

The Empty Church

Readings: 'Take Love for Granted' by Jack Ridl
'Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks' by Jane Kenyon

Once upon a time. Isn't that how all the best stories begin? And today, I have one of the best stories for you, one of the best stories from our Universalist tradition. Some people even call it a miracle story, so unlikely it was to have unfolded this way.

Anyway, once upon a time, or, to be more precise, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, on the coast of New Jersey in a village appropriately called Good Luck, there lived a man named Thomas Potter. He was a farmer and a Universalist. He believed that everyone is saved, that God loves everyone—no exceptions, that everyone is going to heaven. We modern Unitarian Universalists have a variety of views on the existence of God. When Universalism was new, it was a movement within Protestantism. It was a rejection of a judgmental, angry God and the belief in a God of love. Even though some of our beliefs about God have changed, our belief in love has remained constant through the centuries.

Thomas became a Universalist around 1744. No one is quite sure how he came to his belief. Scholars think he might have been converted to Universalism by missionaries from a German religious commune in Eastern Pennsylvania. He also could have become Universalist through his own reflections on the Bible, which others read to him as he was illiterate. There were also some Universalist Baptists in other parts of New Jersey, so perhaps they helped him find or sustain his faith.¹

Though there were other Universalists within a few days travel, Thomas Potter was the only Universalist in Good Luck. What would you do if you lived in a town with no others who shared your faith? This was long before the church-by-mail and the online congregation that keep some of our more far-flung coreligionists connected to Unitarian Universalism. What did Thomas do? He built his own church. He set aside some land and constructed a small one-room meetinghouse. It was an act of faith. Perhaps he was like Ray Kinsella, the lead character in *Field of Dreams* and was in his field one day and heard a mysterious voice say, "if you build it, he will come." He was so dedicated to his life-giving, life-saving faith that he would do whatever he could for it – and building an empty church was what he could do.

And then his church built, Thomas Potter waited. And waited. And waited. He hoped and prayed that someday, a Universalist preacher would preach in his church. In the meantime, he let his neighbors use his building for their religious services.

Then, one day, ten years after the construction of his church, the hoped-for and prayed-for

¹Morgan, John C. "About Thomas Potter." *Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.murraygrove.org/#!thomas-potter-story/cizo>

preacher appeared. John Murray was an Englishman hoping to start a new life. In his native land, he had been a Universalist lay preacher and it had not gone well for him. He was excommunicated from the Methodist church where he had been a member. He struggled to find work and became very poor. Both his wife and his child became very sick. The family had no money for the medical care they needed. John's wife and child died. Broke and heartbroken, John decided to flee to the North American colonies and start a new life, leaving behind the Universalist theology that had caused him so much trouble.

And then, a series of events so unlikely that miracle might be the best word to describe them. The ship that was to take him to New York City ran aground on the coast of New Jersey, not far from Thomas Potter's farm. The ship's captain sent John Murray ashore to look for food, as supplies were running out on board. And John Murray, of course, found Thomas Potter. They got to talking. Thomas Potter gave John Murray enough food to sustain the ship's passengers and crew for a few days. And John Murray mentioned to Thomas Potter that he had been a Universalist preacher in England.

Thomas Potter was so excited. At last, the long-awaited the long hoped-for and prayed-for Universalist preacher had arrived! Thomas quickly invited John to preach in his church next Sunday – three days off. John Murray was torn. He had promised that he was not going to preach anymore, as Universalism had led to so much heartbreak for him back in England. And yet, Thomas was so excited to hear him preach. John came to what he thought was a compromise. He told Thomas that if the winds hadn't changed and the ship was still stuck on Sunday, he would preach in Thomas's church.

And Thomas, full of faith, replied, "The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God." ²

On Friday the winds did not change. On Saturday morning, the winds did not change. On Saturday evening the winds did not change and Thomas invited his neighbors to hear Universalist preaching the next morning. On Sunday morning, the winds did not change. John preached to a full house in that small, usually empty church. And, as the service ended, a sailor came running to the church with the news that the winds had changed. John returned to the ship and continued on his way to New York City.

That Sunday morning at Thomas Potter's church changed John Murray's plans, changed the trajectory of his life, and changed the history of Universalism in America. John Murray realized that this faith filled his life with meaning. He needed to stand by this faith. He was going to continue to preach Universalism. After arriving in New York, he quickly turned back to Good Luck and spent several years preaching at Thomas Potter's church and in the surrounding area. He later started a congregation in Gloucester, Massachusetts, one of the first Universalist churches in this country. He was involved in a landmark case establishing the separation of

²"Story of Thomas Potter and John Murray". *Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.murraygrove.org/#!thomas-potter-and-john-murray-story/c1jzf>

church and state in this country and disestablishing the Unitarian church, but that's another story for another day.

John Murray is usually the hero of this story, perhaps because much of our denominational history is written by and for clergy and we like to see ourselves as the heroes. John Murray is usually considered the father of Universalism in America—even though Thomas Potter and others clearly show that there were Universalists on this continent long before John arrived. Then, over the centuries, that Universalism grew and changed and merged with the Unitarians and became the Unitarian Universalist faith that binds us together today. And Thomas Potter's church grew into a congregation of more than one person. The original church has long since been torn down to make room for more people. It became a Methodist Church for a while, but is now back in Unitarian Universalist hands and is part of a retreat center on the Jersey Shore. It's called the Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center. Again, John Murray gets all the press.

I think Thomas Potter is actually the hero of this story. The act of building a church where your faith might be practiced – even if you don't know if anything will ever come of your building – is a powerful act of courage and faith. He gave up some of his livelihood – as he built his church on some of his farmland—for his faith, for our faith.

It is hard to not see parallels between Thomas Potter's small one-room building personal project and the recent building expansion here at People's Church. You all chose to make your building more accessible and to add meeting and classroom space. You built to better serve your faith and serve one another. You are modern-day Thomas Potters.

In this congregation, there is a wide variety of beliefs about God. Some you have told me that you are thirsty to hear of God more in our services while others have made it clear that God is not a relevant concept to you. Today is a day for those of you who thirst for God, as there is no way to talk about our Universalist heritage without talking a lot about God. I trust that those of you for whom God is not part of how you make meaning can find meaning in powerful stories of our history of radical faith and commitment to love, can find meaning in stories of people who have taken bold action their quest for truth, that you can find meaning in knowing that the God-thirst of others in our community is being quenched today.

The thing that made our Universalist ancestors distinct from other Christians—and they were part of the Christian tradition, a radical part of it—was their beliefs about the nature of God. Thomas Potter lived in an era when the most popular sermon, a sermon published and passed around in pamphlets was Jonathan Edwards' 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' Thomas Potter lived in an era when most people believed in an angry God, a judgmental God that would cast people into eternal torment for the slightest transgression. The most prominent religious leaders of the day asserted that heaven was an exclusive club that only the elect would enter after death. The rest of us, the overwhelming majority, would spend eternity in hell, suffering forever.

The first Universalists on this continent offered a radical alternative to the predominant theology of their era. They believed in a God that was not angry, but loving; a God that was not judgmental, but forgiving. They believed in a heaven that was not exclusive, but expansive. They believe that hell, if it exists, is empty. They described their faith as 'the larger hope' as it offered hope that all would be saved.

Meister Eckhart was a German monk who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries. He is one of the greatest of the Christian mystics. He believed that it is the nature of God to give birth, 'over and over, eternally, in every human soul that will make room.' Eckhart urges each of us to prepare the perfect setting for these divine births, to prepare nests or even mangers. He calls people of faith to empty their souls of all ego and attachments and turn the resulting space over entirely to God.³ God will then fill the emptiness with something new.

Thomas Potter prepared a setting for God to give birth more literally than most. His nest, his manger was an empty church awaiting a preacher. Thomas Potter built a church to serve the loving God he believed in, the holy love that surrounds us always and will not let us go. We inherit this tradition of serving love. He also figuratively built that nest for new birth. He knew the church building would never be enough to build a worshipping community. He needed someone to articulate to his friends and neighbors the saving faith that filled Thomas' life with meaning. He held that space, that empty church and empty nest and waited and waited and waited.

And how do we prepare room in our hearts for God, for love, for our sources of reason and radiance to birth something new? Again, as a people, you have the literal part down, you have added to this building making nests and mangers. So much has been birthed here by God or people or some combination of the two – ideas and collaboration in meetings, learning and connection in religious education classes, work in offices, gatherings in air conditioned spaces in the warmer months, and immeasurable amounts of meaning, of joy, of service.

The non-literal mangers and nests are harder to build but probably even more important. How do we create a space within us for the new and the holy to emerge?

To create an empty nest, an empty manger, an empty church within us, we need to stop worshipping at the altar of busyness. So many of us run all day from one thing to the next to the next. This seems to be almost a universal experience in our community. I know this about you because when we try to schedule meetings we pencil them in three weeks out because that is when we can find the time. I know this about you because when these meetings finally happen, we begin by saying how busy and full our lives are. I know this about you because of conversations during coffee hour and what you post on facebook. I know this about you

³ Barbara Ehrenreich. *Living with a Wild God: A Nonbeliever's Search for the Truth about Everything*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014. page 224

because this is my story too. We try not to let the worship of busyness suck us in. We try to remember that busyness isn't our highest value. Sometimes, we are more successful at this than at other times.

And because it is my story, I haven't found the solution to this busyness, but there is a mantra that is helping me. I heard this first at the Religious Education Retreat this fall and I believe it was originally coined by People's Church's own Bob Wallis. The mantra is "do less that means more." And yes, I fully recognize the irony of encouraging you all to do less. This congregation would not last a day without the efforts of hundreds of volunteers. I hope that your efforts here to serve this community mean more to you, that they help you explore and live your faith, that they help you serve your highest values.

When we do less that means more, we are creating empty space in our lives, empty space in our hearts. When we do less that means more, we are inviting our egos and attachments to step aside and creating room for our deepest values, the love that holds all of us, maybe even God to birth something new in us. When we do less than means more, we are gifted with beauty, wisdom and courage. When we do less that means more, when we build that metaphorical empty church, we create openings for amazing coincidences and maybe even miracles, the first chapter of stories that might be told 250 years from now.

So in this moment, sources of reason and radiance, courage and compassion, God of Grace and God of Glory, Source of Love that drew Thomas Potter and John Murray together centuries ago, be with us as we make room in our church and in our souls for the holy to do its work. Help us to do less that means more. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour and for the living of these days.

May it be so.

May we make it so.

Amen.