



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### A Life of Art

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The great writer and social critic James Baldwin once remarked:

The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.

This week our nation's history took a bewildering and troubling turn. At such challenging and uncertain times as these, it is important to take stock of our values and to subject our commitments to new scrutiny.

As a people of faith, we are deeply disturbed by the turn the nation has taken. In our grief, our outrage, and our deep sadness, we have the sense that somehow something fundamental must shift to produce a different future. But how do we begin to imagine what that looks like, when our hearts are broken and we fear the worst? Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams puts it this way:

The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share in the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it.

It is only by truly probing and unearthing the history that is ours can we begin to imagine what kind of history we may seek to make.

This morning we are lifting up our Neighborhood Church heritage on this Pasadena Craftsman weekend. We take a moment to take a clear-eyed look at the architecture of our religious community, the strong beams and sturdy scaffolding upon which we stand today.

Over 130 years ago, a small band of Congregationalists, Presbyterians and other people of good will gathered to form the First Congregational Church of Pasadena, worshipping at a small chapel at the corner of Orange Grove and Colorado. Soon afterwards, the members began organizing to build a church at the corner of California and Pasadena Avenue. The Presbyterians then splintered off to form their own congregation and the members who remained became gradually more liberal, eventually affirming their Unitarian identity. An article by Joseph Giovannini describes what those first Pasadenans might have been like:

These new arrivals (Midwestern transplants) were the liberal Democrats who supported national parks, women's suffrage, progressive education, healthful living and a Craftsman ethic and aesthetic -- the Americans who were looking to the land itself to forge an American cultural identity independent of Europe's. Home-grown architecture was very much an instrument of this idealism, and the unpretentious wood-frame villas they built in Pasadena, fused with its noble landscape, embodied the apparently simple life and democratic values they espoused.

The architects Charles and Henry Greene were a part of the liberal westward migration. Born to a Presbyterian family in Ohio and raised in Missouri, the brothers were first trained at MIT in Boston and relocated to Pasadena to be closer to their parents, who had already made the mid-western pilgrimage. As the story goes, Mary and David Gamble met the Greene brothers when visiting a work in progress owned by their friend John Cole. Their chance encounter happened at none other than the Cole house, the Craftsman home that sits regally as the centerpiece of our church home. The Gambles then commissioned the Greene brothers to build their magnificent home next door.

If you've ever toured the Gamble House, you know that the Greene's were builders and craftsmen, dedicated to showcasing the quality and integrity of their materials and harmonizing with the natural beauty of Southern California. British artist, poet and interior designer William Morris, known as the father of the "arts and crafts movement" inspired generations of artists, including Charles and Henry Greene. Morris' successor, Charles Ashbee, visited Pasadena in 1909, the year of the Gamble House's completion, and exalted the Greene's houses as masterworks in the Morris lineage.

Morris' romantic style featured motifs of the natural world, applying meticulous craftsmanship to every aspect of the domestic sphere: embroidery, textiles, tapestries, stained glass, and decorative objects.

Morris praised beauty as expressed through the arts, as a hallmark of our essential humanity. In his lecture the "Beauty of Life," Morris wrote: "Beauty, which is what is meant by art. . . is no mere accident to human life..." but a "positive necessity of life." To Morris, the home was the place where art and life converged in our encounter with everyday objects. To live a life of art, we must surround ourselves with beautiful objects, simply but elegantly rendered. These simple but meaningful daily encounters create an experience of the deep happiness he believed was the birthright of every person, rich or poor, citizen or immigrant.

While Morris's decorative work appealed to the Victorian attitudes of the time, which enlisted wealthy women to dedicate themselves to domestic life while their husbands assumed their role in the marketplace, in fact, the arts and crafts movement was profoundly countercultural. Morris was not only an artist, but a passionate and prolific activist who used his popularity to engage both the wealthy and the poor. He educated and raised consciousness with the wealthy about the conditions of the poor, creating empathy and advocacy on their behalf. And with the poor, Morris sought to create working conditions that would create both financial reward, joy in craftsmanship and pride in their labor.

Art was the bridge that Morris believed could have the power to close the gaping distance between the rich and the poor, the immigrant and the British national. The common appreciation of beauty had the potential to unify, bringing mutual respect for their civic and economic interests. What would it take to bring such a complete reorientation of relationships? Nothing short of a revolution, a radical, fundamental change of heart on both

sides of the economic divide. Morris spent the latter part of his life speaking and organizing. His 1888 book *Signs of Change* explained:

The word Revolution has a terrible sound in most people's ears, even when we have explained to them that it does not necessarily mean a change accompanied by riot and all kinds of violence, and cannot mean a change made mechanically and in the teeth of opinion by a group of men who have somehow managed to seize on the executive power for the moment. Even when we explain that we use the word revolution in its etymological sense, and mean by it a change in the basis of society, people are scared at the idea of such a vast change, and beg that you will speak of reform and not revolution.

As, however, we do not at all mean by our word revolution what these worthy people mean by their word reform, I can't help thinking that it would be a mistake to use it, whatever projects we might conceal beneath its harmless envelope. So we will stick to our word, which means a change of the basis of society; it may frighten people, but it will at least warn them that there is something to be frightened about, which will be no less dangerous for being ignored; and also it may encourage some people, and will mean to them at least not a fear, but a hope.

Morris imagined another world was possible in both the public world of the marketplace and the private sphere of the home. He admonished “revolutionists” to take the long view of social change, urging that the ultimate political end was not to seek revenge against the still stinging sufferings of the past, but to secure a new social and economic future.

Gloria Steinem once famously said: “Like art, revolutions come from combining what exists into what has never existed before.” On Tuesday night the slim majority of America shunned an existing insider candidate who dedicated her career to reform: policy making and diplomacy. The vote against reform illuminates a new and unfamiliar perception of revolution: a vote for undefined social and economic change with one clear mandate to undo many of the hard-fought initiatives of the Obama administration.

This election has made clear that we liberals, religious and political, have been living with more than a few flawed assumptions about what revolution means to our fellow Americans. We assumed that the existing political system had been delivering results to a majority of Americans. We assumed that advances in human rights would be universally embraced. We assumed that our enthusiasm for a diverse, interfaith, multicultural world be enshrined in our democracy by the first African American president.

In all of our idealism about our democratic future, not only have our assumptions failed us, but our imaginations have failed us too. Most of us simply could not imagine what a presidential loss might realistically look like and feel like, and did not plan for the future we know face with uncertainty and fear.

In theological terms, the “*via negativa*” or the “negative way,” is a way of describing reality by explicitly naming what it is *not*. It’s the “glass half empty” model. So far, much of what we can predict about our future reality is media speculation stoking the *via negativa*, now hazy with anxiety and dread. Many fear that Trump’s rise to power signals a surge of American fascism, a mingling of extreme white supremacy with mainstream conservatism we have seen manifesting globally, most notably in the unpredicted Brexit and the circling of national borders around the worldwide refugee crisis. In his book *Anatomy of Fascism*, historian Robert Paxton writes:

Fascism does not rest explicitly upon an elaborated philosophical system, but rather upon popular feelings about master races, their unjust lot, and their rightful predominance over inferior people.

The signs of the dawning of a new fascism of the Trump era are already visible: Michigan Middle School students reducing Latino students to tears chanting: build a wall. With these demonstrations of racism and xenophobia already a constant, and the pain so fresh, it is very easy for us to confirm this *via negativa*, to go down the rabbit hole of what ifs and hide our head in the sand, even to lose hope. It’s not comfortable for us as liberals, but we must fully understand the implications of this negative view. We shouldn’t not dwell there or allow it to cloud our sense of purpose, but rather to use it to reorient our expectations so we may begin defining and reclaiming the positive future we wish to see.

The true art of revolution is to imagine another world is possible, and to live into that vision of a preferred reality, one day at a time. We must begin imagining the world we want to live in but have not yet experienced, this time all the more passionately as it matters more than ever. We need to channel the best of our liberal ancestors: the idealism and creativity of artists, the bold vision of revolutionists and the practical skillfulness of organizers. From this dream, we can begin to strategize and to plan. We can leverage the power we have to make history. We can begin to move past our own fear and kindle our empathy, allowing ourselves to stop the blaming and start honestly seeking to be a bridge between those with whom we disagree, starting with our own families, neighbors and community members.

At Neighborhood Church, our purpose has remained steady for over 130 years, through multiple wars, unfit leaders, scandals, and tragedies. Today, let us dedicate the next chapter of our history to beauty and to justice, ever listening for how we will next answer love’s call. Let the beauty we love be what we do.

May we continue have the courage to choose life,  
to choose love, to choose hope.

May we have the strength to face the days ahead with bravery and fearless persistence.  
And may we know deep in our hearts that the arc of the moral universe is long  
but indeed it bends towards justice.