

*A Sanctuary Heart*

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton

A modern Buddhist monk tells a story of having to build a stone wall for his monastery. This was not the sort of work to which he was accustomed, so he had a lot of learning to do, but he was a teacher and physicist in his earlier life so he knew how to learn. And learn he did – how to lay the foundation and build the wall and make it secure so that it would last. He carefully choose each stone and placed it exactly it should go, used cement and mortar so that would stay there, and by the end, he had created what most would consider to be a lovely and perfect wall.

After he finished, however, and stepped back and looked at his creation, he was mortified to see that two stones were out of place. They were inclined a little – not flat like the others, and they marred the entire rest of the wall for him. He couldn't stop looking at them, but it was also too late to fix them. There were stuck there. They were mistakes that would draw his eye to them every time he looked at the wall.

One time he was showing a visitor around the monastery, and the visitor commented on what a beautiful wall it was. The monk said, can't you see the two bad bricks in there? Don't you see how they spoil the entire wall? The visitor replied, yeah, I see those two bricks. I was noticing the other 998 though.

The monk who tells this story is named Ajahn Brahm and he is an abbot in a monastery in Australia. His story asks us to think about how we view what we and others make and create. Some of us are our own worst critics. There's always more to do; always something to fix, always opportunities for repair. And when we ourselves have created, or left, those blemishes to be seen, often we will see them first, and make sure others do too.

That's to say nothing of how we ourselves can see the blemishes of others and focus on them, and how others can mistreat us the same way. It's true that sometimes we are our own worst judges, but sometimes others can pretty bad at that too. And sometimes we judge others harshly as well. We would like to be more easy-going than the monk; accepting the imperfection with perspective and laughter instead of frustration. And we would like to be appreciative like the visitor, noticing the beauty and ignoring the mar.

For some, for many perhaps, these are skills to learn and attitudes to adopt. These are mindsets, and conditions of the heart, to cultivate and grow; accepting, even smiling, on the imperfection, and appreciating, out loud, the beautiful and good. These are things to practice until they're learned; to do until they're done naturally, to fake until they're authentic. For in that more embracing and grateful space, we can build something new; something with different flaws but with equal beauty; something that captivates us and serves a good purpose.

The “wall” part of the story stands out to me, for the visibility of walls in today's discourse, especially political discourse. I'm reminded of Ronald Rael, an architect who heard the US Government's request for ideas for a new border wall in the mid 2010's. He responded with a book: *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S. – Mexico Boundary*, that imagines many different kinds of borderwalls; a solar wall to help generate power, a teeter-totter wall that straddles the boundary and emphasizes interconnectedness and interdependence, a library wall where you can pass books back and forth, a giant xylophone wall where you can play music, even a confessional wall where you could confess to whoever who is on the other side. My favorite may have been the simple beauty of a cactus wall; just a long row of cactuses. He sums up his manifesto by writing:

“[But] a reframing of our borderwall as architecture is but one way of illustrating an ever more important goal: we must also work toward finding creative methods to raze the walls of racism, misogyny, homophobia, poverty, religious persecution, and fear that now more than ever define us as citizens of these divided states.”

Laura Markham, in her book, *A Map of Future Ruins: On Borders and Belonging*, calls Rael’s book and project “a form of protest, for to imagine such exultant utility of a border wall is to interrupt a border’s indifferent bifurcation.” It reminds us, as Emerson wrote, that “every wall is a door.” Or can be, at least, if approached creatively and with that intent. The monk’s wall became a door to acceptance and appreciation. And the border wall was among other mindsets and instruments proposed in this country that became doors for a committed and creative approach in our congregation toward offering justice and compassion to those from others countries, here now, who need assistance.

That ministry took an initial form of offering sanctuary to those at risk of unjust deportation, a ministry affirmed by the members of our congregation. When that need never manifested in the ways we thought it would in the late 2010’s, the ministry would become that of offering temporary housing, in partnership with a group that focuses its efforts in this area, so that refugees or asylum-seekers would have somewhere safe to stay while they set their lives up here. That did happen, with many surprises and lessons learned though out the process.

The ministry was successful; it blessed in ways we couldn’t have imagined. It was generous and committed and grew the good within and among us and our neighbors. That ministry was complicated, and sorting through those complications will be the work before us as we continue serving in the area. That ministry was led and continues to be led by dedicated, resilient, and incredibly loving lay leaders who represent the best holy impulses within each of us, and who made manifest the real power of Unitarian Universalism in the world. This is not the power of proclamation; instead it’s the power to directly and actively bless lives around us. The great power of our faith is not in our words. It’s to do, act, and enliven the good in the world.

The power of our faith is centered in the congregation’s call and determination to be of hope, love, justice, and joy in a world that often lacks all of that. Our great power is to bless, not berate, and to build doors into walls and bridges out of barriers and expand the common ground, aligned with our Universalist faith that all ground is common ground and our Unitarian ideal of a fundamental unity in life. This comes alive in congregations like ours, when good people surround a good idea and build it up into something great, even when that something great looks different than what we had initially imagined. And we don’t really know with this ministry what that “something great” will turn into next. That will take some discernment and exploration. One thing I’m sure of is that we don’t know all we need to know, yet, about what is next. And the other thing I’m sure of is that something will be next, and it’ll be generous, creative, and important.

And the last thing I’m sure of is that the next expression of our Immigration and Sanctuary ministry will be one that, like everything we’ve done so far, we’ll do together. We’ll be committed to one another so that as we build our ministries; this and all of them, we knit our lives together as well. That’s the blessing that outlives the event, or program, or whatever stage we’re in at whatever point we are. We build together, and having served in love and grown in spirit, we then hear that voice during a brunch, we see that face in worship; we come to know their families and interests, and they, ours, and our lives more connected than they were. There’s friendship, affection, and a sense of unity that lives well beyond the moment of any given ministry. That’s the blessing we get, and it’s the blessings that builds and builds and builds, for in each ministry, we are reminded until we believe it that we are not alone. And that we are important. And that we

can create great expressions of justice and compassion in the world. And that we can expand the care that we have for and with one another to bless beyond every wall; imagined and real.

And like the monk's wall, what we build will never be perfect. But it's the imperfect wall that becomes a door, or a pathway, or a fallen barrier whose rubble reminds us of the overwhelming and undefeatable love within the human condition. The love that answers fear with faith; despair with hope, powerlessness with the assurance of how strong we are when we serve in love, together. The love that answers every evil with human words, human acts, human groups working together for the good, and the true, and the free. The love, enlivened by this congregation and others that acts to bless the world every day, in countless ways.

And with that, the walls in our heart can fall as well, and the walls in our minds, and the walls we've constructed between ourselves and our neighbors. We can look at those little openings, those imperfections, those uneven bricks, and see not errors but opportunities to further chip away at them. To make them fall. To speak with love of whoever we wall off in our hearts until we believe it, and the walls come tumbling down.

And then our love, like the Source of love, becomes bigger, broader, and better. It's the kind of love that catches on; that transforms and heals us, and through us, all our relations. It's worth serving, and growing, and sharing, for it saves and frees us from lives of anger and division. And we build it best together, perfectly imperfectly, dreaming big, working hard, learning, and as often as we can, laughing, as we go.

May we learn, laugh, and serve in love together, in ways we can imagine right now, and in ways that we can't. May our love and service never be perfect, but always good; always hopeful; and always opening new doors of life, freedom, and community.

Amen.