

Faithful and Forgiving

Jamaica Plain, May 20, 2001, Rev. Terry Burke

Last month our family was in Ravenna, Italy travelling on my sabbatical grant. After viewing the wonderful 6th century Byzantine mosaics in that town, including those of the Empress Theodora and her attendants, Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote one of his most famous poems, "Sailing to Byzantium." Yeats regarded the Byzantine Empire as possessing the greatest cultural unity of the artistic, the religious, and everyday human life. Speaking of his own time and culture, Yeats writes in the poem:

"This is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arm, birds in trees...
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect."

Those "monuments of unaging intellect" can take the forms of living traditions of thought or artistic expression such as painting, music or architecture. Institutions also can have their own "unaging monuments." Today I will speak about some of the monuments I viewed on my sabbatical, and discuss our monuments as a religious institution.

Last March I spent a week in Moscow, an outpost of Byzantine culture, at one time dubbed the "Third Rome," following Rome, and Constantinople or New Rome. I chose not to photograph one of Moscow's most impressive buildings out of sensitivity to the feelings of my Russian hosts. The Liubliana, or KGB headquarters, is a monumental building about ten stories high. However, it has many more stories underground. I was told that a person taken to be interrogated in the underground floors would inevitably "go north" to the camps of the Gulag.

As you probably know, President Putin of Russia is a former head of the KGB. Russians would say to me, "Why are Americans so concerned that Putin was head of the KGB?"

Former President Bush was head of the CIA!" Still, the building has the look of weighty, massive, unforgiving paranoia, as if waiting to crush the smallest infraction. The thought of what went on in that building is chilling.

My Russian friends took me to a very different building soon after I arrived in Moscow. Christ the Savior Cathedral is a very different sort of monument from the Liubliana. The original cathedral was built over a period of 40 years in the late 19th century as a memorial to those who fought and died resisting Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia. In 1936, Stalin had the cathedral completely dynamited in only a few hours. His plan was to build a monumental palace of the people, but the site resisted all such attempts. Finally, a huge swimming pool was built on the spot. I was told that the pool was often the location for clandestine baptisms.

Recently, the Russian Church rebuilt the cathedral at the cost of over \$150,000,000. It's a beautiful building with bright, vibrant colors in the interior, but my initial reaction was, 'how can you spent so much money when old ladies are begging in the street for money for food?' Later, I asked my hosts, "How similar is this building to the one which was destroyed." I learned that using archives it was rebuilt exactly the same way as the building that Stalin had destroyed. For example, quarries were reopened in Italy to exactly match the marble of the former building. So the church remembers those who suffered in the terror of Stalin; it forgives, but it does not forget.

What are our monuments as a religious community? Certainly one would be this wonderful and historic building. We should be grateful to those who have worked so hard to preserve and maintain it. Another monument of our church is our living traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism. I want to especially mention today our Universalist heritage, which stressed the faithful and forgiving love of God, a love which sought the salvation and reconciliation of all people. As God was faithful and forgiving to us, so were we to be a faithful and forgiving as a community.

People can't get better at loving by themselves. Our community tries, however imperfectly, to embody that faithful and forgiving love of God in the daily, weekly, ongoing ordinary and divine tasks of congregational life. Those tasks include celebrating worship, marrying and burying and christening, educating and deepening in spiritual meaning and tradition, caring for our members, and helping to serve and transform the wider world.

Our church building is a monument in space, while our faithful and forgiving community is a monument in time. William Butler Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium" was published in a book entitled *The Tower*. The poet was then living in a Norman tower in Ireland, which he saw in Jungian terms as a symbol for a living spiritual tradition.

For me our church tower is not only a monument in space, but also a sign of that monument in time of our faithful and forgiving Unitarian Universalist community. I see its stones as representing many names past and present: Susanna Pemberton, who convinced her husband that there should be a church on the Jamaica Plain; Dr. William Gordon, our revolutionary minister; Emily Greene Balch, our Nobel Peace Prize laureate; Helen and Frank Holmes; Florie Povirk; Jon Laramore and Janet McCabe; Geoff Gevault and Ginny Roberts; Gretchen Lovas, ...and many more names, including our names. And the names of those we welcome today.

Our physical church tower is a sign of our church tower in time, and our living tradition of faithful and forgiving love. The quality of our loving and forgiving as a community is our ultimate monument.