

**Breaking Through**  
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**Gleanings from Wisconsin Voices**

**From *Walden West* (1961) by August Derleth**

**J**ust east of the house of my childhood, by a block, stood the Freethinkers' Park.... It occupied an entire village block. A trim round bandstand stood at the approximate center of the park, and along the sidewalk on the south line rose the great, barn-like structure of the *Freie Gemeinde* Hall, in which the congregation held meetings, funerals, and the like....

Though ... the Freethinkers were declining in numbers and prestige, the hall itself was used in the years of my childhood and youth for a variety of "doings," from puppet shows—an event of huge importance for the children—to the annual masquerade ball. Yet it was not so much the special events that lent meaning to the cavernous old building as it was the regular meetings of the congregation.... Freethinkers had, in fact, set the cultural tone for Sac Prairie over many decades; they were an offshoot of the Humanist movement at the University of Prague, and were composed for the most part of dissident aristocrats, of upper class tradesmen, from the German countries. Most of them were well educated, and they were not satisfied with the customary pap to be heard from the pulpit or lecture platform....

I grew into the habit of attending their meetings—not regularly ... but often enough to be enabled to reach out beyond the provincial boundaries of Sac Prairie.

Perhaps of all the pleasant people I met at the Park Hall none had the presence of Professor Max C. Otto of the University of Wisconsin, who, as a speaker, as teacher, as philosopher reinforced my directions.

Yet it was no one person, no one meeting of significance, that mattered as much as the general atmosphere of Park Hall, of the Freethinkers' congregation and the ideals put into practice there. The very air in that great old building seemed to stand positively for freedom of thought.... And the old building stood in the days of my youth as a tangible encouragement to think and act with complete freedom, respecting the rights and happiness of others.... Even now it spread its unseen influence over the wider reaches of the mind.

**From "The Eternal Law" (1955)**

**by Frank Lloyd Wright**

According to the radical Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "Everything is in a state of becoming."

Human traditions should be made and maintained subject to the Law of Change. Other laws are minor laws.... Growth appears according to the eternal law—the law of ceaseless change.

You may have heard it frequently said, concerning something or other, "It's a museum piece." When you do visit a museum, you may be told that what you see there is "the accumulated riches of the human race."

That is true, but what you see is there *in* the museum. No longer living, because the civilization represented finally failed to apprehend the Law of Change that applied to them.... What you see in those vast museum collections is the "debris" of the human race.

It is clear by now that there is no great tradition that should dare ignore this great law of laws. The one law that is true: true of all men and all things, at all times and in all places.

This never-ceasing, tragic law is rooted in the principle of growth, elemental to Nature. The Law of Change, then, means that we are all in a state of becoming, that is to say, of growth or decay—decay being but another form of growth....

If you observe this major tradition, you will wish to become aware of what might well be better tomorrow than today; and what it is that will keep you continuously alive, alert, conscious: let's say, creative. You will cultivate a tremendous flexibility of mind and, if you have the moral courage to face it, what you learn may make this courage useful not only to you but to others.

What this Law of Change means in practical application is really Progress! The organic expression of Life itself.

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## **Reflections**

A week from now I will be in Sauk City, conducting worship at the Freethinkers Hall that exercised such an important, though subtle, influence on August Derleth. Over the last eighteen years I've visited that small congregation many times, speaking to Sunday audiences as small as a dozen and as

large as 35 or 40. I've witnessed the waxing and waning of the Free Congregation and admired the tenacity of the local leaders who have sought to preserve its unique 150 year heritage.

But Sauk City is not the only small congregation at which I schedule appearances. Janesville, La Crosse, Woodruff, and Sister Bay have also hosted me on a regular basis. Not large or wealthy enough to support their own full-time minister, these congregations are most appreciative of my willingness to devote an occasional free Sunday to their interests.

This is one reason our movement needs faith communities as flush and as flourishing as our own. A survey of all UU congregations reveals that two-thirds report fewer than 150 members. Less than 5% have more than 550 members, and only five congregations out of 1042 have reached four figures. Ours is, then, a movement where small, often scarcely visible, congregations predominate. In most American cities, the average citizen is likely not to have heard of Unitarian Universalism and is probably unaware of the presence of a UU group in the immediate area.

Ironically, it is the large *size* of First Unitarian Society that makes it possible for me to assist and to serve a small, historic fellowship like Sauk City. Because we have the wherewithal to retain three ministers, my presence isn't always required here, and thus I can devote a certain amount of time to outreach, to serving the larger liberal religious movement. By providing a quality worship experience and sharing growth strategies that a small congregation could profitably employ, their morale is improved and their sense of mission and purpose is strengthened. Often a number of visitors will be present when I speak to groups outside of Madison, and thus the liberal religious message gains a wider hearing in small-town Wisconsin.

Now, I don't *have* to make these visits; my job description doesn't require me to do so. But I believe that with size comes added responsibility, an aspect of which is disseminating the UU "good news" through such visits. I am grateful that First Unitarian Society takes its responsibility in this regard very seriously. In recent years, we have not only supplied other UU churches with Sunday morning speakers, we have shared religious education resources, given financial assistance and support, supplied consultation on fund raising, provided access to our handsome facilities, launched a new congregation on Madison's east

side, and we have connected with hundreds of students on the UW campus. The fact is, when one large congregation is present in a community, *all* UU entities and enterprises benefit. Often a large congregation like ours is better positioned to nurture and support smaller churches and fellowships than the denomination itself.

Although congregational growth does advance our own private needs and interests, that is not its most important function. It is really all about *service*—to individuals, to human and natural ecologies, and to the greater cause of honest and responsible spirituality. "What are our churches called to do in this place and time?" Mike Durall asks.

The primary purpose of the church is to create a community of compassion ... calling members to lead lives of dedication and commitment—lives not just of success, but also of service and, when called upon, sacrifice.

Now, FUS is already big—some would say, quite big enough, thank you very much. According to denominational records, FUS is *the* largest of its kind

in on the planet. With almost 1400 adult members, many more "fellow travelers" and over 460 children and youth enrolled in its programs, First Unitarian Society has enjoyed unmatched, continuous success over the last 20 years. That is why the Unitarian Universalist Association recently recognized us as one of just four "Breakthrough" congregations in the movement. In other words, we have succeeded in "breaking through" the institutional and attitudinal barriers that prevent most churches from realizing their full potential.

But I, for one, am convinced that we ought to be bigger—not because growth is unambiguously good but because growth here, at this location, serves a number of important purposes, all of which relate to service. I am hardly an apostle of the growth gospel that has made so many of our cities, corporations, and even universities virtually unmanageable, pushed them beyond a scale that the environment can readily support. But neither do I believe that, despite its virtues, small is always beautiful. "What scale is appropriate?" E.F. Schumacher once asked.

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It all depends on what we are trying to do.... What is needed in all these matters is to discriminate, to get things sorted out, because for every activity there is an appropriate scale, and our challenge is to determine what that is, case by case.

It's also important to remember that even a congregation the size of FUS isn't exceptionally large by current institutional standards. In Dane County alone, there are undoubtedly a dozen Catholic, Lutheran, and evangelical churches bigger than this one. Beyond central Wisconsin, there are megachurches attended by thousands on Sunday morning and that feature bowling alleys, basketball courts, and snack bars—none of which are included in our current building plans, by the way.

So why grow and what would further growth mean? First, the growth of the congregation will ensure that the architectural masterpiece in which we are sitting today is treated properly. I do not believe that by adding a major new addition this historic Meeting House will become a lower priority or have its needs neglected. The plain fact is, congregational growth over the last twenty years has *saved* the Meeting House.

More than three-quarters of a million dollars have been spent on restoration-related projects since 1987, work that was desperately needed and that a smaller congregation could not possibly have undertaken. All funds to preserve, restore, and study the Meeting House during this period have been raised internally. More work remains to be done, and it will be accomplished by a generous, growing congregation. Growth and preservation go together. The stronger the congregation, the safer and more beautiful our beloved Meeting House will be.

To be sure, growth means change as well as preservation: change in the appearance of our campus, change in the way we use our facilities, change in how we do business. But to repeat the words of Frank Lloyd Wright: "there is no tradition that should dare ignore this great law of laws." It is not our congregation's calling or its destiny to preside over a static museum piece. Wright said, "What this Law of Change means in practical application is really Progress—the organic expression of life itself."

Unlike some of his successors, Wright was not an architectural fundamentalist. He advocated flexibility. If we recognize the inevitability of change, he promised, we will be "continually alive, alert, conscious, and creative."

Growth at 900 University Bay Drive is desirable in the second place because it will increase our contributions to the quality of life of the larger community. Already we serve as a frequent venue for fine music, planning meetings and public lectures. As the congregation has grown, community outreach and education have increased significantly. Today, First Unitarian Society may be the most socially activist faith community in the county, and we are looked to for support and leadership.

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Growth and an expanded facility will only make us more effective. A handsome, state-of-the-art "green" building will serve as an environmental teaching tool, inspiring families, other faith communities, and even businesses to embrace and put into practice "sustainable" principles. We will have more space to accommodate worthy outside groups, and none of our current efforts will be undercut or compromised by this commitment to additional "bricks and mortar."

Most urban congregations these days, when they reach a certain size, depart for the suburbs, sacrificing the interests of the center city, contributing to urban sprawl, and increasing their member's dependency on the automobile. A socially and environmentally responsible congregation will do everything it possibly can to "stay in place," maintaining its historic commitments and managing its growth in order to better serve not only its own members, but its neighbors. As long as we continue to think of First Unitarian Society as a "public" church and to make service a priority, Madison can only benefit from the congregation's future growth.

Growth would deliver other obvious benefits, including:

- An increase in the breadth and depth of our member programs, which would mean more opportunities for participation and the promise of greater congregational diversity;
- The ability to recruit and retain excellent staff;
- The chance to demonstrate to the entire UU movement that a *progressive* faith community can become as large and significant as one that is conservative and evangelical. No Unitarian Universalist church in the last 30 years has

grown beyond 1500 members and we have a real opportunity to “break through” that barrier.

And this brings us to the most critical reason for growth. At the end of his Thursday press conference, President Bush made an approving comment about the “Third Great Awakening” that has been sweeping through our culture. Religious enthusiasm, religious commitment, and religious initiative have all increased. “Everywhere I go,” the President said, “people are praying for me.”

Unfortunately, the “awakening” Mr. Bush praised isn’t altogether benign. In a recent essay Marilynne Robinson, author of the acclaimed novel *Gilead*, expressed certain misgivings, pointing out that this Third Great Awakening is quite different from earlier ones.

During the First Great Awakening [of the 1740s] ... Jonathan Edwards encouraged people to believe that they *themselves* were the problem, not some decadent “others” who were corrupting the cultural atmosphere. A century later, the Second Great Awakening ... was strongly focused on slavery, its abolition, and on the education of women.... Its main thrust was profoundly progressive and reformist. It addressed inequality—of black and white, women and men, wealthy and poor—as a social sin to be overcome.... The movement we are seeing now is notably devoid of interest in equality ... and shows startlingly little sense of responsibility for the vulnerable.

What Robinson doesn’t mention is that this “Third Great Awakening” also lacks a responsible environmental ethic. At a time when climate change, habitat loss, the depletion of fresh water supplies, and deterioration of our ocean ecosystems seriously threaten the planet’s future, religious conservatives have willfully opposed almost all meaningful corrective measures. Indeed, the same people who offer prayers to the President have characterized environmentalism as an anti-Christian, pagan heresy and indiscriminately spread irresponsible stories about Armageddon, the imminent Second Coming, and the irrelevance of environmental stewardship.

Conservative leaders of the Third Great Awakening have also waged war against sensible

family planning, the teaching of evolution, basic biological research, and the legitimate rights of same-sex couples. Their respect for non-Christians is nil—the views of other religions are to be refuted, never accommodated. As religious progressives, we ought to be deeply concerned about this shift in America’s religious attitudes, for it is having a profound affect on our nation’s public policy. Frank Lloyd Wright, who was a bit of a prophet as well as an architect, challenged our institutional complacency in 1946: “The Unitarian Church,” he wrote,

... always a leader in the ethical thought of humanity ... must resolve to lead, or we will all be led to destruction.

I believe our best opportunity to shape and redeem the future lies right here—in generously funded, highly motivated, dynamically active, strategically placed communities like the First Unitarian Society of Madison. I don’t think I am alone in my feelings. Church consultant Mike Durrall has spent the last twenty years asking UUs around the country what they really long for in a faith community. These are some of the most frequent responses: A more adventuresome congregational life; a willingness for the church to love more boldly; a church that takes some risks, that is not too comfortably settled in; a church that accomplishes great things or affects lives; a church with service at its core, not at the edges.

It is because I believe so fervently in the critical role a strong progressive religious movement can and must play in today’s world that I choose to serve a large church and, when possible, challenge our smaller congregations to take their mission seriously and to grow. Spirituality can not be for us a merely personal interest or private indulgence. And preservation by itself—even of an edifice as magnificent as this one—is just not a lofty enough goal. Too much is at stake for us to allow our talent and our potential to be wasted.

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