

# “A Work in Progress”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
16 September 2012

## **Meditation**

A Community of Memory and Hope by Josiah Royce

“A true community is essentially a product of a time process. A community has a past and will have a future. Its more or less conscious history, real or ideal, is a part of its very essence.... Common memory and common hope, the central possessions of the community, tend, when enlivened by love, to mould the consciousness of the present, and to link each member to the community by ideal ties which belong to the moment as well as to the stream of past and future life.”

## **Introduction of Speakers**

Today we begin what is sure to be  
our most important conversation in at least a generation—  
a conversation that will set the course for our future  
and affect our congregation for generations to come.

Today we begin a serious conversation about our building—  
about how it serves us well and about how it holds us back.

And about whether we would do well—  
in our effort to live out our mission  
to make a meaningful difference in our lives and in our city—  
to undertake extensive renovations to our current building  
or seek out a new and different home.

This is just about the most exciting and stressful thing  
a congregation can ever consider.

It can summon our highest hopes and lay bare our deepest fears.  
It can bring out the best in us—  
and it can bring out the less than best, too.

As I've said a lot lately and will continue to say,  
"how is more important than what."

The manner in which we proceed through this conversation over the next year or two has a great deal more to say about the strength of our faith and the quality of our character than whatever decision we will arrive at when we reach the end.

For that reason, I challenge us all to bring our very best to this dialogue.

To bring our capacity to listen deeply.  
To bear witness to one another's hopes  
and to recognise what cherished concern  
dwells below the surface of each fear that is expressed.

To practice patience and forgiveness,  
knowing that we can all be a bit awkward  
when we speak in matters of the heart.

To have a little humility and deepening wells of trust—  
in each other and in this process.

There are so many things to consider.

Not one of us yet can, at this point, possibly have enough information  
to know what is truly in the best interests of the congregation.

Let us then resist the temptation to decide too quickly.  
Let us resist the lure to stake out a position  
and shut ourselves off from the possibility  
that we haven't yet heard everything that needs to be said.

Let us commit, instead, to living for the next year or two  
in the "messy middle."

If you've already decided we should stay put or we should go,  
I invite you to come back into the centre and sit for a while.

Share your hopes and fears and frustrations,  
that we might work out a future that addresses them.

And take in what's on the hearts of others, so that we all might grow.

Over the next year or so, as we digest all of this information,  
let us resolve to hold open our hearts to each other  
and to possibilities that are still to be found,  
for this is the spiritual practice at the core of being Unitarian.

This morning, we welcome to the pulpit three members of our community  
to share their heartfelt reflections about our future.

### **Reflection by Anne Montagnes**

In the early 1950s, at a Unitarian youth conference held here – this building was brand new, and I was sixteen – the keynote speaker told us that we Unitarian youth were the generation who would reconcile differences by making creative compromises. We would show the world how holding this, and that, in quiet contemplation, would suggest a third way, a way more satisfactory than either this, or that. A creative compromise.

During that 1950s youth conference, I first led worship from this pulpit. In the 1970s, my son led his generation's youth conference, from this pulpit. In the 1990s my daughter was our summer minister and led Sunday services from this pulpit. We brought this pulpit with us when we sold the old church on Jarvis Street. Let's take this pulpit with us if, maybe, we locate elsewhere.

But, let's not relocate. Geographically, right here, we are central to our membership. Let's make a creative compromise: not this inadequate building; not locating elsewhere; something better than both. Maybe we'll have a condo right here, over our heads, an income-earning condo.

As we together investigate this mighty issue over the coming months, maybe years, let us all stay mindful of the values we affirm in our covenant. The inherent worth and dignity of all. Justice, equity, compassion. Acceptance, and encouragement. Freedom, and responsibility. Conscience, and community. Respect.

### **Reflection by Doug Buck**

Good morning.

Six years ago, Kate Chung and I moved to a condo building at 235 St. Clair Avenue West. This is exactly a two-minute and fifty-second walk from our

home to First Unitarian.

This is very convenient. We can leave home at 10:27 a.m. on a Sunday morning and glide in just before the service begins. Either of us can leave home at 6:57 p.m. on a weeknight and be on time for a 7:00 meeting.

But if we get halfway here and discover we've left important papers at home, we're late -- and, we may be teased by fellow committee members who have struggled with traffic and erratic streetcar schedules. Unlike us, they've allowed extra time for delays, thus managing to be on time.

So I want to tell you that if our congregation decides to move -- anywhere -- it will be an inconvenience for Kate and me.

But -- I'm serious now, if our congregation has all its ducks in a row, and a move would provide the brightest future for First Unitarian, then the move will get my vote.

Of course, I'd never be here at all if it weren't for Kate's long-time involvement with UU's, first in Oshawa, then Don Heights, and for the past 20 years, at First. And Kate was introduced to Unitarianism by Janet Vickers, a name some of you may know, who's now with the Nanaimo Fellowship.

So our close connection with UU's and First goes back a long time, with many changes along the way. We're ready to accept new changes, too.

### **Reflection by Darryl Neate**

Problem what problem?

That was my first reaction to the question of our space and our future.

As a relative newcomer to First and a parent with two young children in the RE program, our home at 175 St Clair appeared ideal to me - bright rooms for the children and a vibrant and welcoming Sanctuary.

We all see the world through different lenses and those lenses shape our interpretations and our conclusions. My initial lens was both narrow in scope and lacking in detail.

Every one of us in this room will use a different lens to consider our space and our future. Perhaps your lens is driven by location. Or a sense of comfort with the existing space. Perhaps your lens is driven by a particular frustration or frustrations with the building. Or a sense that we should capitalize on current market conditions.

I know that my own lens has changed.

As I thought more broadly about the space from a parent's perspective, I thought of how nice it would be to have an outdoor space for the children to play on beautiful, sunny mornings. If not our own outdoor space, what about closer proximity to a park? I also thought about how nice it would be to have a gymnasium where the children could burn off some energy during rainy or colder mornings.

As I thought more broadly about the space from a buildings systems perspective, I thought about the investment and technical challenges required to make our heating and cooling systems work properly. I also worry about how building repairs might snowball and overwhelm us if we don't invest more significantly – and regularly – in our building.

And finally, as I thought more broadly about the space from a more personal perspective, I thought about how much I like our current space and how comfortable it feels, despite it's many idiosyncrasies.

I remain clearly on the fence about our best path for the future – the anxiety I feel is balanced out by the sense of anticipation around what might be possible.

What could our space be if we dreamed big? At 175 St. Clair or elsewhere.

I think that's the question.

And I think I've moved from "Problem what problem?" to "What an interesting challenge we have."

## Sermon: “A Work in Progress”

Fifteen people and 52 pounds sterling.

That’s how this whole thing got started.

The year was 1845, and those few people came together to form a Unitarian church in the newly named city of Toronto.

They were mostly working class immigrants, though one of them had recently bought a chapel building down on George Street, he had intended to use as a warehouse.

He sold it to the newly formed congregation for the £395 he had paid.

It was apparently unsightly and ill-ventilated, but it was cheap and available, which fit the bill, since they, as Unitarians, would have had a hard time legally buying a church building at that point in history.

Within time, they gathered a choir, established a Sunday School, and found themselves a minister, who had, of all things, been Professor of Oriental Literature at Harvard.

Within six months of their first gathering, our forebears adopted a forward-looking constitution that asserted that “the privilege of worshipping God according to the dictates of conscience is an inherent right...”

They went on to state that the members united in forming a “Society for the purpose of public worship,” the guiding principle of which would be “the maintenance of the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief, and the rejection of all tests, creeds, or formal declarations of opinion.”<sup>1</sup>

Our by-laws today echo that same language, and in some cases use these very words, though I think we’ve softened that bit about declarations of opinion...

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Hewitt, *Unitarians in Canada*, 65.

Unfortunately, the first minister stayed only for a year.

In short order, the congregation sent out word to Unitarians in Britain and the U.S. that they were seeking another minister:

whose (quote) “perseverance and zeal shall enable him to contend successfully with all the difficulties connected with the hazardous enterprise of consolidating a numerous and vigorous society in these dark regions of the spiritual world”

(of course, today, much of The Rest of Canada would agree!).

Not surprisingly, they didn’t get any responses to that advertisement. Frankly, I’m not so sure I would have answered their call either—though I think it funny now that they thought Toronto to be among the “dark regions of the spiritual world.”

Happily, after four years of lay leadership in the pulpit, a new minister did finally arrive.

The congregation began to thrive, reflecting the growth of the surrounding city.

With soaring attendance, they turned their attention to their building.

As Phillip Hewett, our Canadian Unitarian historian, puts it:

It required real conviction to become a Unitarian in Toronto, . . . , not only because there was so much public prejudice [against them], but also because, [as they described it,] the church was ‘a disagreeable looking, repulsive old wooden building in a back street some distance from the main thoroughfare.’

Within just a few short years, though, the congregation sold their first building and engaged William Thomas, the leading architect in Upper Canada, to build a new church in Victorian Gothic style.

That building was dedicated in November of 1854.

It stood for a century on Jarvis Street, just north of Dundas,

where the parking lot for the old Sears headquarters is today.

Though the church was set afire by a religious fanatic on Christmas Eve in 1865, the building survived and the congregation grew in numbers and in strength.

By the time of the Second World War, though, the neighbourhood had become the city's Red Light District.

Soldiers on leave had to get special passes just to attend Sunday services, as it was otherwise unseemly for men in uniform to be seen in the area.

During this period, the congregation fell on tough times, shrinking in size and vision, with only a part-time minister.

After the war, with the arrival of a new minister, the congregation decided it was time to move.

But nothing happened until the Robert Simpson Company offered the congregation \$40,000 for the building and the land.

The congregation accepted the offer and took \$25,000 from the proceeds to purchase the land we sit on today.

Simpsons wasn't in a hurry to build, though, and the congregation was allowed to remain in the church rent-free for some time.

But, that's when the congregation got cold feet.

Nothing happened.  
Financial and member support nose-dived.

The new minister, Bill Jenkins, submitted his resignation in despair. The board offered to step down, too.

A congregational meeting was hastily called and the members endorsed Jenkins' demand for immediate action on the building plans, the launch of an effective financial canvass, and an initiative to grow the membership.

Jenkins told the congregation:

“If you are determined to take advantage of the great opportunity for the Unitarian faith in Toronto, then I shall remain to work with you. But to drift and retrench mean congregational atrophy and suicide, and I will have no part of it.”

Even after accepting Jenkins’ ultimatum, though, progress was slow.

The architect’s building plans were considered too costly and rejected. A congregational meeting on the plans had to be cancelled for a lack of quorum. The building committee was replaced.

But, in the end, what finally got the congregation moving, quite literally, was the Simpsons Company giving the congregation just two weeks to vacate the building.

It turns out the company had become aware of a looming steelworkers’ strike in the U.S. and needed the land to stockpile metal beams.

So, two weeks later, our congregation began meeting in a theatre on Sundays and soon broke ground, here at 175 St. Clair West.

Over a year later, the congregation moved from its temporary quarters to occupy the original building on this site.

At the time, people complained that the new building was practically on the outskirts of the city.

But before long, the congregation was thriving.

It was the golden age of Unitarianism in North America, as the post-war Baby Boom fueled a surge in attendance here and in churches everywhere.

In that era, we carved out a strong progressive religious voice for ourselves. It was common that my predecessors’ sermons were published in the newspapers on Monday morning.

(Those were the days!)

Church-going is what most everyone did.  
With Sunday Closing Laws in place,  
I suppose there wasn't much else to do!

In the 50's and 60's, this congregation swelled  
to a membership of over 800.

Children's religious education took place in nearby school buildings  
and, still, there was a substantial waiting list to get in.

To handle the overflow of adults,  
we launched congregations in other parts of the GTA.  
Potential new members were encouraged to go elsewhere  
because there wasn't room for them here.

It was a tumultuous and exciting time.

And then the tide suddenly went out.

By the beginning of the 70's,  
the congregation was half its former recent size.

There are likely many interrelated reasons for why this happened.

The world had changed almost overnight,  
especially in terms of how people related to religion.

And yet, I have to wonder if the stress of trying to sustain  
such a large congregation in too small a building  
took a greater toll than has been recognised.

It was only after the congregation undertook significant renovations  
in the early 90's that our congregation really began to grow again,  
reaching a membership of just under 500 members.

Those renovations enlarged our worship space  
and the gathering space upstairs for coffee hour.

It wasn't long, though, before the congregation

had to go to two services to accommodate a growing congregation.

It worked for a while, but as many of you will recall, there is a certain amount of strain involved in our trying to put on two services and running identical religious education programs on Sunday mornings.

The volunteer and logistical demands are, well, demanding and can easily exhaust a congregation.

It seemed the congregation was too big for one service, but too small for two.

When I arrived five years ago, the congregation was down to a single service and attendance had dipped significantly from where it had been at its peak during the Morrison-Reeds' ministry.

Over these past few years, we've witnessed another steady increase in attendance.

Though our actual membership is growing more slowly, our attendance on Sundays is now nearing the point we were at as a 500 member congregation a decade ago, and to the best of my knowledge, the point we were at as a 800 member congregation 40 years ago.

Congregational Growth Theory finds that when a congregation hits 80% of its capacity in its worship space, people feel that there isn't actually room for them and they give up and stay away.

Truth is, people don't really like to be crowded—while we worship or are at coffee hour.

We, as a congregation, have been hovering around that 80% mark for some time now.

While there are usually seats to be found, here and there, they're not easily found by a family of four arriving at 10:30 or by a couple arriving a little late.

Last year, we moved the choir up here to the chancel

to give you all a bit more breathing room,  
but this isn't a permanent solution to the pressures of our vitality.

Coffee hour is crowded and chaotic.

Our children's space for religious education  
doesn't quite match the needs of present programming  
or the reasonable expectation of many modern parents.

Last Sunday alone, there were ten infants in the nursery.

And there is, of course, a lot of wear and tear on this building  
to make it work in such a multi-use way.

As you've heard, help is needed to set up tables and chairs  
in this room for lunch.

What wasn't explained is that the room will need to be  
completely switched over two more times in the next 24 hours  
to accommodate our friends from Shir Libeynu, who rent our space,  
and are gathering here this evening to mark Rosh Hashanah.

The very good news in all of this is that we have fabulous problems!

While most liberal forms of religious engagement  
are in significant decline all around us,  
we are bucking the trend.

We are nearing once again to the threshold  
of our potential to be a force for progressive religion in this city.

What will we do with this opportunity?  
Will we make the most of this moment?

I will confess that I don't fully know what that means or involves.

I have no idea if it is best that we stay and renovate,  
stay and somehow get *much more* creative in our use of this building,  
or move in hopes of finding a home that better fits our vision.

The choice, though, isn't so much about where we will live,

but about who we, as a congregation, are and who we are becoming.

And this matters because we live in bewildering times of dramatic change.

The challenges facing the human race  
and life on this planet we call home  
are arguably the most serious the world has ever known.

In too many places around the globe,  
religion is ripping at the fabric of life itself, dividing people  
rather than drawing them together in common purpose.

This planet and her people are in desperate need  
of courageous souls who have come alive  
with a burning commitment to create a better and sustainable world—  
a world of justice and peace, held together in freedom and in love.

If we are to be a vital part of that—  
to be truly relevant to the times in which we live—  
I believe we will have to summon the courage to embrace  
a much bolder way of being.

While I am—and intend to remain—neutral  
about whether it is in the best long-term interests of the congregation  
to stay or to move, it is clear to me  
that the only unacceptable course of action is one of inaction,  
of choosing to do nothing to address  
the challenges and the opportunities we face  
in the most faithful way we can possibly imagine.

With all of my being, I believe action is what is asked of us  
by being part of this enduring community of memory and hope.

I hope you've noticed the photo on the cover of today's Order of Service.  
It was taken at a congregational picnic in High Park in 1902.

Those people were and are our congregation.  
This enduring community is a thread of commitment though time  
we are called to tend in our day, just as those who've gone before us  
have done in theirs.

We hold a sacred trust not only with them, though,  
but with those who will follow after.

It's hard to imagine the world the future generations  
of our congregation will face.

In our time of discernment, though, let us remember,  
that it is not only our individual wants and needs and dreams  
that should guide our deliberations, but those of generations still to come,  
who will take up from us the mantle of this free faith  
and give it expression and life in a future age.

Friends, we are a work in progress.  
We are characters in a story that's been unfolding in this city for 167 years.

And, we now face a significant choice in how this story turns out—  
not whether we move or stay—  
but whether we respond to this moment  
with the full courage of our faith.

So may it be.

Amen.

## **Benediction**

Empowered by faith,  
inspired by hope,  
and led by love,  
let us go forth into the future  
with the courage to live in ever bolder ways of being. Amen.