

## **“Perceiving Pearls”**

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*First Church in Boston*

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In May of 1972, at the first Annual Meeting of the congregation in the newly rebuilt church, Minister Rhys Williams proclaimed his optimism, calling the rebuild “a triumph of our enthusiasm for our religion and for the uplift of all people as we face tomorrow.” (1972 *Minister’s Report*, 4) Far from platitudes of positivity, his simple words belie the ferocity of struggle the congregation had passed through to maintain both a commitment to their religion *and* to serving a larger world. In our own moment today as powerful forces dismantle rights and unleash violence, the question remains: *how relevant is what we are doing here together this morning to the needs of the world outside these walls?*

Fifty-eight years ago today, Rhys woke to a phone call in the middle of the night. A fire was raging on Marlborough Street near Berkeley. Rushing to the scene from his home, his taxi driver confirmed First Church was on fire. Williams recollects:

*As I walked up Marlborough Street, the flames were shooting above the tower. The cinders were flying in a wide arc. It was obvious that the building was going. There was no hope of saving it. (“Trial By Fire”, 2)*

In that moment, there was no optimism. Just the horrifying realization of loss.

Just hours later, around 8am, a group of church leaders gathered at the parsonage. So many questions needed to be answered about what now? what next? It was Friday. Where would Sunday services be held in two days? A knock came at the door. Rhys writes,

*A ministerial member of the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association was there with advice. We should immediately join another Unitarian church and turn our money over to a relevant social project. (“Trial”, 4)*

While our own history as a church involves several mergers of churches, in that fragile space of fresh loss, this “advice” was dismissed and the congregation met that Sunday at the Lutheran Church across the street. In that service, Minister Robert Haney, prayed:

*“We loved that venerable house for all that it taught us of thee and of ourselves. Now has it joined the ashes of those who loved it first. .... The place where one story ends is where the next begins.” (“Trial”, 6)*

In the sermon that day, Rhys described his journey from despair to the sparks of hope that came in a hot cup of coffee, neighbors on the sidewalk offering help, and receiving the first donation from a *Globe* reporter. The sparks kindled into a faith that the story *would*

continue. “The essentials are still with us,” Rhys preached, “Your ministry is intact.” Like the returning spring of that late March Sunday, he assured them of the possibility of new life. (“As Spring Came” sermon)

This seed of hope was planted within the landscape of a wider world. In March of 1968, the Vietnam War was at its bloodiest peak following the start of the Tet Offensive. Anti-war activism was vibrant throughout Boston. While neighboring Arlington Street Church was better known for anti-war activism, First Church would host overflow events. Earlier in March, leading anti-war activist and Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin had spoken to a crowded sanctuary here at First Church. (“Trial”, 3)

In addition to anti-war activity, the Civil Rights movement was still actively influencing change and discussion around racial justice. Within Unitarian Universalism, a Caucus meeting of Black Unitarian Universalists was held in February of 1968 in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Edna Pruce was sent as a representative of First Church. On her return, she delivered a sermon in mid-March about her experience and support for Black Power.<sup>2</sup> In late March, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King arrived in Memphis to support the Sanitation Workers Strike. On Thursday, April 4, 1968, not even a full week after our fire, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis.

In Boston, another King, Mel King, was quickly rising to prominence as an anti-poverty activist in the South End. In April of 1968, he organized a “Tent City” occupation of a leveled lot to protest city plans to build a parking garage, rather than replace the housing which had been demolished. Born in the South End, King was one of many leaders who had emerged to fight for community control over the redevelopment of this impoverished neighborhood, which had housed generations of immigrants and people of color.

As conflicts and tensions of war, poverty, and racial injustice roiled our nation and city, First Church wrestled with existential questions about the direction of its future. Worship was meeting weekly at the Lindsay Chapel of Emmanuel Church on Newbury Street. For operations and programs, Park House, the brownstone beside the church at 66 Marlborough Street, remained usable. As Rhys explained,

*A member of the Social Concerns Committee had returned, after leaving Park House at 11 o'clock that night, to confirm that the fire door between Park House and Hale Chapel had been closed. And it was because of this thoughtful act that our records*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism*, (Boston: Skinner House Books), 69.

<sup>2</sup> Pruce's participation, support by First Church, and subsequent sermon are mentioned in the 1968 Standing Committee Report. In “Trial By Fire,” Rhys Williams writes that shortly after Coffin preached at First Church, “the pulpit had been occupied Sunday morning by a black woman who was a strong advocate of Black Power.” (3) I suspect this may have been Pruce who the 1968 Standing Report reports “gave a splendid Sunday sermon.”

*going back to 1630 and the base of our programs and operations were saved. (“As Spring Came” sermon)*

Thus, committees for Social Concerns, Music, Religious Education, and more continued their work alongside many new committees that were created to build a new church *and* to support a merger with Second Church. People came together not only to build a new structure, but to continue *doing* the work of a church through worship and service.

A year after the fire, in the summer of 1969, the national Unitarian Universalist Association hosted their annual General Assembly here in Boston. In protest over how the denomination was handling its own racial reckoning, a racially diverse group walked out of the main body to assemble at Arlington Street Church. From those who walked out, the white allies formed a new group called, the “Fellowship for Renewal” or “FFR”. To many UU’s, this walkout and surrounding events became known as the “Black Empowerment Controversy.”

Early in my own experience as a UU, I heard stories about this 1969 walkout and an era of conflict that led to an exodus of Black UUs from Unitarian Universalism when support for Black UUs fell short of what had been promised. If we ever want to seriously move beyond the racial injustices and prejudices of the past, I believe we need to learn our *Black* UU history to understand how choices made in the past alienated Black UUs and how choices we may be making today continue to do so. Indeed, this story directly impacted what happened at First Church during the rebuild.

When I first began learning about First Church a few years ago, I heard stories about the 1968 fire and how a group of activists demanded that the church spend their money on low-income housing rather than a new church building. As it turns out, the “activists” were the Fellowship for Renewal, or “FFR” formed after the General Assembly walkout in 1969. As First Church was meeting to plan a rebuild, the FFR was organizing at their new Allston headquarters. As 1969 drew to an end, FFR alerted Rhys on Wednesday, December 3 that they planned to attend the First Church worship that Sunday, sit in the front pews, and read a statement.

By Saturday, representatives of the church and FFR met and agreed to a compromise where the statement will be read in coffee hour—although FFR did put 180 index cards into the offering plate with the names of South End folks in need of housing. Press covered the events and the Monday headlines read, “New Church Plan Called Injustice” and “Group wants parish to build low-rent housing.”

In response, a series of meetings between FFR and a designated committee from the church met several times in the winter of 1970. In his history of these events, “Trial By Fire,” Rhys notes that UUA President Robert West was supportive of the church, but that another UUA

staff member threatened to throw themselves in front of the bulldozer if the church tried to rebuild. After more than a month of conversations, FFR sent a letter in February saying they will no longer negotiate with the church committee but go straight to the congregation. On February 22, 1970, FFR pickets the service.

In response, church leadership sends a notice to church members as well as to FFR stating “the New Church is going to be built” to avoid “dissolution of our church Society.” The notice also affirms a commitment to “charitable efforts” and cooperative methods to address low-income housing.

However, on the next Sunday, March 1, members of FFR were joined by Black activists from a South End group called “People’s Development Group.” Disrupting the service, the minister, Jack Hammon, dismisses the congregation. Some congregants stay to engage in conversation with the activists.

The People’s Development Group again disrupts the service on March 15. An Open Letter to church members was sent March 14 from the “South End Community” asking for a \$500,000 grant for the People’s Development Group to rehab housing. This was the last communication from the Group.

Although active pressure from this Group had ceased, at a special congregation meeting on April 26, 1970 the members voted to support low-income housing through a \$25,000 grant to help rehabilitate Parcel 19—an area in the South End some of you may know today as Villa Victoria. To be honest, it’s a bit more complicated than this as funds were actually loaned to the Edward Everett Hale House Inc. who in turn loaned them to the Emergency Tenants Council in the South End. (If you want to really learn all the details of this story, I have a few copies of Rhys’ report here and will send a link to a pdf in the e-news.)

Stories are often more complicated when we look more closely at a situation, when we try to listen to conflicting points of view, when we put a local story into a national context. Today we wrestle with the role of the congregation in responding to the immigration crisis, the dismantling of democracy, and an illegal war in Iran. In the tumultuous events of the winter and spring of 1969-1970, the congregation struggled with what to do and *why*.

On the one hand, they fiercely defended their right to rebuild a church building in which they could gather for communal experiences of transcendence. Yes, they wanted to serve the wider world, but they also wanted the religious freedom to choose how to worship and with whom. That’s a story *deep* in our congregational DNA, right!?

On the other hand, just how effectively was the church in responding to the larger social context? In a report for the June 1970 Annual Meeting, Assistant Minister Olav Nieuwajaar, shares the significant concerns of the college student group, writing:

*"If the church cannot, by virtue of its existence and what it does, attract students, as well as regular members, on its own without resorting to various forms of armtwisting, then it seems to be to be an appropriate time for re-evaluation and re-examination of the philosophy behind the church's reason for being, with a predominant and transcending question being not "What's wrong with the student?" but "What's wrong with the church?"*

For that same Annual Meeting, Standing Committee chair H. Lawrence Holcomb also reflects uncertainty, writing in his report: *"In great part we have been sailing on unknown seas. Only time will tell whether or not we have navigated well."*

Two years later at the 1972 Annual Meeting, the first in the new building, Rhys declares his optimism for the future of the church. But between those opening and closing paragraphs that John read, Rhys also lists two pages worth of challenges that range from television disrupting family communication, to 3-day weekends negatively impacting church attendance, to how to use radio, and perhaps television, to reach a broader community. Rhys may have declared himself to be an optimist, but his report also suggests a lot of realism. When we know more of the story of the church at that time, we better understand that he is speaking to a congregation whose very reason for being had been tested and whose commitment to serve a world beyond themselves had been challenged.

Fifty-plus years later we face our own challenges within and beyond the walls of the church. We too are *"sailing on unknown seas"*. None of us know the clear path forward as a congregation or as a nation. Messages of simple optimism ring hollow. And, "The essentials are still with us." We continue to gather as a *religious* community who has faith in transcendent values that ground our spirits and inspire our action. As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we choose to center the value of Love in how we show up here and how we fight to defend a world where every human life has dignity—including immigrant lives, Black lives, trans lives, and all those who face historic and current forces of violence and oppression. We are not a faith detached from the world. Neither are we only a social services center. We are a centuries old religious community who chooses to live their faith in daily action. We may not always get it right as individuals or as an institution, but it matters that there is a place we gather together to try to figure out how to live meaningfully and well, how to be guided by a Spirit of Love, and how to move together in mutual Love and respect.

May we continue on this journey together—seeking *both* transcendent meaning *and* relevant engagement in the issues of our moment.

So may it be. Ashé. Amen.

## **Excerpts from the opening and closing paragraphs of Rhys Williams 1972 Minister's Report to the Annual Meeting**

### *The Opening Paragraphs:*

When a pessimist looks at an oyster, he thinks of ptomaine poisoning. When an optimist looks at that same oyster, he thinks of a pearl. The first Annual Meeting in our new building is a time when we should think optimistically.

We are here because each of you had vision and because each of you held your tongue on those little things which could undermine and tear down a project that is dedicated to the service of people, not only today but long into the distant future. Together we have planted boldly our believe in the spiritual community of human beings. Thank you for what you have been and what you will be.

### *The Closing Paragraphs:*

Emerson once said, "Every great and commanding moment in the annals of the world is the triumph of some enthusiasm." Enthusiasm has been the spark behind the creation of our new church building.

Let it be a symbol of triumph of our enthusiasm for our religion and for the uplift of all people as we face tomorrow. I am optimistic. I am sure you are too.