Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church

Habits of the Hearth

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March 13, 2016

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In 1630, Puritan lay leader John Winthrop delivered his famous sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" aboard the ship Arbella, on route to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. One of nearly a dozen ships setting sail for the British New World, the passengers had left their native England for one of the established colonies we now know as Salem and Boston. The Puritans were determined that they were to be a beacon for all of Europe, a model of Christian charity as Winthrop proclaimed with what he called his "Arbella covenant." Although his sermon was not published and circulated until the 1830s, one phrase in particular has resonated throughout history.

"We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

Taken from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, Winthrop was inspired by Jesus' words: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

The fate of John Winthrop and the Mass Bay Colony are powerfully linked to beginnings of American religious and political history. As their power and territory expanded beyond the city of Boston, their conservative religious fervor slowly lost its potency as their economic and political power grew, conflicting with the austere Puritan life. The congregation they established as the First Church of Boston, Congregational, would become the First Church of Boston, Unitarian Universalist.

Nearly two hundred years later, the Unitarians would create their headquarters on none other than Beacon Hill, akin to the Massachusetts State House.

It's no mistake that Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" sermon was unearthed and published at a time when our national narrative needed to be revitalized. Westward expansion pushed early settlers and a wave of new European immigrants beyond eastern borders of colonial life.

With it came the occupation and displacement of the native peoples. President Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Treaty and Removal act provoked refusal and resistance from the Cherokee nation, who was violently displaced from Georgia to Mississippi under great duress in what is known as the "Trail of Tears." Disseminating the sermon widely boosted the settlers' sense of purpose—a mission carried out under the divine authority known as manifest destiny. In his 2006 book *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark and Manifest Destiny*, law professor Robert J. Miller describes manifest destiny as:

- The special virtues of the American people and their institutions
- America's mission to redeem and remake the west in the image of agrarian America

- A divine destiny under God's direction to accomplish this essential duty

While the separation of church and state were protected by the constitution's establishment clause, the democratic project was very much linked to this religious vision for American life, renewed with vigor for westward expansion. While Americans pushed west, across the Atlantic the French Revolution of 1830 infused the nation with interest in this vision and the social, political and religious conditions required to produce it. In 1831, the young French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville was granted permission from the new liberal monarchy to study American prisons and penitentiaries. Tocqueville traveled extensively, studying American civic and public life. His observations were recorded in his book *Democracy in America,* which still remains one of the most vivid descriptions of our national character, including the damaging effects of slavery on the African people and genocide of native peoples.

Tocqueville described American ethics and norms as "habits of the heart," principles and practices essential to shape and sustain democratic life. Central to the American habits: family life, religious convictions and participation in local politics. In Tocqueville's view, the interplay between the three realms of the private, the public and the political keep American democracy alive and flourishing. You may recall how a group of sociologists led by Robert Bellah took up Toqueville's phrase for the title of their 1985 book *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American life.*

Most recently, Quaker author Parker Palmer takes up Tocqueville's work in his 2011 book *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit.* In Palmer's interpretation, what is most critical to American democratic habits are "the health of the local venues in which the heart gets formed or deformed: families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, voluntary associations, workplaces, and the various places of public life where 'the company of strangers' gathers."

Along with Tocqueville's writings on the habits of the heart of American democracy, the image of Winthrop's America as the "City upon a hill" has endured the test of time, used in every age by liberals and conservatives alike to motivate the habits of American life from the public towards the political. Take then President elect John F. Kennedy's speech to the Massachusetts congress in 1961:

> . . . I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. "We must always consider," he said, "that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us." Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us—and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill — constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities.

And President Ronald Reagan, on the eve of his election nearly twenty years later:

> I have quoted John Winthrop's words more than once on the campaign trail this year—for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining "city on a hill," as were those long ago settlers . . . These visitors to that city on the Potomac do not come as white or black, red or yellow; they are not Jews or Christians; conservatives or liberals; or Democrats or Republicans. They are Americans awed by what has gone before, proud of what for them is still . . . a shining city on a hill.[4]

Presidents Kennedy and Reagan use the American ideal of the "city upon a hill" as a way to unify Americans around commitments to the public good in the midst of divisive political tensions. We are now in the midst of a challenging political time where the foundations of our common democratic life are being shaken and shattered. The interplay of private, public and political commitments is wildly out of balance. Campaign finances are skewed by corporate capital. Our politicians have created a culture where insults and aggression are celebrated and civility is scorned as weakness. Private bigotry is inflamed into dangerous public policy which threatens our global reputation and targets our most vulnerable citizens. Authoritarianism is being legitimized as response to a complex and diverse world. Public space is increasingly becoming policed and privatized and protest violently subdued.

The alarming trends of our election cycle have created the need for a return to the essential habits of the heart at the center of our democratic life. We cannot be silent. Our congregation is one of those unique public places in our American life where hearts are formed in service to our public and political life. Our fifth Unitarian Universalist principle proclaims "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." This principle is not simply about voting democratic or republican but is one of our Unitarian Universalist habits of the heart, a commitment to protect and promote the common good upon which our democracy stands. We believe that our congregations contribute to the common good by shaping our members in our ethical and moral lives, from birth until death. We believe that good citizenship means actively participating in our political process to influence decisions on issues we care about. At every juncture in our nation's history, our congregations have taken a stand for human dignity, health care, civil rights and religious freedom for all people. We have stood for a just economy for the preservation of our earth. Today we need to take a stand for the heart of our very democracy itself.

We have a stake in the next chapter of our national story. We have had a hand in shaping the past and have a responsibility to its future. The narrative of the "city upon a hill" has been used as a religious and political vision from generation to generation. In our own Unitarian Universalist congregations, we have had our own resonance with this imagery.

After all, John Winthrop did found the First Church of Boston, and like it or not our religious tradition has its origins in that Puritan past, in all of its complexities. Today, our Neighborhood Church logo is a beacon, shining out into the darkness- its rays of light radiate out.

A beacon is constructed for the purpose of attracting attention to a location—to help the lost navigate to their destination, or to alert defenses, warning of approaching danger. Beacons are often isolated, built atop high places or at the edges of rough coastal terrain. In all cases, beacons serve as messengers. As we look towards our future, we want to shine that beacon even brighter. But in this time of such critical need for progressive religious voices, we must be mindful of our intentions—what message we are proclaiming? And what are we illuminating?

Terry Tempest Williams is an American author and environmental activist, deeply connected to her Mormon heritage and her Utah homeland. Her collection of essays *The Open Space of Democracy* chronicles her own political journey to preserve the habits of democracy after 9/11, a staunch anti-war activist who fought to protect civil liberties. Her love and deep commitment to the Utah landscape drew Williams and her family into a grassroots community organizing effort to preserve the wilderness areas of Castle Rock against developers and corporate interests.

As an antidote to her own anger and frustration at the often daunting odds stacked against their efforts to influence the future of their community, she used her writing as a place to help her recommit to the daily practice of democracy necessary for working across difference. She returns to Tocqueville's notion of habits of the heart, naming another critical practice to the flourishing of the democratic good of the public: the practice of open space. In proud defense of our national parks, the necessity of undeveloped land, and the preservation of wilderness places of our nation, she believes this open space is essential to a healthy democracy.

Listen to her thoughts:

> What does the open space of democracy look like?
> In the open space of democracy there is room for dissent.
> In the open space of democracy there is room for differences.
> In the open space of democracy, the health of the environment is seen as the wealth of our communities.
> Cooperation is valued more than competition; prosperity becomes the caretaker of poverty.
>
> Open lands open minds. In the open space of democracy, we are listening—ears alert—we are watching—eyes open—registering the patterns and possibilities for engagement. Some acts are private, some are public. Our oscillations between local, national, and global gestures map the full range of our movement. Our strength lies in our imagination, and paying attention to what sustains life, rather than what destroys it.

Tempest Williams points to another way for us to understand our relationship to the "city upon a hill." What if the light we are casting is not to warn off but to send a message—not of our exceptionalism but of our openness? What if the light we are casting shines not as a walled fortress set apart from the world, but as a model of open space—a symbol of our religious commitment to inclusivity, truth, beauty and justice? What if our beacon glorifies the

mountains, deserts, and rivers, illuminating the beauty of the natural world? What if the light we shine illuminates the possibility of the spaces between disconnected people—the open spaces of possibility for public engagement – a place for listening and dialogue, a place where differences can be honored?

So friends, can we be that beacon burning bright known far and wide for our habits of the heart? We have the power to shape the future. Today we begin with our hearts—generous, open, compassionate, liberal, committed deeply to our sense of history and our deep religious purpose.

I close with the words of John Murray, an 18th Century Universalist Evangelist.

> Go out into the highways and byways of America. Give the people something of your vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage.

Amen, and blessed be.