

**“A House for Hope”
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On this beautiful warm spring morning, it may be hard to imagine how desperately I sought shelter from the storm just over a week ago. The annual spring migration to Camp deBonneville Pines took a treacherous turn. A day or two before leaving the low land in Upland, ominous messages started arriving – “Winter Travel to Camp” and “What to Bring to Winter Camp.” “Emergency items – Consider carrying the following items in your vehicle: flashlight with good batteries, deicer or ice scraper, gloves, and old jacket should you need to be on the ground installing chains, a plastic garbage bag to kneel on, a small broom to brush snow from your car, a shovel, sand or kitty litter for traction, warm blanket, thermos with hot beverage, and a few candy or snack bars.”

Growing up in Wisconsin, I was familiar with winter driving. Yet I had neither bought nor ever used chains on my tires. Then again, my tromping ground in the southeastern part of the state did not include over 5,000-foot mountains. At the auto supply store, I asked for chains and learned to my surprise that chains come in different sizes. Soon I was the proud owner of chains, though I was mystified how they could fit chains for four tires into this little carrying case. I did not open the carrying case out of concern that I would never get all the chains back into it. Ah well, I probably won't need them after all. Those weathercasters have an incentive to make the weather seem to be more dramatic than it usually is. I promised to be at camp by 3 p.m. for the start of registration. I passed through Redlands and Mentone and began the snaking ascent to camp.

Coming around one curve, I was startled to see thick white frosting on top of a car heading down the mountain. I wonder how far away those people are coming from? I thought. They must be coming from the high Sierras, judging from the thickness of the snow frosting on the car roof. Then came another car looking like it was coming from Siberia. Then came a truck looking like it came from the Arctic. Then I rounded a curve and drove into the embracing arms of the storm. Big swirling flakes, big as a pancake flakes, tumbling wildly. I had blundered onto a race course

-- cross country pancake sized snowflake race. The unlucky flakes who smacked into my windshield would never cross the finish line.

I had a funny feeling that I was going to be opening Pandora's chain box before too long. Mercifully, right where the paved road turns to a dirt road into camp, I spied a snowplow and a man. Hallelujah! Ray is the deBenneville Pines camp caretaker, and he graciously put chains on two tires (not four; I learned something). The lacy pancake flakes scrambled to cover my car.

After unloading some gear at the lodge, my car nearly went slip sliding away (even with chains) as I headed for my next stop – my cabin. Trundling my gear into the cabin, I nearly went slip sliding away on the snowy path and steps. I pictured my movements as they would look from the white sky. I was a speck of humanity shuttling from one shelter to another – from the mobile shelter of the car to the stationary shelter of the cabin. In my padded winter coat, I was a puffy, cushiony pinball bouncing from shelter to shelter.

Each one of us is a pinball. In fair weather or foul weather, we human beings bounce from shelter to shelter. Sometimes we puffy, with metaphorical winter coats between our skin and the howling wind. Sometimes we are brittle pinballs, ready to crack upon the slightest impact with an obstacle. “Gimme shelter,” by the Rolling Stones reverberates through the 42 years since it was released: *Oh, a storm is threat'ning my very life today; If I don't get some shelter, Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away.* The nature of that storm? Violence accompanying political and social strife: *War, children, it's just a shot away, It's just a shot away . . .*

We seek shelter from violence (inside the home or outside of it), shelter from economic hardship, shelter from emotional turmoil, shelter from physical pain, shelter from loss, shelter from oppression, shelter from loneliness, and shelter from all the blustery elements that disrupt our parade and our lives.

Religion offers shelter for the spirit. It is not the only shelter, but it is a good one. Not all religious shelters are alike. The shelters of *liberal* religion (sometimes called progressive religion) has distinctive features. John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker outline the promise of

progressive religion for the 21st century in their new book, *A House for Hope*. John Buehrens is a former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and Rebecca Parker is the present of Starr King School for the Ministry.

They write of liberal religion in general, though most of their references are to liberal Christianity, in particular. Why do they care? Why should we care? They believe that hope cannot be sustained without having the shelter of systematic theology. For some of us, the shelter might be systematic philosophy. We cannot manufacture hope out of thin air, Christopher Reeves' comment on the front of the Order of Service notwithstanding ("Once you choose hope, anything is possible . . ."). I believe that we cannot even manufacture hope out of the thicker air of connection with companions on a spiritual path. It takes more than that.

A house for hope requires a suitable environment, a roof, walls, welcoming rooms, foundations, and a threshold. Familiarity with liberal systematic theology and ease in talking about it helps Unitarian Universalists connect with allies, unexpected allies such as Evangelical Christian minister Rob Bell, small u universalist, whose new book is *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.¹ If Unitarian Universalists are not familiar with liberal systematic theology, we will imagine ourselves lonelier in the world than we, in fact, are.

Eschatology is the theological term for "speaking of final things" – ultimate hopes. Eschatology is the *environment* for the house of hope. The environment is a garden. A traditional religious perspective is that the best is yet to come – after death. Rebecca Parker writes, "Progressive eschatologies come in three major forms, all of which move earthward [instead of heavenward] . . . For handy reference, these three alternatives can be identified as Social Gospel eschatology, universalist eschatology, and radically realized eschatology."² The Social Gospel eschatology says "We are here to build the kingdom of God on earth." Universalist eschatology says "God intends all souls to be saved." Radically realized eschatology says "Paradise is here and now."

¹ Time magazine, April 25, 2011. On the cover: "What if there's no hell? A popular pastor's best-selling book has stirred fierce debate about sin, salvation and judgment" by Jon Meacham.

² *A House for Hope*, John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, Beacon Press, Boston, 2010, p. 6.

Ecclesiology is the theological term pertaining to religious community. Religious community provides the *sheltering walls* of the house of hope. Religious community constitutes the sheltering walls of the house of hope. “Two progressive theological claims stand out. First, congregations can be ‘communities of resistance’ – countercultural habitations in which people learn ways to survive and thrive that can resist and sometimes even transform an unjust dominant culture. Second, congregations can provide an embodied experience of covenant and commitment among people; they can foster freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence.”³

Soteriology means salvation, and it is the *roof* of the house of hope. “Recognizing and naming the limits of the traditional doctrine of the atonement is a defining feature of progressive Christianity. The classic doctrine of the atonement says violence will protect us.”⁴ Progressive religion says that our self-centeredness is what we need to be saved from.

Yet “Progressive women and theologians of color have gone further. They have noted that social systems often unequally distribute the imperative of sacrifice . . . Self-sacrifice is not sufficient to transform evil.”⁵ “Evil is that which exploits the lives of some to benefit the lives of others . . .” writes Rebecca Parker. “Evil can be neither denied nor destroyed. It is a perennial in the garden. It has to be astutely recognized and unmasked.”

Theology as such forms the *foundations* of the house of hope. Liberal theology maintains that the human conclusions about God are always provisional. Any fixed image is an idol. Religious liberals have, over 200 years, dismantled concepts of God as king and father. More recently, the concept of Goddess as mother has been dismantled since mother is not inclusive and since it’s Romanticism and not historical. Monotheism itself dies in depth psychology; polytheism may be making a comeback. The psychologist James Hillman writes in *The Myth of Analysis* that polytheism as a way to avoid religious monoculture.⁶

³ Page 37.

⁴ Page 63.

⁵ Page 68.

⁶ Notes taken during a “Postmodern Theologies” class with Rebecca Parker at Starr King School in 2003.

Continuing the list of dismantlings, liberal theologians dismantled concepts of God as white. They dismantled concepts of God being omniscient and unfeeling. Jewish theologian David Blumenthal says that “fighting with God is the only means by which human dignity can be asserted in the aftermath of the Holocaust.”⁷ Thanks to liberal theologians, God has become an idea, not a thing.

The *welcoming rooms* in the house of hope are formed by liberal theological anthropology and pneumatology, that is, by liberal theological views of human nature and sources of inspiration. Efforts promoting free public education, women’s rights, and the abolition of slavery gained momentum from liberal theologians. Religion is not about submission to authority but about enhancing conditions for the unfolding of human capacities.

I have mentioned the garden surrounding the house of hope, as well as its walls, roof, foundations, and rooms. I conclude with its threshold. Missiology is the theological term related to mission and evangelism. Rebecca Parker writes, “Finally, without pretending to any messianic powers, what is the mission of a liberal or progressive religious community? If it is not to bring others into one’s house to convert them to one’s own way of thinking, how can dialogue and partnership with others advance efforts to promote justice and compassion in this world?”⁸ The religious rubber meets the road in how we relate to the Others outside our theological house.

Liberal theologians urge us to see our house of hope as a site for hospitality, sometimes inviting others inside, and at other times, accepting invitations to visit their home. Liberal theology says that a house for hope is not a fortified castle but a lively inn – the place to go for companionship, refreshment, stimulating conversation, and connection with old friends, new friends, and friends yet to be.

This is a visual representation of my house of hope. [gesture to large painting on the stage] It is not a traditional house. The artist is our own Nick Livingston. When I saw this painting entitled

⁷ Page 95.

⁸ Page xiv.

“Tea Time with Picasso,” I thought, “This is my reality.” The art now resides in my office, and you are welcome to view it there any time.

My imagination fills in the context of the painting. The painting portrays a friendly encounter among multiple Others, human and nonhuman. The encounter takes place in a gazebo. [there is no actual gazebo shown in the painting] In my imagination, there is a small gazebo roof which protects guests from harsh sun and driving rain, yet the open air on the sides allows raindrops and a breeze to enter.

In this painting, it is not clear who is serving tea and who is being served. This resonates since I move in and out of transpersonal consciousness. Sometimes I serve tea and am served tea, all at the same time. What forces pushed or pulled these people across the threshold of the gazebo? A mixture of curiosity and obligation, I suspect. Here around the borders of the painting are various beings, perhaps Gods (and one dog, perhaps a dyslexic image for God). These beings (which may be parts of the personality) huff and puff and create competing sailing currents.

My house for hope is a site of creative chaos, a vibrant place that has room for alienation. For me, alienation and hope are two sides of the same coin. Tea, which Nick prefers over coffee, marks this place as an outpost of human connection within nature’s beauty and nature’s bounty. One guest is heading out to sea, perhaps bored, looking for salvation? Holding his cup, he apparently has salvation in mind for his tea, if not for himself.

What does it mean that my house for hope has no walls? Walls are religious community. Perhaps I am not anchored by particular religious communities. I am always curious about who else out there I might meet. In addition, I do not have a romanticized view of religious communities. I conclude with an excerpt from the words of Rebecca Parker which are used to welcome each new class of seminarians. This congregation’s ministries are shared between clergy and lay people. These words are for all of us.

“We are here at the threshold. *We* are here.

We who have crossed many thresholds already

to arrive at this space and time . .

[We are here at] the threshold of a house of hope

for greater justice and compassion in the world;

the threshold of a house of history

that can inform our present lives

and link us to a communion

that crosses the boundary of death;

the threshold of a house of preparation

for the thresholds we will lead others to cross,

for the thresholds yet to come,

for the thresholds the world stands on –

poised, now, as always

between the possibilities of violence

and the possibilities of peace.

Come, let us cross this threshold together.”⁹ Amen and blessed be.

⁹ Page 173.