

University Presbyterian Church
San Antonio, Texas
Elizabeth McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Conspiracy”
Genesis 1: 1-2; 2: 4b-7
John 20: 19-22
March 30, 2008
Second Sunday of Easter

The way we begin our worship service—breathing in and out together—started several Lenten seasons ago. When it was first suggested to me, I was ambivalent. It seemed a trifle New Age-y; thus, it took some prayer and no small amount of rehearsal time (think of me standing in front of the mirror trying out a range of intonations and gestures) to nudge me over the hump of my opening day jitters.

But I was comforted by the knowledge that the act of breathing in and out is a God thing. It is biblical; the Hebrew word *ruach* that is translated “wind” in Genesis 1 is the same word as the one that is translated “breath” in Genesis 2. In other Old Testament references, it is translated “spirit.” The Hebrew word *ruach* is then carried over into the New Testament where it becomes the Greek word *pneuma* (as in “pneumonia”) and retains its rich, multivalent meaning.

The late John Courtney Murray liked to use the word “conspiracy” when referring to the church. He liked to use the word because it derives from the combination of two Latin words: *com*, meaning “with,” and *spirare*, meaning “to breathe.” Conspiracy=breathing together. The church, then, is a conspiracy, not in the sense of a sinister plot, but the company of those who breathe together with a shared sense of grace as the people of God. (1)

The gospel lesson describes this conspiracy as being born on Easter evening. The birth of the conspiracy begins strangely, to be sure, for at the end of that mysteriously wonderful day of Jesus’ resurrection, where do we find the disciples? They are barricaded behind bolted doors, a terrified little band huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the doorknob, peeking through the drapes to make sure the world isn’t roaming the streets in a search-and-destroy mission. (2)

And then, suddenly, Jesus is standing in the middle of them. He speaks to them. He offers them his peace in exchange for their fear. He pulls back the folds of his shirt sleeves so that they can see his wounds. And he breathes. He breathes *his* breath, *his* life, into *them*.

The scene looks familiar to us. It feels familiar to us. We reenact it every Sunday as we begin our worship services here at UPC. And we re-enact every time we ourselves trust Christ enough to rise up out of our fear and breathe, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “the livingness of those who are alive.” (3)

The scene looks familiar to me; it feels familiar to me because I witnessed it being reenacted last Wednesday night by the UPC Session.

As many of you know, there have been two committees hard at work these past few months. One of these is a committee which was charged with establishing a columbarium which is a location where urns of ashes are lodged in niches. This committee has been chaired by Sharon Holcomb. The second is the Holy Conversations Committee which was charged with following up on the recommendations of the Master Plan Committee, chaired by Joe Stubblefield, which had put forth a concept for a new community room and a sanctuary renovation, along with the construction of a columbarium. The Holy Conversations Committee has been chaired by Thurman Adkins.

Things were moving along at a good clip when, of all things, the pastor up and announces that she has accepted a call to another church. Well, it would surely not be accurate to draw too close a parallel here between the band of disciples fearfully huddled together and the UPC Session, but it is fair to say, I think, that this news which was as surprising to the pastor as it has been to most of you injected a note of uncertainty into the enterprise.

And this uncertainty, or, more accurately, the certainty that a transition into the next chapter of the church's life will pose challenges led the Session to deem it unwise to undertake a mega-project like tackling the entire Master Plan at this particular point in time. Thus, the work of the Holy Conversations Committee was accepted, with sincere thanks, and the decision was made to postpone further action on the building of a new community room and the renovation of the sanctuary until permanent pastoral leadership is in place.

However, today you were given some drawings of plans for a smaller project: a memorial garden to be located where the courtyard currently is and a gathering place to be located in front of the Center for Education on Bushnell. I know that you have lots of questions! After worship, we will hold an informational meeting and Chris Schultz, the architect, along with Thurman and Sharon, will be here to answer your questions.

But for now, I want to say a few things about the project, specifically, how this project relates to the text which we have read today and how we as a band of disciples might view the memorial garden and the gathering place as an expression of our "breathing God's Holy Spirit into us and breathing out our worship and our praise." (4)

First, regarding the memorial garden...

To my way of thinking, "breathing God's Holy Spirit into us" represents the contemplative aspect of Christian discipleship. You know, many of us live busy, demanding lives with all kinds of forces working on us 24/7 to distract us from God. I would like to think that the presence of the memorial garden and columbarium will serve as spiritual antidote to those poisonous forces which, frankly, can suck the life from our souls. "In life and in death, we belong to God," the opening sentence from the Presbyterian Church's Brief Statement of Faith will be inscribed there. It will be a place where anyone can come to pray, to cry, to think, to

ponder, to be nourished by, simply to be, if you will, surrounded by God's good creation, listening to the sound of flowing water, comforted and made braver by the memory and continuing presence of fellow disciples who, Christians believe, continue to breathe with us as they live eternally in life beyond death.

At the Session meeting the other night, someone voiced the concern that the presence of this memorial garden and columbarium might be viewed as something that we are building "for us." It is a valid concern, but I trust that it will not be so. I trust that what will be witnessed here is a visible expression of the affirmation "In life and in death, we belong not to ourselves but to God."

Regarding the gathering space...

Not long ago, I read an article in which reference was made to the work of William Whyte. Whyte spends decades studying the patterns of diverse people on the move. His fascinating analyses of crowd behavior on New York City streets, using time-lapse photography and extensive notes and graphs, are published in his 1988 book *City: Rediscovering the Center*. Whyte discovered that pedestrians walking on busy sidewalks have a natural way of avoiding collisions with one another. Without even realizing it, they form a mass or a crowd that is both smooth and efficient. "They give and they take..." The sidewalk "comes alive with movement and color—people walking quickly, walking slowly, skipping up steps, weaving in and out in crossing patterns, accelerating and retarding to match the moves of others. There is a beauty," Whyte said of this sight, "that is beguiling to watch."

Peter Marty, the author of the article, observes that the beauty that White saw in these coordinated crowd movements is not unlike the beauty of a congregation that understands itself as a community moving forward together. When I imagine UPC gathering in that space in years to come, I imagine a beauty that is beguiling to watch. I imagine a community continuing to be inspired by Jesus, propelled by the Spirit to walk around inside each other's lives even though they may think and live quite differently from one another, and the love that is generated from this spiritually coherent community being breathed outward in peace and love to a broken world to a degree that is far greater than the sum total of the love and peace emanating from its individual members' lives. (5)

There is something else which I must tell you about this project, and this "something else" speaks to the question that is most assuredly bubbling about in your minds: How much will it cost? How will we pay for it?

Some of the answer to that will come from Thurman at the informational meeting following worship. For my part, I will tell you a story. It is the best kind of story because it is about people you know, people very much like you, making a witness of faith in the community of faith of which you are a part.

In the fall of 2006, Joe Stubblefield asked if we could meet and talk. He told me that after discussing the matter with Phyllis, he had decided to make a gift to the building fund, \$25,000 at that time and \$25,000 later, in early 2008. As you know, Joe, who was an elder here,

had put time, energy, and his amazing creativity in the Master Plan. He gave me a handwritten letter in which he articulated the pledge of financial support which I have just described along with the request that I keep the source of the gift confidential. I gratefully accepted his gift on your behalf, and I promised him that his gift would be anonymous.

Later in 2007, as it the plans for the columbarium and memorial garden and the gathering space, also projects in which Joe was involved, seemed to be moving to fruition more quickly than plans for the community room and sanctuary, I sat down with Joe and asked him what his wishes were concerning his gift. Was the Session free to use his gift for the construction of the columbarium, or should it be reserved for community room and sanctuary construction and renovation? Joe immediately responded, “The memorial garden is a part of the master plan. Yes, it can be used this way.”

Joe died before he made the gift of the second \$25,000 was made. He had not stipulated in his will that the gift was to be made. However, when Phyllis told Joe’s children, Katie and Sam, of Joe’s pledge, they immediately responded, “Yes, this is what Joe wanted. We will make the gift on his behalf.” And they did.

On December 28, after the movers had cleared out Joe’s and Phyllis’ apartment at the Bushnell, Phyllis and I sat in the front seat of my car saying good-bye. She knew of Joe’s request that the gift be kept confidential, but I asked her if I might have her permission to break my promise to Joe and to talk about this in some way because it was a witness to Joe’s, not to mention her and Katie’s and Sam’s, confidence in UPC’s continuing faithfulness that would stretch beyond his lifetime and, who is to say, perhaps it might inspire, breathe in, a similar confidence in others. Phyllis thought about it for a little while, and then she said yes.

Some might call the deal that Phyllis and I struck in the front seat of my car on the afternoon of December 28 a conspiracy. And I, remembering that John Courtney Murray liked to refer to the church as a conspiracy because he thought of the church as a group of believers who breathe together with a shared sense of grace as God’s people, am inclined to agree.

1. Peter W. Marty, “Breathing Together: Community as a Way of Life,” *Christian Century*, August 23, 2005.
2. Thomas G. Long, *Whispering the Lyrics* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Company, 1995), 90.
3. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 112.
4. The words which conclude our time of breathing together and usher us into worship.
5. Marty, “Breathing Together.”