

THE MEANING OF NEW HOPE
Remarks at the Affirmation of the Ministry of
The Reverend Suzanne Paul
And
The Dedication of New Hope's New Building
January 27, 2008

Fresh from a vacation trip to the Hawaiian Islands, I received an e-mail from your minister inviting me to be the “the guest speaker at New Hope’s Building Dedication and Minister Affirmation service on Sunday, January 27th.” Because Suzanne Paul is a long time friend and respected colleague, I had no hesitation about accepting this invitation, even though it was not clear at that point what exactly was wanted of me.

Little did I know that in a very short while Suzanne Paul would become a national celebrity, her picture and words gracing the pages of *Psychology Today* in an article about “An Atheist in the Pulpit.” Not only that, but the picture brings out an aspect of her personality that she is too modest ever to mention, namely her saintliness. Her beaming face and glowing head are surrounded by a magnificent halo!

When Suzanne was ordained at the Farmington UU Church some 20 years ago, her old friend and mentor, the late Rabbi Sherwin Wine, told the congregation, with special notice to her children, that henceforth she should be addressed as The Reverend Mother! I am sure that Sherwin would agree with me that now we must all call her Saint Suzanne!

Her childhood Catholic instructors surely had no idea whom they were teaching!

Nor did I when I first met Suzanne at a Humanist conference in 1985 and she asked me if she could be an intern with me in the Ann Arbor congregation. After some difficult financial negotiations—she wanting to work and not caring whether she was paid and I insisting that ministry was a profession not a philanthropy—we agreed on a ten month internship beginning in September, 1986, with a modest stipend, all we could afford. With due respect to the other women and men who have interned with me, Suzanne was the best intern I ever had, very quickly moving into the role of assistant minister more than student minister.

Since then, as you know, she has gone on to serve two other congregations before joining with you to form this congregation, always with a growing edge of vision, competence, and accomplishment.

So it is with a sense of honor that I accepted the invitation to speak today, appreciating as you do, but in a way more than you do because I have done this work and know what it takes, appreciating what a gifted and caring minister your spiritual leader is. And yet, as I noted, I had not a clue as to how I was going to give a talk that would both affirm your minister and celebrate the dedication of your new building.

Puzzled, I thought back on other slightly unusual moments in my ministry for inspiration. I remembered blessing a bell with a Roman Catholic priest, though neither of us had a clue how to do such a thing. I recalled performing a wedding in shorts and t-shirt—at the request of the bride and groom who were similarly dressed—along a riding path with horses thundering down upon us every minute or so; the processional was a very slow and careful one to avoid certain deposits upon the ground. And I thought back on a recent memorial service in which three brothers swapped one-liners about their father while I provided a kind of bass note of facts about his life.

These were not helpful, but I was sure I'd think of something, And I have. I am going to talk about affirmation and I am going to talk about building. I am going to talk more about the former than the latter because I know more, but I recognize how important both minister and building are and how important it is to affirm that minister, as she affirms you, and to dedicate this building to the high purposes that are part of your mission as a congregation.

Affirmation means firm support, acceptance, agreement. In the context of this congregation, affirming your minister means that you approve and bless the ministry of Suzanne Paul, that you have a bond with each other to mutually enrich each other. Having known Suzanne as a minister for more than 21 years, I see in her ministry certain themes, themes that in affirming her you affirm them as well.

The first of these themes is empowerment. I called Suzanne earlier this week and asked her how she would describe the focus of her ministry and with virtually no hesitation she said “to inspire people to be empowered, that is

my ministry.”

Despite her recent celebrity, Suzanne’s ministry is not about public acclaim or trying to climb some ladder of success to a megachurch. Suzanne’s ministry is about you, each one of you, and whoever walks through the doors of New Hope. Suzanne’s ministry is about encouraging in each member and friend of the congregation stronger spiritual growth, more committed ethical awareness, discovering new capabilities within and renewing contact with old talents that have been lying dormant. Empowerment.

Like so many of us, Suzanne’s life has been a spiritual journey. Raised in a Roman Catholic home, she was an atheist by her late teens. Because, in her words, “I recognized early that you can clear a room if you say you’re an atheist,” she prefers “to identify myself as a humanist.” She has grown and expanded her understanding of what that means across the years, so that today she is a humanist with a heart as well as a mind.

Something of what she has gone through is spoken of in a book by the biologist H. Allen Orr, *LIVING WITH DARWIN: EVOLUTION, DESIGN, AND THE FUTURE OF FAITH*. Orr argues that there are basically three types of faith: providential, supernaturalist, and what he calls spiritual and I would call ethical. The first of these believes in a God who designed the universe for us and who cares deeply about us. It is a belief destroyed by Darwin, whose theory of natural selection involves mass suffering.

The second requires taking certain texts literally, impossible to do with all we know of how the texts of the world’s religions actually came to be, the problems of translation, and the simple unreliability of the deity portrayed by these texts, one minute saving people and the next wiping them out in anger, acting like nothing so much as an oriental potentate.

The third kind of faith—Suzanne’s faith and yours too, I would imagine—“offers ethical models of right action and moving portraits of nobly lived lives.” Making no claims to cosmological truths, it joins in partnership with science to offer a vision of human potential and the steps needed to get there.

From Suzanne’s early sermonical efforts through her growing prowess as a preacher to the Klein Lecture she gave at the Ann Arbor congregation to the

work she did with my congregation in Bowling Green to help them figure out how to decide what their future should be, it is her mission to help people understand what their possibilities are and how they might realize them.

Empowerment.

What better purpose in a ministry could there be? Is this not what all religious communities strive to be? Is this not what we all need—encouragement, a helping hand, insight, inspiration?

In affirming the ministry of Suzanne Paul, you are affirming her ministry of empowerment.

Secondly, Suzanne's ministry is pastoral. I mean by pastoral that she cares about people, about the members and friends of this congregation and about the strangers whom she meets who need her assistance.

It is my conviction that ministry is most deeply grounded in the pastoral dimensions of congregational life, that caring about people is necessary and the key to success in every other aspect of a religious community's existence. My father, a Presbyterian minister, wrote a book in the early days of the Second World War whose purpose was to dry the tears of those burdened by sadness, lighten the load of those heavily laden, bring a smile to a face weary with trials and tribulations.

These are the things a pastor does, and one thing more—shares in the joys of the people. Suzanne Paul does all these things. She's a pastor.

You will know specific pastoral moments in the two year history of this congregation. I go back to her early days as an intern. I did not have to teach Suzanne anything about caring for people as a minister. She had either studied with somebody quite good at this kind of work or she had an inborn sense of what to do and how to do it. She already knew which people in the hospital needed only a ten minute visit and which were eager for conversation of a longer duration. She instituted the practice of giving poinsettias to our congregation's shut-ins, those in nursing homes, and those who had been through some difficult times recently. To this day, Suzanne

has never forgotten my birthday. A card arrives every year bearing her good wishes.

There was a lovely man in the congregation who had been diagnosed just a few weeks before Suzanne started with us with a bad cancer for which there was no treatment. I invited Suzanne to accompany me on a visit to Bob Klein. It quickly became apparent that Bob was much more interested in speaking with Suzanne than in talking with me. She continued to spend time with him over the next few weeks until he died, obviously giving him much comfort in those last, difficult days.

When I met with the family to plan a memorial service for Bob, his widow asked me if it would be all right to have Suzanne take part in that service, new as she was on the job. Ruth said that Suzanne had meant so much to him that the family would really appreciate it if she could do something. Of course, I agreed. Suzanne then continued to call on Ruth for many months.

Almost 20 years later, when Suzanne was proposed as the Klein Lecturer, Ruth, who had a final say on the choice, was thrilled at the selection and made it clear how much it would have meant to Bob to have her in that role.

Suzanne cares about the struggles that people go through and the triumphs that come as well. Suzanne is there to be a listening voice for a few minutes on the telephone, or maybe even in the store. She counsels and advises. She is always there when you need her, even if it is only to offer a cheery greeting and brighten the day with her friendliness.

Suzanne is a pastor.

A third theme that informs Suzanne's ministry and that you are affirming today is community building.

In the article in which she appeared in Psychology Today, Suzanne is quoted as saying that "we are naturally social animals and like to be with like-minded people. I enjoy the community aspects of religion." Yes, she does.

Creating and sustaining community in a UU context is no simple task. If Suzanne, not basically a sportswoman although a very good sport, will

forgive me, I want to use a sports analogy to talk about religious community. This is a description by John Paul Lederach in his book *THE MORAL IMAGINATION*.

“In soccer, the field is wide. The motion is constant. In order to create a goal, the ball moves back, across, forward, and back again. Multiple sets of players coordinate and create a complex pattern of relationships and relational spaces from which openings are derived for pursuing the goal, more often than not in totally unexpected ways that require imagination and skill. Unlike American football, progress is not measured by each play and whether forward movement was created.”

I venture to say that I am not alone in seeing this description as rather apt for the way congregations function—constant motion, not a great deal of scoring, movement forward and back and sideways, goals achieved somewhat unexpectedly through imagination and skill.

I think Suzanne understands the importance of team effort in reaching goals and has the knowledge of the players to be able to help them use their talents wisely. She certainly appreciates the dynamics of how congregations function, which is why other congregations, including my own in Ohio, have invited her to help them figure out how to get past roadblocks, how to build new relationships and structures, how to generate harmony.

When Suzanne went to the Farmington church, she went as a quarter time minister. The membership was about 70-80 adults and just a few children. Within four years, she had become first the half time and then the three quarter time and then the full time minister. When she left, there were some 250 adult members and well over 100 children. This was not done alone, of course, and Suzanne would be the first to say that. But it required leadership that had a vision of what could be, knowledge of how to grow a congregation, and competence in managing the complex problems that arise in any congregational setting.

And remember, in a UU context, folks who don't like what is going on just walk out the door. Suzanne created a loving community that functioned at a high level of efficiency and extended its concern for the world into the wider society.

I do not need to say anything about New Hope, a story you know far better than I, except to say that Suzanne has been in the thick of this challenging effort to plant a UU presence in South Lyon. I know she has been both inspirational and practical in creating New Hope UU Congregation.

In affirming Suzanne's ministry you are affirming her commitment to community.

Community is closely tied to building, and today's service is not just about affirming your minister and her ministry, but also about the dedication of this new space you have. One of the central truths of human life is our need for a place of our own. We need a physical space that belongs to us or is shared by others of like mind, some piece of earth or some building that we can identify with.

Langdon Gilkey, the eminent Christian theologian, wrote of this in his memoir of being imprisoned by the Japanese in World War II, SHANTUNG COMPOUND. He talked of the terribly overcrowded conditions in which he experienced the necessity of some space, albeit only a tiny one, that was his and did not belong to others. Those who were unable to carve out such a space had a harder time surviving, and often did not. Like individuals, communities need a place that is their own, that is their home.

That is why Jews for 2,000 years spoke of "next year in Jerusalem" and why Palestinians yearn for homes their families knew for generations.

The problem of homelessness is precisely the problem of people not having a place that is theirs.

We need a home, as individuals, as families, and most assuredly as religious communities.

Your story of coming to this building is one of great determination, great patience, and great courage. You formed as a congregation and you found a very charming and workable site. I visited there several times and had the pleasure of speaking to you. How beautifully you had decorated and remodeled to make that space your own! What a warm and inviting space it was. It was a terrible thing to have it taken away from you.

It is a testimony to Suzanne's leadership and to your resilience as a congregation that you did not despair—or, if you did, you kept it well hidden and got over it quickly. You found this building. Having seen it at a fairly early stage of your occupancy, I know what work has gone in to making it your home. You now once again have a warm and inviting space.

Here you will have services, have meetings, have classes, plan programs, enjoy one another's company, and fill this space with a spirit of love and justice. In this building, you will be creating a rich, meaningful spiritual life for one another. What symbols you display here, what music you play here, what words are spoken here, what relationships are formed here, what experiences are shared here will tell the world who you are and what you stand for. People driving by—and some will stop and come in—will know this is a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and will see by the way you live what that means.

You have come here today to dedicate this building to the greater good of your congregation and the greater good of the human community. You have come here today to dedicate yourselves to using this building in ways that will reflect the greater good of congregation and society. It is a worthy purpose, for which I salute you, as I salute you for all that you have done through these past sometimes very difficult years that has brought you to this point.

So here you are with this splendid building and here you are with this minister who is committed to your empowerment, to your pastoral care, and to the community whose members you are, all of this within the context of Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism is a faith that begins in the conviction of the sacred and inherent worth of every human being, that treasures freedom and tolerance and reason, and that opens its arms wide to take everyone into its universalist heart.

What a religion!

What a building!

What a minister!

What a day!

Celebrate and rejoice in what you have achieved, in what you stand for, in the fine minister who is your spiritual leader, in this lovely building that you are filling with the spirit of love and justice.

Celebrate and rejoice!

Hooray and Amen!

