

# Living in Right Relationship

The Reverend Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
19 September 2010

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Meditation Words

"A Ritual to Read to Each Other" by William Stafford  
from *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*

If you don't know the kind of person I am  
and I don't know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,  
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood  
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
a remote important region in all who talk:  
though we could fool each other, we should consider --  
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give -- yes or no, or maybe --  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

## **Sermon: “Living in Right Relationship”**

She spent the first day packing up her belongings into boxes, crates and suitcases.

On the second day, she had the movers come and collect her things.

On the third day, she sat down, by candle-light, for the last time at their beautiful dining room table, put on some soft music, and feasted on a pound of shrimp, a jar of caviar, and a bottle of spring-water.

When she finished, she went into each and every room and deposited a few half-eaten shrimp shells generously dipped in caviar into the hollow of the curtain rods.

She then tidied up the kitchen and left the house for good.

When her husband returned to the house with his new girlfriend, all was bliss for the first few days.

But, then slowly, the house began to smell.

They tried everything; cleaning, mopping, opening all the windows.

Vents were checked for dead rodents, and all the carpets were steam cleaned.

Air fresheners and scented candles were deployed. Exterminators were brought in to set off gas canisters.

Finally, the expensive wool carpeting was replaced.

But, nothing seemed to work.

Contractors refused to work in the house.  
People stopped coming by.  
The maid quietly quit.

Finally, when they could take the stench no longer,

the happy new couple decided they had to move.

A month later, even though they had cut their selling price in half, they could not find a buyer for the overwhelmingly smelly house.

Word got out, and, eventually, even realtors refused to return their calls.

Finally, they had to borrow a huge sum of money to purchase a new home.

It was about this time that the now ex-wife called the man to ask him how things were going.

He spilled out to her the saga of the rotting house. She listened politely and said that she missed her old home terribly and would be willing to reduce her settlement in the divorce in exchange for getting the house back.

Knowing his ex-wife had no idea how bad the smell was, he agreed on a price that was 1/10th of what the house had been worth, but only if she would sign the papers that very day.

She agreed, and within the hour his lawyers delivered the paperwork.

A week later, the man and his girlfriend stood smiling as they watched the movers pack up everything to take to their new home.

And just to spite his ex-wife, the man made sure that the movers packed up all the curtain rods. . . !

I suppose that, maybe, sometime, there's something to be said for getting even.

Certainly, serving up someone's just desserts might feel like justice being served.

But, getting even is usually a far cry from getting things right.

Getting things right demands much more of us. It calls us to a higher level of discourse. It asks us to make real, through our thoughts and our actions, the values we profess to hold.

That makes the question of how we live together a central spiritual concern.

This morning and this afternoon in the first of our Congregational Conversations, I want for us to wrestle with what it means to get it right, what it means for us to live in “right relationship” with each other.

This conversation matters because the answers that we arrive at— and the way we make our answers real in our day-to-day lives, both within and beyond the walls of this building— have a great deal to say about who each of us is as an individual, and who we are, together, as Unitarians in the world.

It’s a critical question of integrity that gets to the heart of whether our values and our actions are in alignment.

Maybe you’ve seen them here in Toronto, too, though they’re much more frequently spotted in the American south.

Several years ago, when I lived in Texas, they were everywhere.

I was struck by the number of people who had, affixed to the bumper of their cars, the outline of a small fish, the ancient Greek *ichthys*, an early symbol of Jesus, and a modern-day proclamation to anyone behind them of the driver’s identity as a Christian.

What was equally striking, to me, though, was how amazingly discourteous some of these people could be on the road.

They might have been loving parents, stalwart members of their churches, and deeply devoted people of faith.

But, behind the wheel, with a fish on their bumper, so many of them just didn’t quite drive as I imagine Jesus might. . .

But, before we laugh too hard, we might do well to consider just how well we would hold up under public scrutiny of our faith as Unitarians.

In every day and in every way, do we truly respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

Do we honestly practise justice, equity, and compassion in all of our relationships?

Are we able to genuinely accept one another and respect the right of conscience for others as much as we do for ourselves?

I'll go out on a limb here to confess that I, for one, don't.  
Not as often as I would hope, not as consistently as I would like.

The principles of this faith call us to a very high level of living.  
And the truth is that, for most of us,  
our actions don't always match our aspirations.

At sunset on Friday evening, here in this sanctuary,  
with our almost 400 friends from Congregation Shir Libeynu,  
I joined in their service to mark the solemn eve of Yom Kippur,  
the Jewish Day of Atonement.

The Shabbat candles were lit,  
the brilliant violinist Moshe Hammer played Max Bruch's moving Kol Nidre,  
the cantor led prayers and chants,  
all leading up to the stunning moment of The Great Confession,  
when an "Alphabet of Wrongdoing" was shared.

I was struck by its simple, straight-forward language.  
I was struck by the fact that while no one surely had committed every sin on  
the long list, it was equally impossible to imagine anyone making  
it through the inventory of human failings completely unscathed.

Of these things we have been guilty [the litany began]:  
we have acted out of malice;  
we have back-bitten,  
we have been contemptuous of others;  
we have double-crossed;  
we have given evil advice;  
we have falsified the truth;  
we have gloated over our achievements;  
we have hated wrong-doers;

we have been insolent;  
we have jeered convictions not our own;  
we have knifed friends in the back;  
we have lost our self-control;  
we have manipulated;  
we have nullified the humanity of others;  
we have oppressed our brothers and sisters;  
we have told petty lies;  
we have quietly acquiesced in wrong;  
we have refused to back down from positions we could see were incorrect; we  
have sneered at serious matters;  
we have trifled with other humans;  
we have usurped others' positions;  
we have practised violence;  
we have committed x-number of sins of which we have not been aware;  
we have said Yes when we should have cried out no;  
[and] we have lacked zeal to struggle for our convictions  
    through unrewarding months and years.

Now, confession is not a common practice among Unitarian Universalists.

There is something to that old joke  
about Universalists believing God to be too good to damn them  
and Unitarians believing themselves too good to be damned.

And, yet, a central act shared by almost all of the world's great religions  
involves examining one's life against the values at the heart of one's faith—  
to gauge the sometimes telling gap  
between one's beliefs and one's behaviour  
and to set out with intention on the path to make that gap  
smaller than it was before.

I chose to write my Masters Thesis on the glaring absence  
of such a ritual in the Unitarian Universalist tradition  
because I see it as a significant spiritual problem.

It's not so much that I see a need for us put on sackcloth and ashes  
and grovel before a judgmental God,  
though a little humility doesn't hurt any of us from time to time.

But, my feeling about this grows more out of a concern for keeping it real.

The “onward, upward forever” optimism of our faith coupled with our very lofty principles can make it pretty hard to admit when we miss the mark—either in our own lives, or in the life of our congregations.

I think this reinforces the streak of perfectionism we have inherited from our Puritan roots.

But, even our Puritan forebears had days set aside to fast and pray, and rituals for considering and confessing the ways they had fallen short.

Now, you may well be wondering what any of this has to do with living in right relationship.

And the answer, which is quite simple, comes in the form of a question: have you ever tried to be in a relationship where no one could ever own up to their faults?

Where no one was able to confess to actually being human?

Such relationships don’t tend to last all that long. Aside from being insufferable, the illusion is hard to keep up.

And that’s the reason all of this matters to me.

To get things right, to live in right relationship, we need to take time to look at what we’ve gotten wrong.

Through that spiritual exercise comes accountability, at least to ourselves, and, when we find ourselves in community, it often also comes with support and understanding.

To live in right relationship involves dealing with the sometimes hard reality of being human, and, with that, the reality of our human differences.

It means recognizing conflict, when it inevitably comes, as an opportunity to deepen the quality of our relationships and to wrestle with competing values that we might gain some measure of clarity and conviction.

To live in right relationship means to strive toward making those values real, and to accept the sacred possibility that that striving, even when we stumble, has the power to change our lives.

In her book *The Spiral Staircase*, Karen Armstrong says that: “Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you.

“It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, [she says,] you will be transformed.”<sup>1</sup>

That is why, I believe, we come together in religious community. Because this isn’t work that we can truly undertake on our own.

A significant ingredient in that “ethical alchemy” is having to work through our challenges with other people—while keeping in sight the shining goal that we need not be divided by our differences.

Each week, we covenant “to dwell together in peace” with one another. It’s not always easily done. Truth be told, it’s not always done, period.

But, each week, when we says those words, I hope we wrestle with how we make them real.

To dwell together in peace does not mean that we live free of conflict, or that we even aspire to.

Conflict arises, of course, because of our many differences, and very often it springs up whenever we are called to sort out our competing values and priorities.

That’s why congregations, and arguably Unitarian congregations most of all, are seemingly well-oiled, perfectly crafted machines for generating conflict!

But on our of best days, I hope we might come to see that as a blessing rather than a burden—for conflict brings with it the invitation to live out our faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, p. 270.



For me, our commitment to dwell together in peace speaks to how we handle conflicts when they come.

It means asking whether we're living out our values and holding to our principles, even when we find ourselves struggling to find common ground.

It means recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of others, even when we are in the deepest of disagreements.

It means responding with compassion, striving for equity, and seeking after justice, even when they are not afforded to us in return.

And, it means looking at our lives from time to time, and if we find ourselves stuffing caviar into curtain rods or trying to swindle our ex-wife, asking ourselves just who we are and who we are becoming.

Conflict will always come.

The spiritual question is who we are when it arrives, and whether, when we come up short, we can keep at it until we get it right.

May it be so.

Amen.