

You Will Be Found
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UU Church of Meadville

In the town of Omelas, everybody 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.” The story 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.

When they do, they kick the child or look at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and water jug are hastily filled; a half-bowl of cornmeal and grease per day. 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 an amazing 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

passes 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 utopia and like all utopias, 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 and the Divergent series. Especially with virulent white nationalism on the rise we mustn’t neglect to add the Third Reich to our list – a utopian vision of a pure race that was pure evil.

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. 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.

Utopian fantasies in popular literature and movies sometimes hold a kind of tragic romantic melancholy – they can’t last and some poor love-struck couple is doomed. I’m thinking now of Brigadoon or Shangri-la, self-contained and idyllic places in the mist. The Buddhists give us their version of paradise in the concept of Shambhala, a mythical city of complete enlightenment. For some reason, that doesn’t show up on Google Maps. Go figure.

As the powers-that-be ponder the course of America First nation-building in red MAGA caps, the specter of utopian fantasy rears its ugly, but beguiling head. What type of nation will be built or deconstructed? I’d wager that more than one suffering soul might find themselves under lock and key in such a society.

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, and bashing gays. For others, it’s created through peace-making and protest and conflict resolution.

Sadly, as in Le Guin’s story, our forms of American utopia (or at least, our relative prosperity) depend on some equivalent of that child chained in the basement – sweatshop labor, systemic racism, factory farming, and economic injustice. Lastly, because American is consumer driven, we’re sold utopian dreams through merchandising. “Buy me and your life will be better; drink me and your love life will flourish, drive me and life will be perfect, “riend” me and you’ll have worth.” Facebook is Shangri-La; The Tanger Outlets are Brigadoon.

If we stop to examine the origin of 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, “There is no there, there.” So, by its very nature, utopia is actually a dystopia – a dysfunctional place.

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. The state punishes crime with slavery, and oversees almost every aspect of its citizen's lives.

America has seen its share of utopian experiments. Both the desire for an Edenic Utopia and an attempt to start over in "unspoiled" land of opportunity merged in the minds of several religious and secular European groups and societies from across the pond: 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 and Henry David Thoreau populated a one-man utopia on the banks of Walden Pond in nearby Concord.

We UUs, here today, may have mistakenly believed that we were being welcomed into a religious utopia. Even if that idea ended up being shaken, you may have settled on the belief you had found the *perfect* church at some point in your time here as a newcomer.

And most likely, that swoony, in-love-ness sensation morphed into something more sane and balanced and grounded, as you've come to see UUCM as the perfectly imperfect church *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 UUCM will not shield you from pain or suffering or disappointment or grief.

This is not Omelas. Here, 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, 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.

As you know, I am departing for India tomorrow to live in community, to live with a tribe at the Brahmishi Mission – to offer service in whatever form it is needed. I'm

looking forward to what I will learn about community from them; about abundance of heart and spirit, if not abundance of material wealth.

The school has 500 students and 60 of them receive room and board. In the city, as in many parts of India, there is abject poverty. This mission has saved these children but it is not a utopia. It is a real place and I hope to find simple gifts and to be found there in profound and simple ways, too. I will set an oil lamp adrift on the river during Divali with a blessing for this church. The aroma of hundreds of marigolds will be intoxicating.

I'd like us to think of the UU Church of Meadville as a tribe, too. 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 to a 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."

"And the fury is an energy that can be directed, blended, integrated. It need not be an isolated cold fury that hardens the heart, but can instead be shared and warmed and used to promote change. The further we share it the greater the chance that the change will integrate and spread out in a trillion little ways."

Friends, this no time for what our UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray calls a "casual faith." Our Stewardship chair, Peggy Bell, offered some blunt truths earlier in her Stewardship moment and they needed to be said and heard. As a tribe, we are self-sustaining, too. 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.

Members of tribes do not withhold their contributions, in whatever form, based on grievances or personal preferences or whether or not they like this year's version of the Medicine Wheel ceremony or are a fan of the chief. The community is placed before the individual and the tribe thrives. As needed, they sit in circles face to face and they resolve and repair what is torn. And we must do the same with similar communitarian values.

Peggy suggests \$10 per week. That's around \$500 per year. Perhaps you can afford more. Perhaps you genuinely cannot afford even this much. 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.

Utopia means "not a place." Yet, I know a place, a real flesh-and-blood place. A place where love is. A place where light is. A place where the sidewalk ends and the grass is green and you can be found.

This place, where we search for ways to be whole and to be connected. A place where we strive to create a beloved community with what we've got – a tribe of real, messy people feeling real messy feelings.

A place where we band together to speak out against injustice, especially when it appears as bald-faced fascism masquerading as a patriotic utopian dream. If there are ways this place can foster a greater sense of belonging for you, come and tell me or one of the church leaders.

UUCM 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 makes this a place of hope and connection that few of us should easily walk away from.

And so may it be.

Amen and Blessed be.

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