

## Who Gets to Play?

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer – June 13, 2021

288

## All Are Architects

$\text{♩} = 104$

1. All are ar - chi - tects of fate, work - ing in these  
 2. For the struc - ture that we raise time is with ma -  
 3. Build to - day, then, strong and sure, with a firm and

walls of time; some with mas - sive deeds and great,  
 te - rials filled; our to - days and yes - ter - days  
 am - ple base; and as - cend - ing and se - cure

some with or - na - ments of rhyme.  
 are the blocks with which we build.  
 shall to - mor - row find its place.

⊕ Words: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882  
 ⊕ Music: Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

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This hymn is a favorite among Unitarian Universalists. My friend and colleague Rev. Kimberly Debus has a blog post devoted to it, it has been included in many of our services. There is incredibly deep meaning for words like “all are architects...” in a theological tradition that does not point exclusively to one god or expression of the divine. Particularly for those who hold on to human agency as the greatest and ultimate expression of being. I can respect that.

But there’s always been something that gives me pause when I hear Unitarian Universalists refer to this piece. One aspect of my identity that I always hold very close to my center is that of being a lyric poet. I literally have a degree in poetry and it is the foundation for everything I write, whether that is poetry, song, or even essays and analysis. As such, I had read these words long before I heard them in a UU church. These are words from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Without getting into the complex history of the man who penned “The Song of Hiawatha” and who lived on Brattle Street, was familiar with First Parish and counted among his friends and colleagues ministers and congregants of this church...I want to take a moment to go back to his original poem, because I believe it has something to teach us in our exploration of play.

We only sing three stanzas of this 9 stanza poem in our hymn. What is more, Longfellow’s poem is not titled “All Are Architects” although that is the first line. It is titled **The Builders**. This is actually an important distinction that becomes evident when reading the piece in its entirety:

*The Builders*

***All are architects of Fate,  
Working in these walls of Time;  
Some with massive deeds and great,  
Some with ornaments of rhyme.***

*Nothing useless is, or low;  
Each thing in its place is best;  
And what seems but idle show  
Strengthens and supports the rest.*

***For the structure that we raise,  
Time is with materials filled;  
Our to-days and yesterdays  
Are the blocks with which we build.***

*Truly shape and fashion these;  
Leave no yawning gaps between;  
Think not, because no man sees,  
Such things will remain unseen.*

*In the elder days of Art,  
Builders wrought with greatest care  
Each minute and unseen part;  
For the Gods see everywhere.*

*Let us do our work as well,  
Both the unseen and the seen;  
Make the house, where Gods may dwell,  
Beautiful, entire, and clean.*

*Else our lives are incomplete,  
Standing in these walls of Time,  
Broken stairways, where the feet  
Stumble as they seek to climb.*

***Build to-day, then, strong and sure,  
With a firm and ample base;  
And ascending and secure  
Shall to-morrow find its place.***

*Thus alone can we attain  
To those turrets, where the eye  
Sees the world as one vast plain,  
And one boundless reach of sky.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

This poem was first published in 1850. This was a full four years before the American Institute of Architects was founded in New York and a full 18 years before MIT would begin teaching architecture as a subject. This reminds me how “architecture” was something very different in the consciousness when Longfellow wrote his poem. Indeed, in my study of the history of our meetinghouse, it is very clear that Isaiah Rogers was navigating the still blurry path between what it meant to be a builder (i.e. engineer, carpenter, mason etc.) and an architect (someone focused primarily on design and buildability).

The three verses of The Builders that we are left with in our hymn focus first on lofty aspiration (***Some with massive deeds and great,/ Some with ornaments of rhyme.***) then the solid ongoing sureness of existence (***Our to-days and yesterdays/ Are the blocks with which we build.***) and then the combination of the two into an ever rising glory (***With a firm and ample base;/ And ascending and secure/ Shall to-morrow find its place.***) But for me this leaves out the most important stanzas of the poem:

*Truly shape and fashion these;  
Leave no yawning gaps between;  
Think not, because no man sees,  
Such things will remain unseen.*

*In the elder days of Art,  
Builders wrought with greatest care  
Each minute and unseen part;  
For the Gods see everywhere.*

*Let us do our work as well,  
Both the unseen and the seen;  
Make the house, where Gods may dwell,  
Beautiful, entire, and clean.*

It is clear to a poet that Longfellow is not concerned with our modern concept of what an architect is...which most of us will associate with project vision, lofty education, the capacity to direct and lead projects and intensely intellectual aesthetic. No slight meant to architects...some of my best friends, literally, are architects, but this is not the architect that Longfellow was speaking about. Longfellow names this poem The Builders because he's calling on us to build something "with greatest care" and to "do our work as well, both unseen and seen" to "make the house...beautiful, entire and clean." Being an "architect" is only one small part of being a builder of life and shared existence.

I am using this poem as the focus today in the context of my question "who gets to play?" because I want us to consider what it means to be focused on being an architect as opposed to a builder. A ship cannot sail if everyone is a captain...there have to be sailors. A play cannot open if everyone is a director...there must be actors and stage hands. Yet, all of this work is important. Although we may all be "architects of fate"...it is much more important that we are builders of our collective experience capable of working together. Being a builder means getting your hands dirty, understanding the plans (not rewriting them) and knowing how to work with the materials you have at your disposal. A builder recognizes the long game and accepts that their part in it may seem mundane or workaday, but it is no less important than the grand "vision" of the architect.

There's another stanza in the middle of the poem that I think is even more important than the last:

*Else our lives are incomplete,  
Standing in these walls of Time,  
Broken stairways, where the feet  
Stumble as they seek to climb.*

We cannot afford to leave our broken stairways incomplete...both literal and figurative. We cannot just draw up the blueprints. Every one of our conceptual efforts must be connected to the realities of how we live, whether that is fundraising, racial justice or care for the unhoused. Our community has the opportunity to continue growing in this period. We are laying the foundation for this growth by putting much needed attention into the physical plant,

reevaluating and growing our staffing model and considering it all in the context of a strategic plan. At the heart of all this there must be the capacity and willingness for everyone in this community to in some ways take on the role of “builders”. Every ministry team, every committee, every group must be able to do this or the organization is woefully out of balance and top heavy.

Who gets to play? Well, no one wants to play with a room full of architects. Its much too competitive and at a certain point it is doubtful that anyone will really be listening to anyone else when everyone has a better idea. Let’s think as a collective about how we can more be builders, who invite collaboration, who welcome energy and effort, no matter what form that may take.

Who gets to play? To answer that question, we need to stop trying to prove to people that they should want to play. That is the cultural architect in us. Better to be builders. Builders show this world who gets to play by first demonstrating that they know how to play themselves and then they make space for others who want to build a team along with them. Builders listen, builders adapt, builders grow, builders bring beautiful things into being that can last an eternity.

- *ALD*