

# Which Way to Mecca?

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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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.

## Reflection

by Terry and Nancy Lee

Unitarianism is a small denomination. There are only 5000 of us strung across 5000 miles of country. That is why it is important that we have opportunities to communicate and meet with one another.

The Canadian Unitarian Council (the CUC) is the umbrella organization that unites us and supports us. Once a year, the CUC holds an Annual Conference and Meeting (the ACM) in a different city. This year, the conference is to be in Toronto from May 20-23, the Victoria Day weekend. It is expected to be the biggest CUC conference ever. It is the CUC's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and 600 people are expected to attend.

The annual conference is always hosted by a local congregation. In the fall of 2008, the CUC asked Toronto First to be the host congregation for the 2011 conference. The Executive Team at First (Shawn Newton, Helen Iacovino and Ellen Campbell) asked the two of us to lead the planning effort. Our work experience and our volunteer experience at First gave us good qualifications. We are both passionate about promoting our faith inside and outside the denomination. We are retired and we have the time. When the call came, we had to say yes.

We are responsible for all the logistics that support a conference like this, but we do not select the actual program of workshops. That is done by a national committee and Diane Bosman is our representative there.

Our first task was to find a venue for the conference. It will be held at the U of T Residence and Conference Centre at 89 Chestnut, right behind Toronto City Hall.

Our second task was to build a team to do the work. Our Host Team is a combination of people with conference experience and first-time conference-goers, of long-time members and new members, and of people from First and other GTA congregations. We have an outstanding group of 26 people. (Ask them to stand up).

The Host Team has been at work since October 2009. We are now deep into the detailed planning that a conference this size entails. This has been very meaningful work for us. We all support the work of the CUC to help build a strong UU denomination in Canada. We know from attending previous conferences how enriching the experience is. Twelve of our Team members were able to travel to Victoria last May for the 2010 ACM.

The theme of the conference is **“Trust the dawning future”**, which is a line the Hymn *“As tranquil Streams”* in our hymn-book. It exhorts us to “revere the past, but trust the dawning future more”. At this conference, we will be celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the CUC, but we will also be looking ahead to the future of Unitarians in Canada.

The keynote speaker will be David Foot, U of T professor and demographer, and the author of *Boom, Bust, and Echo*. We are interested in hearing from him about population trends that will affect us in the future, especially the impact of age and diversity in our communities. We know that he is an outstanding speaker.

How can you participate? There are several ways. First, you can register for the conference and take advantage of the chance to meet Unitarians from across Canada, benefit from some of the 60 workshops being offered, and feel the sense of community that arises from the moving Ingathering and Closing ceremonies and the social events. The conference is in our city; you don't have to travel anywhere or stay in hotels. You will never get a better chance to experience a CUC conference.

Second, you are all invited to the Sunday morning Service of Celebration on May 22. That morning we will join with 1000 Unitarians for a special service in Convocation Hall. Shawn will preach and Dallas will lead a massed choir. There will be no service at First that morning and we are asking other local congregations to cancel their services as well. It is going to be amazing!

Third, we hope you will volunteer to help put on this conference. It takes a lot of people to make this happen. We have jobs for everybody, whether you are skilled or not, can undertake a small job or a bigger one.

This is the largest project that Terry and I have ever undertaken. It is daunting, but we live by the conference slogan, “Trust the Dawning Future”. Trust has become a touchstone for the two of us. We have developed strong trust in each other to accomplish this work. You will appreciate that this conference is a daily topic of conversation at our house. Six months into our work, we got married, so conference planning has been a constant part of our married life together so far.

We have come to have trust in the ability of our wonderful team. They have exceeded all our expectations in their dedication and commitment, and made our job so much easier.

We have trust in the congregation too, to pitch in and help. We remember what a good feeling it was to work together on the Habitat for Humanity house, and we know we can achieve this feeling of community once again working on a big project together.

Lastly, we are humbled by the trust that the congregation has placed in us to lead this effort. We both joined First Unitarian because belonging to a community is important to us. We have found through personal experience that the feeling of belonging grows through working with others to conduct the business of the congregation, to help make things happen.

We want all of you in this congregation to feel that you are part of this great endeavour and to feel a sense of accomplishment in pulling it off. We want everybody to have fun doing this. Let’s do us proud. We can do this together.

**Meditation**                    “The Journey” by Mary Oliver from *Dream Work*

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice --  
though the whole house  
began to tremble

and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do --  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

**Reading      “Middle East” by David Organ**

there is sadness in his eyes as he leans toward Mecca  
a calling he has had since birth nags restlessly on  
slow motion witness to a gathering storm  
he wonders softly if again he must mourn

his calling compassion, his gift intuition  
where have we gone to be so far from the shrine  
his muttering mind muses on

slow motion witness to the gathering storm

his compassion births sadness as he sees harm forming  
his intuition grasping agendas of greed and control  
so many lean toward Mecca to face a gathering storm  
he wonders softly if again he must mourn

there is hope in his eyes as he leans toward Mecca  
such sweetness is there to meet the coming storm  
can deep minds comprehend it  
will meek hearts inherit it  
his muttering mind muses on

he finds a prayer, a charm to unite us  
magic words that can move a world from war  
“Gone, gone, absolutely gone, all that gives birth to harm is gone. . .  
    may it be!”  
he wonders softly if it can be true  
slow motion witness to the gathering storm

### **Sermon: “Which Way to Mecca?”**

I find I sometimes envy other faiths.

I envy their pilgrimage places and their holy shrines.

And, I envy their call to embark on a spiritual journey—  
a journey that is at once both inward and outward,  
a pilgrimage that promises transformation and purpose and peace.

For Hindus it is to the sacred waters of the Ganges,  
for Buddhists to the great tree at Bodhgaya,  
for Jews the Western Wall,  
for Christians the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem,  
and for Muslims the Kaaba at Mecca.

From Stonehenge to Shinto shrines to the Temple Mount,  
this earth is covered with places that instill a longing in the human heart  
to come, to pray, to touch, to reverence, to heal.

As Unitarians, we are largely without such holy sites,  
though some might say each and all of these places  
are accessible to us as our human inheritance.

That's a difficult argument for another day.

But, this morning, I want to explore  
what pilgrimage means for us in this faith.

For we so often speak of being on a spiritual journey,  
but we do so without getting into the nitty-gritty  
of where that journey is leading us,  
of how we hope it might change us,  
or of what it might actually demand of us—  
in terms of commitment and sacrifice.

Such questions are hard to sit with, and they're not often asked in polite  
Unitarian company.

But, without asking such questions, it's easy to set out on a pilgrimage  
and end up becoming spiritual tourists instead of spiritual travellers.

A genuine spiritual journey will always ask something of us.  
It may be different for each of us,  
and it may not be exactly clear what it is,  
but spiritual transformation always comes at a cost.

No one stumbles across Nirvana.

Spiritual journeys start with a willingness,  
an openness to change and being changed.

That's why, for Muslims, pilgrimage begins with intention.  
It is the *niyyah*, the prayerful statement of one's resolve to make the hajj  
that is the first step toward Mecca.

The Buddhists would remind us that the challenge, though,  
is to embark on such a journey *with* intention,  
but *without* being attached to the outcome—  
to undertake the journey with a clear mind, an open heart,  
and a commitment to our own ethical and mental development,

without getting tripped up in our expectations, or enslaved by them.

That's often the problem for folks who set out determined to find enlightenment and discover only disappointment instead.

They find frustration when their spiritual pilgrimage encounters problems.

People on the hajj often arrive in Mecca to find that things can go wrong when two million strangers converge in a tight space to perform rituals all at the same time.

At the edge of the Ganges, people are often overwhelmed and repulsed by the polluted waters.

In Jerusalem, at the sacred sites of Christianity, pilgrims are often shocked to find quarreling clergy from different traditions staking out their sacred turf.

And, people with great hopes of finding deep serenity arrive on Salisbury Plain to find Stonehenge framed by two highways, a parking lot, and a gift shop.

The mountaintop isn't always all it's cracked up to be.

But, maybe that's as it should be.

Because perhaps pilgrimage has as much or more to do with people as it does with peace, with blisters as it does with bliss; the truth is, maybe the journey is the destination itself.

So, I invite you to consider this cold morning just where your journey is leading you?

Toward what shining goal is your heart set on pilgrimage?

Maybe you're not sure. It might not be clear. Perhaps you've never given it much thought.

But, what is this life if not a journey into the depths of your own spirit?

So, I ask you: where are you headed? What is your Mecca?

For what holy place does your heart long?

While we surely have many different answers,  
I believe, as Unitarians, our longing draws us into community.

Our journey leads us into the heart of humanity—  
into the depths of our own humanity  
and that we share with all who travel this life with us.

There is no solitary salvation to be found in this faith of ours.

Spiritual growth is rarely an isolated event.  
It almost always, ultimately, involves other people.

Which means we need not travel to the ends of the earth  
to find ourselves on a pilgrimage.

While enlightenment might be found at Mecca or Bodhgaya,  
we can probably discover as much  
through bumping into people on the subway or at coffee hour  
as we can in trying to find an elusive spiritual spark in some far off place.

Because the call to spiritual depth and transformation  
is not a call out of the world, but a call into the world—  
with all of its possibilities, its problems, and its people.

That means that a pilgrimage isn't something we can  
or really ever should attempt alone.

As Richard Gilbert puts it, the spiritual path  
is not a solitary journey up the mountainside,  
but more like Chaucer's merry band of pilgrims  
making their way to Canterbury,  
telling the tales of their lives as they go.

What's so fascinating to me about *The Canterbury Tales*  
is how little Canterbury figures into the story.

In the story, the journey is at least as important as the destination.

Which is why we would do well to pay attention



to what happens along our own way.

That, to me, is the enduring message of the Parable of the Good Samaritan that Chris shared earlier.

The Samaritan was the only spiritual traveller in this story from *The Gospel of Luke*, the only one awake to what was unfolding in the course of his journey.

In their great rush, both the priest and the Levite, who no doubt had important duties to attend to in the temple, crossed to the other side of the road, leaving the man for dead.

On that dangerous, desolate stretch of highway between Jerusalem and Jericho, they were likely concerned about keeping themselves undefiled.

In his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech given the night before he died, Martin Luther King, Jr. recounted a trip he had taken to Israel with his wife. He said:

I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road I said. . . ,  
“I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable.”

It’s a winding, meandering road. . . conducive for ambushing.

In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the “Bloody Pass.” And you know, it’s possible that the priest and the Levite looked over at that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around.

Or it’s possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure.

And so[, Dr. King said,] the first question that the priest asked, and the first question that the Levite asked was,  
“If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?”

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question:  
“If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

And, I would add to Dr. King's remarks.  
I suspect, on some level, that the Good Samaritan must also have asked himself: "If I do not stop to help this man, who am I?"

There is no such thing as solitary salvation.

Not only is our physical well-being tied up with that of others,  
but so is our spiritual health and growth.

We should be wary of any religion  
that would entice us to cross over to the other side of the road,  
turning from the ways that our destiny is tied up with that of everyone else.

In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the grandmother of a friend of mine  
was determined to protect herself in the event of a chemical attack.

Living in a large city, she felt compelled to do all she could  
to overcome her vulnerability, to plan for every possible scenario  
that might put her life at risk.

In short order, she went online in search of a gas mask  
and quickly found just the thing.

She pulled out her credit card and began the transaction.

But she reached a moment of crisis  
when the website prompted her to enter the quantity that she needed.

She was stymied by the question of how many gas masks do I buy?  
Of where and how to draw limits to her love?

In that moment, thinking of family and friends,  
she realised that true salvation was social.

All week, I have been wrestling with how this story,  
and how the story of The Good Samaritan  
square with those wonderful words from Mary Oliver  
that Lori shared during the meditation.

But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind, [the poet writes,]

the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

I find both texts filled with profound truth about human nature and the human condition.

Both ring true.

It's not an either/or question, though, a choice of one or the other.

As every flight attendant reminds us,  
we must put on our own oxygen mask before assisting others.

While salvation is not a solitary endeavour, there are times  
when we must take care of ourselves if we're to be any use to anyone else.

The trick is never to lose sight of the connection—  
between our own well-being and that of the wider world.

In some strands of Buddhism, there is found a group of beings called  
bodhisattvas.

These are people who, moved out of deep compassion, take a vow, asking:  
“May I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

They strive to alleviate the suffering of others and guide them to freedom.

And in doing so, they progress themselves on their own spiritual path  
toward liberation and enlightenment.

In helping others to find their salvation, they also find their own.

That sounds profoundly Unitarian to me—or better, Bunitarian.

For our spiritual journey is deeply intertwined with that of others.

So, let us live into the fullness of this journey,  
taking up our parts as bodhisattvas,  
working not only for our own well-being,  
but for the good of all. Amen.

P.S.:

I would like to offer you a bit of a postscript.

In a few short months, as you've heard,  
Unitarian pilgrims from across this country will descend on Toronto—  
they will come in search of something—some blessed spark—  
that will deepen their days,  
and touch their lives with grace and a growing purpose.

So, let us never forget in the months ahead,  
as we scramble to bring this complicated gathering into being,  
that we are hosting so much more than a conference.

This will be a meeting of people seeking to live lives that make a difference,  
a group of committed and quirky pilgrims, just like us,  
determined to bend the long arc of history toward justice,  
and build up a better world.

May we approach all the work that is ahead of us as bodhisattvas.  
With patience and compassion toward each other and with all,  
may we practise the arts of hospitality and service.

May we grow through all that is to come,  
and may we enjoy the journey, wherever it may take us. Amen.