

The State of Things

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Meditation by Wayne Arnason

We join together now in a time of meditation or prayer, spoken at first and then for a time in the peace that silence brings.

As we enter into silence we remember the many connections that sustain and uplift us through this religious community.

We remember those who preceded us, whose contributions built a free faith, and this home for its practice.

We remember those around us, whose continuing care in thought and deed is an ongoing blessing in our lives, keeping the dream of free religion alive in our time.

We remember those who will follow us, the children presently in our care and those not yet come to light, who will inherit the work of our hands and hearts.

In the silence now, we sit surrounded by these many connections, visible and invisible that remind us every day that we are not alone.

Reading “The Tragic Gap” by Parker Palmer

Our reading this morning is taken from an interview between Bill Moyers and the Quaker writer Parker Palmer, who is speaking to his concept of “The Tragic Gap.”

[I mean] tragic in the sense that the Greeks talked about it.

Tragic in the sense that Shakespeare talked about it.

The tragic gap is the gap between what's really going on around us, the hard conditions in which our lives are currently immersed, and what we know to be possible from our own experience.

We don't see it every day. We may not see it very often.

But we know it's a possibility among real people and real space and time.

....when we don't learn to hold the tension
between what is and what we know to be possible...
what happens is we flip out on one side or the other.

Flip out into too much reality and you get what I call corrosive cynicism.
Corrosive cynicism is, "Oh, I see how the world is made. It's dog eat dog.
It's whoever gets the biggest piece of the pie
gets the biggest piece of the pie.
So I'm going to take my share and run
and let the devil take the hindmost.
That's corrosive cynicism.

Flip out into too much possibility and you get irrelevant idealism.
Which sounds very different from corrosive cynicism
but both have the same function in our lives.
Both take us out of the action.
Both keep us out of the fray.

...irrelevant idealism that's not held in tension
with what's really going on on the ground
eventually just disappoints and drops people off the wagon.

....Because nothing changes.
Because if you don't have a capacity to hold the tension in your heart
between reality and possibility then you're just going to give up eventually.

Sermon: “The State of Things”

On Wednesday night of this past week,
I attended the annual meeting and dinner
of the Multi-faith Alliance to End Homelessness.

There, at the wonderful new YWCA building on Elm,
clergy and lay leaders from various faith traditions
gathered around the question
of how best to serve the poorest people in our city.

At my table sat a Catholic nun, a Scientologist minister,
a United Church lay woman, a young Hindu man,
and someone from a Catholic congregation
that some time ago decided to throw out their priest and lead themselves.

As you might imagine, a colourful and creative conversation ensued—
about poverty, about our mayor,
and about our individual faith communities.

A very awkward moment came for me, though,
during a conversation with the nun.

I asked about how members of her religious order were feeling about the pope’s
recent crackdown on liberal-minded nuns in the United States.

We conversed in code and talked about
what seems an ever-growing gap between Rome
and how most Catholics in North America actually live their lives.

As the conversation moved on,
she explained that many of the nuns in the GTA
are moving into shared buildings and selling off properties
they can no longer fully use or afford to maintain.

It turns out that fewer and fewer women are becoming nuns,
and very, very few men, these days, are signing up for the priesthood.

Churches are emptying. Donations are down.

She told me that one priest she knows has decided, at 78,
to stay on for another year in his parish,
because the church would otherwise be without a minister.

In a moment inviting me into commiseration,
she suggested that it must be much the same for us.

After an uncomfortable silence,
I shared that things were actually going a bit better for us,
downplaying our reality, as not to rub salt in her wounds.

The truth is that the state of our congregation
is essentially the diametrical opposite
on most every measure of health and vitality from hers.

We have been growing slowly but steadily
and are facing the challenges of trying to squeeze
all the activities of this vibrant congregation into one building.

This past winter, facing the prospect of a significant budget shortfall,
we not only closed the gap,
but surpassed our goal with an outpouring of generosity
that taught us once again that we, as a congregation,
can accomplish anything to which we set our hearts and minds.

And, in terms of new clergy, in this congregation alone,
we have three members who've just completed their first year of seminary,
and I'm scheduled to meet with a fourth later this week
who is exploring a possible call to ministry.

Our future here at First is full of promise at a time when other,
more traditional religious communities are struggling even to survive.

We are, to the best of my knowledge,
the only progressive religious community in this city
grappling not with the trials of decline and a slow demise,
but with the challenges that come with growth in size and scope.

I believe we need to regularly remind ourselves

that we are in an enviable position—
and I believe we need to remember
that this enviable position may well ask,
if not require, something of us.

At this critical moment of change, it may even ask a lot.

Moderate, Mainline Christianity is rapidly crumbling in this country,
while more conservative strains of evangelical Christianity are on the rise.

With increasing cultural diversity,
there is a growing variety of religious expression in our city, as well,
though many of these religions hold much more traditional views than we do.

Unitarian Universalism calls us
to honour the spiritual traditions of others—
to seek to understand and learn from them,
and to grant to them due respect.

But this faith also calls us to uphold and articulate *our* principles and perspectives
when in dialogue across the chasm of human differences.

In the face of disagreement,
it calls us to stand true in our spiritual convictions,
even as we strive to respect and reverence the reverences of others.

This isn't always easy to do out there in the wider world,
which is why it's so vitally important
that we get as much practice as we can,
here, and with one another—
where there are plenty of differences to keep us busy for some time!

The good news is that the skills we build here
in working through our differences are transferable;
the patience that we practise,
the compassion we develop, and the understanding we gain
are all gifts we can take out from here to help heal our world.

And that world is, of course, changing rapidly.

The religious landscape is not at all what it once was—
or even what it recently was.

We are in the midst of a period of unprecedented change and experimentation,
when it comes to religion.

Old forms are passing away; new forms are rising up to take their place.

In an era where it's fashionable to be spiritual but not religious,
ending up in a place like this is about the most counter-cultural
thing you can possibly do on a Sunday morning.

We must continually ask where we fit into these seismic shifts,
and what role, if any, is ours to play.

The leaders in our congregation often joke
that things around here move “at the speed of church.”

For the as-yet-uninitiated, let me explain
that this typically means at an excruciatingly slow, if not glacial pace.

While there's a fun bit of self-aware humour there,
we're going to need to kick things up quite a few notches,
if we, as a congregation, are going to keep up
with the staggering pace of change around us and among us.

To remain relevant in the marketplace of religious ideas
across the years ahead is almost certain to require
that religious communities, such as ours,
be flexible and innovative and rapidly responsive.

And, I think relevance means that we will also have to take some very real risks.

At the Spiritual Leadership Symposium in Ottawa two weeks ago,
my colleague Erik Walker Wikstrom talked about our congregations needing
to fully and intentionally become “full-immersion schools for the soul.”

His point was that learning the language of spiritual transformation
is just like learning any other language.

You can tinker at the edges with textbooks,
you can do verb drills, and memorize a set of flash cards.

If you get desperate, you can buy Rosetta Stone software
and hope for the best.

But, what really makes the difference in our learning
is to be thrown into the deep end of the pool
and forced to sink or swim.

We need full-immersion experiences
if we hope to have any chance of speaking a new language.

And we need full-immersion experiences,
full-immersion schools for the soul,
if we and others who are still out there looking
are ever to see and taste and know
the transformative power of this faith.

Erik later asked what, if anything, holds us back.

He asked about the biggest hurdles—
within our congregations and within ourselves—
to opening up to the full-immersion experience,
to getting in the deep end and splashing around.

What I wrote down in the privacy
of my conveniently provided Spiritual Leadership Symposium notebook
was one word—the same for both First Unitarian and for me.

And that word was risk.
I probably should have written “an aversion to risk.”

I love for things to go well.
And that’s true of this congregation, too.
We’re both careful. We play to our strengths.
We both relish plans and maps and policy statements.
We try to avoid mistakes.

And, yet, I believe the future is calling us
to get out of our comfort zones and to take some risks.

If we are to remain relevant to both future generations
and the population growing more diverse around us,
we will have to experiment boldly—
and perhaps much more difficult,
we will have to be prepared to fail
in some pretty spectacular and audacious ways.

A few weeks ago, I preached about courage and vulnerability
being two sides of the same coin.

That the call to courage is, in equal measure, a call to risk—
a call to put our hearts on the line
with the full knowledge that our hearts will likely get hurt along the way.

Taking risks will require the courage of making ourselves vulnerable,
of living with uncertainty, and coming to trust
the spiritual wisdom we find in each other.

Knowing that there are professional risk managers sitting among us,
I should probably go on record about
what I consider to be the biggest risk we face.

The primary risk I see before us is the uncertainty of whether
we are truly prepared to deepen in our practice of this faith.

Are we ready to risk the commitment required
to live out our faith in every aspect of our lives—
whether at home or work or school?

Are we ready to open here a full-immersion school for the soul,
where people learn what it means
to be most fully and authentically human?

Are we ready to risk the commitment required to bring to life
within these walls a genuine Beloved Community grounded in justice and peace

that models to the world a radically different way of being?

I think we are getting there.

We are, as ever, a work in progress.

But, I do believe we are on the road to building up the Beloved Community, here and beyond our walls.

And I believe that we are learning that the journey is itself the destination—that how we travel together is more important than whether and when we ever arrive.

And, I believe we are learning what it means to live in the “Tragic Gap” that Palmer Parker spoke of—that place between “what is” and “what could be,” between our aspirations and the reality on the ground.

I think Palmer was right in identifying community as being absolutely essential to standing in that tragic gap and doing the inner work required of an examined life.

We need other people to help us do this—we need other people to point to our growing edges, and we need other people to save us from the paralysis that comes from both “corrosive cynicism” and “irrelevant idealism.”

I know that all of this is infused with vulnerability and risk. It takes courage to summon the trust required to be an enduring community. But, we, and those who’ve come before us, have been at this for 167 years.

I emphasize that this morning—on the day of our annual meeting and in a sermon meant to address the state of our congregation—because this inner work of risk-taking and extending trust is going to be central to our meeting the challenges we face.

At this afternoon’s meeting, Nancy Lee and members of the Building for the Future Task Force

will bring you up to speed about the period of discernment we, as a congregation, are about to embark on, as we examine whether this building is sufficient to our future needs, or whether we will need to explore finding another home to live into the vision we have cast for ourselves.

It bears repeating, as it seems some people haven't heard, that this will be a decision made by the entire congregation, a year or so from now.

Over the coming year, we are undertaking a deliberate process to educate and be in dialogue about our needs and about the advantages and disadvantages of this building.

None of us can predict where this conversation will lead us. What I do know, though, is that *how* is more important than *what*.

The year ahead will ask a lot of us. It will involve just the sort of risk-taking I've been talking about.

This sacred task deserves the very best of our intentions. It demands that we listen deeply to one another's hearts. It will require patience, and courage, and hopefully some humour.

And it will ask that we come right up to the edge of everything we know, and then look as far as we can see into the future to discern what will serve not only our present needs, but the needs of the generations of our congregation still to come.

How is more important than what. And *why* may be most important of all.

Our congregation is not the same thing as our building. If this building were to be destroyed in some disaster this afternoon, we would gather again next Sunday, somewhere, and pick up the pieces of what holds us together beyond bricks and mortar.

This congregation came into being in 1845 to serve the free and open search for life's meaning and purpose.

That purpose is as vitally important today
as it was in the middle of the 19th century.

Freedom of thought may not be quite as urgent a concern as it was then,
but the need for the power of transformative community
is needed now more than ever.

The need to stand with others in the tragic gap—
to make sense of our lives and to find the path forward—
to forge a new way of being for a world
living in the grip of a dangerously unsustainable story.

To meet such an enormous need will likely require taking risks we can hardly even imagine.
I'll confess that I find the challenges before us
terribly daunting and more than a wee bit frightening.

But, I also find them absolutely exhilarating—
because I know they are calling us into the fullness of our lives.

And because I believe that we, together,
can summon the courage to answer that them.

Amen.