

Walking Together

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Earlier this week, I attended a three-day retreat out in Northumberland County with the UU ministers serving the eastern half of Canada.

During a break on Tuesday, Fiona, our previous intern minister, and I took a long walk to catch up.

With fallen leaves all about our feet, we hiked through a series of wooded trails until spilling out, unexpectedly, on to a very remote dirt road.

After walking along that road for ten or fifteen minutes, a lone pick-up truck approached, stirring up a whirlwind of dirt in its wake.

As it neared us, the truck slowed down and then came to a full stop. We stopped, too, thinking the driver might need directions.

As the woman in the passenger seat lowered her window, we all exchanged pleasantries.

Without skipping a beat, the woman explained they were Jehovah's Witnesses. and asked if they might share some literature with us.

With maybe too much enthusiasm, I immediately said, "sure!" (I think to Fiona's dismay...)

It frankly felt like a pretty random moment to be on the receiving end of someone's proselytizing efforts there in the middle of nowhere.

Fortunately, we didn't get the hard sell.

So, Fiona and I simply thanked them for the literature,
and never mentioned that we are both actually
fairly well established in our own religious beliefs.

As they drove off, leaving us in the dust,
I glanced over the pamphlet I had just received.

On the cover was the bold-faced question:
“Would you like to know the Truth?”
(Truth with a capital “T,” that is...)

Why, *yes*, I thought to myself, I would, indeed,
very much like to know the truth.

In four short pages, the pamphlet offered up answers
to questions like whether God cares for us,
whether war and suffering will ever cease,
what happens to us when we die,
and whether there’s any hope for the dead.

The answers were full of comfort and assurance,
with biblical footnotes provided for further reading.

Sometimes I really envy such certainty—
such confidence in our capacity to lay hold of Truth.

But reality is that I just don’t trust that kind of Truth.

I’m skeptical of any and all who claim special knowledge of Big-T Truth,
because, in my experience,
I’ve found the little-t variety hard enough to come by.

Now, fortunately, as a Unitarian minister,
I’m not expected to hold a corner on the truth market.

And, you, I’m guessing, wouldn’t believe me,
even if I thought or said I did!

That is why we proudly belong to a tradition
that is covenantal rather than credal.

For it is not a set of shared beliefs that draw us and keep us together,
but, instead, a set of common values—
and a vision of what those values call us to do with our lives.

In place of the assurance of some truth frozen for all time,
we come together in religious community
to wrestle again and again with the big questions of this life,
knowing that sure and certain answers with Big-T Truth
are tough if not impossible to find.

And, so, we put out no pamphlets outlining our claim on the truth.

If we even dared to try, I'm thinking the inside pages
would pretty much be covered over in question marks.

That doesn't mean we are without answers or opinions.
Just that we're without certitude.
That we take doubt to be a sacrament
and questioning to be a spiritual practice.

We walk together not with all of the answers,
but with a commitment to keep walking with each other
toward what we, to the best of our ability, can make out as truth.

Now, this path obviously isn't for everyone.
It gives cold comfort to those who require unquestioned confidence.
And, to the uninitiated, our faith just looks odd and frustrating.

And while that may well be true,
ours remains the most meaningful path I know.

I, for one, would much rather be rounding the bends of this peculiar path,
seeking whatever snippets of truth we may find,
than settling down at a point along the way,
certain that I had already arrived at some final destination.

Our tradition celebrates that “revelation is not sealed.”

We believe there is always more to learn,
that the creation of the world is ongoing,
and that the promise and purpose of our lives is ever-unfolding.

We also know that the path is longer than the time any one of us is given, and that that means it is best to travel the path with others.

The 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it so eloquently:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;
therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense
in any immediate context of history;
therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous,
can be accomplished alone;
therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous
from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;
therefore, we are saved by the final form of love,
which is forgiveness.¹

Our radically different way of doing religion
requires commitment and humility,
and it requires other people.

We need the challenge that comes from being in relationship,
from having to learn not merely to mind our manners,
but to live—from the heart—in a way that upholds the values we profess.

One can affirm the inherent worth and dignity
of other people all day long—in theory, in isolation,
at a safe distance or some comfortable remove.

But it is a different thing altogether
to end up in a difficult meeting or in a bitter disagreement
and realise that the hard work of being human—
and being human with the values we seek to uphold as Unitarians—
demands that we draw upon everything we know

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Charles Scribner's Sons (1952).

of compassion and understanding,
humility and forgiveness,
grace and good humour.

It takes practice to live one's values.
And it takes other people to confirm that our practice has actually paid off.

When our religious forebears first gathered themselves into congregations,
they established covenants to guide them
through the difficulties of being in community.

Through a series of promises,
they pledged themselves to one another
to ensure their mutual well-being.

One of the earliest examples in North America
is the Salem Covenant of 1629,
the covenant from the seaside town of Puritans
dating to the very early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

It read, in part:

“We Covenant with the Lord and one with an other;
and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God,
to walke together in all his waies,
according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us
in his Blessed word of truth.”²

Later it reads:

We promise to walke with our brethren,
with all watchfulness and tenderness,
avoiding jealousies and suspicions,
back-bitings, censurings, provokings,
secret risings of spirit against them;
but in all offences to follow the rule of our Lord Jesus,
and to bear and forbear, give and forgive, as he hath taught us.

Now, it's worth acknowledging that such a shared covenant

² Conrad Wright, *Walking Together*, p. 7.

doesn't head off all the potential conflicts
a religious community might face.

This covenant is, after all, from one of the two Puritan congregations
that six decades later would bring the world the Salem Witch Trials.

In a conversation during seminary comparing epic church conflicts,
a colleague of mine who was a member of that congregation,
put everyone else's examples of conflict into perspective
by pointing out that in her church there had been
an unfortunate history of members sentencing other members to death.

(I should probably reassure our newest members
that we've come a long way in our understanding
about handling our conflicts in the ensuing three centuries...!)

The women and men who added their names to our membership book
this morning have joined with us in a sharing of promises.

They have joined our covenant
as much as they have joined our congregation.

The formal covenant that we recite each week
is a variation on words more than a century old, and used
in many Unitarian Universalist congregations across North America.

Love is our doctrine.
The quest for truth is our sacrament.
And service is our prayer.

To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve life,
To the end that all souls shall grow
into harmony with the divine—
Thus do we covenant with each other and with all.

Though it includes religious words, this is not a creed.
It is the set of promises we renew on a weekly basis
about how we strive to live out our faith, with each other and the world.

It is a present-day statement of our intention to walk together.

But on this day, as we renew our commitment
to the well-being of our congregation
by bringing forward our pledges of financial and volunteer support,
I want to invite us to take up the question of *why*.

Beyond the necessity we find for companions on our journey,
toward what great end do we, as a congregation, walk?

What greater purpose beckons us to walk together?

For me, the answers are many.

I believe this congregation exists and endures,
because as our founders knew in 1845,
there is a need for a sanctuary
where people can worship in freedom,
with hearts and minds fully engaged;
a place where we bring the joys and sorrows of our lives
and have them held in loving community;
a place where our spirits soar and are renewed
to help us take up the work of healing our own lives
and the world beyond these walls.

We need a place where we are strengthened
to live lives of integrity and purpose,
where we strive to expand the scope of human community,
where we educate our children and youth about their bodies,
where we empower them toward their own spiritual development,
that they might forge identities as people
who can and will go forth to change this world for good.

This congregation endures because we desire a place
where we, together, can craft of vision of a world made fair
with all her people one—and then work with one another
to help bring that blessed hope into being,
by working for justice and peace on this planet.

On this Celebration Sunday, then,
may this cradle of our common dreams,

this workshop of the human spirit,
be strengthened and renewed,
that we might live into our calling
to serve as a beacon of liberal religion for the City of Toronto.

May the manner in which we practice our faith,
the way we walk together,
give convincing voice to the values
that dwell at the heart of this congregation—
that through our lives, we might point to the truths that ennoble our days
and testify to the wisdom of Henry David Thoreau—
that we “Be not simply good. [But that we] be good for something.”

Amen.