

Making Room
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
March 18, 2018

Religion often gives religion a bad name. This is so because, instead of connecting and unifying us, which is what the word *religion* means, it's more often used as a high-and-mighty excuse to discriminate against and segregate ourselves from others. On a couple of occasions, for example, one of our church storytellers has told a local Coeur d'Alene Indian myth about a monster that's been swallowing all the animal tribes in the region, until it gets tricked into swallowing Coyote, who frees everyone by killing the monster from the inside out. Coyote then distributes the monster's remains around the region, using them to create its various human tribes, the Spokane and Kalispel in the West, the Kootenai and Pend Oreille in the North, the Flathead in the East, and the Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce in the South.

This isn't unlike what may be a more familiar origin myth to many of us, the Hebrew tale about the Tower of Babel, which seeks to explain why there are so many different people in the world. According to the story, survivors of the Great Flood planned to build a tower high enough to reach Heaven. Yahweh, disliking the idea of having people at his doorstep, confuses their speech so they can no longer understand each other or work together, destroys their tower, then disperses them to different parts of the world. According to Jeffrey Brodd's book on *World Religions*, the Australian Aborigines also believe their magical ancestors, responsible for creating the world through their dreams, "Organized humans into tribes, specified the territory each tribe was to occupy, and determined each tribe's language, social rules, and customs."¹

Myths like these were created to help our ancestors explain why things are the way they are—in this case, why there are other people and why they speak different languages and have different ways. What I notice about them is that they all consider such segregation the result of magical or divine causes beyond our control. Hence, segregation seems natural, there's nothing we can do about it, it's not our fault, we might as well accept it's just the way things are and how they always will be. In this way, by explaining why things are the way they are, myths like these foster a mindset of isolation and superiority; and justify our enmity toward and exploitation of others.

And that's the problem with myths, especially when they become the basis for religion, they form the foundations of our behavior, leading us to live them out in real life. If thunder and lightning are explained as the gods striking their weapons and waging war in the heavens, then we must emulate them with weapons and wars of our own. Likewise, if the gods have segregated us from each other, then we should segregate ourselves from each other—it's only right. If the gods have set us apart, chosen us, and led us to the promised land, then we should consider ourselves better and more deserving than anyone else, even if they are in our way, already living on the land we consider our divine right.

¹ Brodd, Jeffrey, *World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery*, 3rd Ed., St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN, 2008, p. 23.

In American history, for example, White masters initially rejected the attempts of missionaries to convert their slaves to Christianity. For how could a Christian, they reasoned, rightly continue enslaving a fellow Christian? Not to mention, the enslavement of Christians was illegal according to English common law. So, they considered their slaves as beings from a different race, inherently incapable of becoming Christians due to their innate inferiority and sinfulness. But eventually Christian leaders argued they weren't making slaves of Christians, but Christians of slaves, and found biblical support for putting the onus on slaves to obey their masters. In 1724, for example, Reverend Hugh Jones, a William and Mary College professor, wrote, "Christianity encourages and orders," people "to become more humble and better servants," adding that Blacks were, "by Nature cut out for hard Labour and Fatigue."² In other words, to be a good Christian meant being an obedient slave, which just so happened to benefit those in power.

So, these myths about the way things are, explaining things as completely out of our control, enable us to see ourselves as passive actors caught up in the natural or divinely ordained circumstances of life, with no power and no responsibility to shape a world that is more just and inclusive. People are different, that's just the way it is. Some people are better off than others, that's just the way it is. Some people are more deserving than others, that's just the way it is.

Myths of segregation and inequality are also made manifest through our devotion to false beliefs about rightness and righteousness, of property and borders, and, of course, the unfounded belief there are different races. Religion, in particular, through its insistence on the absolute truth of its doctrines and creeds, which make it not only ideologically right, but morally righteous, and those who disagree with it, ideologically and morally wrong, has, throughout history and to this day, excused all manner of evil against others, ordained, not by the perpetrators of such evil, they think, but by God himself. Again, those responsible for such injustice and atrocity, from the Crusades and Inquisitions of yesterday, to homophobic legislation and ISIS today, conveniently see themselves only as passive actors doing what nature and God intends.

The myth of property, that we have a right to draw imaginary boundaries on paper and call the place our land or our country, or that few deserve more wealth at the expense of almost everyone and everything else, or that we should build walls to keep others out, and pass laws to keep others down and out, is also excused by stories of natural segregation. A parable attributed to Jesus addressed this problem 2000 years ago. It's about a wealthy landowner who buys a vineyard, puts a fence around it, builds a tower to live in, and finally moves far away, leaving his oppressed servants to run things. By building a fence, he isolates himself from others, and considers them beneath him, as symbolized by his tower, and finally distances himself from them so he doesn't have to acknowledge how his greed is ruining their lives. It reminds me of a line in John Denver's song, *Raven's Child*, about those who exploit others, in which he refers to them as being, "away, and above, and apart." In the end, the landowner in Jesus' story is completely baffled when his servants revolt, unable to

² Kendi, Ibram X., *Stamped from the Beginning*, Hachette Book Group, New York, NY, 2016, p. 74.

comprehend why they're so angry. In our age of such enormous income inequality, this parable may be more relevant today than ever.

And, of course, the miserable myth of race, of different tribes being part of the natural order, of certain people being chosen and blessed, and of others being inherently cursed, remains the cornerstone of our society and our economy, even though, since the human Genome was successfully mapped more than 25 years ago, science has proven there is no such thing as race. All people, no matter the color of our skin, our nationality, or our ancestry, are genetically the same. Another way to put it is that when scientists examine the genes of different people, they can't tell if they are "Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian or African American."³ As Craig Venter, one of the scientists involved in the Genome Project told reporters, "The concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis."⁴ Yet, too many of us continue to speak of race as it were a reality and not a myth.

In his biography, psychologist Carl Jung said, "As early as 1909 I realized that I could not treat latent psychoses if I did not understand their symbolism. It was then I began to study mythology."⁵ *Psychoses* are mental illnesses that cause people to mistake their own thoughts and feelings for external, empirical realities. Today we are considering a few myths of human dispersion and segregation that portray our separateness as natural or divinely ordained, to get at the social psychoses they've caused, like extremist ideology, income and political inequality, and racism, as well as war and violence. For they are not just the foolish stories of our primitive ancestors, but reflect the oldest of paradigms, ancient patterns of psychotic thinking and behavior that continue to this day.

After 911, for example, the entire world, including our Muslim neighbors, stood with the United States, and felt, as a French paper declared, "We are all Americans." Yet, instead of seizing the opportunity to usher in an unprecedented era of global unity, the illegitimately elected Bush Administration chose the very real destruction of what was once the tallest tower in human history to justify further dividing the human family, going to war with Islam and attacking a country that had nothing to do with that terrible attack. The result has been prejudice and discrimination against Muslim Americans, war with Muslim nations, retaliatory terrorist attacks around the globe, and the rise of militant Islamic organizations like ISIS, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and the reemergence of the Taliban. As in the old myth of Babel, the tower was destroyed, and the world became more divided and less able to understand each other than ever.

I bring this up today, as we consider our church, and the reasons we support it, because Unitarian Universalism offers a different paradigm that, instead of further dividing us, longs to bring more of us together. As John Murray, the founder of American Universalism famously said, "Go out into the highways and by-ways of America... [to] Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling religion, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and

³ Ibid., p. 475.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jung, Carl G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p.131.

understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage.” Today, 200 years after Murray spoke these inspiring and challenging words, 2000 years after Jesus told his parable of the unjust landowner who set himself “away, and above, and apart,” and a thousand more years since the Hebrews first told the story of Babel, the world still needs us to put our Unitarian faith into action by uniting the world, and making Universalism a reality by bringing us all together as one people—with many creeds, colors, and cultures, yes, but one people, brothers and sisters all.

And this is why, for this year’s generosity campaign, we’ve chosen the theme of *Making Room*. For our religion does not seek to construct ziggurats so we might climb stairways to heaven to imitate our imaginary gods, away, and above, and apart. We don’t seek lofty position from which we can look down upon others, or remove ourselves from them, or build trade centers so tall that the wealth flowing through them is out of reach for most people. As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t build upwardly, stacking the odds in our favor, piling up riches, or pointing our gaze upward to the heavens, longing for power and glory. We don’t erect systems of inequality and unevenness, of those above and those below. As Unitarian Universalists, rather than building things up for a privileged few, our religion requires us to build outwardly, making room for everyone, especially those the old systems and myths of segregation and separation have left out.

What Murray called our “small light,” I call our tiny pebble of a faith. For it may be small, representing far less than even one percent of the population, yet it is large enough to cast into the sea of humanity and cause its waters to ripple endlessly outward, creating ever increasing circles of inclusion. In this way our faith can save the world, not one person, or one soul at a time, as the old myth says must happen. For we do not gather a small collection of souls, we embrace all souls. Instead of saving fallen souls we embrace forgotten souls by making room, widening our circle, rippling outward into the highways and byways, creating hope and courage where there is fear and despair. As I have said before, and often remind myself, the Hebrew word for “salvation,” *Yeshuah*, which we pronounce, *Joshua*, or *Jesus*, doesn’t refer to saving individual, fallen souls, as the old myth of control and dominion, of away, above, and apart, has come to interpret it, but, as Gerald May says in his book, *The Awakened Heart*, it connotes, “space and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction.”⁶ In other words, the original meaning of salvation wasn’t “saving souls,” but “making room.”

There are so many ways to make room, to remove the constrictions, the barriers, the walls, the borders, and rules, and systems that keep people out, because, unlike building isolated towers, too high for most people to climb, making room requires us to reach out in every direction. We make room, literally, by making our space more welcoming and inviting, and ready to accommodate those wishing to become part of our church. Having more than enough chairs, for example, as mundane as it may sound, is a vital part of making room. As Robert Latham says in his book, *Moving from Church Folly Lane*, “Church consultants believe that when a sanctuary is 80% full the message is that there is no more room available for

⁶ See Michael Schut, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p.42.

new people. This message is the same as a no vacancy sign.”⁷ But such accommodations aren’t easy, because they take risk and resources. Today, we have almost 400 members, yet only about 200 chairs in our sanctuary, two restrooms, one water fountain, and no air conditioning in our Religious Education wing. For those new to our church, I apologize for these shortcomings, but please know we are working on it, and that you are welcome here. Making room, as I said, is a continuing process of ever widening our circle, of making it roomier and more inclusive as we grow.

Shortly after I came here, going on seven years ago, I walked into our empty sanctuary one day with its architect, church member Moritz Kundig, who said, “I remember when we built this place, we thought, ‘We’ll never have to worry about filling this place up.’” Yet today we need to have two services to accommodate everyone wishing to be here, with more people joining every year. But don’t worry about our cramped quarters, because making room is who we are, it’s what we do, it’s what we’ve always done. Our church began 131 years ago with 20 founding members in the Spokane Opera House. A year later they started constructing our first church building, a 275-seat meeting house at the corner of Jefferson and Sprague. For a while, our attendance grew large enough we had to move to the Clemmer Theatre, now the Bing, to accommodate everyone. After a period of moving from one place to the next, we settled, for about 15 years, in the old Jewish Synagogue, and later purchased the Patrick Welsh Mansion, now known as the Glover Mansion. During our 50 years there, we even had to construct a separate sanctuary on the property to accommodate growth, and, when we outgrew that space, our members found a way to build the magnificent space we’re in today.

So, like I said, even if we could use more seats, restrooms, drinking fountains, don’t give up on us. We’re working on it, because working on making room is something we’ve continued to work on since we began in 1887. Making room is why we recently began taking advantage of technology to stream our services for those who can’t be here on Sundays, and why we’ll continue to make use of new technologies as they advance. It’s also why this past year our church joined the sanctuary movement, so that, if necessary, we can hold space for those whom others in our world are threatening to cast out.

Improving our space, embracing those who are left out, reaching out to those who can’t come, are just a few of the ways we’re making room. As I said, making room requires us to widen the circle in every direction, and in many ways. This is why most of you, I trust, not only tolerate but appreciate a minister who, rather than giving you false assurances and easing your mind each week, challenges your paradigms and constantly tries to stir things up. Because, as Unitarian Universalists, we’re making room in our heads. We want open minds and we don’t mind having our minds blown wide open. We don’t want our questions answered, we want our answers questioned, because that’s part of what making room means for us.

Making room in our hearts is just as important as opening our minds. The psychotic myth of building up, of domination from the top down, requires us to close our hearts, to build walls,

⁷ Latham, Robert T., *Moving from Church Folly Lane*, p. 72.

borders, and rules to keep people down and out, but our story and history of making room calls upon us to open our hearts to love. We reject the mindset that criticizes and condemns us as sympathizers and traitors for loving our enemies, welcoming outcasts, and demanding an end to war. We reject the mindset that considers men who love each other and women who love each other “queer;” or that dismisses those who say we must care for the poor, heal the sick, and educate our children, as “do-gooders” and “bleeding hearts;” or that calls those who want a level playing field for workers in this country, “Unamerican;” or that ridicules those working to protect our environment as, “tree-huggers.” For we know that making room means opening our hearts, that having sympathy can never be a betrayal, that there’s nothing queer about loving each other, and that hearts are made for bleeding, and arms for hugging. So, they can poke fun of us, demonize us, even criminalize us, but making room in our hearts is what our faith is all about.

It’s also important, hard as it can be, to make room in our church, and in our lives, for new ways, for doing things differently. It’s hard because, like all beings, we are creatures of habit. Our habitual ways give us comfort, makes us feel safe, make us feel right and righteous. I can’t recall the number of times I’ve discussed changing some little thing in the churches I’ve ministered, like moving furniture around, or adding something new, and been told why it would be morally wrong to do so. Opening our minds to new paradigms, and our hearts to others, seems to be the easy part for us, but changing our habits, our way of doing things is about as difficult for Unitarian Universalists as anyone else. As Alice Mann says in her book on church growth, “It is not uncommon for parishioners to want to add a hundred new members to the parish but be unwilling to change one thing about their parish to accommodate the increase.”⁸ Fortunately, as I’ve already shown, our church ultimately understands the need to sometimes make big changes, as our history of continually making room has proven.

Today the ancient myth of segregation and separation, of dominance and exclusion, remains strong. That’s why we the world needs us to counter it with our story of making room, by opening our doors, opening our minds, opening our hearts, and opening our lives to new ways and possibilities. It’s why I thank you for your tremendous support of this church as, together, we cast our pebbles into the troubled waters to create ever-widening circles of inclusion.

⁸ Mann, Alice, *The In-Between Church*, An Alban Institute Publication, 1998, 2000, p. 88.