

The State of Things

Rev. Shawn Newton
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.

Reading from Annie Dillard’s book *For the Time Being*

Are we ready to think of all humanity as a living tree, carrying on splendidly without us? We easily regard a beehive or an ant colony as a single organism, and even a school of fish, a flock of birds, a herd of elk. And we easily and correctly regard an aggregate of individuals, a sponge or coral or lichen or slime mold, as one creature – but us?

Houston Smith suggests that our individuality resembles a snowflake’s: The seas evaporate water; clouds build and loose water in snowflakes, which dissolve and go to sea. The comparison galls. What have I to do with the ocean, I with my unique hexagons and spikes? Is my very mind a wave in the ocean? How can an individual count?

Of Allah, the Qu’ran says “Not so much as the weight of an ant in earth or heaven escapes from the Lord.” That is touching – that Allah and God and their ilk care when one ant dies or a sparrow falls, but I strain to see the use of it.

We are civilization number 500 or so, counting from 10,000 years ago when we settled down. We are *Homo sapiens* generation number 7,500, counting from 150,000 years ago, when our species presumably arose; and we are generation number 125,000, counting from the earliest forms of the *Homo* species. We who are now alive, we [several] billion, are outnumbered by those 80 billion who have lived and died, by about 14 to 1. How can an individual count?

Every 100 hours a million more humans arrive on the planet than die into the planet. One fifth of us are Muslims. One fifth of us live in China. Every seventh person on the planet is a Chinese peasant. Almost one tenth of us live within range of an active volcano. We humans love tea; we drink more than a billion cups a day. Among us we speak ten thousand

languages. A hundred million of us are children who live on the streets. Over a hundred million of us live in countries where we were not born. Twenty-three million of us are refugees. Sixteen million of us live in Cairo. Twelve million fish for a living from small boats. Our chickens outnumber us four to one. On a shore, eight thousand waves break a day. At any one time, the foam from these breaking waves covers between 3 and 4 per cent of the earth's surface. This acreage of foam is equal to that of the entire continent of North America.

Our generations rise and break like foam on shores. Yet death, at least in the west, apparently astonishes and blindsides every [one] of us, every time.

Is it important that you have yet died your death, or I? It is only a matter of time, after all....

A rabbi says that God allots to everyone of us a little area to care for, a speck of the world in which we live, just as it is and not otherwise—a little area, a few years, and a small circle of people.

What to do then, what shall we do, for the time being?

Sermon: “The State of Things”

And the seasons, they go ‘round and ‘round,
And the painted ponies go up and down
We’re captive on a carousel of time
We can’t return we can only look behind
From where we came
And go ‘round and ‘round and ‘round
In the circle game.

- Joni Mitchell

At our Coming of Age service last month,
as we sang those words from Joni Mitchell,
I got all choked up at the poignancy of these marvelous lyrics.

While we were gathered to celebrate this wonderful rite of passage in the lives of our young people—we were also giving voice to the turning of the seasons in the life of our religious community.

A congregation, like precious few institutions in modern society,
encompasses the full wheel of life, the full circle of our human experience.

As we go ‘round and ‘round, we bear witness to each other’s lives: celebrating
the arrival of new children,
marking the milestones of youth moving toward adulthood,
sharing the joys and sorrows that shape our being,
and honouring the beloved memory
of those whose lives have come to an end.

Together, week by week, we mark the seasons and cycles of our journey,
learning as we go what it means to embrace
both the bitter and the sweet that this life brings.

Later today, we will gather upstairs for the 166th annual meeting of this
congregation, celebrating another trip ‘round the carousel.

We will receive reports about our activities and our budget,
elect new board members and mark transitions in leadership.

We will remind ourselves once again what it means
to practice democracy within our religious life—
playing our part in the major decisions
that guide the life of this community.

But, this morning, before that, I want to begin an annual tradition
of offering up some reflections about where we are as a congregation,
and where we might be headed.

In the sermon I preached at Convocation Hall last month,
I talked about some of the challenges and opportunities
I believe are ahead of us as Unitarians in Canada.

Now, I imagine that part of why that sermon was seemingly well-received was
that it was, perhaps, easy enough for folks to think it was a sermon about other
people in other congregations. . . .

This morning, I want to bring that message home, so to speak,
and to consider what it might mean for us, as First Unitarian,
to truly trust the dawning future.

I want to bring before you what I see to be the significant spiritual questions we are facing as a congregation.

My hope is to begin, and in some cases advance, a conversation—
or better, a series of conversations—
that will help us to deepen our understanding and to grapple
with what both the present and the future is asking of us.

I'd first like to invite you, though, into a few moments of shared silence—
a few moments for you to give thought
to what you think to be the biggest questions facing our congregation.

Silence

There is no doubt that we have many different thoughts
about what constitutes the most pressing challenges before us.

In my own reflections over the past weeks and months,
I've boiled it down, for myself, to two—two large categories,
which encompass more than they might initially seem.

The first is the question of culture, and the second of real estate.

By culture, I mean the larger context in which we live,
but also the culture we are creating within these walls.

All around us are signs of dramatic change—
change that greatly affects whether a congregation, today,
thrives or even survives.

Long gone are the days when everyone spent Sunday in church.

Toronto's Blue Laws are a relic of the past, which is a very good thing.

But, hockey leagues and road races now compete with Sunday worship,
and attending a religious service has more and more
become a counter-cultural act.

(See what rebels you are—just by being here this morning?!)

Today, Canada is a strikingly more secular place than it was fifty years ago.

The prominence of religion in our society—
especially establishment Christianity—has forever shifted.

For most of the past half century,
since Trudeau ushered in a celebrated era of multiculturalism,
religion in Canada has been primarily a private concern.
Don't ask, don't tell.

But, with debates about the rights of Muslim women to wear the niqab
or for Sikhs to carry the kirpan, the ceremonial dagger
that symbolizes the power of truth to cut through untruth,
religion is increasingly making its way back into our public square.

Rev. Diane Rollert, in her Confluence Lecture at our Annual Conference,
rightly asked if Unitarians are prepared for this more open,
and often heated, conversation.

Are we at home enough in our own religious identity
to allow others to be fully at home in theirs?

Diane observed that the difficulty we sometimes have with theological diversity
within our congregations suggests we have a ways still to go.

Amid the wider culture,
the nature of religious community is also rapidly changing.

We are ever more consumers,
who expect a certain level of service from our own congregation,
and who sometimes forget that this is ultimately a voluntary organisation.

Yet, seismic shifts in volunteer culture
are profoundly altering the way that congregations function.

Stay-at-home moms and retirees once made up the volunteer backbone of this
and most every congregation in North America.

But, those days are more and more behind us.

While we still have a dedicated core of volunteers who are able to contribute
their time and energy here, it is growing more and more difficult

to find volunteers to take on both some of our largest roles and some of our most menial tasks.

In his lecture at the Annual Conference, demographer David Foot cautioned us against hoping for a great influx of volunteers to suddenly set things right.

With charts and graphs he showed us that this isn't in the cards.

This will beg serious questions of us going forward, as we try to meet the needs of a complex congregation with a smaller base of support.

To me, the question is whether we will still endeavour to carry out shared ministry with a large number of volunteers involved in the running of the congregation, or whether might explore expanding our staff to manage the day-to-day issues, while equipping the majority of our volunteers to contribute in ways that change the world beyond our doors?

While there will always be vital roles for lay leaders to play in the life of our congregation, I long for the day when the bulk of our volunteer energy can be poured into activities that not only look and feel like ministry to the wider world, but are.

The couple dozen members of First who are beginning their work volunteering at the Regent Park Music School is a taste of what's possible if our energies were to be directed to changing the world rather than simply maintaining our institution.

Imagine if the 200 volunteers who helped out with the conference were turned loose in Toronto to live out their Unitarian faith!

I believe it would transform our lives, our congregation, and our city—for good.

Earlier, I said that the first concern I was raising was a question of culture. At its heart, this concern contains a challenge to us to embody the values of this faith in a way that makes a meaningful difference beyond our own lives.

To do so would put us in a much-needed conversation

with the culture in which we live
and is essential if we intend to remain relevant to the world around us.

The second question I raise is one of real estate.

As many of you know, we are in a multi-year conversation
about whether we would sell this building,
if we were to be approached by developers interested
in constructing a condo tower on this site.

The city's long-term development plan
calls for the densification of St. Clair Avenue,
meaning that the not-very-serious offers made to us
before the downturn in the economy
will almost certainly pick up in the years ahead.

Will we be ready to respond, if the right offer comes along?

It's an important question, given that the three neighbouring buildings to our
west are owned by a single person, who likely won't need nearly as much time
and dialogue as we do to make a decision.

We had a task force that did wonderful work
in helping to prepare us for this decision a few years back,
though, when the economy tanked three years ago,
that conversation was put on hold.

While much uncertainty remains about the world's financial future,
there is reason to think that perhaps the time has come
for us to take up this question again.

I am not of one mind in what I believe we should do.

I can see the limitations of this building
when we don't have adequate room for our religious education program
or when we are forced to juggle space whenever multiple programs are
underway—as they will be this afternoon.

I can see the need to protect the asset that is this building, and that the value of
our property might be diminished if the land to our west was sold.

I can see that our location at the edge of Forest Hill,
while central and well-served by public transit,
is also a world away from much of the diversity of this city.

And, I can see a future where the role of physical buildings in religious life
is less certain, as virtual communities blossom and the burden of maintenance
outstretches financial reserves.

And, yet, those words from Phillip Larkin's poem "Churchgoing" stay with me,
in that poem where he describes a young man wandering into an empty church,
not quite sure why he bothered.

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for which was built
This special shell?

For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;
A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

When I look to the future, I want to trust
that there will always be a need for a touchstone place—
a serious house on a serious bit of earth—
to which people will return as the seasons go 'round and 'round,
and they endeavour to make meaning of their days.

I am not yet clear whether a move will be best for our congregation,
but I do hope that this place, this community, wherever it may be rooted,

will live on for generations to come as a home for the soul,
a beacon of justice, and a testament to the dedication
of people who have come alive in the service of their faith.

These questions of culture and real estate are not unrelated.
They both beg bigger questions of who we are and who we intend to be.
They both point to change, and hold out the possibility of transformation.
They both ask what the longing of our hearts requires of us
in order to live out our calling in this world.

May we look into our hearts, may we lean on our faith and each other,
that we might take up these concerns, not merely as problems to be solved, but
as spiritual questions to be answered.

Finally, a personal post-script.

My late colleague Jeb Bartlett said to his friends from his deathbed that
ministry provides “the best seat in the theatre of life.” And so it does.

In our four trips around the great carousel together,
I’ve been so very blessed to hold your babies
and to hold the hands of those who have died.

I’ve been honoured to stand alongside members of this congregation
as they’ve promised their hearts to each other,
and I’ve delighted to see our youth come of age and come into their own.

So, at the end of what has been a wild and wonderful year,
I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart
for the awesome privilege it is to serve as your minister.

My heart is so deeply moved by the ways that you stretch your hearts
to live out lives of integrity, justice, and joy.

More than you may know,
I am ever-inspired by your example and the depth of your commitment
to building up a beloved community in the heart of this city that we share.

You make me such a better minister than I could ever otherwise be.

So, I thank you for the gift of being able to answer my life’s calling

by serving as your minister.

You have my gratitude, and my love, and my devotion.

And, I, for one, can't wait to see what we'll do next.

May it be bold, may it be worthy of our many gifts,
and may it be a testament to our faith—
in life, in each other, and in the future that is to come.

Amen.

Closing Words

In our going forth, let us commit ourselves to this task:
to engage one another and the wisdom of the world
to renew our faith anew with the dawning of each day
that it might speak with power to the times in which we live.

- KSN