

AN ARCHITECTURE OF HOPE
Jeff Liebmann, Ministerial Intern
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Call to Worship

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once asserted that the view that men and women are 'sinful' is "one of the best attested and empirically verified facts of human existence." Perhaps this is true. It may be that how we respond to our mistakes and the intent with which we live our lives matters more, however, as we define what human nature truly entails.

Sermon – An Architecture of Hope

Recession, high cholesterol, terrorism, global warming, unemployment, drugs, genocide, poverty, road rage, carcinogens. Our lives abound with threats: threats to our well being; threats to our happiness; threats to our very lives.

Like most life forms, we possess certain instinctive reflexes at birth that protect us from harm. But, human society – civilization – cultivates our fear response like a masterfully crafted crop sown in fertile soil. We learn from our earliest days to fear sources of legitimate harm to our bodies and our souls. Elders teach us how to behave to avoid being ostracized – how to blend in. Our media bombard us constantly with warnings about everything from rare medical conditions to what constitutes unacceptable physical appearance and lifestyle choices.

Our ever growing and complex social infrastructure follows a blueprint aimed at guarding us from ourselves and from others, at controlling unwanted urges and fantasies, and at reducing the chance that our choices may cast us too far adrift of established paradigms. That blueprint represents the work of many architects, some working deliberately and others not, toward building an orderly society to manage human community.

We guarantee the progressive growth of our culture with safeguards and laws, checks and balances, and systems of vested interest. We buy insurance to protect our homes, our cars, our possessions, and our lives. We set aside earnings to fund our living costs decades in the future. We invest in corporations, which in turn invest in other corporations, with a goal of accumulating wealth as increasingly measured by electronic ledger entries and quarterly statements.

The events of September 11, 2001 seemed to escalate our architecture of fear in this country. But, I can remember a time when our collective anxiety cut like a honed blade. As a youngster, for instance, I remember that a day hardly passed without seeing a television commercial about the dangers of stray blasting caps to playing children. Thankfully, I just missed the era of students huddling under desks in response to the detonation of an atomic bomb. But, we still grew up in a period when the destruction of the world loomed as more than just a statistically significant probability.

I loved science fiction and horror television shows, from Boris Karloff's *Thriller* to Rod Serling's brilliant and timeless *Twilight Zone*. The best of these offerings, sadly, lasted only two short seasons. *The Outer Limits* premiered ominously just two months before President Kennedy's death. The network deemed the original title of the show, *Please Stand By*, as too frighteningly similar to Civil Defense messages to broadcast.

You may remember the opening sequence as images of oscilloscope sine waves and a commanding voice informing you "for the next hour, we will control all you see and hear." When that voice took over the horizontal and the vertical control of my television screen, I sat in rapt attention to see how this week's bug-eyed monster would wreak havoc on humanity.

Of course, as a seven-year old (who probably had no business watching the show in the first place), I did not comprehend that the "monster" was usually humankind itself, finding some new way to self-destruct, or learn too late that a hubris-induced course of action was horrifically misguided. Like the network executives, I wanted monsters, not morals. The challenge laid in creating a horror of entertainment that somehow surpassed our own endeavors to create terror in real life.

The third episode of the series, titled *The Architects of Fear*, involved a group of eminent scientists facing the imminent nuclear holocaust. In hopes of staving off an apocalyptic military confrontation between nations, they stage a fake invasion of Earth by an extraterrestrial power in an effort to unite all humanity against a perceived common enemy. To represent the attacking species, the scientists effect biological transformations on one of their own, Dr. Allen Leighton, using genetic material from a rather small and unimposing alien life form already in their possession. The transformed Dr. Leighton is launched into orbit with plans to land his craft in the United Nations plaza.

Of course, in the grand tradition of Greek tragedy and Shakespearian drama, the plan goes awry. The space ship fails to perform as expected, and fearful hunters fatally wound the horrific-appearing Dr. Leighton. The story concludes with the pregnant widow of the sacrificial lamb castigating the other scientists for their thoughtless inhumanity. The show ends with the following control voice narration:

Scarecrows and magic and other fatal fears do not bring people closer together. There is no magic substitute for soft caring and hard work, for self-respect and mutual love. If we can learn this from the mistake these frightened men made, then their mistake will not have been merely grotesque, it would at least have been a lesson. A lesson, at last, to be learned.

I love the juxtaposed phrases here, so let me repeat one sentence. There is no magic substitute for soft caring and hard work, for self-respect and mutual love. This language reminds me of another voice from that era, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when he described the beloved community. King envisioned a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice, in which men and women would live in true equality and peace in all aspects of social life.

Who are the architects of fear today, whether malicious or benign, for I believe both exist?

- Our news media, which with the recent passage of icon Walter Cronkite, displays the demise of journalism today. We have dozens of news outlets of marginal quality from which to choose, most owned and controlled by the same corporations with their own agendas as to what constitutes news.
- Our government, which continues to engage in questionable military adventures against alleged enemies whose origins often lie within our own attempts at economic control or geo-political domination.
- Our system of law enforcement, which after the recent sad arrest and treatment of Henry Louis Gates in Boston reminds us that it remains a rich and viable culture for sustaining racial bias and judicial double standards.
- Our overburdened educational system, asked to do more tasks and fulfill more oversight requirements with fewer resources each year.
- Our medical establishment, which produces mammoth profits for the few and inadequate care for many.
- Our organized religions, which preach rigid adherence to ancient views often with

divisive and violent results.

And, lest we feel too comfortable among these indictments, we also shoulder some of the responsibility for this design work. For every time we fail to speak up against oppression, or quietly acquiesce to systematic power dynamics, we sign our own names to that blueprint as fellow architects of fear.

Who, then, are the architects of the beloved community? Who will craft our architecture of hope? First, let us look to our history. Nearly five centuries ago, the Protestant Reformation elicited waves of violence among people of differing religious belief. In Poland, one group seeking asylum from the violence created the Minor Reformed Church, later known as the Polish Brethren. A woman named Jadwiga Gnoinska persuaded her husband to obtain the necessary charter to form a new town where religious toleration would be guaranteed. Racovia immediately attracted many people of liberal Christian belief.

Racovia became the center, not only of the Polish Brethren, but of great scholarly activity. A school was established that trained over 1,000 students, and a printing press later produced a constant flow of books and tracts. One seminal publication, the *Racovian Catechism*, refuted the Christian doctrine of original sin as a founding precept of salvation. Baptism was described as a merely symbolic gesture and not a requirement for either infants or adults. Communion was reduced from its sacramental status to that of a common meal perhaps accompanied by preaching and prayer. And, finally, the *Racovian Catechism* denied the right of a Church institution to exercise authority over individuals, and that a church exists wherever truths are accepted and expounded.

Unfortunately, religious violence continued in Europe and began in Poland. Fighting between Catholics and Protestants broke out regularly and the Polish Senate eventually ordered the Racovian school and press closed. Residents were given four weeks to leave their homes to exile. After seven decades, the Racovian experiment ended. But, the legacy lived on in the *Catechism* and other writings, influencing people from the philosopher John Locke to Thomas Jefferson.

An example of intentional beloved community from the 19th century derived from the work of Universalist and Unitarian minister Adin Ballou. Ballou believed in temperance, abolition, and a form of pacifism called Christian Nonresistance. The signatories of his "Standard of Practical Christianity" announced their withdrawal from "the governments of the world" that used force to maintain order. Ballou came to believe that Practical Christians were called to make their convictions a reality and should begin to fashion a new civilization. After studying other utopian community plans, Ballou and others began to design their own community. In 1841, they purchased a farm and christened it Hopedale.

Hopedale included a boarding school, where many children came to live and learn, including some escaped slaves. One day, Adin called a student who persistently misbehaved to the front of the room. He told the boy that whipping was the usual punishment in most schools for disobedient students. He got a rod and said to the boy, "I cannot bear to whip you; perhaps it will do more good if you whip me. At any rate, I have concluded to try it." Adin handed the boy the rod and told him to whip him for as long as it took to make him a good boy. The boy looked at his teacher, and at the rod, and began to cry. He promised he would not disobey again and gave no further trouble after that.

After 15 years, the Hopedale Community ended. Two brothers who owned the majority of the shares withdrew their assets, claiming that the community was not using sound business practices. Lacking these resources, the community collapsed. Ballou later wrote, "Times and generations are coming that will justly estimate me and my work...for them, it has proved, I have lived and labored...to them I bequeath whatever is valuable and worth preserving of my possessions."

As the beneficiaries of the legacies of Racovia and Hopedale, we owe it to our descendants to keep trying to design a better society. And we start with our congregations. First, we build and sustain sanctuaries where worship occurs in an atmosphere of beauty and caring; sustained by generations; and open to all who enter. Second, we support a free pulpit, whose occupants speak truth to power; speak truth in love; and speak the truth of ageless wisdom. Third, we provide an institution of education, of liberal thought and learning, where people of all ages study and seek meaning together with open minds and open hearts.

In his first Inaugural Address, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. This sentiment may oversimplify reality. But, fear *is* a worse enemy than all the objects of our fear. Later in that speech, he added:

Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.

We have built a strong foundation in the 1,000 Unitarian Universalist congregations across this nation. In Manhasset, we possess a daunting physical infrastructure, ministerial resources that staff a vibrant pulpit, and an impressive program of religious education for all ages. Every reason exists that the blueprint for this congregation could serve as a model for others to emulate and to become a breakthrough congregation within the Unitarian Universalist Association.

But, to do that we as individuals must also emulate our churches, living as sanctuaries of caring and sharing, speaking as prophetic voices of truth, and engaging as lifelong teachers and learners. We can expand our religious selves into a 24/7 enterprise, spreading our beliefs and commitments into all aspects of our lives. We can use every opportunity available to us to become truth seekers and meaning makers in the world. And, we can never stop teaching, learning, and connecting in vital life experience with brothers and sisters everywhere.

This last point may be the most important. The will of society's fear architects is powerful and their pockets are deep. We can be sure that the forces arrayed against those of us who stand on the side of love come fully armed with humankind's most devastating arsenal of conflict. But, whatever calamity ensues, we can endure. We can endure the setbacks if we learn the lessons of our mistakes. We can endure any failures if we keep our toolbox filled with the fire of commitment, the warmth of unconditional love, and the torch of liberal theology. We can endure if we never stop imagining the beloved community, and strive to become its architects of hope.

Closing Words

What sets humanity apart from the other occupants of our natural world? Perhaps, our ability to imagine, to dream, to commit to a vision of hope, and to craft a plan to implement that vision. Perhaps unique in human nature is our ability to act as architects of hope.

Let it be so.