

First Unitarian Worship

August 7, 2022

Opening Remarks by Rod Haynes

Good morning. I bring warm salutations from Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, Bellingham, Washington. Allow me to first thank Reverend Liz, the History committee, and the entire congregation here at First Unitarian Church. I feel like I am reuniting with an old friend in this sanctuary. It feels great.

In the summer of 1999, during an interview at his home on Martha's Vineyard, U.S. historian David McCullough mourned "the 60 or 70% of our American people who are historically illiterate." He invoked the words of University of Chicago American Historian, the late Daniel Boorstin, who said (I am paraphrasing here) that a country in search of itself, without the knowledge of its history, is like planting a bunch of cut flowers in the ground and expecting them to bloom. I think the history of the First Unitarian Church warrants periodic "watering."

This morning I will share my memories of the catastrophic fire here on August 23, 1966. I was 10 years old then. I'm almost 67 now. I hope you will consider the passage of time, my faulty memory, and my reliance on sentimentality when sharing my stories. Civil War writer Shelby Foote cited historians' proclivity for confusing fact for truth, too often using them interchangeably. Facts are facts. They remain facts, indisputable reality, down through time. A terrible fire happened here on August 23, 1966, an historical fact. Truth on the other hand, is one's own personal take on facts under scrutiny. Truths are not always constant, not impermeable. Truths evolve or disappear. Politicians, for example, preach truths that often prove anything but. My truth about the First Unitarian Church fire is not the same story told by my late father, restoration architect and prolific painter Irving B. Haynes and the leadership of this church. It couldn't be. In 1972, five years after the fire was extinguished, Dad and the church leaders issued a detailed final report. It was and remains a comprehensive enough document explaining the intricate, complex steps by the architects, the 40 some odd contractors, Reverend Schacht, church leadership and church committees, and historical consultants who together collaborated in restoring this church. Future researchers will find it much easier to understand what went on here in the 1960s, because of the thoroughness of this text. My story, in contrast, not only incorporates firemen and flames, the resilience of the congregation, the commendable professionalism of the restoration teams, and how the church emerged intact, even stronger in spirit once the restoration was complete. I acknowledge borrowing from the 1972 final report when compiling my message today. I also intend to explain the relevance of First

Unitarian Church to me, before, during, and after the fire was extinguished. Organized religion in general is on a precipitous decline these days. It does not have to be this way. This church of the 1960s and 1970s will always be a vital part of me. I will explain more a little later. For now, I offer two caveats. Native American poet Simon Ortiz writes, "there are no truths, only stories." Lastly, one of my favorite rock and roll stars, Keith Richards, of the Rolling Stones wrote in his memoir LIFE that, "Memory is fiction." Consider yourselves forewarned. Thanks again.

Sermon – "Up From the Ashes"



The First Unitarian Church in Providence RI was the crowning achievement of celebrated architect John Holden Greene. Erected in 1816, the steeple instantly became a prominent feature of the city's East Side skyline. Greene's homes were distinguished by roof and portico balustrading, embracing the Neo-classical style known as Federal architecture. Greene designed a series of Providence's finest early 19th century homes and public buildings which still stand today, including his own home, as do some of his edifices in Savannah, Georgia. In early 1966 the church celebrated its 150th anniversary by renovating portions of the structure, including installing a new carpet in the Meeting House. The congregation then was largely comprised of blue-bloods and their families, from the East Side: college professors, medical doctors, attorneys, and the like. Only a few short months later, on August 23, the church took a direct hit from a lightning bolt during a ferocious summer storm, the bolt traveling down the steeple tower into the Meeting House, obliterating the old pipe organ and blasting burning embers and red-hot organ pipes onto the main floor below. The organ could be considered ground zero, as far as where the fire began.

The fire burned undetected for 30 minutes in the vicinity of the organ overlooking the Meeting House below, while flames quickly made their way up the steeple. The gilded chandelier dropping from the crown molding looming high above the floor in the meeting house suffered damage, but somehow it remained in place. By the time an assistant to the Sexton entered the Meeting House, flames had already destroyed the organ and made their way back up the steeple, attacking the old timbers and trusses supporting the tower. As the first firefighting units arrived, the greatest concern was the church bell in the tower, reportedly the single largest bell ever manufactured by a foundry owned by Paul Revere. The weight of the bell could bring down the steeple if it fell. From the outset, the firefighters confronted multiple problems. There were major fires both in the Meeting House and in the tower. How best to attack the tower fire was the greatest concern. Again, the possibility of the bell plummeting down into the Meeting House, was quite real and for that reason firemen were not permitted to climb the steeple's interior. Until circumstance improved fighting the steeple fire was restricted to the exterior. The conflagration was made much worse when a door to the meeting house was opened and a huge draft of fresh air rushed up inside the tower to stoke the fire. Major reflashes or even explosions happen when an oxygen-starved fire is suddenly boosted by a large supply of oxygen introduced to the space.

In the 1960's my Dad owned a fledgling architecture firm in Providence. Our family lived in Limerock, a small colonial village 15 miles to the north. On the afternoon of the fire, the telephone in the kitchen rang. Dad picked it up, paused, and exclaimed, "Yes. I'm on my way now." He quickly hung up, calling upstairs to Mom, "Helen, that was Bob Schacht. He needs me at the church. The steeple was hit by lightning. There's a bad fire. Don't hold dinner for me." He looked over at me. I was eating an apple. He asked, "Want to come?"

"Yes, yes, wait for me, Dad," I shouted, running to the mudroom to grab my baseball cap. Seconds later we were rattling down Wilbur Road in Dad's tan-colored Volkswagen Beetle towards Providence. Parking next to Brown University's main campus, we walked half-way down College Hill, finding a crowd of firetrucks crawling with firemen in full gear, pre-staging equipment on Benevolent Street. The place was going crazy.

Police cars parked at crazy angles held back growing crowds of spectators. Acrid smoke swirled around the scene, giving off the strong smell of wet charcoal. The storm had weakened slightly, leaving a light rain falling with intermittent rumbles of thunder in the background. The air had a strange, almost tropical feel, heavy and extremely moist, crackling with electric energy. When I look back the sights and

smells of the fire, it's weird. It was like wearing yellow sunglasses because the whole scene seemed to be tinged yellow, but it wasn't. I just recall it that way. Dad grabbed a cop, explaining we needed to find Rev Bob Schacht. He nodded, "Okay, come on. He's looking for you, too."

Dad squatted down to shake a finger in my face, shouting above the din of sirens and chaos. "This is *dangerous*, Rod. Stay right with me. NO wandering off." I vigorously nodded. "Okay, here we go," he said, standing up and grabbing my hand.

We followed the policeman towards the church parking lot where we found the minister, anxiously gazing up at the stricken steeple. Dr. Schacht said, "Ah, there you are, Irving. I hear John D'Abate [Chairman of the Church Buildings Committee] made it to the basement to shut down the furnace gas lines, so that's good. Oh, just look at this mess!" Dad placed his hand on Dr. Schacht's shoulder, nodding. In the 1972 final report my father recalled his first impressions at the scene:

The writer of this report was one of the many spectators watching the frustrating battle to save the tower [steeple]. . . It was a magnificent and elegant spectacle—great plumes of smoke gently blowing off the tower while graceful fountains of water arched up from the hoses—a mournful vision in grays, lavenders, and silvers with great beams of light moving back and forth, up and down, illuminating now the tower, now the smoke and catching the great streams of water . . .the spectacle was punctuated with oohs and aahs from the spectators as yellow, orange, and red flames would suddenly send a tongue licking out through a cornice from the raging inferno inside..”

Standing beside Dad, I heard Reverend Schacht murmur, "What do you think, Irving? Is it coming down?" I felt sad and suddenly frightened.

Dad didn't know. "They need to get those hoses down inside the steeple right now to get at the flames and reduce the heat eating at those timbers. The bad news is doing that allows oxygen into the steeple to feed the flames. The whole thing *could* go." The firefighters hacked through layers of shingling and thick glass the original builders had installed throughout the tower to withstand New England's brutal climate. In one sense, the final report noted, the progress of the fire inside the steeple helped the firemen hack their way through the exterior shingles by weakening the interior. Firehoses were fed through those crude openings to douse the fire with high pressure water pouring straight down the steeple's interior.

The drama continued. Fire ladders leaned against two sides of the church. Firemen dressed in rubber from head to toe and covered in water and soot as hot smoke

enveloped them, had to step across an open space 250 feet above the ground with one hand on the ladder, then grab something solid on the burning steeple, secure themselves, and only then cut a hole to feed the hoses inside. The resulting water damage would no doubt be extensive, but the only thing that mattered now was extinguishing the blaze. Everything else was secondary. It was a race against time. Miraculously, the steeple stayed in place as the hard work went on, giving Dad and Dr. Schacht hope. Tears from the stinky, choking smoke filled my eyes, but I stayed right beside Dad, admiring those firefighters' risking life and limb to save the old church. I was surprised to see Mom and my sister Libby suddenly appear in the crowd behind the crowd control rope, in the distance. We all looked on as the battle raged. Working in tandem, teams inside the Meeting House and on the steeple-tower slowly beat the angry flames into submission. Water poured out of the Benefit Street entrance to the church in torrents, with firemen wading up stream into a black, soupy mess that only recently had been the main floor and organ balcony areas.

The steeple, heavily scarred by broken windows and pock-marked by fire axe holes in its sides, stood defiantly in place, steady trails of smoke seeping from new orifices up and down the structure. As twilight slipped into uneasy darkness, a fireman in the bell tower struck the church bell with his fire axe, triumphantly signaling the fire was out. Less than a week later weather reports of a hurricane creeping up the eastern seaboard required more scaffolding and reams of heavy plastic to be wrapped around the steeple, its pitiful temporary appearance unrecognizable from its former grand self.

First Unitarian Church archives relate the congregation's reaction to the disaster:

Although Dr. Schacht had been looking forward to retirement, he threw himself into the work of restoring the Meeting House. The decision to do a complete restoration of the damaged sanctuary, rather than merely repair it, was made after a very short debate. Of course, this was the more expensive route to take, but in light of the church's designation as part of a national historic monument, there was little resistance. This decision, however, meant that additional funds were needed to supplement the insurance claim, since much of the restoration work to be done was due to the passage of time, desired structural changes, and expensive reproduction of the plasterwork on the ceiling, and not simply to fire and water damage. In addition, a new organ had to be purchased and installed. The congregation rose to the challenge. A short but enthusiastic capital fund drive was held and quickly raised over \$200,000 (the equivalent of \$1.5 million today.) With the

insurance money and some funds from the endowment, the church was able to cover the total cost of \$760,500.

While I am not sure, Dad's bid on the church restoration project was likely a long shot. His experience in leading a complex restoration job was limited, though he had already established a toehold in the Providence architecture scene. Historic preservation had gained momentum in the early 1960s in east coast towns and cities, but there wasn't that much expertise for him to draw from, nor was there much documentation in the church's possession offering a technical "road map" as he began his work. Antoinette Downing, a leading figure in historic preservation in those days, was indispensable to Dad's success, he wrote in the report. Dad sub-contracted with thirty or forty specialty firms and businesses from Boston to Philadelphia, including numerous Providence-area contractors. His commitment to historical integrity and his and his associates' superior organizational skills helped ensure the ultimate success of the project. He learned and applied new knowledge and guidance in rapid succession. In the final report Dad said he felt John Holden Greene looking over his shoulder as the project progressed. One of the greatest challenges was ensuring the restoration would remain true to Greene's aesthetics, while incorporating necessary modern safety features and materials not available to Greene. The plentiful oak and chestnut supply Greene had at his disposal in 1816 had all but disappeared from the American landscape by the late 20th century. Dad wrote in the final report:

The artistic aims and goals of this project were, 'simple,' to restore as correctly as possible the fabric of the church to a sound condition appearing as closely as possible to what might have been when John Holden Greene finished it . . . [at the project's outset] the church was faced with the full range of problems: restoration of the historic fabric, major structural repairs from the fire damage, and from various aging elements; introduction of new supporting systems [sprinklers, ventilation, etc.]; and renovations to accommodate dated church programs . . ."

When the project was completed in late 1968, the results were widely praised in political, professional, and media circles. The spirit of the First Unitarian Church of Providence infuses the chapters of my life in numerous ways. Memorial services, marriages, Christmas pageants, long-standing friendships, and the enduring history of the church is very much part of who I am. Daria and I were married here by my

sister Holly, a Unitarian minister. Holly was married at the church 35 years ago. The church is in my marrow.

My story of the First Unitarian Church fire is not only about my father finding his professional niche in restoration architecture and gaining increased recognition for his contributions in Providence, though that did happen. The larger tale is how an architecture firm unfamiliar with the craft of historic restoration, joined over 40 subcontractors, obtained guidance from specialists in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, while employing the congregation's enthusiastic support of the project, to produce the final quality product that was achieved. The revitalized church infused pride in Providence with the refurbished steeple gracing the East Side skyline once again. The church's restoration spurred other restoration projects by drawing attention from the media and wealthy supporters. Lastly, it is important to note that the final report of the project, published in 1972 (five years later) was not intended only for the consumption of church leaders of that time. The report is a detailed road map for future architects and congregations. The work required on-the-spot innovation, while maintaining the integrity and aesthetics of John Greene's original vision. Sketches by Cornelius DeBoer, Dad's eventual partner at the firm, are the only known documents for much of the detailed interior and exterior so critical to future researchers and project managers. We should not take for granted the innovative skills, and tremendous collaborative effort that brought the project to its successful conclusion. It was truly well done by all parties involved in the effort.