

“The Tragedy of the Commons?”

Imagine you were challenged to design a place of worship for the modern world. It should acknowledge the discoveries of science and reflect the human place in nature. It should include all the world’s diverse cultural and spiritual traditions, yet point beyond them to an emerging planetary society. In 1949, Kenneth Patton, the minister of the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston, set out to create such a place of worship. The old church was transformed. As he described it:

“At the front of the auditorium, an arch which is fifteen feet wide and twenty-five feet high, we have reproduced the Great Nebula in Andromeda from astronomical photographs. This nebula is our next door neighbor in space, practically a twin of the Milky Way or which our solar system is a part. It give us a window into the universe, and provides us with the key for our cosmic orientation. We call it a “symbol of the fact.”

“The earth is symbolized by a large polar-projection map inlaid in linoleum in the very center of the floor. All national boundaries are eliminated, giving the one land mass, the one earth. Around this is a golden circle, which we have chosen as the master symbol of Universalism. The circle is found in all cultures and has variously symbolized the universe, the sun, the moon, the earth, unity, perfection, holiness and peace.”

“On the platform at the front is a large bookcase which houses the major writings of all the world religions. Whereas dogmatic faiths sometimes put ‘the one book’ front and center, we put the many great books of humankind together as a symbol of our acceptance of all human wisdom.”

The perimeter of the sanctuary, Patton explains, was adorned with dozens of icons from traditions ranging from the Apache to the Zoroastrian.

The Charles Street Meeting House must have been an inspiring place, at least until it was sold, subdivided and turned into condominiums. Twenty five years ago, the congregation found it could no longer pay its bills, so the building was surrendered to developers. Instead of gathering to worship, the occupants now live behind locked doors. Instead of sharing community suppers, the residents now warm Single Servings and Lean Cuisine. The mural of Andromeda is gone, and the map of the earth without boundaries has been covered so the building could be cut into units and sold to private investors. Ellen Goodman, a columnist with the Boston Globe, commented on the sale:

“The church around the corner from my house has been turned into condos. They held an open house last week, on Sunday, of course, and we attended. The congregants were well-behaved, respectful of property rites, awed by interest rates. The ritual was presided over by an agent of real estate. Walking through it on this Sunday, I wondered what the former ministers would say about this event. Had as many people come regularly on past Sunday? Had they listened as attentively to the sermons as to the tax break information? It seemed to me that there was something symbolic in this secular conversion. Another meeting place had been lost. Another private living space had been created. It looked like part of a pattern away from the communal world to the private. A pattern in which people value what we share less than what we own.”

People value what we share less than what we own. This simple fact—if it is a fact—is at

the heart of an essay by biologist Garrett Hardin called "The Tragedy of the Commons" which may explain not only why the Charles Street Meeting House had to be sold for condos, but why our oceans are dying, why the climate is changing and, not incidentally, why raising our congregation's budget is so difficult each year.

"The tragedy of the commons develops in this way," writes Hardin. "Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably well for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is, the day when the long desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point, the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy. As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. Explicitly or implicitly, more or less consciously, he asks, 'What is the utility to me of adding one more animal to my herd?' This utility has one negative and one positive component: 1) The positive component is a function of the increment of one animal. Since the herdsman receives all the proceeds from the sale of the additional animal, the positive utility is nearly +1; 2) The negative component is a function of the additional overgrazing created by one more animal. Since, however, the effects of overgrazing are shared by all the herdsmen, the negative utility for any particular decision-making herdsman is only a fraction of -1. Adding together the component partial utilities, the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another, and another. But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."

It is easy to see the implications of Hardin's argument, for the world contains many variations of the common. Our planet's forests are a commons. If each person finds it makes economic sense to chop down just a few trees, the forests soon disappear. The oceans are a commons. If each municipality finds the cost of dumping at sea cheaper than investing in waste management, the oceans are soon polluted. At Crater Lake National Park in Oregon, there is another version of the commons. A field once covered with lava today has no traces of the volcanic rock, for over the years, millions of tourists decided, "I can take one piece. It will never be missed." And of course, congregations like ours are a commons. If each person decides to let others carry the burden of leadership and financial support, the faith community atrophies and dies.

Why did Garrett Hardin call this the tragedy of the commons? The reason, and what made his essay so controversial, was that Hardin believed this process of mutual ruination to be inevitable. Foul air and dying seas are calamities in and of themselves, but what makes them tragic is the fact that nothing we do can avert the final disaster. "The essence of dramatic tragedy," he says, quoting Whitehead, "is not unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things." A government scientist on National Public Radio reported recently, for example, that too much attention was being paid to preventing global warming when at this point there is nothing we can do to

stop the greenhouse effect. If he is right, we understand the tragedy in that. We are caught in the grip of a mechanism we have created but cannot control. We have laid the conditions for our own downfall.

The reason the commons are doomed to extinction, says Hardin, is that “natural selection favors the forces of psychological denial. The individual benefits as an individual from his ability to deny the truth even though society as whole, of which he is a part, suffers.” Those couples who limit the size of their families out of concern for world population, for instance, will always be outnumbered by their more prolific peers who have no contraceptive scruples. Corporations that voluntarily adopt expensive scrubbers for their smokestacks will eventually be forced out of business by companies that consider only the bottom line. It’s to each individual’s advantage to exploit the commons, and those who fail to exploit will be relentlessly exploited. Thus conscience tends to be self-eliminating. “Society appeals to an individual exploiting a commons to restrain himself for the general good—by means of his or her conscience,” concludes Hardin. “To make such an appeal is to set up a selective system that works toward the elimination of conscience from the race.”

If Hardin’s analysis is correct, then this religious Society is eventually doomed to go the way of the Charles Street Meeting House. This little commons at the top of Church Street will one day be sold and subdivided. One more coffee bar or luxury apartment complex will be built here, for our congregation depends on an appeal to conscience for its survival. It relies on the voluntary support of individuals, and asks that each of us give something to the common welfare.

This year, again, we ask our friends and members to contribute on a sliding scale, from one to four percent of their adjusted gross income. Those funds make possible everything that happens in this building, from yoga and Zen to weddings and funerals to social action forums and sex education for teens, almost all programming that is offered to the public without admission fees or out-of-pocket costs attached. Each of us has to decide how much of our resources to reserve for our personal needs, and how much to give for the support of the commons. If Garrett Hardin is right, most of us will come to the conclusion that we can well afford to have our children receive private lessons in music and math, but can’t afford more than a token amount for their religious education. We’ll determine that what we own is more valuable than what we share. Those who decide to exploit the commons, the enjoy its ministries and facilities without giving back for its support, will outnumber the conscientious few who take their responsibilities more seriously. We will decide not to give up to our potential. And such decisions, in their cumulative effect, spell the slow stagnation of our spiritual community.

Why both to support our faith, though, if our earth is not going to last long anyway, if tragedy really is our fate? The reason is, that Garrett Hardin is wrong. We can be optimistic about the future of our principles and our planet because conscience is not the weak and sickly thing Hardin believes it to be. It may be the most powerful force in the world. How was human slavery ended? How was child labor abolished? How did the first laws against animal cruelty come into being? How did women gain the right to hold property and vote? Each of these steps forward began with an appeal to conscience,

and though they involved people of many faiths, Unitarian Universalists played important roles in almost every case. They took years to accomplish. They required organization and struggle at many levels. But they were ultimately successful because they could engage and elevate the moral imagination of humankind. Conscience has the power of a chain reaction. One person's vision and commitment awakens another's and another's, and their combined energies can awaken an entire generation. Hence Norman Cousins writes, "Nothing is more powerful than an individual acting out of his (or her) conscience, thus helping to bring the collective conscience to life."

That's not always easy to believe, not easy if you've ever walked our front yard picking up beer bottles and assorted litter from the night before. It's hard to understand how people can be so thoughtless as to leave their trash on our doorstep, yet the truth is that many people are so thoughtless. We regard a commons—any commons, be it a churchyard, public beach or coastline—as a trash bin to deposit our debris. That attitude has to change, and will change as we work to develop a new ethic of the common. Last summer I had a talk with a sincere and good-hearted Christian who told me he had thirteen children. I think the day is not far off when a man of conscience fathering thirteen children will be as inconceivable as a man having thirteen wives. Public morality and common decency will no longer tolerate such a thing. There will come a day not far off when our children or grandchildren will look on our current dependence on fossil fuels in the same way we look on Thomas Jefferson's and George Washington's dependence on slave labor: an historical aberration that could only have happened in the past. There is a greener future ahead of us, and it will grow from a new recognition of the value and integrity of what belongs to us all. It will grow from a new recognition of the biological and spiritual unity of life. It will grow as we come to a new understanding of what is required of the individual in an interdependent world.

How can such a change come about? Is there any institution or organization on the scene today whose distinct mission is to educate, transform and mobilize the individual and collective conscience? Historically, this has been the role of our liberal faith: to bring the human heart and mind to new visions of what might be, and adapt the wisdom and ethics of the past to new occasions. We have helped people change the way they think and feel and set them free to grow toward new understandings of the universe. We have been a catalyst of consciousness and culture.

Now imagine that you are challenged to erect a place of worship and spiritual renewal for the modern world. It must acknowledge the discoveries of science and reflect the human place in nature. It should respect the many religious and tribal traditions of humankind, but point beyond them to an emerging planetary culture. It must teach people to live responsibly and peacefully on the earth, and to respect the balance of life that sustains us all. We have that challenge. We have that opportunity. It can begin with us, here in this congregation. Perhaps we need a mural of Andromeda on our front wall to remind us of the grandeur and majesty of which we are a part. But the important thing is not to HAVE a symbol, but to BE a symbol ... of conscience, of integrity, of hope.