

THE CATHEDRAL OF THE WORLD

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Forrest Church

As far as I can reckon it, this is about my 10th farewell sermon. I've turned this genre into a very successful groove.

About this time last year, I was measuring the life remaining to me, if not in coffee spoons, certainly not in years. Diagnosed in February with incurable stage 4 cancer, by May, I had lost twenty-five pounds. Death hovered closer every day, or certainly seemed to. But then the tables reversed. I gained all my weight back and began feeling better physically. Meanwhile, the tumors, scattered throughout my lungs and liver, dwindled to almost nothing. For almost fourteen months, from early February 2008 to about a month ago when we learned that my tumors had finally outwitted the experimental therapy designed to thwart them, I lived in a kind of suspended animation. My death interrupted, life became timeless. Near the end of this welcome hiatus, a year dedicated in part to reading hundreds of books—by the way, it's like dying and going to heaven—I got the itch to write another one myself.

Under the expansive canopy of my ministerial calling, I've been blessed with three distinct vocations: as your pastor first and foremost, but also as an historian and as a liberal theologian. In early 2007, during recovery from my cancer operation, I finished the sprawling narrative history I'd always hoped to write, In God We Trust: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle over Church and State. This accomplishment rounded off the first of my vocational trajectories, launched more than thirty years earlier when I received my doctoral degree in church history.

Love & Death completed a second arc, summing up what I had learned during my three-decade tenure here at All Souls. I loved writing that book. It offered me a final pastoral opportunity. And it gave me the chance to ponder life and death from a new, more intimate perspective. There was only one problem. When my renewed lease on life made it possible for me to consider writing one more “final” book, Love & Death didn't naturally lend itself to a sequel.

Only one genre of my work remained incomplete. Over all these years, I had not systematically scored out my universalist theology. I'd never gathered my

thoughts on religion, faith, and God in a single volume. So I decided to seize this unanticipated gift of time to frame my theological teachings. The Cathedral of the World, which will come out next fall, completes the arc of my third vocation—as a universalist theologian.

Assuming that role this morning, while offering you a sneak preview of my final final book, let me take you on a brief initial journey. We shall walk together to the water's edge and follow the light of the moon wherever it may lead.

We are standing on the shoreline of a mountain lake, moonlight lapping against our boot tips, mesmerized by the golden carpet laid out across the lake as if lowered from the heavens just for us to the very place we stand. Before us, along the moon's glorious trail, we can see all the way to the lake's rocky bottom. Above the sunken branches, we watch the water dance and sparkle, a rack of moonbeams on each ripple's crest. Across the lake, where the moon is rising, our path turns to liquid gold.

Standing on the shore some distance to our right a man contemplates the same view, yet appears shrouded in darkness. To our left stands a woman, her silhouette all but obscured by the blackness that envelops her.

Pondering these two apparently benighted people, we wonder to ourselves, "What can they possibly be thinking? They stand encompassed by darkness, the lake before them, flat and lifeless. If only they would join us at the foot of the moon's luminous path, they too could bathe in celestial light."

Henry David Thoreau once chastised the Florentine artist and adventurer Benvenuto Cellini for mistaking the aura he saw surrounding his shadow on a dew-drenched day as a special sign of divine recognition. In the moonlight, we experience a like illusion, as do (unbeknownst to us) the man and woman to our right and left. Judging only by what they see, they too may feel themselves uniquely illumined. To their eyes, it is their other neighbor and we who languish in darkness.

Expressive of both the wonder and danger of religion, on the one hand, the moon's golden light extends a path across the lake to the feet of everyone who stands under the spell of its supernal glow; on the other, given that each onlooker sees only his or her own golden pathway, all others standing in apparent darkness, we are left with the impression that we walk the one true path alone, whereas those who fail to join us are lost. Here nature can serve as our theological tutor. She reminds us that, in almost every way that matters, we and our most distant neighbor, sprung from a single source and sharing the same destiny, are one. This revelation, drawn from the book of nature and nature's God, encapsulates the essence of universalist theology. To perceive things as they are, not merely as they appear, we must view them with parallax vision. We must imagine seeing them through others' eyes as well as through our own.

That then is one metaphor for a 21st Century Universalist theology. My new book pivots on another one, making much the same point in a slightly more nuanced way. I call it the Cathedral of the World.

Imagine awakening one morning from a deep and dreamless sleep to find yourself in the nave of a vast cathedral. Like a child newborn, untutored save to moisture, nurture, rhythm, and the profound comforts at the heart of darkness, you open your eyes onto a world unseen, indeed unimaginable, before. It is a world of light and dancing shadow, stone and glass, life and death. This second birth, at once miraculous and natural, is in some ways not unlike the first. A new awakening, it consecrates your life with sacraments of pain you do not understand and promised joy you will never fully call your own.

Such awakenings may happen once in a lifetime or many times. But when they do, what before you took for granted is presented as a gift: difficult, yet precious and good. Not that you know what to do with your gift, or even what it really means, only how much it matters. Awakening to the call stirring deep within you, the call of life itself, the call of God, you begin your pilgrimage.

Before you do, look about you. Contemplate the mystery and contemplate with awe. This cathedral is as ancient as humankind, its cornerstone the first altar, marked with the tincture of blood and blessed by tears. Search for a lifetime (which is all you are surely given) and you shall never know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with your gaze. The builders have worked from time immemorial, destroying and creating, confounding and perfecting, tearing down and raising up arches in this cathedral, buttresses and chapels, organs, theaters and chancels, gargoyles, idols and icons. Not a moment passes without work being begun that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who constructed it, or the expectant worshipers. Throughout human history, one generation after another has labored lovingly, sometimes fearfully, crafting memorials and consecrating shrines. Untold numbers of these collect dust in long undisturbed chambers; others (cast centuries or eons ago from their once respected places) lie shattered in chards or ground into powder on the Cathedral floor. Not a moment passes without the dreams of long-dead dreamers being outstripped, crushed, or abandoned, giving way to new visions, each immortal in reach, ephemeral in grasp.

Welcome to the Cathedral of the World.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of grime, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of

humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the Cathedral are where the Light shines through.

As with all extended metaphors for meaning, this one is imperfect. The Light of God (Truth or Being Itself, call it what you will) shines not only in upon us, but also out from within us. Together with the windows, we are part of the Cathedral, not apart from it. We comprise an interdependent web of being. The Cathedral is constructed out of star stuff, and so are we. We are that part (that known part) of the creation that contemplates itself. Because the Cathedral is so vast, our life so short and our vision so dim, we are able to contemplate only a bit of the Cathedral, explore a few apses, reflect on the play of light and darkness through a few of its myriad windows. Yet, since the whole is contained in each of the parts, as we ponder and act on the insight from our ruminations, we may discover insights that will invest our days with meaning.

A twenty-first century theology based on the concept of one Light and many windows offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring multiple religious approaches, it only excludes the truth-claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the Light shines through their window only. Some, as we know from painful recent experience, go so far as to beseech their followers to throw stones through other people's windows.

Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshipers, they conclude that there is no Light. But the windows are not the Light. They are where the Light shines through.

In the Cathedral of the World, the Light can refract in very different ways through two distinct windows, enlightening different faiths with different truths. Scientific logic suggests that this is impossible. According to my Cathedral metaphor, scientific logic is, in this case, misleading.

Two and a half millennia ago, Aristotle coined something he called the Law of the Excluded Middle. As a logical certainty, he asserted that A and not A cannot both be true at one and the same time. By the light of my cathedral metaphor, Aristotle is wrong, at least with respect to theology. His logical certitude oversteps the law of experience. Contrast one stained-glass window (its dark center bordered by more translucent panes) with another (configured in the opposite fashion). Though the same light shines through both, they will cast diametrically opposite shadow images on the cathedral floor (A and not A, if you will). Is the Truth darkness surrounded by light or light surrounded by darkness? In the Cathedral of the World the answer is, "both."

As refracted through the windows of tradition and experience, truth emerges indirectly. To a modern universalist, this suggests that—since the same light can

be refracted in many different ways (including A and not-A)—the only religious truth claims we can discount completely are those that dismiss all other claims for failing to conform to their own understanding of the creation.

One presumably impartial response to the war of theological passions is to reject religion, to distance ourselves from those who attempt, always imperfectly, to interpret the Light's meaning. There are two problems with this approach. One is that it deprives us of a potentially deep encounter with the mysterious forces that impel our being, thereby limiting our ability to invent and discover meaning. The second is that few of us actually are able to resist interpreting the Light. Whether we choose the windows that enlighten existence for us or inherit them, for each individual the light and darkness mingle more or less persuasively as refracted through one set of windows or another. Attracted to the partial clarification of reality that emerges in patterns of light and the play of shadows, even people who reject religion are worshipers of truth as they perceive it. Their windows too become shrines.

Because none of us is able fully to comprehend the truth that shines through another person's window, nor to apprehend the falsehood that we ourselves may perceive as truth, we can easily mistake another's good for evil, and our own evil for good. Modern universalist theology tempers the consequences of our inevitable ignorance while addressing the overarching crisis of our times: dogmatic division in an ever more intimate, fractious, and yet interdependent world. It posits the following fundamental principles:

1. There is one Power, one Truth, one God, one Light.
2. This Light shines through every window in the Cathedral.
3. No one can perceive it directly, the source of the mystery being forever veiled.
4. Yet, on the Cathedral floor and in the eyes of each beholder, refracted and reflected are patterns that evoke meaning, challenging us to interpret and live by these moments of illumination as best we can.
5. Each window refracts Truth in a unique way, leading to various truths, and these in differing measure according to the insight, receptivity, and behavior of the beholder.

This final point is essential. Unless some criterion exists to test the validity of one's truth claims, universalism lapses quickly into uncritical relativism. The criterion is this: our degree of enlightenment will be reflected not in our faith claims but in our lives. In a universalist construct, good (enlightened) behavior unites and heals; bad (benighted) behavior mars and divides. Unless our faith, whatever its particulars may be, helps us to improve our lives (leading to integrity and a clear conscience), inspires us to reconcile with our neighbors (leading to peace), and plants our feet firmly on the Ground of our Being (uniting us with the one Light, Truth or God), we have been blinded by the Light that shines through our chosen window, unaware of the long shadow that those who bathe themselves blindly in the Light too often cast.

Fortunately, since the Light shines through each window of the cathedral, as we ponder and act on insights derived from even a single reflection, we may instead find illumination. In the Cathedral of the World, we can discover or invent meanings that invest both the creation and our lives with greater purpose. To me the purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.

One final thought. We are each on a journey, a quest for life's meaning and purpose. I have found both in universalism. To save yourself without damning another is a wonderful thing.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.