

# Order of Service “Saving Paradise”

Sunday, January 10, 2010

9:30 AM and 11:00 AM

Welcome: Board Host

Choral Introit: “Ring in the New Year”  
UUFC Choir

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words

Opening Song: #1023 “Building Bridges”

Time for All Ages

Sung Response: “Children’s Benediction”  
by B. Pescan and B. Bradfield

Reading: from *Saving Paradise*

by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker

Celebrating with Music: “WoYaYa” by L. Amoa, S. Amarfio, R. Bailey, R. Bedeau,  
Osei, W. Richardson, and M. Tontoh  
UUFC Choir

Sermon: “Saving Paradise”

Sung Response: #1008 “When Our Heart Is In a Holy Place”

Spoken Response

Candles of Joy and Sorrow/ Offering  
Prayer and Meditation

Closing Song: #1017 “Building a New Way” (verses 1 & 2)

Closing Words:

Closing Song: #1017 “Building a New Way” (verses 3 & 4)

Celebrants: Kathy Kopczynski and the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods

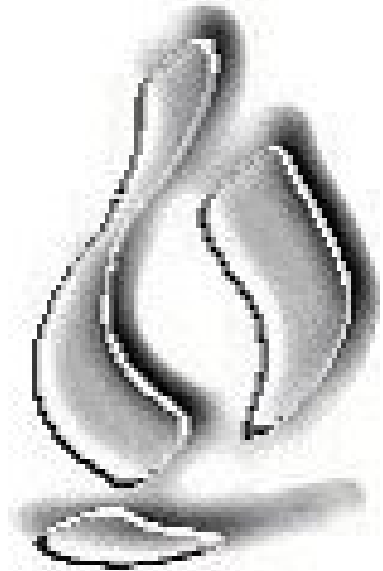
**Chalice Lighting:** We join Unitarian Universalists around the world in kindling a flame of freedom, of truth, of justice: a light to the people around the world and a source of warmth for all who share our values.

**Opening Words:** We gather in this religious community to study, to serve, and to celebrate life. As we do so, we address some of the most difficult issues facing our society and the world, including differences in our vision of how the world is and how it could or should be. We struggle together to find, articulate, and work for a vision of a world in which the “earth is made fair and all her people one.” May our words lead to actions that cause this to be so. So Be It! Blessed Be!

**Reading:** from *Saving Paradise*

by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker

In reaching our conclusions and constructing this history of Western Christianity and paradise, we have sought to avoid falling into what we know in our very bones is a self-defeating habit. That habit searches history to retrieve a pristine, pure origin and separates this precious kernel of truth from all subsequent chaff that hides it. The kernel of truth becomes the measure for judging everything that followed as corruption and betrayal. From that purified kernel, the Protestant habit constructs a vision for the future as a hope and enjoins the faithful to labor tirelessly to bring the vision into being. In rejecting everything between the pure past and the hoped-for future, Protestants tend to identify themselves with an original goodness and to disassociate from the messy history and ambiguous institutions that their forebears created and that ground present existence. However, this tendency forces us to view the past selectively and impose purity upon it rather than to see its fullness, which is as complex, ambiguous, and diverse as any human endeavor ever is. Without the messy (as opposed to pristine) past and all its people and years, we would not exist at all, in this time, in this place, in our particular bodies, in these communities and institutions. History is our social and cultural DNA. We have inherited it, and it shapes who we are. We have some measure of choice in how we express it in our lives, but how we creatively transform it is the greater responsibility. We cannot lament and transform, however, what we reject or deny and refuse to engage. (Brock and Parker pp. 415 – 416.)



F.



## **Sermon** **“Saving Paradise” by the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods**

As I asked our children this morning, what would a world that you could live in well and feel valued look like? How often have you thought about that question? I know that is something many of you are actively pursuing in one way or another. Just the turn-out and the visceral responses that attended the program with David Swanson and David Rovics this past Friday tells me that.

One thing that is clear is that we have lost a great deal of faith in our political system, especially the two party aspects of it, as well as the artificial “Wall Street/Main Street” split. Most of us understand that that too is a distraction from the real problems we face and the real solutions we might achieve, even if, as David Swanson asserts, we cannot achieve them in our lifetime.

So, today, while continuing this series of sermons on “paradise,” I offer a continuing history of visions of paradise that have attempted to save the concept from the serious deterioration we observed last week. Next week, I shall conclude this process with a sermon of concrete suggestions of how we might get there, both individually and collectively, but first some of the visions of paradise that have attempted to retrieve and reform the concept after the first millennium A.C.E.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker believe that reforming Christianity is the way to achieve paradise in our world. They see Protestantism as a somewhat failed process that attempted to return to the notion of paradise that is embodied and attuned to this earth, rather than to some other world. As they write, “In contrast to Martin Luther, who thought that paradise was completely lost in the Flood and that the *imago dei* in humanity drowned with it, Calvin held that the earth ‘still bears the traces of this largesse of God.’”<sup>1</sup> In a commentary on the book of Genesis, Calvin published a map of Mesopotamia that located paradise there. “Calvin explained that the world, as the handiwork of divine creation, was intended as good and God’s elect must care for it.”<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the theology of atonement, most Protestants believed that paradise *was* achievable on this earth. This led many religious reformers, especially the Puritans and Pilgrims (some our forebears) to believe that they could create a “New World” across the Atlantic. Of course, they completely disregarded the peoples already in the New World as not only unimportant, but also obstructive to creating paradise. The pain, displacement, and genocide this caused “Indians” has yet to be fully acknowledged by the Europeans (ourselves) who overran the land. As the authors observe, “Within a hundred years, the Puritans would denude the Eastern landscape of its great, ancient forests, and deplete or make extinct its wildlife in the rivers and forests.”<sup>3</sup>

Still, in the ensuing years, Europeans found God – and intimations of paradise -- through their experience of the beauty of nature on this continent. Both Jonathan Edwards of the Great Awakening in the middle 18<sup>th</sup> century and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had their conversion experiences in, respectively, Edward’s father’s cow pasture<sup>4</sup> and the gardens of Paris and the woods of New England.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, both men also saw nature as subordinate to “man,” rather than a concrete manifestation of paradise.

Sadly, this dominant/subordinate perspective was consistently held by most people, male and female, of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A notable exception was Thomas Starr King, a Universalist and Unitarian minister of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “He translated love for the beauty of the earth into active efforts to conserve the environment. . . His articles (for East Coast newspapers) influenced Lincoln’s decision to create the nation’s first environmental preserves – Yosemite and Mariposa Grove.”<sup>6</sup>

Universalists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from John Murray and Judith Singer Sargent Murray through Hosea Ballou consistently refuted the notion of an angry God who would damn human beings to an other-worldly hell. Universalist Ballou published the first “unitarian universalist” tract of the New World.

Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expanded the notion of sin into a transpersonal process that was sustained by the “four powerful social systems of economics, politics, education, and organized religion.”<sup>7</sup> Thus he foreshadowed the later theologians of the “social gospel,” especially that of Walter Rauschenbusch, who “. . . was clear that personal salvation for individual souls after death was not the point of Christian faith.”<sup>8</sup> So much for any other-worldly heaven or hell. Paradise for individuals was less important for followers of the Social Gospel than relational concerns and a collective paradise on earth.

Rauschenbusch led the way for many great African-American commentator/theologians, like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglas, and, finally, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As Brock and Parker note:

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*, pp. 330-331.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 331

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 369.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 383.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 386-387.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 394.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 399.

The Social Gospel's focus on engagement with life here and now rather than salvation in an afterlife provided King with an antidote to his experience of black Baptist piety that counseled people to accept suffering and discrimination in this life and anticipate release and vindication in the afterlife. In addition, his study of Gandhi in graduate school and his friendship with the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nat Hanh, who organized nonviolent resistance to the U.S. war in his country, provided insight for King's development of methods of nonviolent worldly salvation in his call for "beloved community." His clear analysis of the connections between racism and the Vietnam War testify to the enduring importance of prophetic critique. His concrete commitment to embody human solidarity and justice here and now reveal what it means to love the world.<sup>9</sup>

King was not willing to wait for paradise in some other-worldly experience. He led a struggle to bring it to every one of us here and now.

Other great minds have been writing and working toward a paradise that is of this world: David C. Korten's *The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community* and Charles Eisenstein's *The Ascent of Humanity* offer images of an "earth made fair and all her people one." None of these visions of paradise require that Christianity – or any other currently dominant world religion -- be the desired religious mode for the changes needed on our planet at this time. In fact, as already indicated by many well-known writers of the current era, most of the present organized religions support the notion of empire and dominant/subordinate relationships that make destroying our planet a precursor to bringing on a better era to come in another world.

Korten puts it this way:

Earth Community offers an alternative to the alienation and the sorrows of Empire, a way of living that places life values ahead of financial values and organizes by the principles of partnership rather than the principles of domination.<sup>10</sup>

Korten's perspective offers a view that mirrors all the great inspirations of world religions, whether we speak of Abraham, Jesus, or Muhammad: they all mystically know that the values that bring paradise of any sort are relational, not dominational.

I return to Brock and Parker for the final words of today's exploration:

We reenter this world as sacred space when we love life fiercely and, in the name of love, protect the goodness of earth's intricate web of life in all its manifold forms. We feast in paradise when we open our hearts to lamentation, to amplitudes of grief for all that has been lost and cannot be repaired. The beloved departed who have come before us draw near. The veil lifts between the living and the dead. We recommit ourselves to this world as holy ground when we remember the fullness of life that is possible through our communities, our life-affirming rituals, and our love of beauty. Thus immersed, we are more responsive to and responsible for life in this world. We give thanks for gifts of love that have been ours all along, an ever-widening circle of beauty, the Spirit in life. We enter fully – heart, mind, soul, and strength – into savoring and saving paradise.<sup>11</sup>

So Be It! Blessed Be!



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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 409.

<sup>10</sup> David C. Korten, *The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community*. P. 301

<sup>11</sup> Brock and Parker. P. 420.