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Metaphors of Place
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On April 15, 1755, the first great dictionary of English was published. Samuel Johnson's giant *Dictionary of the English Language* was an audacious attempt to tame his unruly native tongue. In more than 42,000 carefully constructed entries, Johnson had mapped the contours of the language, combining huge erudition with a steely wit and remarkable clarity of thought.

In doing so, Johnson had fashioned the most important British cultural monument of the 18th century. Its two folio volumes tell us more about the society of this period- lustily commercial, cultivated but energetic, politically volatile yet eager for consensus- than any other work. They document the copious vitality of English and its literature, and Johnson's spirit- by turns humorous, ethical and perceptive- presides over every page.¹

The dictionary's power could have starting results. In the summer of 1775 the toast of British high society was Omai, a young Tahitian man who was a member of Captain Cook's party. Omai referred to the dictionary frequently in order to grow his command of the language. This was not always a successful strategy. After learning that pickle meant preserve, He once saluted Lord Sandwich, the Admiral of the Fleet, with the hope that 'God Almighty might pickle his Lordship to all eternity.'²

What we have learned through many editions of the dictionary is that words and their construction are subjective, that they reflect the meaning of a people and culture more than they reflect any objective truth. And as words and meanings circulate, what they refer to and how they refer to this, become part of what we call truth. For example, in Johnson's dictionary, the entry for triumphant is: *graced with conquest*.³

Words create meanings more than reflect them. We would no longer in good conscience use the words *graced with conquest* nor would this signify something desirable. Words change as we change. Meanings change as we change. Words follow, gather up, both reflect and are used to create other meanings, other realities, to sustain and to collapse truths.

There is a story in the book *Defining the World* written by Henry Hitchens from which I have gleaned this information about Johnson that tells how his dictionary influenced many important writers of his day and long after his day.

The story goes that Becky Sharp, the anti-heroine of William Makepeace Thackeray's satirical novel *Vanity Fair* published in 1847, receives a copy of Johnson's dictionary and, writes Thackeray, 'just as the coach drove off Miss Sharp put her pale face out of the

¹ Hitchens, Henry. *Defining the World, The Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary*. (New York: Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, 2005): 1.

² Hitchens, 6.

³ Hitchens, 222.

window and actually flung the book back into the garden.’⁴

The gesture was a symbolic overthrow of tradition, masculinity and of Englishness, which Johnson’s dictionary mirrored through its definitions and many quotations used to elucidate meanings.

As we enter our Hendrix Hall renovations, I have been reflecting on words, their genesis and power, and the stories they tell.

Frank Darabont, the Hungarian-American film director, screenwriter, actor and producer has been nominated for three Academy Awards and a Golden Globe Award. He has directed the films *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Green Mile*, and *The Mist*, all based on stories by Stephen King. He writes, “Visual storytelling of one kind or another has been around since cavemen were drawing on walls.”

It strikes me that as we prepare to recover the cushions, paint the walls, recarpet the floors, we touch a story that went before us, we unearth words and ways gone by-used to generate the enthusiasm and creativity needed to make Hendrix Hall what it is now.

How do renovations touch the past and call us into the future? What new stories will we write now together, using which words to generate passion, enthusiasm, hope?

Before we can draw the future, we must learn how to read the past.

Claire Nicole Wallace writes in her University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Project entitled, "Storytelling Through Architecture," “Throughout time, people have used visual devices to capture stories. Architecture is an ever-present form of visual storytelling. The built environment has the ability to capture the history of a place and tell that story through *space*.

Architecture forms a visual, spatial link between the past, present, and future, becoming a point in the timeline of a place and culture. Translating the concept of storytelling into form involves a spatial language that reveres the past, fits present needs, and is adaptable to future use. The story of the site is always evolving, always growing, always changing.’

What is the story of Hendrix Hall, what are the words we use to tell it and what new story are we telling as we do our renovations?

The Hendrix brothers were the leading contributors to the 1980s restoration of this space. They alternated as President of the Board of Trustees and Chairman of the South Church Preservation Fund. They designed Hendrix Hall, the kitchen, and the activities room. They upholstered every pew cushion by hand.

At their own expense, they replaced cracked and missing antique sconces on the Victorian light fixtures, restored the 200 year old mahogany furniture, including the main pulpit, designed and installed a carpeted platform for the piano, and regilded the interior

⁴ Hitchens, 6.

clock and the hand carved eagle that sits above the words, Tempus Fugit, time flies, inscribed on the clock face in the upstairs sanctuary. They sang in the choir, took up the collection, brightened the hall with astonishing flower arrangements, and often provided delicious food to coffee hour. In other words, they loved this Meeting House and they were clear that their love should take a shape that would not only contribute to the present but to the future as well.

As we begin our renovations, with funds from The South Church Preservation Fund, a non-profit that gathers resources to maintain and restore this Meeting House, Shirat Ha Yam, the Jewish congregation that meets here, Faro de Luz, the Spanish speaking congregation that meets here and some of you, we touch that love with our own.

Ted Anderson recently contributed an article to the Weathervane. I quote,

Though most of the participants have faded from memory, they still deserve our thanks for undertaking the restoration projects of the 1980's. It was a challenge magnified by the fact that the last survey taken beforehand revealed only 28 members taking part in the life of the church in any way. Such limited numbers and resources made it audacious to utter the words, "major restoration."

The South Church Preservation Project did not begin as a "major" anything. Spontaneously two retired librarians began calling the congregation's attention to a couple of serious structural deficiencies. Mary Gulick insisted there should be an emergency door in the basement "for safety's sake."

The only way out was through the main front door. The present door into Hendrix Hall was then a window. Mary was so obviously right no one could argue, as always seemed the case when Mary was making a point, writes Ted. Eleanor Phinney, a fine Nantucket poet, was the other librarian who raised the flag of renovation.

Poet and author David Whyte says, "One of the central disciplines of life is remembering." Remembering is its own art, is it not? The tools we use to remember matter, the photos and stories, writings and poems we gather so that we might find our way into the past and therefore the present.

There is a story about remembering.

An older couple were having problems remembering things, so they decided to go to their doctor to get checked out to make sure nothing was wrong with them.

When they arrived at the doctors, they explained to the doctor about the problems they were having with their memory. After checking the couple out, the doctor told them that they were physically okay but might want to start writing things down and make notes to help them remember things. The couple thanked the doctor and left.

Later that night while watching TV, the man got up from his chair and his wife asked, "Where are you going?"

He replied, "To the kitchen."

She asked, "Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?"

He replied, "Sure."

She then asked him, "Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?"

He said, "No, I can remember that."

She then said, "Well I would also like some strawberries on top. You had better write that down because I know you'll forget that."

He said, "I can remember that, you want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries."

She replied, "Well I also would like whipped cream on top. I know you will forget that so you better write it down."

With irritation in his voice, he said, "I don't need to write that down! I can remember that." He then fumes into the kitchen.

After about 20 minutes he returned from the kitchen and handed her a plate of bacon and eggs. She stared at the plate for a moment and said angrily:

"I TOLD you to write it down! You forgot my toast!"

I met with Ted recently to talk with him about what we call Hendrix Hall. He drew me a map of the space we now occupy.

The floor was sand. There were chairs that were arranged for church meetings. The pulpit was where Seth Smith looks upon us now. The back door was a window that swung open and had stairs leading up to it in case of fire. Here there was a wall that was half windows that were painted. Behind this was a hallway that led into what is now the activities room. Then, the children's area was a kitchen, not much to speak of though, lit by the windows that now light to office. There were 2 bulk heads that Ted called Flying Buttresses, used to keep the walls up that were crumbling. This language of buttresses reminded me that before Ted was minister here he had worked on this building as a carpenter.

Jack and Jim were not only committed to these walls and cushions and to this community, they cared deeply about the world around them and how we as Unitarian Universalist engaged and influenced that world.

Ted told me that in 1992 after the hurricane in Florida when 30 church people volunteered to go down there and help, the trip was funded by Jack and Jim. Born as twins in Hope Arkansas, they were major supporters of immigration rights and equality for all races. They worked there and here to improve race relations and racial equality.

When the decision to renovate occurred, the Hendrix brothers were right in the lead not only as major funders and visionaries, but also those willing to put their labor into the project. Jim Hendrix decided to pitch the floor the way it is now. They upholstered 995 feet of pew cushions themselves, including the ones we sit on now, about to be reupholstered by an island upholsterer, Susan Hussey.

Susan will sew into these cushions a part of her story here now. Susan has been sewing since she the second grade. She sewed for her brothers and sisters and later for her children.

She sewed in home economics talent shows and eventually had her own alterations shop behind her home in South Carolina so she could tend to her children and work. She specializes in upholstery. She came to the island in 2000 and continues her sewing career.

Our own Bob Lehman will be doing all the painting of Hendrix Hall. Bob has lived on the island for 31 years and has been painting since he was 16. He came to this church just after it has been refurbished in 1981 and began singing in the choir, led by Barbara Elder at that time. He soon became part of Jim Sulzer's barbershop quartet, Willie and the Wailers, named for Barbara and Jim's infant son. Bob and his beloved wife of 12 years, Diane Lehman now sing at many venues and grace our own church with their musical passion and excellence.

What stories will these walls, cushions, floor, ambience tell now as we put our revisions in place, as we add our story to the story once written here and as importantly, how will we tell them? As the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri, writes, "Stories can conquer fear. They can make the heart bigger."

When the minister in 30 years from now stands here, what will he or she say about who we were today, what we believed in, what we valued and which words and actions we used to reflect that? When people tell our story, how will they remember us? Will they say we cared about each other and showed it with our gifts of time and resources to this community? Will they say we cared about the world we live in and showed it through our actions of social justice?

Will they say that we showed up here knowing that this place feeds us, nourishes our hearts and souls and responded not with our suggestions about how to make it better but with our love in all its many forms?

What story do you want to paint into these walls and cushions and floors? What words do you want here that linger in all we touch, all we do, all we dream of doing? Which definitions of what matters do you want imprinted here as surely as if they were graffiti flung across each surface? Okay, that was a metaphor!

As author and poet David Whyte writes, "The story knits together in ways we cannot know. We must apprentice ourselves to it. And if you tell it often enough, you will find a place for yourself in it."

How do you want to apprentice yourself to this story we are telling now? I invite you to do so, wherever you enter, with heart open, holding what we know to be true lightly, until the truth that seeks us all our lives has room to find us all, right here, in this our sacred Meeting House.

There is a place for all of us in this story.

Amen.