

“Forward through the Ages: If We Build It...”
A sermon by Charles Blustein Ortman
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The Unitarian Church of Montclair
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Foreword through the Ages...

Three weeks ago I was at the Annual Meeting of the Unitarian Universalist District of Metropolitan New York. Tom Stites, the editor of the UU World Magazine was the keynote speaker. He told the story of a graduate student who had been an intern at the UUA a few years ago. Upon completion of his internship, the student wrote a report that included a review of the Unitarian Universalist Association, itself. The student first mentioned that he had never worked with so many truly intelligent and creative people in his life. He went on to say that the folks at the UUA were so creative that they were able, not only to create, but to *re-create the wheel* an incredible number of times; that in fact they had produced so many wheels that were going in so many directions that steering was nearly impossible.

Tom shared with us his chagrin and he took the opportunity to ask us to imagine all of our congregations as wheels. And then he asked us to imagine what a powerful religious movement we might be if we were able to use an axle to harness and direct the energy, both within our congregations and among our congregations, in order to create a more intentional and powerful force for good in the world.

Listening to Tom Stites, I couldn't help but to imagine Ezekiel's wheels, *the wheel in the middle of a wheel, way up in the middle of the air*. Now, I know there are a lot of interpretations of Ezekiel's wheels, from the controversial anthropologist Erich von Däniken's unidentified flying objects cited in his book, The Chariots of the Gods, to the understandings of religious fundamentalists who claim that Ezekiel had a vision of a literal visit from God (although fundamentally, the text clearly indicates that there would have been more than one God).

“The big wheel runs by faith and the little wheel runs by the grace of God.” I always begin with the assumption that any great metaphorical literature has some deeper, inner truth to it. Here is my own interpretation of Ezekiel's wheels. Let's start with the little wheel. What is the grace of God? Each of us here might have a different answer to that question. For me the deeper truth is that the grace of God represents the Spirit of Life itself, the cause of being, the infinitely great *want to be*. The inner wheel is the residence of spirit and soul.

But the *want to be* wasn't enough on its own and so out of that yearning came the universe. And within the universe arose humanity, we sentient beings capable of self-awareness, destined to the human experience of both joy and separation. And so for us to hold ourselves in communion with that inner wheel, we are left to run the outer wheel through our faith and by the actions it

provokes. The big wheel runs by faith, by our commitment to the larger picture, by our visions of wholeness and of love, by our work for justice, by our faith in connections, connections that maybe we can only sense and might not even see. And the little wheel runs by the grace of All That Is, however we might imagine or envision whatever we hold to be that greatness.

In a few minutes we will sing our closing hymn, “Forward through the Ages.” I don’t know if you ever ask yourself what it is in the song that moves forward through the ages. Maybe you can do that as we sing it this morning. For me, it’s something akin to this understanding of Ezekiel’s wheels. It’s the combination of that integral energy that sustains the universe and our own investment in promoting that loving, that living energy through both our faith and our actions.

I want to talk for just a minute about how we might describe that little wheel in terms of our faith community here. There’s much talk in various Unitarian Universalist circles these days about the lack of a core for our faith tradition. There are many theological and spiritual ways of being a Unitarian Universalist. There are Christians, Jews, atheists, humanists, Buddhists, naturalists, theists, Deists and Moslems among us and many more, all of whom are bona fide Unitarian Universalists.

That’s confusing to a lot of people; that’s even confusing to a lot of our own people. What holds us together as Unitarian Universalists if we can come to it from so many different directions and perspective?

I don’t think it has to be all that mysterious. There are many other faith communities that our members could be a part of, if they wanted to participate in a particular traditional faith community, with a particular doctrinal approach. And yet we are not a part of some other faith community. We are Unitarian Universalists. What makes us that? At least from where I’m standing, it is that we believe in the unity of all things. Like our name says, we are Unitarian Universalist. *We believe in the unity of all things*: from the inherent worth and dignity of every person to the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, we believe in the unity of it all.

It is that unity which is at our very core; it is that unity which reaches to our furthest periphery. Unitarian Universalists believe in the unity of all things, not as doctrine or dogma – not because anyone has instructed us to believe it. We believe in the unity of all things because our reason, our experience, our connections, our intelligence, our intuition, because our faith tells us that each of us, that everyone one of us, that everything is part of everything else. We might understand that unity in different ways; we might express our relationships with it in different ways.

Still, for us unity is at the center; it is the little wheel within the wheel. And for us unity extends to the furthest reaches of that larger outer wheel, calling us to a life of reverence, of faith and of hope, of love and of service. It’s what calls us to do our part, during our lifetimes, to promote the Spirit of Life, as it moves forward through the ages.

If we build it...

In 1905, exactly one century ago, our forebears in this Unitarian Church of Montclair (known

then as Unity Church) completed and dedicated to service this very space where we are gathered this morning. We are the manifestation of the religious community that they envisioned 100 years ago. It was their foresight, their determined investment of blood sweat and tears, their generosity in the investment of resources, time, energy, finance, and a commitment to that vision that has provided the liberal religious traditions and the physical home we enjoy today.

Ours is a community that is born of their imagination and investment. We, their heirs, gather together in this sacred space provided for us by those prophets of our existence. We gather now for worship. In the next hour, during our annual meeting, we will be gathered to once again envision the future of this community: its physical and spiritual life, and to imagine on behalf of those who will be the heirs of our legacy.

What is our vision for the future of Unitarian Universalism here in Montclair and in Northern Essex County? What is our vision for a faith tradition that embraces, not the divisiveness so prevalent in national and world politics, so prevalent in many of the fundamentalist religious expressions growing in our own country and throughout the world, but what is the vision for our faith tradition, one that holds at its very center the unity of all people and of all things? What is our vision as we imagine the future?

I can tell you my vision. It is that we will leave to the future a faith community dedicated, as it has been for over a century, to unity, like the original name of this congregation, Unity Church. My vision is that this will continue to be a place where pilgrims on life's journey will be able to come for soulful sustenance and for the sacred community of kindred spirits; a place to ask questions, to seek answers and then to act on what has been discovered. My vision is that this place will continue to be the home of a faith community of people dedicated to the work of justice, doing battle to end racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, ableism and any other form of oppression yet to be recognized, either within our congregation or out in the world.

My vision is that the buildings that house this sacred community of the future will be more than merely safe, sound and well cared for. Although they will be that, they will also reflect the integrity of our values, the generosity of our spirit, the dedication of our mission, the duty and the beauty born of our aspirations. I invite you to join me in this dynamic vision of our future. I suspect, I hope, it may already be yours.

In a few minutes you're going to be asked to vote on what I think is a pretty simple proposition: whether or not to engage in an upcoming capital campaign. I say simple because, if we look around us here in the sanctuary or in any of the other rooms in these buildings, we can easily see that the time to shore-up, spiff-up and upgrade these well-worn facilities is quickly becoming past due. If you agree, the question that your Board of Trustees will be putting before you in the next hour really is a rather simple one. We need to maintain and to take care of what has been entrusted to us; that is our very clear responsibility.

And while that's the question you'll be responding to this morning in our meeting, the Board and I are asking you to begin thinking about something much larger; something beyond responsibility something in the arena of opportunity, something that you'll be deciding a little further down the road, that road that leads us forward through the ages.

With the help of architects and builders and consultants a plan has been drawn up that has three

parts. Generally, Phase I is about the challenges I've just mentioned: shoring-up, spiffing-up and upgrading. It's mostly about dutiful maintenance.

Phase III, if you'll jump forward with me, is an imaginative and creative idea for switching the social functions of Fletcher Hall with the administrative functions of the Annex and vice versa. There could be many advantages to such a design and I hope that we look at it closely as we come to discern its merits and its efficacy.

It's about Phase II that I would like to ask for your special consideration at this time, though. You won't have to vote on this today, but I do want you to begin considering it anyway. Phase II is a plan for re-creating the space which is now the walkway between the sanctuary and the Annex. It would become our Town Center: a grand, enlarged space to welcome all those who enter the Unitarian Church; a large, open, bright space where information would be available; where art would be exhibited; where symbols that tell the world who we are would be on display; where the sun would shine through; where one could see out into the backyard behind us, a lovely outdoor space that has been hidden from view for years. It would be a central place, a hub around which the activities of this community, the mission of our church, the activities of our faith would occur. It could be our wheel within a wheel, a space where we welcome ourselves and our visitors, adorned with evidence of our ongoing faith in the unity of all things.

It is a marvelous idea, one that is about much more than maintaining what has been. It is an idea of vision that more creatively exposes us to the broader community and then invites that community to engage in our values and to join us in working toward them. It is an idea that allows this generation to contribute in a structural, a beautiful, a meaningful way to the elegant facilities that have so faithfully served as home to this religious community for a century. It is an idea that allows us to provide the future a physical vision, a beacon of hope for a world made more whole for having embraced its unity.

And even though that's not what you will be voting on this morning, it is what I'll ask you to be thinking about when, in a few minutes from now, we begin to consider what will be our legacy to the future heirs of this sacred community. And as we continue to consider that future as we enter our campaign in the fall.

Ezekiel saw the wheel
way up in the middle of the air
Ezekiel saw the wheel
way in the middle of the air.
The big wheel runs by faith
and the little wheel runs by the grace of God
It's a wheel in the middle of a wheel
Way in the middle of the air.

The Spirit of Life is forever moving forward through the ages. We can, we will be moved by it, but we can also choose to move with it, to participate in building the future. We are the ones in this time who are the agents of that Spirit in and for this congregation, segue to the manifestation of what is yet to come.

So let us harness our wheels together, let us envision together and work together in order to

create an ever more intentional and powerful force for good in the world.