

“A Usable Past”

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First Church in Boston

How do you greet a new era?

Recently, to celebrate a significant birthday, I decided to greet the new decade at dawn. Waking in the dark, I drove to the summit of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park to watch the sunrise. Having envisioned a spiritual moment of inspiration, I instead found myself amidst throngs of people. Many of whom were remarkably chatty given the very early hour.

While I did move away from a particularly boisterous group, I also quickly realized the need to adapt my expectations. This was going to be a shared experience, not a solo one. In many ways, it was fitting that the era of my new decade did not begin alone. Indeed, when are we in fact ever truly, entirely alone?

My sense that we are never really alone began years ago in college when I was a philosophy major reading Martin Heidegger. Fortunately, I had parents that never asked me “*what are you going to do with that!?*” And now as my son is currently majoring in philosophy I also remain mum with the practical questions. Because what I did learn from philosophy was to appreciate the big questions of life—including the question Heidegger asks, “what does it mean to simply *be?*”

Throughout his book *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses the German word for existence, Dasein. In Heidegger’s hands, Dasein becomes a story of what it means to be a self, to be a person existing in the world. He *really* meant IN the world—he described Dasein as a single hyphenated word: Being-in-the-world. In other words, there’s no such thing as being human or living a human life apart from being in relationship with all the many people, places, and creatures that constitute our shared world.

To further explain this idea of Being-in-the-world, Heidegger discusses Dasein as being *thrown* into the world. I love this active image of being *thrown*. No saccharin images of a stork gently flying in with a bundled, cooing infant. Rather, a self is *thrown* into the world—I imagine a kid flying off a rope swing into a lake . . . arms flailing, and mouth open wide in a happy scream. There’s no going back. You’re in it now. Thrown into the midst of the world.

And it's a world that is already full of life, of other beings, persons, selves. It is as if we appear on a stage in the middle of a play already in progress with no script other than the cues we start to pick up from the people, places, and situations around us. We arrive to find ourselves suddenly part of an ongoing story that is much larger than our singular self. A story that precedes our arrival and, most likely, will continue beyond our existence.

As I arrive here at First Church, I enter a larger story already underway. Each of you are part of that story. In the coming days, I look forward to hearing more of your stories—stories of your own beginnings here as well as why you continue to engage in the life of this church. And, of course, the story of First Church extends far beyond any one of us or even the all of us gathered here today. Perhaps like me, part of what drew you here *is* this history.

The calligraphy memorials by Margaret Shepherd along the back of the sanctuary remind us of some of the stories. John Cotton. Anne Hutchinson. Charles Chauncy. e.e.cummings. Nearly four centuries of history.

There is also the history of this place and the peoples who predate all of First Church. The Massachusetts. The Pawtuckets. All those who pulled their boats up to the hilly peninsula known as [Mashauwomuk](#). A name from which the English settlers derived Shawmut.

Recently I participated in a walking tour of 1630 Boston led by the Partnerships of Historic Bostons. Walking the distances among the places the early colonists would have known, I felt connected to the story of when this church was born. There amidst the concrete of sidewalks and granite of buildings were the markers of John Cotton's house, of the first Meetinghouse, of the Great Spring that sustained them all—Massachusetts and English alike.

To varying degrees, we all know the history. And I look forward to learning much, much more. But what do we do with such history? With a history that refuses to stay still but emerges again and again in new tellings, shifting frameworks, and unexpected challenges to our current understanding of people and places?

As you may have read, I grew up in Michigan to a religiously conservative family. When I was 12, my mom began to bring my brothers and I to an old-fashioned Methodist [Camp-meeting](#) that had been happening since 1865 for 10 days each summer. My mom had attended when she was young and my grandma had rarely missed a session in decades. Worship services happened twice a day, morning and night. I spent hours of my adolescence on simple wooden pews with musty horse-haired cushions in a hundred-year-old open-sided tabernacle. Massive old-growth posts carried the weight of the roof high above us. Unpainted and uncovered, the chisel marks of hands long dead remained evident in the beams.

Wiggling and giggling with peers in those pews as the ancient organ groaned to lead us in singing imprinted me with a sense of generational faith. Beneath those hand-hewn post and beams, I could feel the presence of those who had come before us. And yet, even as the past remained present, all around me were the very present sounds of singing and preaching, sweaty scents of hot summer nights, and the longing to hold hands with the boy I had a crush on.

This tangled crush of past and present is often where we live, isn't it. The entwining asks us to wrestle with the question: what role does the past play in our lives now?

This is no small question—not just for a historic congregation such as First Church, but for our wider society as well. We see this question playing out in the banning of books and curriculum that address the historic injustices of enslavement which continue to shape not only our individual biases, but also our institutional structures and assumptions as well. The post and beams of our ideologies and social practices can remain as sturdy as that Methodist tabernacle in Michigan. The past remains present with us.

So I ask again, what role does the past play in our lives now?

A couple weeks ago, I broke a 19th century cordial glass. Because of my partner Bill's family history, we have a number of such antique items in our house. While some particularly valuable items are safely tucked away, on the whole Bill and I share a philosophy that is it better to use items, even it risks wear or breakage. As another example, *this* is the footstool I use beneath my desk at home. The name imprinted in the wood is Zachariah Allen, a 19th century industrialist, inventor, and philanthropist, and Bill's great-great-great grandfather. It's just the right height to enable the recommended ergonomics of typing at my desk. *And* my feet have totally worn out the embroidery of the top.

Should I use it or store it?

The idea of a “usable past” is typically traced to a 1918 article by cultural critic Van Wyck Brooks. [Brooks asked](#), “What is important to us? ... What, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind, ought we elect to remember?” In raising this question, Van Wyck challenged his readers to engage with the past in ways that was more than facts of dead presidents, but also as a resource for shaping our present and future.

Historians today continue to engage with the idea of a usable past, even as criticisms of the idea arise. In a *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* blog, Michal Raucher, points to an article by Emily Mace who defines “usable past” as a history that serves a contemporary or future goal. To illustrate, Mace cites the 1974 re-publication of Elisabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible* by feminist theologians who saw in Stanton's work “a historical predecessor to their own work as feminist theologians.” Feminist theology—which is my own academic field—has long lived in this tension of staying connected to tradition while also bringing critical questions and analyses in service of a more equitable and just future. And while such an approach bridges the past, present, and future, Raucher adds an important note of caution when she asks,

Which historical figures are not “usable?” Whose contributions have been overlooked? Who is being re-interpreted to fit a particular mold that serves a purpose for today's movement? As we tell a particular history about ourselves, are we excluding certain figures because they do not fit with the image we want to present today?

Such questions are relevant also for First Church in Boston. As a congregation with a deep history, there are many moments to lift up and perhaps other moments, persons, or issues

that have been overlooked. Out of all the names, convictions, and conflicts of First Church's past, what do you think ought to be remembered? Why? To what end?

If you choose to call me as your next settled minister, my hope would be to search for a "usable past" that draws upon the story of First Church to engage in the pressing issues of *this* moment. Whether a crystal glass, a wooden footstool, or stories of Puritans, I believe that history should be *used* as part of our present and not simply conserved as memory. While history may shape our present, I do not believe that our present should be defined entirely by the past. Rather the past is part of an ever-evolving story. As the [Rev. Sean Neil-Barron](#) says,

The history of your church is the gift of potential and momentum, of baggage and personality. The history of your church is the launch pad from which you spring—into action or disarray.

Each day your church is born.

As your minister, I would ask you to be open to exploring new interpretations of the history of First Church—whether of the 17th century or of the last seven years. I would ask you to be willing to learn from stories that have been overlooked or tucked into the shadows, but whose presence nonetheless is also part of the larger story. And I would ask you to consider what we might *do* with this history?

Each of us carries a history that inevitably holds moments of joy and struggle. Times that we'd gladly post on our Facebook page and others we'd rather keep quiet as we wrestle with regret or shame. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we seek to embrace the all of us. We do not need to be perfect to be worthy. We do not need to be without faults to be loved. I do not expect you to be perfect or without faults. And, if you thought the new minister would be perfect, well, I'm not her! (My partner and son are here today if you need any confirmation about that!) So also, I know that First Church is not perfect or blameless. Not in its past and not in its present.

But that's okay. As I will say more about next week, I believe we gather in religious community *because* life is a struggle within the tensions of hope and loss, love and heartbreak. In the story I tell about religion, we are always seeking meaning amidst all manner of experiences of delight, despair, and confusion. Life is an ongoing mix of stories into which we are all thrown at birth. This is the challenge . . . and the wondrous gift.

So may it be.

Amen