

You Will Be Found
The Need to Belong and the Power of Tribes
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
March 29, 2020

In the town of Omelas, every one has what they need. There is no hunger, no war, no violence or inequity. People do not raise their voices in anger or feel despair. People are happy and they are sophisticated; not “bland utopians” The science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin takes us to this odd village in her extraordinary short story entitled, “The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas.”

She writes: “Oh miracle, I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion.” This fable takes place during the festival of Summer, sweet perfume fills the air, lilting flute music can be heard along the winding lanes.”

But, there’s a dirty little disclaimer to all of this bliss. Le Guin explains: “In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar in one of its spacious private homes, there is a tiny room. It has one locked door and no window. The floor is dirt and damp to the touch. In the room, the child is sitting. It could be a girl or a boy. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. The door is always locked and people seldom come.

Sometimes the child, who can remember sunlight, speaks: “Please let me out, I will be good.” But they never answer.” LeGuin continues. “They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why – their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the abundance of their harvest depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.”

The terms are strict and absolute. There may be not even one kind word spoken to the child. Often, when this Faustian bargain is explained to them at age 10 or so, the children react in disgust and rage. They may brood over it for weeks but then they become convinced that this arrangement offers the greatest good for the greatest number. The wretchedness of the child, they reason, awakens their compassion and their nobility. That its because of the suffering child that they are so gentle with their children.

Yet, sometimes one of the adolescents or adults who learn about the child do not go home to cry or rage or get over it. “Sometimes,” writes Le Guin, “they go out into the street and silently walk straight out of the town of Omelas. They keep walking and walking. The place they go towards is unknown. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.” What a timeless short story.

The Ones who walked away from Omelas just could no longer bear the chilling, unjust quid pro quo. It was too high a price to pay for harmony; or at least, for what passed as harmony. As Le Guin herself asks somewhat rhetorically in a commentary on the story, “How hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?”

Literature is full of cautionary tales about utopias and like all such places, Omelas possesses an unreality, existing as it does at the intersection of fantasy and travesty. Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*, also come to mind. More recently, we’ve been captivated by *The Hunger Games*, *ready Player One*, and the *Divergent* series.

In my view, utopias, evil or benign are misguided primarily because they micro-manage all of the creative enterprise of the human endeavor of being together in community, in our inherited and in our chosen tribes. For, as we well know, life is messy, we’re messy – at home and work, in relationships, here at church. I’m reminded of that classic Bissell Vacuum cleaner commercial: “Life is messy. Clean it up.” That’s a pretty darn good definition of the utopian goal; a cleaned-up, sanitized world. One we surely do not recongize today in the very real world of the coronavirus crisis.

Of course, we Americans hold differing ideas about the ideal society and the divide gets wider each day, it seems. For some, utopia is gained through burning books, restricting reproductive rights, or caging immigrants. For others, its created through peace-making and protest and conflict resolution, promoting diversity and democracy, and sharing resources and hope.

America is consumer driven, and we’re sold utopian dreams through merchandising. “Buy me and you’re life will be better; drink me and your love life will flourish, drive me and life will be perfect, “Friend” me and you’ll have worth.” Facebook is Shangri-La; Disney World is Brigadoon, Amazon is our on-time Savior.

If we stop to examine the origin or the word Utopia, we get quite a jolt. It doesn’t mean quite what we thought. *Utopia* -- from the (Greek *ou*, not + *topos*, a place) means literally “nowhere.” Or as Gertrude Stein quipped when asked about Los Angeles some years back, “There is no there, there.” So, by its very nature, *utopia* is actually a *dystopia* – a dysfunctional place.

I wonder: What is our sense of “where,” right now, as we shelter in place, physically distanced from our regular routines and familiar places?

The Western idea of utopia originates in the ancient world, where legends of an earthly paradise lost to history (Eden in the Old Testament, the mythical Golden Age of Greek mythology), was grafted onto the human desire to create, or recreate, an ideal society. The Greek philosopher Plato (427?-347 BC) sketched a human utopian society in his *Republic*, where he imagined the ideal Greek city-state, with communal living among the ruling class, perhaps based on the model of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta.

Certainly the English statesman Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) had Plato's *Republic* in mind when he wrote the book *Utopia* in 1516. Describing a perfect political and social system on an imaginary island, the term "Utopia" has since entered the English language meaning any place, State, or situation of ideal perfection. However, as often happens, More's Utopia unravels in real time. which soon is beset with problems of its own.

America has seen its share of quixotic utopian experiments - the Shaker, Oneida, Ephrata and Amana communities, among them. The Utopians were people and communities trying to set themselves above and apart from culture. Unitarians took a shot at it too. From 1841 to 1847, a group of Transcendentalists, led by George Ripley, experimented in "plain living" and "self reliance" at Brook Farm, 200 acres in West Roxbury, Mass. It began with 15 members and never contained more than 150 people at one time. Bronson Alcott tried to get Fruitlands off the ground in Harvard, MA. These nobly-envisioned collectives ultimately failed, in part because they could not be self-sustaining.

For many, finding a modern-day UU congregation like Beacon can elicit giddy excitement at finding the promised land. I hear it regularly when I visit with newcomers. We UUs, tuning in today, may have mistakenly believed initially that we were being welcomed into a religious utopia. Even if that idea ended up being shaken (which I can presume it has!), you have not walked away, but instead have settled on a belief that you have found a good religious fit, a place of belonging. After all, you're still here!

And most likely, that swoony, in-love-ness sensation morphed into something more sane and balanced and grounded, as you've come to see Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation as the perfectly imperfect tribe *for you*. And rightly so, and we're all glad you are here. But being part of this community will not make your life perfect. You probably already know that. Joining Beacon will not shield you from pain or suffering or disappointment or grief or even this terrifying coronavirus. But, you will not be alone. Social science tells this simple truth— Belonging helps us survive!

This is not Omelas with its cruel equations. We are a supportive, reciprocal tribe. And belonging to a tribe like Beacon is a gamechanger. Because we humans are created for connection. It is a primal biological urge. Here, at Beacon, we share the common task of shouldering pain and joy, freedom and good stewardship. And our mission isn't to live in bland contentment or to exist as a church against or apart from culture. On the contrary, our stated mission is to be what theologian Reinhold Niebuhr calls a "church in culture," a religious community grounded in the real world.

Our very survival depends upon our finding our way to the heart of compassion where it hurts, where we feel real feelings like pain, fear, confusion, and contempt. It defies sameness, blandness, flatness. Our health and future as a congregation depend on supporting this tribe where we now find ourselves, with our time, talent and treasury.

When I picture your faces, folk who experience Beacon as a tribe grounded in covenantal ideals, I'm reminded of a meditation by the Rev. Victoria Safford called "Why do you come, John?" She writes: I knew a man once who came to church every Sunday, and because of hearing loss (more than a sense of his own importance), he sat in the front row. I asked him: "Why do you come, John?" in all kinds of weather, when you're well and when you're not, when you like the guest speaker or the sermon topic and when you don't?"

His answer was straightforward. "I come," he said, "because someone might miss me if I didn't." He worked hard on Sundays to make other people feel at home, to feel that they belonged to a tribe. And he was right. The Sunday after his memorial service, someone walked right in and sat down in his empty seat in the front row. They came hoping there was room and John himself would have been delighted."

Why do *you* come to Beacon, on N. Leroux St. or here to our Youtube channel? Do you come to be found? to belong? to sustain your tribe?

In a reflection for the UU journal, *Quest*, entitled, "My Tribe," Cassandra Gail Fisher, an artist from South Bend, Indiana, captures the many genuine and connective aspects of this tribal paradigm. She writes, "My tribe is the people I stand next to while I cook, while I work, while I play, while I mourn, while I grow—and who stand next to me. Life comes at us, one moment after the next, and how we respond defines us."

"My tribe is not all people I like. It is not all people I agree with or even get along with. There are people I love dearly who I cannot stand to be in the same room with for very long. But those moments that come at us change everything. Sometimes it is subtle, sometimes startling, but there is always change. A deeper smile line. A new scar. A work of art."

"My tribe is not a still pond. Some days it rages and thrashes like the ocean in a storm. Some days it is all four seasons at once. We are many and varied and ever, ever changing and we are doing it together here on this planet. We may not always be entirely happy about all of it—hell, some days, some moments, it's absolutely infuriating to be human. But I am. We are."

Friends, this is no time for what our UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray calls a "casual faith." As a tribe, we are self-sustaining. It may not be in animal pelts or game meats or potatoes, hand woven cloth or medicinal herbs; but, self-sustaining we are and if we are not willing to support the tribe, it will perish. When the tribe is placed before the individual, the community thrives. As needed, members of the tribe sit in circles face to face and they resolve and repair what is torn. And we must do the same with similar communitarian values.

I ask that you support one another by staying connected to one another through whatever means are available to you – phone, facetime, facebook, letters and emails. And I ask that you support our Beacon tribe with donations and pledges, especially during this challenging time. What do you spend \$10 a week on that you could forego to support

your tribe and sustain this place where you've all been found. You'll now find a "Donate" button on our website to make secure remote contributions to the weekly offering, or to make pledge payments.

Utopia means "not a place." Yet, I know a place, a real flesh-and-blood place. In the words of poem we heard earlier by Martha Kurtz Hogan, "I know a place where love is. A place where light is. I know a place. I will not leave it." A place where you can be found – "when the dark comes crashing through and you need a friend to carry you."

This place, where we strive to create a beloved community with what we've got – a tribe of real, messy people feeling real messy feelings. Beacon may not be Shangri-la, and thank goodness for that. If it were, we'd be separate, a church apart from culture. But we're not, and we choose not to be. We're a tribe grounded in the world, broken and wondrous as it is, striving to make it a bit better.

That mission, that enduring truth, makes this a place of hope and connection that few of us would casually walk away from.

And so may it be.

Blessed be. Blessed we and Amen.

©2020 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.