

The Digital Reformation
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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If you would create something, you must be something. J.W. van Goethe

Reading

These are UU minister Ralph Helverson's words on why he goes to church:
"We go to church in expectancy, to find the missing part, to relate to what we can never explain, to live with unanswerable questions.

We go to church because we are looking for something of life's fulfillment, a fleeting sense that we wish to make life whole, to find the point of our existence, what the great religions have called God.

We go to church because we're looking for fellowship, a community where we think of helping one another rather than exploiting one another.

We go to church seeking composure to face a world of confusion with its many problems, and predicaments to be faced over and over in life, calling for courage and decision.

We go to church to find the strength to go the second mile, to offer forgiveness, to make amends, to find the good with the evil, the healing beyond the hurt, to rise again after we have fallen.

We go to church to find anew the vision of what life may be....."

Sermon The Digital Reformation

Almost 500 years ago, in 1517, a theology professor living in what is now Germany walked up to the door of the local Cathedral and nailed up a piece of paper.

With that act, Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation.

Luther's 95 statements of complaint about immoral and corrupt practices of the Church were also printed as a pamphlet on the recently developed printing press.

The pamphlets quickly spread through his sleepy town of Wittenberg and beyond.

The rest, as they say, is history.

From Martin Luther's influence arose the Lutherans, the Calvinists, the Anabaptists, the Protesting people across Europe who created Protestant Christianity as distinct from the one true Catholic church.

Among those were our early ancestors,

men like Michael Servetus in Spain

and Francis David in Transylvania who,

after reading the bible for themselves

– again courtesy of the fancy new printing press –

began to question the concept of the trinity and

argue for freedom of thought.

These theological challenges began to change European society,

as these new religious options offered different ways

for understanding the way people were part of the world

and related to God.

Luther's angry act set off a cultural shift which reached beyond religion to influence politics, arts, philosophy as well as concepts of individuality and community.

Luther's act changed the world because the printing press allowed his ideas to be distributed to the masses.

Unitarianism began in part because the printing press

gave the bible to the people,

letting them read and understand it in their own way.

Today we are living in a Digital Reformation

in which the ways we communicate are once again transforming society.

The internet, email, cell phones, smart TVs, are influencing how we communicate.

And how we communicate impacts on how we think.

Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan once said the medium is the message, and while that is not entirely true, it has enough truth in it to make many people wonder how our instantaneous, electronic communications is shaping what we are saying.

The first reaction is usually that the new media is making us shallow and stupid. We have lost our attention spans .

William Ellery Channing preached the first Unitarian sermon in the United States in 1819. It was 14,000 words long and took about 2 hours. I do not intend to follow his example.

Lousy attention spans, maybe.

But we know better now how people learn, and it isn't through lectures but through engagement.

Sermons are shorter allowing more time for conversation after in coffee hour.

You have insight into whatever the sermon topic may be, and in dialogue we all learn more together.

Technical innovation always brings anxiety.

The Greek philosopher Socrates, at least according to his student Plato, disliked the newly created written alphabet:

"it will implant forgetfulness in their souls:

they will cease to exercise memory

because they rely on that which is written,

calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks...

[They will be] "filled, not with wisdom,

but with the conceit of wisdom."

Only "a simple person [would think that a written account]

was at all better than knowledge and recollection of the same matters." *Version*

from Nicholas Carr

Socrates wasn't entirely wrong.
Literacy destroyed the oral tradition and
forever altered societies based on oral knowledge,
which passed their meaningful stories from
one generation to the next.

But we also know the value of written language.
Writing opened up the world.
It gives us words of wisdom uttered thousands of years ago in the
Bhavagad Vita and the Tao Te Ching and the Hebrew Scriptures,
letting people today benefit from the grace of ancient traditions.
Writing lets people build on other's people
knowledge and experience.
It creates lasting works of great insight.
From William Shakespeare's "to be or not to be"
to Anne Frank's poignant belief in the basic goodness of people,
the written word lets us see the world through other people's eyes.
Books are brilliant.
Reading does give us carefully considered knowledge.

But the written word contained in books,
in physical objects,
also made knowledge into power.

When only the Catholic priests could access and read the bible,
they could interpret the scriptures as the needs of the institution demanded.
The printing press, the mass distribution of knowledge,
changed how society operated.
But books and paper still allowed some knowledge to be hidden,
Files can be stamped top secret.
Information can be controlled and sold.

The Digital Reformation we are in now is changing how we experience
knowledge.
Information isn't power in the same way anymore.
It is available to anyone with a smartphone.
Personal experience is becoming more important.
Our notions of authority and power and knowledge are changing.

It matters less what you know and
more that you know where to find the knowledge you need.

I myself am a resister, rather than embracer,
of new communication technologies.
I am always late to the party.
Not only do we still have a home phone,
we have an actual answering machine as well.
I struggle with new media, for all sorts of reasons.
The financial cost, the cost to our privacy as we live our lives
in a crazy public kind of way,
the cost to our daily actual physical selves as
we spend more and more time plugged into the network.
The cost of having information – accurate or not –
volumes and volumes of information –
readily available at the touch of a screen.
The cost of everyone with plugs in their ears
looking down at a screen when they are out in public.
All these things worry me.

But what is life but change?
To be alive is to be in flux.
Socrates thought writing was a bad idea.
But we wouldn't even know his name if Plato hadn't used
that awful new form of memory called writing.

And now that I am at the party, I'm so glad I came.
I love having so much information at my fingertips courtesy
of the world wide web.
I can look up Martin Luther's story.
I can check the translation of Plato.
New media makes it so much simpler for me
to follow my interests and connect with like minded people.
I can skype my parents across the country.
I can follow my friends on their exotic vacation in Morocco.
New media makes it easier for me to stay connected
to friends and family.

Religion is inherently conservative,
even a nice liberal denomination like our own.

Religion is about being rooted in tradition,
being grounded in a particular way of being in the world.
So it is no surprise that religions can be slow to embrace change.

Except for Evangelical Christians.

These Baptist breakaway denominations
– which like us don't have a hierarchal central authority -
were early adopters of social media.

They put up the big video screens, got a band on stage,
set up websites, blogs, and twitter accounts.

It worked, they grew big and they grew fast.

And they have found is that for people to stick around,
they needed to keep the services smaller
– 300 people instead of 3000.

People wanted more intimacy, not less, in worship.

Face to face interactions matter.

There is also research to suggest
the younger generation of evangelicals don't care
about the same issues as older evangelicals.

They aren't necessarily against marriage for everyone.

They care more about caring for the environment
than being anti-abortion.

I can't say this is caused by new media,

but young evangelicals are more comfortable thinking for themselves.

They are more interested in living like Jesus than judging like Judas.

New communication technologies

are less about hierarchy and authority and
more about relationships and dialogue.

Maybe they are shaping the message.

As Unitarians, we should be more comfortable than we are
in embracing this new media which highlights
individual understanding of issues,
offering so many perspectives we must
decide for ourselves where we stand.

Facebook, Twitter, and other systems support
grassroots organizing for change –
they help spread the news on issues through
old fashioned word of mouth.

The internet supports collaborative creativity and innovation.
 Sites such as Kickstarter allow new ideas to be funded
 through small individual donations,
 allowing the creators to maintain ownership
 instead of being beholden to powerful single investors.
 Less institutional authority, less hierarchy.
 More collaboration, more grassroots action.
 This is very Unitarian.
 If the medium is shaping the message,
 then the message seems to be in alignment with our principles.

While there are problems and issues around access and control
 and accountability on-line, enough good things come digitally
 that it is time for Unitarian congregations to learn how to integrate
 an on-line presence with our physical presence.
 One Unitarian minister whose congregation has been
 intentional about using new media
 has realized that their reach on-line is great.
 She suggests that she reaches about 37 times
 more people through the internet.
 Our Facebook page is liked by 130 people or so,
 less than half of our actual membership.
 But at least one third of the likes are from non-members
 who want to be connected with us.
 One post about marriage equality was shared by so many people
 that it reached over 1,000 people.
 Can we imagine our congregation as larger than this building?

New media will change us just as the printing press changed Christianity and
 European society.
 Perhaps our services will move away from the
 sermon sandwich model to more of a buffet.
 Maybe we won't gather just on Sunday morning
 but also on Wednesday evening in an on-line chat room.
 Ministers may be less the spiritual authority and more about
 being a catalyst for each person's spiritual journey.
 Wisdom will be shared in new ways,
 shaken out over the world so all can access it.

At the Spiritual Symposium in May

I attended the session that looked at social media.
 Much attention was given to the idea that
 anyone aged 35 or younger are Digital Natives,
 they have no problem living publicly on-line,
 through iPods and iPads and iPhones.
 For congregations to have a future,
 we need to learn how to reach the Digital Natives.

Our on-line presence might change from a bulletin board of information to being
 like coffee hour – a forum for conversation. (*Brian Kiely*)

Twitter may be the next frontier.

Evangelical Christian preachers are consistently more popular on twitter than
 celebrities like Lady Gaga.

There are a lot of possibilities for our
 Unitarian message of grounded hope
 to reach out beyond the walls of our too few Canadian congregations.

We just need to be open and ready to try.

Now that I am at the party, I instagram my photos,

I facebook my friends, and I blog.

Most of the people who check out my blog are scientists and artists, very few are
 actually Unitarian.

Perhaps it is time for us to be UU evangelists.

I know that the far flung community that exists on the internet
 can feel worrisome, too fragmented,
 too disconnected from everyday lives.

In the conversation in Ottawa, we were asked what
 we value about Unitarianism,

Almost everyone, no matter their age, valued the people.

Our ultimate value is this community,
 the love and acceptance we offer to each other.

Being together matters.

Being together in community will continue to be important,
 whether that is Sunday morning or Wednesday night.

As much as communicating through new technologies
 may reshape our social landscape,
 our very human needs will not change.

We will still need to love and be loved.

We will still need to be hugged.

So while we need to keep ourselves visible on-line,
While we need to adapt to the cultural shifts in understanding,
People are still seeking what they were always seeking,
To be in a community of care.
To be in relationship with others.
To belong to something larger than ourselves.
Larger than Google even.

We will always need to be together, face to face.
Humans are social creatures,
we need one another's company on this
complex and often confusing journey of life.

May we learn how to belong to one another
with grace and compassion
both in person and on-line.