

"OF MARBLE LIONS AND IMAGINARY TREES"

**A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Patrick T. O'Neill
Delivered Sunday May 22, 2016
At First Parish in Framingham, MA**

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Good morning, dear friends! First, please allow me to express my gratitude to Rev. Kathleen for her very kind invitation to preach to you this morning, and for the gracious support she has given to my being named the newest Minister Emeritus of First Parish. Equally I want to thank the Board of Assessors and the Congregation at large for the extraordinary honor of Emeritus status. How proudly I remember the first time seeing my name listed on those historic plaques on the wall with all the ministers who have served this Parish going back to 1701. Now these many years later, having completed 37 years in Parish ministry, this lasting relationship with you and with this beloved pulpit I count as a treasure in my heart. It means more to me than you can ever know.

With your permission, I'd like to dedicate my sermon today in loving memory of three large souls who for me will always represent the best and brightest of First Parish over the years. Tony Greeley, Janet Werner, and Ewell Hopkins, Sr. Large souls, great hearts, each my dear friends and mentors throughout my years as minister here.

I thought I would speak to you this morning about what in theological terms is called a "faith vision." This notion implies that all faith is based on a vision which precedes it. Or in other words, people believe the things they believe because first they see the things they see. In a metaphorical sense, our beliefs are directly tied to our angle of vision, the way we view the world and the people around us.

And so it is with church communities. A church is first defined by the way it views the world and the people who inhabit the world.

So, I wish to speak to you about the connection between faith and vision. And specifically I wish to lift up for you two kinds of visions that are descriptive of faithful living. I wish to tell of imaginary trees and marble lions.

The first reference comes from a true story told by anthropologist Loren Eiseley in his autobiography, ***The Night Country***.

In the final year of his life, the story goes, an old man slowly dying of cancer, Eiseley dozed by the fire one autumn evening, and he half-remembered, half-dreamed of a day long ago when he was a young boy in a small Nebraska farm town. And he remembered helping his father one day plant a tree in their backyard behind the picket fence, and he remembered his father's words that day:

***"When you are an old man," his father said, "you might come back here someday. And when you do, you can sit here with your back up against this tree, and you can bask in its shade. And I hope you will remember and take pride that you planted this tree with your dad. And perhaps on that day you might even say a prayer for your Old Man."***

The vision remembered, nothing would do but that he make that journey - a dying man's last pilgrimage - back to that little town on the Nebraska prairie, to that backyard behind the picket fence, where by now, he imagined, that young sapling must surely be a great sheltering maple, or was it now a mighty spreading oak?

He could scarce contain himself as the plane landed, and the bus finally brought him at length to the small town where he once lived, and yes, finally he arrived at his boyhood house, newly painted, with a brand new picket fence out front. He opened the gate and rounded the corner to the backyard, and he looked at the spot where his father had planted the tree, and he saw there.... nothing. No tree. No great spreading maple, no mighty oak.

Crestfallen, he walked over to the spot where his father's tree had failed to take root, and he sat down on the grass, and he leaned his back up against the air. And he began to weep. But not for long. For soon his tears turned to laughter, and his sorrow turned to joyful remembrance, and finally to a deep realization of gratitude. **"For over sixty years," he thought to himself, "I have sheltered in the real shade of an imaginary tree!"**

His father's real gift to him was a metaphor, an image - of a tree, an illusion. But for a lifetime of struggles and travels and journeys and pilgrimage, his father's tree had served as a compass point for home, his True North, a reminder of the boy he was once upon a time in the place where his life had begun. And there in that spot behind the picket fence where his own life had been rooted, he breathed a quiet prayer of blessing on his father, a prayer of blessing and of thanks.

Were we able, each of us, to return to the picket fence yards of our youth, I wonder if we could do as Eiseley did in the midst of his shattered illusions - lean our backs up against the air, and give thanks for all the sheltering, shade-giving, protective metaphors of the imaginary trees that grow there?

Sometimes we discover at various points in our lives that the faith visions that once sustained and guided us, and around which we once established our values and our identities, prove to be inadequate or illusory. We change. We grow, we survive crises, we sustain wounds, we evolve into different persons over time. And as different persons, we eventually come to see the world through new eyes, from different angles.

And this sometimes requires us to let go of earlier, younger, more innocent visions of life. And sometimes that can be a painful process that leaves us feeling resentful or bitter. The challenge as we move through life, of course, is to learn to bless the whole journey - to give thanks for the gifts and the graces we have received along the way, to forgive ourselves and others for those myopic moments when our vision

proved too narrow; when we failed to see the best in others, when others failed to see the best in us.

The past, of course, is often seen in distortion or in the light of romantic illusion. But upon discovering that the mighty oak trees that grow there in the garden of memory are but a myth, the truth is that the shade they provided us was indeed real. To miss the trees - to fail to see them for lack of religious imagination - is to miss a vital dimension of religious maturity.

I wonder about the religious journeys that we all bring with us into this church this morning. Can we take a quick show of hands here for a moment? How many people here right now were born and bred Unitarians or Universalists, would you raise your hands for a moment? And how many people here this morning were raised in families that were not Unitarian Universalist?

Perhaps it is precisely because so many adult UU's were raised in other traditions, given other faith visions by our birth families - visions we then had to adjust or replace for ourselves over time - this notion of defining our faith vision is very sensitive to many of us.

The very fact that UU's don't have a pre-packaged twenty-five-word-or-less definition or creedal formula that sums up our faith, the mere fact that we hesitate or search for the words to describe our way of being religious to others, even that hesitation is interpreted as some proof that UU's are an airy, imprecise, ill-defined bunch who aren't really very sure of themselves or what they stand for. The poet John Ciardi once said he admired people who have "**the courage of their own confusion.**" How he would have loved us!

In our culture people do not expect churches to admit their own confusions or to admit their own lack of definitive answers to life's great mysteries. People don't expect churches in our culture, in this age of aggressive Fundamentalism, to be humble and human enough to admit their own ignorance or their own fallibility in any matters of faith. People just expect churches in our culture to be more narrowly precise than we Unitarian Universalists have ever been comfortable with.

We envision a different kind of church community in this tradition. We have shaped and claimed for ourselves a broader idea of church. Simply put, we operate on a different assumption of what a church ought to look like and what a church is for.

If you assume a definition of church as being a group of people who all believe the same things in just the same way - the Unitarian Universalist church will disappoint you. Period. Because, you see, in this tradition we are more interested in how a theology *lives* than how it *reads*. We care more about how a theology encourages people to live and act in the world than we are in how concisely it can be recited. And rather than search for one prevailing pathway to truth, we are generally more interested in the **variety** of ways people have found depth and meaning in human experience, and in the **variety** of ways people have sought to address the Sacred and the Numinous in life.

For we do not see the Sacred as being limited to any one single expression or any one cultural idea based any one single sacred Scripture. One becomes a member of this community, not by conformity of creed, but by affinity of spirit.

We brook no interfering structure between ourselves and the God we might yet discover in the midst of this company of searchers. We hold hands lightly in this circle, allowing each other the space to come and go as our lives beckon, always making new space in the circle for those who only now have found us.

We see our church as a place for imprinting upon our consciousness a world that is seriously wounded in so many places: wounded by injustice, by ethnic and racial divide, by war and oppression, by hatred and exploitation. And in response to the cries and whispers of that broken world, church is where we still make bold to sing the defiant hymns of hope that keep us human.

Oh, there will always be those who think that religion ought to be about formalities, about following the proper rituals, saying the proper prayers, lighting the proper fires - and then holding heresy trials for anyone who dares to think differently. I think Elie Wiesel in today's reading is closer to the truth: religion is properly about learning to understand our stories.

We expect our church to make us think, to help us change what we need to change about ourselves, to help us learn what we most need to learn. Church is where we come to join in prayer and praise, to celebrate our loves and heal our hurts and confide our fears.

All this is our common purpose, as I see it. But you see, it takes more than a recited paragraph or a memorized Creed to say even this much. And next week, frankly, I would probably write an entirely different litany on what a UU church is for and about.

I once heard the great Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen at Harvard tell a story about Michaelangelo that I sometimes use to illustrate our UU faith vision. It seems an appropriate closing for today's sermon.

The story goes that a young boy once watched Michaelangelo as the great sculptor worked with his hammer and chisel on a huge block of marble. The little boy stood transfixed for hours every day watching the artist at work, but he saw nothing more than piece after piece of stone falling away left and right. The boy had no idea what the artist was doing.

When the boy returned to the studio one day, he saw much to his surprise a great and powerful marble lion sitting in the place where the huge block once stood. With great excitement the boy ran to the sculptor and said, "**Master, how did you know? How did you know there was a lion in the stone?**" And the artist smiled and replied, "**First, I only thought I could see him in there. And then, last night, I heard him roar.**"

There are different ways of looking at the world, I suppose. God knows there are no end of churches that see human beings as sinful and depraved and in need of supernatural salvation from the moment we come into the world. But this church sees something different in our humanity. I like to think of Unitarian Universalism as a church that sees in every human soul a *lion* - strong, capable, proud, and worthy. And church, well, church is where we come to do a little “hammer and chisel” work on ourselves, to chip away at all that imprisons and holds captive the best that is in us, to make visible the lion in us all!

A theology of the lion! Something to think about while you’re doing the dishes this week!

**--Patrick T. O’Neill**

**And now may Peace be with us and in us and through us.**

**And may Goodness and Mercy follow us all the days of our lives. Amen.**