



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“A Window on the World,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 30, 2011

Some years ago, the photographer Ruth Orkin published a book called *A World Through My Window*. It's a collection of pictures all taken through one window in the fifteenth-floor apartment she shared with her family on Central Park West in New York City. She began the project, she says, because she was there, in that apartment with a good view, raising children, being a housewife, for almost twenty-five years. Most people who see the book ask, “Were they really all taken from one window?” Orkin says she says sometimes she finds this hard to believe too. If you'd like to see her pictures, I've left her book on the table in the middle of the Murray Room, so you can check it out at coffee hour.

What are windows for? To look out of, that's for sure. And to let light and air in, of course. To bring the outside in, at least a little bit. When I was an English major in college, I spend a lot of time in a building called Greenlaw Hall, which housed the English department. On a campus with old brick buildings with tall windows, Greenlaw had only a narrow window at the corner of each classroom. It was built in 1970, during a tumultuous time on college campuses. They almost eliminated the windows, and they bolted the desks and chairs to the floor. The idea was to keep students from being distracted by any protests going on outside, and if they were, they couldn't use the furniture to barricade the doors, or toss it through the windows. It's an ugly building, but at least it's riot-proof!

Do you know what stained glass windows are for? They often illustrate passages from the Bible or the lives of saints. They served a teaching purpose back when most people were illiterate. Two of our windows represent two of the parables Jesus told--the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the prodigal son. It's no surprise that a Universalist church would choose these stories, both about the loving nature of God, to tell in its windows.

I have to imagine that stained glass windows also were chosen, kind of like those windows in Greenlaw Hall, to keep the outside out, to control the view from inside the church. That's one of the criticisms that the Puritans, and later the Unitarians, would make, and why they built their churches with clear glass windows. Those plain churches were built in a time when ornamentation and beauty were suspect--because they were seen as signs that the church spent too much on itself and was disconnected from the world.

But stained glass has a higher purpose than telling stories or hiding the everyday world. Have you ever been in one of great cathedrals of Europe? Even on a hot summer day when you walk in from the bright street, you enter a space that is cool, because of the thick stone walls; and vast, because of its height and length; and dark, because of the stained glass windows filtering the light. As your eyes adjust, you are bathed in light that is dominated by jewel tones--blue and purple and red. This is no accident. Those cathedrals were build to recreate that magic time of day that photographers live for--the time around dawn and dusk when the sun is beyond the horizon, and the sky is like velvet, blue and purple mostly, the time when the barrier between heaven and earth seems thinnest. Some cathedrals have ceilings painted a deep blue or purple, punctuated with golden stars. Stained glass wasn't meant so much to shut the world out as to simulate the world at its most beautiful, to recreate that liminal time and space which happens at dawn and dusk, that time, as any photographer knows, which is always fleeting.

What are windows for? Certainly they have a practical function, but windows are for more than that. They let the light in.

Kate Braestrup, chaplain to the Maine Warden's service, is a UU minister and author. She tells the story of a favorite professor, and what he taught her about windows. That professor, at Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine. was trying to impress on her class the idea, from the 20th century theologian Paul Tillich, that aspects of religion, the church, the saints and the Bible for example, are not the ultimate, but are transparent to the ultimate. But the class wasn't getting it.

So the professor said, "Imagine that a friend has come to visit my wife and me at our home. We find ourselves standing by the big picture windows that make up most of the living room wall. 'What a beautiful view,' the guest says.

"I say to my guest, 'What do you see?'"

The professor informs his class that the windows look out on the water, a marvelous setting, he says. "What does my guest see?" the professor asks the class.

One student says, "Water?"

"Yes! Brilliant!" the professor says. "Anything else?"

Other students chime in: Rocks... seagulls... seaweed... clouds... The professor beams.

"Splendid! Yes. But do you know what guest doesn't say? She does not say, 'I see a big pane of glass.'"

The professor continues, "The glass is what's closest to her eyes, isn't it? If you look at a window, you can generally see the glass, unless it is very, very clean. So why doesn't my guest say, 'I see glass'?"

"Because the glass is transparent," someone said.

“Exactly! The whole point of a window is that you look through it... to see what lies beyond it... this is what Tillich was trying to get at: Scripture is a window. A prayer is a window. The Bible is a window and even--thought Tillich got in trouble for saying so--Jesus was a window.”¹

Here, in this church, Jesus is a window--literally. Windows work because they are transparent--they illuminate. They let the light come through. But we humans forget this, and focus on the window rather than the light. If you read the gospels, you see that Jesus had power because we was deeply connect to, and always pointing toward, God. In Zen Buddhism there's a saying: "to point at the moon you need a finger, but woe to those who mistake the finger for the moon." Religions and spiritual practices are like that finger, they point us toward the light. But they are not the light.

That's what Forrest Church is saying in his image of the cathedral of the world.² Imagine yourself there, in that most amazing cathedral, built over the ages, still under construction, created with the sweat and tears, the love and hopes of humankind. Look around and see the countless windows, each one an attempt to portray the most profound of human experiences; each one different, each one a beautiful expression of the holy, the good, the true.

Forrest Church says we don't have long enough on this earth to contemplate more than a few of these windows. It doesn't serve one to be a tourist in the cathedral of the world, wandering around snapping pictures but never basking in the glow of any one window long enough to see its nuance and sense its complexity and really experience the light that is shining through. It's a fact of life that you can't do everything. Choosing to stand in one spot means there are others you won't get to explore. But it's also true that if you want to go deep in this life, you have to commit to standing somewhere.

That's why this is such a joyful day. Because Jen, Libby, Robyn, Corey, Jessica, Michael, Diane, Nancy and Rosalie have made the intentional commitment to be part of this church community, have planted their feet here, with us. To you newest members I want to say what I think you know already, but which bears repeating. We don't claim there is only one window. Look around you--we have a variety of styles here. We affirm that the diversity of creation is good, and holy, and that we are meant to inhabit and celebrate that diversity. So whether you are an artist or a scientist, a Christian, or a Pagan, or a Humanist, we welcome you. We affirm that life is not a solo journey, but rather, is best done in communion with others. We encourage you to share with us your hopes and fears, your doubts and beliefs. We need one another, and together we will go deeper on the journey.

I want to encourage each of you in this community to ask yourself, “What is my window on the world?” What are the experiences that inform your view--the circumstances of your birth and family, the religious and cultural life you inherited, the joys and sorrows that have shaped your life and added to its meaning? Does the window you grew up with still work for you? Or have you found a new window? Or maybe you're between windows, searching for the light.

¹ Kate Braestrup, *Marriage and Other Acts of Charity* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2010).

² The reading was from Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

If don't have an adequate window right now, don't despair. You just need to find the right one. And you've come to a good place. We're here to help you find your window, one by which you could happily spend your life. One through which you can apprehend the light of love and truth that some of us call God. One that filters the light enough so that you can behold it, with awe and wonder. My hope and prayer is that you will find your window, that you will plant your feet where there's a view that will inspire you and bless you and bring you into communion with others, so that you can lead a joyful and a helpful life.

That's why we're here. To be so full of light and love, that we are compelled to let our light shine among people, and help heal and bless our world.

"Glory be to God for dappled things," wrote the poet Gerald Manly Hopkins. Let us be thankful for light and for shadow; for these lives we have been given, for the Love that binds us one to another, for these beautiful and sacred windows through which we can see in dappled light the splendor of creation, and through which catch glimpses of the glory of God.

Amen.