

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Sunday April 22, 2007
Whats a Pulpit For?
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Time for All Ages

Today, April 22, is a sort of holiday. It's Earth day! What's Earth Day about? Earth Day began about 40 years ago, when people began to realize that we must take care of the Earth our mother.

On Earth Day we remind each other **what** we can do to take care of her. What are some things we can do for the Earth? Conserve water, electricity, gasoline. Recycle! Nowadays most everybody knows the list of WHATS that we can do to take care of the Earth, but we still have Earth Day....

Because we sometimes just don't do the whats, Earth Day celebrations are designed to motivate us, to remind us in a fun and happy way, **Why** we must take care of the Earth our mother? And why must we take care of her?

We need her. The Earth our mother takes care of us in lots of ways, and she won't be able to keep doing that unless we take care of her too. We NEED her. We also LOVE her. What do you love about the Earth?

So Earth Day celebrations remind us of the whys—why take care of the earth? because we need her and we love her. And once we remember the whys, then we WANT to do the whats. Church does that for us too—reminds us of the whats and why and helps us with the “want tos.”

Sermon

What's a pulpit for?

The pulpit, a feature of religious architecture, though appearing to be rooted, has moved about through history,

First--connected to the choir area as a place for reading.
Then--sometimes a lofty perch extending from one side or the other of the nave, sometimes mostly ornamental, like a castle turret, and sometimes placed practically, extending over the congregation

so the speaker could be heard well.

Then came what was erroneously called “split pulpits--”

On one side of the chancel was the lectern from which lay people read every thing but the gospel reading.

The pulpit was across the way, and the position for sermon delivery and readings from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

With the Protestant Reformation came the central pulpit, located center chancel, where the altar had traditionally stood.

The symbolic message of that placement is the centrality of the word as the foundation of faith, as opposed to the sacraments, the liturgical ritual, the priesthood or papal authority.

The central pulpit is a visual representation of the idea that words, typically words preached, take precedence over other parts of the service.

So, what about **our** main sanctuary pulpit?

It is not only not in the middle, it is not nailed down.

We could put it anywhere, even remove it, if enough people were willing to exert the energy to heft it down.

This pulpit seems to indicate that USH, values other parts of the service as much as you value the sermon, a modern era notion that I share.

The sermon is not the focal point of the service for me.

I wish it were, because it is easier for me to write a long sermon--

--Easier to give myself ½ of our precious hour for a message full of academic research, abstract principles, spiritual reflection,

--easier than to take on the additional task of wielding the agonizing razor of the editor artist, who sculpts that long sermon

into a briefer piece, which has deft poetic language,

quickness of story, lightness of repetition placed according to linguistic standards and forms designed for affect.

It is less challenging to write a long sermon than to winnow down the message to few words, or to other art forms than words altogether.

It may be less challenging to hear a long sermon too, may require the use of fewer faculties to hear the full message.

I am called to take those extra steps, to place the pulpit to the side,

to a position not unlike the place in the mosque

from which the Imam speaks, called the minbar.

The minbar is a raised platform with steps leading up to it, and can be tall or short, elaborate or simple, but the most interesting thing about it to me is not how it looks, but where the Imam stands on it.

He stands NOT on the top platform but on a lower step,
to indicate that there is one higher than the Imam, that the preacher
does not have the final or best or even latest revelation, and must always pay homage,
reverence, to that than which there is no greater.

So, our pulpit is to the side, because by daring to engage other vehicles for the message, the
message reflects more fully the face of
good orderly direction, g-o-d,
a face that can be seen and heard and felt in myriad ways.

Yet the pulpit still has place, And what is that place, for me,
for us during my tenure as your minister?

Let me say first what the pulpit is NOT, for me.
It is NOT a soapbox-- a temporary platform used for making an
impromptu or unofficial speech that is mobile
and can be delivered to just any audience along the tracks.
I hope our pulpit will not to be a soapbox for anyone who speaks from it.

The audience before me today should be in the mind's eye of speakers
as they prepare the words they will speak.
I'm not too big on canned talks that can be pulled from a drawer
for just any audience.

I respect you profoundly and I want what you hear, from this pulpit,
to be the living word fresh from the mind of grandness of design,
for you, today.

The time you shared last Sunday with Debbie Humphries was born of
two long interviews and lots of emails between Debbie and me,
Not to speak of her many hours of study and preparation.
She had YOU, my congregation, in her mind's eye as she prepared
Her words for last Sunday.

And as for the impromptu part of a soapbox talk,
I used to believe that someday I'd be confident enough to speak extemporaneously,
or from an outline,
but I have grown to believe that for me the true confidence is a
mature willingness to embrace the discipline of delivering words
from a full transcript, which I will practice and perhaps memorize,
as I memorize the time for all ages, which is also a full transcript.

I respect you, and our children, profoundly and I want the words
that you hear, to have been surrendered to the polishing stone,
to come to prism like precision so as to reflect the light of eternity.

Secondly, for me the pulpit is not a podium or lectern,
such as I used in the classroom, for holding my notes.

The podium was sacred for me, and held me up as I stood, sometimes in fear and trembling at the magnitude of my possible influence, as young minds listened, usually with respect and sometimes rapt attention.

The preparation of information, toward the education of the mind of another, another who could help to shape a better tomorrow is an awesome task, but with the academic freedom of the podium,

it is only I who rise or who fall in the popularity and promotion and tenure rankings, while the pulpit suggests for some hearers that my words reflect an authority beyond me.

The pulpit is not for me a soapbox, nor a lectern, nor is the pulpit a stump, which is defined as “a platform raised to give what is normally a political or campaign oratory.”

Among the terms that ministers are taught for our various roles are ‘the prophetic’ and ‘the priestly’ roles. In olden times, the priest spoke to God on behalf of the people, and dealt primarily with the arena within the temple proper, within the human heart.

The priest might say,
“O Lord God King of the Universe, have pity on these gathered here out of love for you.

They are weak and you are strong.
They have fallen again and again, but look, they return to you, their first love. Pour out your grace on them.”

The prophet, on the other hand, spoke to the people on behalf of God, and dealt primarily with the arena beyond the temple mount—the market place, societal structures, foreign policy ‘beyond the gates.’

The prophet might say,
“Thus saith the Lord, God King of the Universe, Take heed.
For I am a jealous God, a demanding lover of souls.
Forswear thy foolish ways,
Or these seven lean years will be visited upon you seven times seven years and to the tenth generation shall you know lean years.
Take the land, sound the trumpet, build the walls of the city, gather a solemn assembly of all the people and let justice roll down.”

The prophetic role is at home on the stump,
From which to direct what the people of God should be doing out there,
In the market place,
From which to magnify passionate confidence that the prophet knows what the hearers should be doing, knows that service, to which members of the congregation are called, and does not hesitate to correct those who see differently.

I admire colleagues who handle the prophetic role well,
as did Martin Luther King for example.

It is however very difficult to make the list of Whats
that a people should be doing, and to present that list in a way that
encourages them to want to do those things. There are few Dr Kings.

It is easy to fall into scolding, shaming--righteous indignation perhaps,
But a presentation which does not bring about the desired result
nearly as often as the prophet might like.

It requires immense effort, years of work on ones own spiritual maturation to be an effective
prophet regarding the civic arena,
and often freedom from the other roles of ministry--
Freedom to take to the streets and stand on the stump,
As MLK was freed early in his career from local church,
parish related responsibilities.

It is territory I am not yet mature enough to tread.
I am not confident that I know WHAT you should each be doing
in the market place, to influence public policy.

**I respect you profoundly and I want what you hear, from this pulpit,
to fill your cup with spiritual strength, with relational commitment,
with clarity of ethical conviction, with balm for your own suffering,
with compassion for the two legged, the four legged, the winged,
furred, and feathered, and for “pachi mama” our mother the earth,**

to fill your cup so that you will be inspired to go figure out
the “whats” you are supposed to do, and that you will want to do them,
so that your own heart is full of joy in performing that service.

Those ministers for whom poetry, philosophy, and psychology are primary
help us understand the why's behind that list of whats we must do in order to create societal
justice, and they help us want to do the whats,
through the ways they use the pulpit as a tool of pastoral care.

They inspire and motivate, from the inside out,
to reshape attitudes, to open eyes to a generosity of sharing.
They create spirit filled green sanctuaries, where justice seeking people
can grow roots, shoots, and soaring wings for bold and full living.

In this priestly role, the preacher moves metaphorically in ritual
and story, pointing out the inward and invisible grace
which is present in natural objects,
in human beings gathered in covenantal community for the good.

I **am** confident in that role my friends,

And I am convinced that as you allow me to work on
the whys and the want to's with you,
we will continue to grow in spirit within these walls,
grow to love mercy, to do justly, to walk humbly,
to speak peacefully with each other.

And as we do, two more things will happen—
these walls will expand naturally, organically so that more of those
in the market place who need the fruits of the spirit that
we are growing will fit in here with us,
and secondly each of you will move with a call to ministry clear,
clearly your own 'what' list,
will move from in here to some kind of service
to humankind out there. Such is my confidence.

This pulpit is for me the place for the UU version of Dawah.
Dawah is the open and general act of giving others the message of Islam by making it
available through positive, engaging presentations and dialogue, based on study, civility,
sincerity, and full intent to action.

I respect you and this your pulpit profoundly, and pledge my full intent
to make experiences available to you in this hour,
by which you may choose to see the whys behind the whats,
experiences through which you may choose to remember
that it is because we need and because we love
that we must take care of the earth, and our children, and each other,
experiences of hearts strangely warmed at ministry joyfully given
both within these walls and beyond our gates.

As George Harrison sang, it's gonna take time,
a whole lot of precious time, a whole lotta patience and time
to do it right,
to build a kindred vision among us of
a priestly and prophetic church with liberating ministry,
a church that reveres the past but trusts the dawning future more.
It will take patience and time,
And with grace and grit, with grace and grit we'll have that time.

(end)