"Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

These words from the old Shaker hymn speak to me of this month’s theme: place. There is in the lyrics a hope, a longing, for that place where all is just right. A place of peace. A place of harmony. A place, perhaps, of deep fulfilment. I imagine that we are all, to some degree, seeking such a place.

For Shakers, there was at the heart of their faith a belief that the world around them would eventually be transformed for the better; they took as their central task hastening the arrival of “a new heaven and a new earth” through the simple and peaceful living of their lives. In the 18th and 19th centuries, they established utopian communities, sharing their labour and resources for the common good. They were committed pacifists. And took a dim view of human sexuality; their commitment to celibacy is recognized as at least part of the reason there are only two living Shakers today.

In the 19th century, Unitarians also established utopian communities, though far less successfully than the Shakers. The most famous Unitarian (and Transcendentalist) efforts, were named Fruitlands, and Hopedale, and Brook Farm. None lasted more than a few years.

In our own day, in these trying times, the desire to live in a utopia might sound particularly appealing. Until recently, I had always thought of a utopia as an idealized place set apart from the rest of the world. But a few months ago, I came across the etymology of the word itself and was surprised to realize it actually means “no-place.” True utopias are always just out of reach because they don’t actually, fully exist. At best, our aspirations for a better or ideal world are a constant work in progress.

Perhaps the better approach, then, is to embrace the world, the place where we find ourselves, in all its messy and sometimes heart-breaking imperfection. We need not remove ourselves from the world as it is, but labour on to bring about a better world by working from within to improve it. In doing so, we might very well find ourselves in the place just right.

Wishing you fruitful reflections on the many meanings of place in your life.

In faith and love,
Shawn
Questions to Live With

1. Are you where you want to be? Or need to be?
2. What is the “place just right” for you?
3. Is there a place that speaks deeply to you? If so, what is it like? And have you actually been there? What would it take for you to journey there?
4. Is there a place to which you’re longing to return? Or a place you’ve left behind but aren’t quite done with? What does that place mean for you?
5. Where do you feel the greatest sense of belonging? Why there?
6. If not one of these questions, what is your question about place this month?

For Inspiration

There is a word for love of a place: topophilia, popularized by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in 1974 as all of “the human being’s affective ties with the material environment.” In other words, it is the warm feelings you get from a place. It is vivid, emotional, and personal experience, and it leads to unexplainable affections. One of my fellow Seattle natives made this point to me when he said he hated the rain in Boston but not Seattle. Why? “Only Seattle rain is nice.”

- Arthur C. Brooks

It was a most insistent place but nobody seemed to be overwhelmed by all the insistence.

- Alice Munro, Too Much Happiness

There are places in this world often believed to be empty, such as old homes or the sea, but the people who believe this are wrong. It is precisely because of what fills these places right up to the brim that we are drawn to them, and it’s for these very same reasons that we fear them.

- Corinne Beenfield, The Ocean’s Daughter

The key figure in public life is the stranger. The stranger is also a central figure in biblical stories of faith, and for good reason. The religious quest, the spiritual pilgrimage, is always taking us into new lands where we are strange to others and they are strange to us. Faith is a venture into the unknown, into the realms of mystery, away from the safe and comfortable and secure. When we remain in the security of familiar surroundings, we have no need of faith. The very idea of faith suggests a movement away from our earthly securities into the distant, the unsettling, the strange.

- Parker Palmer, The Company of Strangers
True hospitality is marked by an open response to the dignity of each and every person. Henri Nouwen has described it as receiving a stranger on his terms, and asserts that it can be offered only by those “who have found the centre of their lives in their own hearts.”

- Kathleen Norris, Dakota: A Spiritual Geography

You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don’t know what’s happening, who your friends are, or what you owe. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.

- Joseph Campbell

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.

- John Muir, The Yosemite

Since Copernicus, we have known better than to see the earth as the centre of the universe. Since Einstein, we have learned that there is no centre; or alternatively, that any point is as good as any other for observing the world. I take this to be roughly what medieval theologians meant when they defined God as a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere... There are no privileged locations. If you stay put, your place may become a holy centre, not because it gives you special access to the divine, but because in your stillness you hear what might be heard anywhere. All there is to see can be seen from anywhere in the universe, if you know how to look; and the influence of the entire universe converges on every spot.

- Scott Russell Sanders

If from Space not only sapphire continents, swirling oceans, were visible, but the wars – like bonfires, wildfires, forest conflagrations, flame and smoky smoulder – the Earth would seem a bitter pomander ball bristling with poison cloves. And each war fuelled with weapons: it should be visible that great sums of money have been exchanged, great profits made, workers gainfully employed to construct destruction, national economies distorted so that these fires, these wars, may burn and consume the joy of this one planet which, seen from outside its transparent tender shell, is so serene, so fortunate, with its water, air and myriad forms of “life that wants to live.”

- Denise Levertov

A ship in harbour is safe — but that is not what ships are for.

- John A. Shedd

Real places are never captured in words. There is always more.

- Erin Morgenstern
Home is the place you get to, not the place you've been.
- Paul Monette, Halfway Home

“A Spiritual Journey” - Wendell Berry
And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet, and learn to be at home.

Join Us

Join a Journey Group

Journey Groups are the best way to go deeper with our monthly theme by sharing with a small group of people for a couple of hours each month. Groups meet online on Zoom and are scheduled at different times during the month.

For more information, visit our website https://firstunitariantoronto.org/journey-groups/, or look for the link in First Light.

Upcoming Themes

October – Possibility | November – Reconciliation and Racial Justice | December – Blessing
January – Intention | February – Contentment | March – Money | April – Awakening | May – Beauty

Upcoming Services

Sundays at 10:30


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