*” in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE meaning “walled estates.” It found its way into Hebrew and Greek, building on the Persian root word “*pardis*” which was the name of a beautiful garden enclosed between walls. It is from this background that the use of “paradise” came to refer to the Garden of Eden. Because according to the biblical tradition when the Garden of Eden was lost, paradise in religious texts and translations started to mean heaven; a

non-earthly beautiful place that could be reached only after death. But we know that the original beautiful “*paradis*” gardens could be enjoyed fully by living human beings, implying that happiness and peace can be obtained in the here and now. It is the intersection of beauty, peacefulness, and accessibility in the context of religious tradition that impels an examination of the role that conceptions of paradise can play in the contemporary UU community.

In an effort to clarify the role that this conception of paradise had within the context of Christianity the authors Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker in their 2008 book, *Saving Paradise*, published the results of a five-year study of early Christian art. They visited ancient sites. They consulted art historians. They read ancient texts. Paradise, they came to realize, was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries. And to their surprise and delight, they discovered that early Christian paradise was something other than “heaven” or the afterlife. In the early church, paradise – first and foremost – was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. Images that filled the interior surfaces of religious sanctuaries, together with the liturgies of the day, fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and joyful.

As soon as congregants entered an ancient church or mausoleum they stood in a sacred cosmos. With its art and buildings the church created a space that attempted to unite the living on earth with the heavenly beings and departed saints who were believed to surround and bless the living. One could see depictions of the abundance of earthly things. In a number of churches can also be found images of bushes laden with fruits, vines with grapes, deer and doves drinking at fountains or pools, and rivers flowing to the four corners of the earth.

How should we perceive and understand the beauty of the paradise that we are beckoned to immerse ourselves in? The authors point out that in Western thinking ethics and aesthetics are often divided, and ethical concerns take priority. The ancient understanding of beauty, however, included both. Beauty integrated goodness with glory, ethics with grace, and spirit with flesh. All were essential to a fully realized humanity. Beauty made ethics possible by evoking deep yearnings for justice, healing, and peace. The ethics of beauty were grounded not in a mental list of rules to be obeyed but in a loving orientation toward the world. Without beauty there is no life. Beauty called humanity out into life and invited acute observation and attunement to the here and now. Such cultivated attention grounded ethics in responsive relationship to the world.

In the Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew Chapter 7 verses 3-5, Jesus taught that no one could help another without first removing the log from her or his own eye. He asked his disciples to perceive carefully the things of the world – to consider the sparrows and the lilies of the field and to learn from them. They must

open their senses to the world, with the heart's assistance; then, perceiving the world through many sensory ways, each could become a means of knowing God and loving one's neighbor as oneself. The complex interactions of perception, reflection, and feeling deeply determine our behavior, even when we think we have made conscious, rational choices. Active involvement in the rituals of the church, within the image filled spaces of the church structure, was designed and intended to aid in this contemplative process.

Many trivialize beauty as a vain preoccupation with physical appearance or with a materialistic acquisition of art objects befitting one's social class. But through many ordinary pleasures, such as gardening, enjoying music, walking outdoors, or sharing a meal with friends, people renew their appreciation for life and the power of beauty. The Greek word for beauty (*kallos*) has its root meaning in "whole" and "vigorous". The apostle Paul understood it as the power of many, diverse particulars, each with its own *doxa*, or "beauty." The Greek word *doxa* also meant "splendor," "glory," or "shining presence." Beauty was thus not simply an object to perceive and behold, but a shining presence of spirit in all things that called for **your** "presence" in response. Beauty's ethical power was its ability to call forth a loving orientation toward the world. It gathered into a life-giving whole all the fragments of life that the secular powers of "this world" tore asunder.

Beauty instructs humanity to move beyond narrow self-reference or isolated, individual concerns toward a vast, value-filled world as do when we promote the second and sixth UU Principles. The Native American scholar and activist Vine Deloria understood this need when he spoke for a culture that was practical and pragmatic and that ritualized many ordinary acts that most of us do thoughtlessly and automatically. He made the plea:

The lands of the planet call to humankind for redemption. But it is a redemption of sanity, not a supernatural reclamation project at the end of history.... The lands wait for those who can discern their rhythms. The peculiar genius of each continent – each river, (each) valley, the rugged mountains, the placid lakes – all call for relief from the constant burden of exploitation.... Who will find peace with the lands? The future of mankind lies in waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things. Who will listen to the trees, (to) the animals, and (to) the birds, (to) the voices of the places of the land?

Peace with the lands should not imply that all of nature is good. Natural disasters and the routine violence between predators and prey are basic parts of nature that should give pause to those seeking god everywhere in the natural world as would a "natural theist" or "pantheist." When dealing with the natural world, therefore, selectivity becomes important if we are to build paradise.

So what does it take to see the Spirit in life and embrace the intrinsic value of the world? Interpretive frameworks tell people what matters. Ritual can change those frames and can attune people more acutely to the presence in the world, of both its beauty and its difficulty, and can return them to their senses. Whether we see or don't see the *doxa*, the glory, the beauty, may determine whether we will build or destroy paradise.

In the image filled “universe” of early Christianity, paradise had both a “here” and “not here” quality, the authors note in *Saving Paradise*. Christians taught that paradise had always been here on earth. Sin had closed its portals, but for those active in the church Jesus Christ had reopened those doors for the living. To this day, theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church speak of “the transfiguration of the world.” They define salvation as an awakening to the whole world illumined by the brilliance of divine presence. Sacred art, music, and ritual help to initiate people into this life changing knowledge of how the combining of the spiritual and the material in the church restored divinity to humanity and returned the world to the beauty in which it was first created.

Part of this early idea of restored divinity and beauty was gender equality. As Clement of Alexandria was moved to write in the third century: “Men and women share equally in perfection, and we are to receive the same instruction and the same discipline. For the name ‘humanity’ is common to both men and women; and for us ‘in Christ there is neither male nor female.’ ” The reopened paradise of a transfigured world would restore humanity to its original dignity and equality.

While early Christians could taste, see, and feel the traces of paradise in ordinary life, they arrived most fully in paradise within community worship. With its art, buildings, ritual, and music the church created a space that united the living on earth with a heavenly presence. The early church understood that paradise encompassed many dimensions – material and spiritual, awaited and fulfilled. Perception and knowledge connected these dimensions, and Christians gained them through their lifelong training of perception and spiritual practices in worship that developed ethical discernment about good and evil. To know how to distinguish good and evil required acute attunement to the present – to the here and now – and then reflection about ethical behavior. Through such wisdom during the first 900 years, as described in *Saving Paradise*, Christians sought to live joyfully and enact justice, nonviolence, and love.

During the second millennium of Christianity images of the Crucifixion and of final judgment expelled paradise from the earth. The authors conclude that eight hundred years after Jesus, the brutal logic of empire started to twist the celebration of his life into a perpetual re-enactment of his death. The initial momentum for change emerged as Charlemagne, King of the Franks, expanded the Frankish kingdom during the late eighth

century into a Frankish Empire that incorporated much of Western and Central Europe. In a protracted war to the east the empire subjugated the Saxons and forcibly converted them to Christianity. This bloody encounter was later reflected in Saxon Christian art as they produced, in the year 965, the earliest surviving crucifix, a life sized wooden sculpture known as the Gero Cross. After Charlemagne also conquered Italy he received the Christian reward for these exploits by being crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in the year 800.

Charlemagne also imposed on Europe a Roman Eucharistic rite, or Lord's Supper, that replaced an earlier ritual that had celebrated the creation of human beings in the image of God. Instead the bread and the cup were now considered the flesh and blood of the crucified Christ. The theology supporting this change would lead Christians to believe that their sins helped to crucify Christ and that they were judged by the blood of the cross. The shift from Christian transformation here on earth to an emphasis on human mortality and brokenness required a need for a sacrificial atonement and, therefore, a need for embracing a dead Jesus. Since that time to the present, the dominant symbol for Christianity became the crucifix or the cross rather than the beautiful gardens of paradise.

At the dawn of the Holy Roman Empire Christianity also began to lose its grip on the sinfulness of killing. For centuries the church had taught that participation in warfare was evil and that soldiers were to perform penance to cleanse their souls from the stain of blood. The decisive turning point came in 1065 when Pope Urban II called the First Crusade. He stated that "Whoever goes on the journey to free the church of God in Jerusalem...can substitute the journey for all penance for sin." With these words he reversed nearly a thousand years of Christian teaching about the shedding of human blood. Killing had become a pathway to a future paradise. It was no longer tasted and felt as a spiritual realm to be entered in this life. It was postponed to the hereafter. The art work, music, and ritual among Christians in the thousand years since then has promoted this altered religious conception. An earthly vision of paradise was lost to mainstream Christianity.

But is paradise lost? The effort to recapture the original Christian view of paradise began with the Universalists whose roots extend back into 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Leaders such as the mystic and church founder Jane Leade (1624-1704) laid the groundwork. In her journals, published in 1697, Leade offered a spiritual vision of paradise as a realm in which humanity's "beautiful diversity" flourished. Entering paradise meant being spiritually transformed into a person rooted in love. People's senses could be ecstatically opened to tasting, seeing, and hearing the beauty that is within, among, and all around us. The Universalist alternative to atonement theology emphasized God's all-embracing love and the beauty of Christ, who drew people to acts of justice, to

acts of mercy, and to happiness, thereby helping to make manifest the request in the Lord's Prayer that "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The life of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels shows ethical grace in action: love and generosity in community, care for all who have need, healing of the sick, appreciation for life, confrontation with powers of injustice and exploitation, and advocacy for freedom of the imprisoned.

It should be evident that Building Paradise now is not a solitary endeavor. In this regard it is contrary to the view expressed by John Milton in the epic poem *Paradise Lost* where, as the first couple are cast out of Eden, he has the archangel Michael say to Adam that he may find "A paradise within thee, happier far." And as Michael Durall notes in the article "Reach out to become a 'public' church" in the fall, 2009 issue of *UU World*, too much emphasis on the inward looking fourth Unitarian Universalist Principle calling for "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" can be an impediment to implementing the outward focus of the second and sixth Principles we have been discussing as the basis for Building Paradise now.

The doors of Unitarian Universalism are open to those seeking a meaningful encounter with life and the world around us. The resources, the traditions, the ritual, the music, the literature, and the human relationships available in the UU world help to provide the beauty and the "grace" for ethical activism. These religious resources are a gift to the community and to the individuals who agree to covenant together to do their part in Building Paradise now.

The authors of *Saving Paradise* note that the challenge for those who are committed to life here and now is to keep the human heart open to truthful encounter with human-created horrors. People need the art, the ritual, the journalism, and the literature that hold such terrible realities steadily before their eyes without moralizing simplifications or lamentations (thoughts and prayers?) that too quickly produce remorse without insight. The commitment to Building Paradise now provides a foundation for emotional aliveness and moral clarity. At the same time it provides a basis for sustained activism in its acknowledgement of beauty and joy.

This congregation knows the joy of activism. We open our arms to the despised, the needy, and the neglected. We volunteer for community projects and humanitarian causes. We offer financial aid through our Community Giving offerings and the Social Action budget. We lend support to budgets and causes sponsored by the district and national UUA. And we find other ways to make improvements in the here and now as we cultivate our outward looking contributions to Building Paradise. We know that we can always do and give more, but we also know that our religious community is here to help provide the vision, the inspiration, and the grace we need when we weaken and fall short.

Building Paradise now is not a place free from suffering or conflict, but it is a process in which Spirit is present, and love and ethical grace are possible. Ethical grace is a full-bodied life in the present – attuned to what is beautiful and good and responsive to legacies of injustice and currents of harm. Entering and Building Paradise in this life are not individual achievements, but are the gifts of religious communities that train perception and teach ethical grace as it was made manifest in the teaching ministry of Jesus and as it was embedded in the early tradition of Christianity.

May the Boone Unitarian Universalist Fellowship continue to be such a Paradise Building religious community.

## **BUILDING PARADISE - - Related Statements**

**Opening Words From Our Sources:** Exposition of Biblical Themes from the book *Saving Paradise* by Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker.

The cross-cultural, multireligious origins of paradise were enough to make pagans accuse Christian of stealing their ideas. In the second century BCE borrowing a good idea or using a great writer's words paid tribute not only to the writer but to the education, skill, and astuteness of the borrower. However, primacy went to the one from whom one borrowed.

In addressing the question of whether paradise was a physical place on earth or the spiritual journey of souls, a number of influential fourth century theologians - - Ephrem, Ambrose, and Augustine, among others - - said it was both a real place on earth and an allegory for human spiritual development. This both/and approach allowed them to speak about paradise on the earth in a diffuse way and to locate its most concentrated form in the church. The church as the concentration of paradise united aesthetic appreciation for the material goodness of the world God created with ethical responsiveness to this gift, what we call ethical grace. (More on this later)

**Introductory Words: (By UU Minister Craig Scott)**

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to spread the message that we work to discover and to claim the existence of paradise in this life. Reclaiming paradise in this world means restoring to human life its divinely inspired dignity and worth; and developing our capacity for wisdom, love, nonviolence, and responsible, ethical use of power. We can taste, see, and feel glimpses of paradise in our ordinary lives. But we experience paradise most fully when we worship together as a community, building ethical relationships, and working to end oppression and injustice.

**Words:** from *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* by Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong

To have the courage to be oneself, to claim the ability to define oneself, to live one's life in freedom and with power is the essence of the human experience. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," said (Jesus) of the Fourth Gospel (John 10:10). True Christianity ultimately issues in a deeper humanism. ... To be a humanist is to affirm the sacredness of life.

So the call of (Jesus) to me is an eternal call to love, to live, and to be. It is an invitation to work for those things that create life and to oppose those people, those attitudes, and those systems, that distort life.