

Proud Sponsors of Elizabeth Taylor's 5th Wedding!

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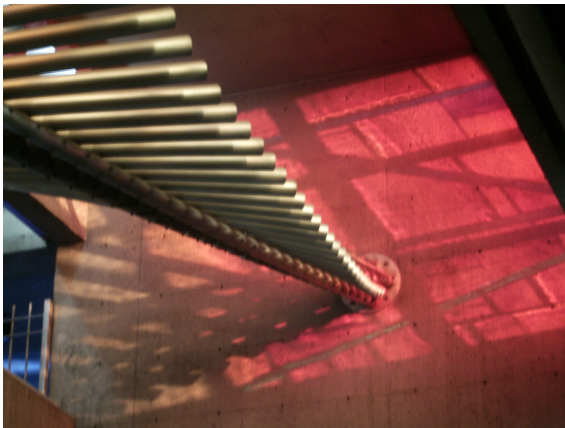
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N.B.—These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship—supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, 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.

This week's reading, which complements the sermon below, came from an article of *The Montreal Gazette* for 20 May, 2013, by David Johnston, available at:

<http://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment/Elizabeth+Taylor+Richard+Burton+married+Montreal/4490576/story.html#ixzz2Dkqlaooa>

If you've ever been interviewed by the media, you may have noticed how some of the details in your story have a tendency to... suffer in transmission. After the old Unitarian Church of Montreal building on Sherbrooke Street burnt down, it was *not* rebuilt in the posh Westmount area, as *The Gazette* specifies, but just off the border, in the blue-collar Montreal neighbourhood of Notre Dame the Grâce—or as we call it: NDG. It's a nice neighbourhood—it's where I spent my three years of seminary. And yes, it is across the street from the Vendôme



métro station—*The Gazette* got that right. I took that métro almost every day; the Vendôme Station features a stained glass window that would rival that of many churches, and which I would look forward to gazing upon on my way to school or work. When the sun strikes it just right, it projects beautiful colours on the concrete wall

of the station, brightening my day before the train arrived.

More perplexing to me, is *The Gazette's* assertion that the Unitarian Church of Montreal was “never more famous than it was on the day of March 16, 1964,” when Rev. Leonard Mason agreed to marry Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. I can't be sure if the Montreal Church has been more famous before or after, but I wonder what the importance of that fame is.

There is, after all, much truth to *The Gazette's* claim that, when Taylor and Burton got married—the first time around—it was a special

moment: a special moment for our movement, for Quebec, for Canada, and for the mission of socially-minded souls all across. That wedding highlighted, firstly, our tradition's commitment to offering dignified ceremonies for those who need them—including rich celebrities with foreign divorces—and moreover, it prompted action in the legal and religious scenes.

While the province of Quebec recognized their Mexican divorces, most churches who could solemnize a marriage, would not. Ours was a rare oasis of hospitality and a legal haven in the religious setting of Quebec. Taylor and Burton were not the only ones who benefitted from our different vision. For a long time, Quebecers who did not fit the Catholic or Protestant models were hard-pressed to find authorized officiants to give the legal or spiritual blessing they needed. Sikhs, for instance, who had a spiritual home, but not one with the required legal qualifications, were in a difficult situation—we were able to help.

I have it on good authority—from an officer of the Unitarian Church of Montreal, who is now in our congregation—that the church staff was less than pleased with Rev. Mason, when he discretely switched Taylor's wedding venue from the church building and crossed Sherbrooke Street to the Ritz-Carleton Hotel. I have a feeling that he was less concerned in advertising his church, and more mindful of carrying out the mission of his church, focusing on providing the most dignified ceremony he could offer to the couple in question. It was only after carrying out that ceremony, that he was able to capitalise on the inevitable publicity that came with it, using the opportunity to push for civil marriage, in conjunction with Mayor Jean Drapeau, so that similar difficulties would not be an issue for other future couples—ordinary or otherwise.

When speaking of mission, it is easy to associate that word with accomplishment: “Mission Accomplished” goes the saying. But I wonder if perhaps mission is something beyond finalizing a task, and more about embracing that search to carry out our deepest aspirations, along with all those things that are sometimes called accomplishments, defeats, or anything else that is part of living out all that makes our community meaningful.

It is this kind of missional work that enriches our congregations and wider communities. At First Unitarian in Toronto, your awareness of, and action in, social justice issues has been your calling card for several years. Today, you have witnessed a celebration of the Lay Chaplaincy program, which continues the legacy that Rev. Leonard Mason was following in Montreal in 1964 of offering dignified ceremonies to those who need them. Today, we serve couples of many backgrounds, be they same-sex, unaffiliated, or with a diversity of needs that might not be met elsewhere; we serve people in mourning who need to grieve and celebrate in a way that is most befitting of their loved ones; families who wish to welcome a child into their community in a way that does not tie them to a specific theology. In mornings such as this one, you offer time and space for spiritual renewal, through ritual, music, the gift of spoken word, and the wonder of shared time together.

It was partly the pursuit of this mission that solidified my own call to ministry. Before seminary in Montreal, the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa honoured me with an appointment as Lay Chaplain. The experience of offering meaningful and dignified ceremonies to members of the larger community beyond my congregation, encouraged me to do that for keeps and follow up in the ordained brand of ministry. Christopher, installed as Lay Chaplain today is following on a similar path. Other Lay Chaplains, like Peter and Margaret, are staying on the “lay” part of the equation.

I find that quite, fitting: our mission is a shared ministry. Our outreach takes many forms. And the way we advertise ourselves to the wider community is often by being the best we can be at what we do as a community of faith. Many of you have come here because you were blessed at one of our ceremonies, or you attended one of them, liked what you saw, and wanted to take further part in it. That’s not always the case, and that’s OK, because our mission has a way of speaking to people’s souls in different ways, whether they wish to get more deeply involved in our congregation or otherwise.

At the Unitarian Church of Montreal in 1964, Rev. Mason’s reluctance to advertise the Taylor-Burton wedding might seem counter-

intuitive. But I think he understood something about mission—and the embodiment of it—that allow for enrichment of our communities; that the business of church is... a different kind of business. Allow me to demonstrate.

Once again, I invoke a favourite scriptural source of mine—the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation! Radio 1's program *Under the Influence*, is an odd choice for a radio show: it is hosted by advertising consultant Terry O'Reilly, and on the surface, it is show about advertising. But anyone who has heard it can tell that it is about much more than that: it is about human nature: psychology, economics, the arts. Even more odd is when Terry O'Reilly's show about advertising featured *Great Brands Built Without Advertising*, showcasing several multi-million-dollar companies, all of which have grown, with a consistent advertising budget... of zero dollars.

Among the many examples he sites, perhaps my favourite one is the story of... a company that hasn't paid me enough to do a product placement for them here, but you might just figure out who they are. It is the story of Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. Ben and Jerry were two buddies who, like many pals, shared a few passions, like eating, having fun, and a deep love for their Vermont community. When the two of them took a correspondence course on ice cream making, they thought they'd have fun making a business in food indulgence made with products from that Vermont community that was so dear to them—to follow their passions. In building capital, they sought to use local Vermont milk from locals who invested in their business: their initiative was so popular, that they had to turn investors away.

They quickly became known for their ethos of being personally invested in the business and the ice-cream making and selling process. And they made a solemn commitment to have fun in the whole enterprise, using their humour in the branding of their ice cream flavours and dealings with customers. They also had a vision to give back to the community, by pledging 7.5% of their pre-tax profits for various local charities. They didn't need to spend on advertising because they *were* the advertising. Their customers understood that they were patrons of more than a business; they were investors in a community.

It has been fashionable among many communities of faith to start looking at themselves in the framework of business, to use the language of efficiency, growth, surplus over deficit. These seems like worthwhile goals to share with businesses, but perhaps the most powerful message from brands built without advertising, is not that churches should emulate businesses, but rather that there is a wealth to learn from businesses that *behave* like churches: that have a mission to carry out, contributing to society; that believe in what they do; whose best missionaries are those who live that mission and embody what is dearest about it.

Such enterprises express a self-understanding as something more. Though they had the same objective as any other business to draw a profit through commerce, their stated *raison-d'être* goes beyond financial gain and into social and community purposes—they have a greater mission in mind. It is this mission that appeals to their employees and customers, driving recognition by endorsements from pleased employees and satisfied customers, who have gotten more than a product or service, but an experience; an experience that solidified a relationship and transformed their personal outlook.

I am increasingly struck at how often your mission is more than something you do. It is something you are.

Last month, I was witness to another testament of your mission, when the *Toronto Star* featured the story of a local family going through a tragic time. The mother, head of her family was dying. Among the many difficulties the children were encountering, was the additional worry that they would not even be able to afford a dignified burial for their mother. This community was quick to act: what could we offer? Words of courage? Financial support? A dignified burial? These are all areas in which you excel when you are called to them. When you brought the plight of this family to wider congregational attention you knew it was time to act. The Lay Chaplaincy committee conferred, it was time to enact our policy to offer a pro bono officiant to someone in need, with no conditions: no proselytizing, no fee, just a desire to do the right thing. In the end, St. Clare's Catholic Church, down the street

from us, our kindred in faith, offered a priest who could provide a ceremony more appropriate to the family's faith tradition. Our official services were not needed. Some of you found ways to contribute to a trust fund that would support the children through their distress.

Amid the tragedy in this family's life, I am inspired by the response from our communities. I am encouraged to see that we are not the only ones in our larger community to respond to such needs—my friends: we are in good company. I am comforted by the support offered by our fellow citizens in Toronto. My friends, I am heartened by the readiness among you to feel the heartbeat of your neighbours and to look for ways to join your soul's journey to them, with compassionate hearts. I am grateful that we shared our ministry with others in this city and reassured that even when our offers appear not to be needed, you are ready to answer the call when they are.

No mission to accomplish, only a mission to embrace; a search to carry out our deepest aspirations, along with all those things that are sometimes called accomplishments, defeats, or anything else that is part of living out all that makes our community meaningful. All the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers—yours, mine, and theirs.^{[after}
Hymn # 112 *Do You Hear?*]

My friends, you are our mission. A mission we share, whether lay or ordained. A mission we share with other communities of faith; a mission—a ministry—that we share with our fellow citizens; a shared responsibility.

So may it be.

Glory be.

Alleluia,