

THE SPIRITUALITY OF OUR BUILDING

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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As must be obvious to anyone who has ever been in our building – and that would obviously apply to all of you sitting before me now! – we are blessed here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach with a wonderful, beautiful, useful, and big building. By almost any standard, dear friends, this is an above average church building -- and believe me I know...for I've seen plenty of ugly and inferior religious facilities in my day...many of them (I'm sad to report) Unitarian Universalist structures around the country! But here in Vero, dear friends... simply put, we have a spacious gem on our hands!

I will unashamedly confess to you that last year – as I was searching for a new congregation to serve – one key factor in my decision that put this congregation at the top of my wish list, was the asset of this wonderful physical structure! The first moment I walked in here with Bob Mroczkowski and other members of the Search Committee, I knew that this was a facility in which I would love to work, study and preach.

Now a building, of course, never, ever, makes a congregation. For as we all learned as children: “Here’s the church...here’s the steeple...open it up..., and here are all the people.” It’s ever and always the people that always make a church what it is.

But the right building – by which I mean a beautiful, spiritually conducive building – can greatly enhance, expand, and enrich what a congregation can do, both for its members and the wider community. And that is certainly the case here. So...the first thing I want to say this morning is that I hope we as a congregation never, ever take this fine facility for granted. Not only must we be forever grateful that the leaders of the congregation had the wisdom to purchase and renovate this building in 2005 (and more on that in a moment), we must also commit ourselves over the long-haul to the maintenance and upkeep of this fine and expansive facility.

So...let’s talk about the spirituality of this particular place, this congregational home that is ours, shall we? I am persuaded that buildings (although inert and unfeeling objects of wood, stone, steel and glass) have a great deal of power to affect and influence what humanly happens within them. The architecture of any building – by which I mean the design...the shape...the configuration...the materials...the lighting...the colors...the textures...the ambiance...even the odor! of a building – can profoundly affect what happens in them. Great buildings (be they homes, schools, courthouses, stadiums or churches) enable, encourage, enhance, and enrich the human activity for which they were built. And, sadly, the converse is also true...mediocre (or miserable) buildings diminish, detract, and distract people from the things they should be about when they inhabit them.

But here at UUFVB – I will assert with grateful pride – we are blessed with a religious building that is well suited to our religious purposes as Unitarian Universalists. Said differently, blessedly, our UU spiritual home here in Vero Beach is extraordinarily well suited to our UU spiritual purposes and pursuits.

This is a bit of astounding and curious luck...for as most of you know, this building was not designed or built by Unitarian Universalists! This building was built in 1982 to house the First Church of God, Vero Beach – a conservative, evangelical congregation which, because they outgrew this facility, is now housed in an even-more-expansive megachurch facility out on 58th

Avenue...a congregation (bless their hearts!) with decidedly different spiritual practices and theological perspectives than ours! So, this fine building of ours (again, which has been bequeathed to us by folks with a very different spirituality than ours) nonetheless by good luck rather exquisitely serves our religious purposes! Let me now count the ways.

The first way in which this facility serves us well is by its obvious and accessible location. This handsome building (nestled on beautiful grounds with wonderful, mature trees and shrubs) sits on a busy and prominent corner near the very heart of Vero Beach, and thus can be found by almost anyone in our community looking for it – even the directionally challenged!

Now those who built this building – those good Church of God folks – chose this highly accessible and visible location because the primary purpose of their congregation was (and is, according to their website) “to bring [as many] people to Christ” as they can ...so that these persons might experience salvation, purpose and joy in that relationship. Now, we are not – as you all know – a conservative evangelical church...but this church building on this site works well for us for slightly different reasons.

This location works for us because it is perfectly suited to two of our central purposes. We Unitarian Universalists here in Vero want to:

1. Provide a safe, practical and beautiful religious home for all people in our area who seek a free faith such as ours (in other words have a beautiful, practical place for us to “do church” just as we do it as religious liberals), while at the same time desire to,
2. Provide a place from which we can simultaneously reach out to the wider community in justice, service, compassion, intellectual stimulation and care. There are surely other busy corners in Vero that would do as well for our purpose, but none better than this particular intersection!

Now...I must tell you that such a great, accessible location is sadly not all that common for Unitarian Universalist congregations. While many of our old, historic, white-clapboard New England church buildings do sit on busy squares in the center of town, many, if not most, of the UU buildings built since World War II are tucked away in hard-to-find locations – off of quiet suburban roads, non-descript side streets or, even worse, virtually hidden from public view in the woods! Unitarian Universalists choose such out-of-the-way, quiet locations for apparently sound reasons – among them cost savings, or the desire to be close to nature and trees (and more on that strong UU trait in just a moment)...but the end result is that many of our buildings are hard for the public to find!

Al (*Parmentier*), when you and Gale travel, you are in the habit of visiting every UU church along the way...am I right when I point out that that many of them are difficult to locate? That was a yes from Al. But that’s not the case with our fellowship, it’s easy to find, with plenty of parking, and so the first way this facility serves us well is just by its sheer location and accessibility.

The next way this building serves us well is simply by the design of its front door and lobby... both of which I hope you have noticed are extremely warm and welcoming. Our front doors here are wide, and made of clear glass, which say to stranger and friend alike, “Welcome... come on in...we’re glad you’re here!” And as soon as you come in the front door, you are greeted not just by the Sunday greeters who do such a good job of welcoming people, but by a light and expansive lobby, with cheerful carpeting, comfortable furniture and plenty of sunlight

pouring in through the atrium windows. I like to think of the lobby as “The Heart Chamber” of our building, the friendly space where we practice – as the Rev. Bill Schulz put it two weeks ago – the precious “art of hospitality” to friends and strangers alike. One of the most important thing any religious community can do is make everyone who comes through their doors -- visitors and newcomers alike – feel instantly safe, wanted and welcome...and our entrance and lobby achieve this with simplicity, openness and warmth.

The third way in which our building serves our spiritual purposes to perfection is by the simple, unostentatious design of this room...this sanctuary...which to my way of thinking is the very heart (the soul!) of our building. The very word “sanctuary” almost says it all, doesn’t it? A sanctuary, any dictionary will tell you, is “a consecrated place...the most sacred part of any religious building...devoted to the keeping of sacred things...a place of worship.” The un-busy architecture of this room (look around you!) is fairly straightforward – the shapes and sightlines are simple...the angles and contours gentle...the colors and textures soothing...the wood warm and the seating comfortable. This room (while not dull) is calm and neutral...and thus awaits the full range of our needs, emotions and expressions.

Depending on what we are doing as a congregation, it invites us to enter into reflective calm, or intense listening, or robust singing, or expressive grieving, or active celebration – this room allows and encourages us to be fully human across the wide range of moods and situations that make up the life of any congregation...and is perfect for us as Unitarian Universalists as we express ourselves and give meaning and purpose to our lives. Another way of saying this is that this sanctuary is an open and gentle receptacle for everything that we care about, seek, share or believe here. I believe it was the near-perfect receptacle for The Church of God congregation which chose its shape and materials and colors as they worshiped Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior...and it is a near-perfect receptacle for us as we live out and express and give shape to our Unitarian Universalist faith as well.

Now...that said, there are several curiosities about this room which derive from the fact that this was built as a conservative Christian space, not as a Unitarian Universalist place. And I want you to know that in preparation for this sermon I called Butch Cappelen – the contractor who painted the outside of our building this year – who was and is an active member of the Church of God congregation which built this building. He confirmed everything I am about to say about the unique features of this room.

What is this, right here...who knows? Right! This is this prayer rail, where the members of the Church of God congregation would come to kneel as they engaged in prayer. Butch tells me this prayer rail was used regularly by his congregation in three ways:

1. When, on Sunday, members of the congregation felt ready to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior,
2. When, on Sunday, communion was offered to the congregation by the elders of the church, and
3. During the week when members of the congregation wanted to come into the sanctuary when it was empty to talk to God or Jesus.

Now...because these decidedly Christian spiritual practices are not part of our faith tradition, we never use this rail in this way, and I imagine some of you just thought it was a nondescript

architectural feature to set the chancel apart from the pews...but it is a clear and useful Christian architectural feature which we must both acknowledge and appreciate.

The second curiosity (to us as Unitarian Universalists at least) is the large and beautiful stained glass window which is back-lit by banks of florescent lights hidden behind the wall there. Now this window (again, created by our Church of God neighbors) has many pleasing colors and a variety of symbols – symbols to my mind both specifically Christian and universal. These intricacies can perhaps be the subject for another sermon to be preached on another day, but I must quickly point out at least a few of them now.

First, down below in each corner you see the signs for Alpha and Omega – the symbol for the eternal nature of Jesus Christ and God. Next you will notice the beautiful growing corn plant. I could find no specific Christian reference to corn, but in the Native American tradition and others corn is used to symbolize life in all its abundance.

Next, please notice the peace dove, again a universal religious symbol of hope and peace. But the one symbol we absolutely must recognize as being the central symbol of the window (which we Unitarian Universalist have respectfully-but-purposefully-obscured) is the huge, red cross of crucifixion which dominated this window, but which we have cleverly obscured with our own dominating symbol, the flaming chalice of Unitarian Universalism. It is only fair and right that after we took occupancy of this building we found a way to supplant the builder's guiding symbol (the Christian Cross) with our own (the flaming chalice of Unitarian Universalism). We replaced the dominant symbol of this window not in disrespect or arrogance, but simply because we spiritually need to focus on the symbols of our faith, not someone else's.

But we should never forget, dear friends, that behind our chalice, there lies a cross...the cross that means so much to the good men and women who built this fine building...and even though we do not display it, we should know it is there, for as long as this building will stand!

And there is one other architectural feature of the builders which we have obscured! Back here. *[Scott moved to the top row of the choir section and put his hands on top of the carpet.]* How many of you know what is back here under this carpet?

Right...It's a baptismal pool...or baptistry – a fiberglass, walk-in, full immersion, hot-water-heated, hand-rails-and-all baptistry. Now I have joked to a few of you that the staff uses this as a recreational hot tub after all our regularly scheduled meetings, but nothing could be further from the truth. This architectural feature will probably never be used by us as a congregation, total immersion baptism is not a ritual we engage in...so this pool will just sit back here unused, collecting dust...but I wanted you to know that this too is a part of this fine building we inherited from our Church of God friends.

The next features of this room – that is terribly important to its architecture – are these large projection screens (and the related, solitary bank of small, high windows) which provide just-a-little light into this room on Sunday morning. These architectural features are very intentional, for the congregation which built this room wanted those sitting in the pews not to pay attention to the outside environment, but to the multimedia messages about Jesus and God and scripture which were regularly presented in this space. Butch told me that his congregation used these projection screens when they sang hymns, or when their pastor was projecting pieces of scripture for them to contemplate...the focus was very much to be inward and upward on the lesson (or points of faith).

The fact that this is a room designed to facilitate multimedia projections is a real plus for us as Unitarian Universalists who also want to share our faith, communicate as clearly as we can to all who come to worship here. As your minister, I highly value this focused, multimedia capacity, and intend to increasingly use these communication tools to share and articulate our faith and the issues of the day. We know that different people learn and take in information in different ways, and by using the marvelous multimedia capabilities of this building – visual slides, power points, video clips – we can hopefully reach more people more effectively Sunday-in-and-Sunday-out.

But we must also acknowledge that the design of this building (which is geared toward multimedia presentations) also prevents us as Unitarian Universalists from doing something our transcendentalist hearts yearn to do – look out the windows on the beautiful world that lies just beyond these walls! Since our earliest spiritual beginnings in America, Unitarians and Universalists have been nature-appreciating-and-focused-folks who have always seen “The Holy” in all things natural. This is why most of our old historic buildings in New England have large windows of clear, unadorned glass...and why almost all of our buildings built in America since World War II have large banks of windows and abundant, bright sunlight.

The church I just left, River Road UU Congregation in Bethesda, Maryland, is a perfect example of this. The ample windows were so large (and the sunlight so omnipresent) that we could almost never project pictures or PowerPoints up on the sanctuary walls. The huge, clear-glass windows which were the dominant feature of our sanctuary did allow us to contemplate and enjoy the woods and sunlight...but prevented us from experiencing the enrichments to worship which pictures, slides, PowerPoints and projected hymn words allow.

I would suggest to you that while this sanctuary (which we have inherited) does not readily allow us to bathe in transcendentalist communion with the outside environment (a spiritual drawback and deficit to be sure), it nonetheless alternately provides us with many multimedia opportunities which open us to multimedia enrichments and enhancements to worship that most Unitarian Universalists can never experience. Because of our unique, Evangelical Christian architecture here in Vero, we simply must find other avenues for our transcendentalist communions – like Sunday afternoons walking on the beach or kayaking on the lagoon or watching the sun set in the West – for this is the particular sanctuary we have, and it calls us to worship (and be blessed) in particular ways.

Well...there is surely much more I could say about this building and its many designs, and, features and venues...but I am out of time this morning, so please let me briefly summarize what to me feels to be the sum and substance of the spirituality of our building.

Despite its big size, ours is warm and welcoming building, that invites people in for the holy purposes of our faith. Our accessible location and friendly, inviting lobby extend the Hand of hospitality to all who seek to find us here at the corner of 27th Avenue and 16th Street...and then this room extends a warm and safe embrace to all who come to worship seeking a fuller, deeper, more meaningful life. The shape and space – that human beings give to places they build with purpose – matter profoundly...and this place is well suited to what we aspire to do here. As a congregation, we are blessed with a solid and beautiful home that invites us to practice our religion boldly, lovingly and well. May we tend with loving care this sacred space...our church home.

AMEN.