

Sermon: Where We Stand

A century or so ago, Rev. Lewis B. Fisher, a leader in the Universalist tradition, observed that we, religious liberals, are often asked to state just where we stand.

He said that: “The only true answer [to that question] . . . is that we do not stand at all,” but that, instead, “we move.”

And so we have, and so we do, and so we must.

Indeed, over some five centuries, we have traversed a great distance from our roots in the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation.

Through the lofty ideals of The Enlightenment in the 18th century, to the innate wisdom of the Transcendentalists in the 19th, across the brave brand of Humanism that emerged in the 20th century, to the embrace, in recent decades, of a theology that reveres our deep interdependence with all of life, we have arrived today at a blessed and sometimes messy mix of perspectives that is, at once, post-Christian, post-modern, post-secular. . . post-a-breeze-to-wrap-your-head-around, and certainly, post-very-easy-to-describe-to-others.

Ours is, as always, a faith in flux, and I, frankly, wouldn't have it any other way.

I do, however, spend a fair bit of time wondering and worrying about *how* we're changing—about whether we are moving in the right directions, and whether we're really moving fast enough to remain relevant in a changing world.

Recently, in Calgary, I delivered the Confluence Lecture,

the most significant address given by a minister
at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

It probably won't surprise you to hear that I talked about you—about us.

I shared with Unitarians across the country
the dilemma we are facing about how to manage our building challenges—
the choice we are facing to decide either to stay here and rebuild
or go elsewhere and construct a building
that will better serve the needs of our congregation going forward.

I explained that I was sharing our story with them
because *our* dilemma begs pressing questions about not only our future,
but about the future of Unitarianism itself.

I say that because it becomes clearer with each day
that in whatever we eventually decide to do,
we must consider a vast number of things that
would, at first glance, seem to have little to do with a building.

If we were a business, after all, the financial case is pretty clear-cut.

We would do well to maximize the value of our physical assets
by cashing out when the market conditions are the most favourable.

But we, of course, are not a business.

We are a congregation.

The decision we will make—likely sometime next winter—
to stay or to go—is, then, monumental,
because in making it, we must consider the obligations we have
to our past and our future, and not merely to our present.

As you've heard me say many times before,
change is happening all around us,
and if we are to remain viable and relevant,
we will have to adapt and evolve. We will have to keep on moving.

So, we need, very much, to get this right,
which makes our decision both terrifying and thrilling.

That's because neither option is the kind of thing we should do without having a solid sense of our own identity.

We have no business tearing down our building if we don't know who we are.

And we would be foolish to put up a For Sale sign without giving some serious thought to what the future holds.

While sorting through all of this can be and will be daunting, the thrilling part of this work is the rare opportunity it provides us to renew our commitment to our shining purpose in this city.

As we've started to do that, what's become clear is that the decision we face is not just about the building.

It's about us. And about who and what we most deeply aspire to be.

To get at these questions of identity requires staring as hard as we can and as far as we can into the future to see the challenges and the opportunities that are there.

+ To ask ourselves what the religious landscape of this country will look like in twenty years or fifty years or a hundred.

+ To ask ourselves what needs coming generations will have and whether we will be best equipped to meet them?

+ To even consider that maybe our future won't be congregationally based at all, but that we will become more a movement of people who call themselves Unitarian without necessarily being part of a specific community, or at least one that functions in the ways congregations do today.

Now, predicting the future is obviously impossible to do with precision. It carries with it the high risk of looking incredibly foolish down the road.

And, yet, to not pay attention to trends,

to ignore the direction that things are headed,
is to risk facing the challenges of the future utterly unprepared.

There's a fine line between unnecessarily fretting over the future—
which as our mediation reminded us, is always a work in progress—
and readying ourselves, as best we can,
for what the signs are telling us the future will likely hold.

To put a finer point on it,
I believe we must pay attention to emerging trends,
because our margin of error is far too small
to not do everything in our power
to prepare for the dramatic changes that are coming.

So, on this, the day of our Annual General Meeting,
I share with you some of what I see, what is starting to come into focus.

The essence of it boils down to this:
the more things change, the less they are staying the same.

To be relevant not only in the future, but even more so, here and now,
we must continually ask the hard question of whether what we're about,
what we are serving—or what we're selling, if you will—
truly satisfies people's real needs.

Once upon a time, people most often turned to Unitarianism as religious
refugees.

They were throwing off the creeds and dogma of former belief systems
in favour of the freedom they found in this liberal religious tradition.

The landscape around us, though, has been rapidly changing.

Our society is simultaneously growing ever more diverse and ever more secular.

This is changing the rules of the game we have been playing for so long.

Professor Paul Bramadat describes how Canadian society
is moving past the pact that had been tacitly made
as part of Trudeau-era Multiculturalism:
the idea that all were free to practice their religion, whatever it might be,

but that religion was expected to remain in the private sphere, a matter of personal, and, again, private, concern.

As he points out, that pact is obviously no longer holding—as evidenced in the debates we’ve had in recent years, such as whether to uphold Sharia Law in Ontario or the right of women in Quebec to wear the niqab, whether biblically-based arguments against homosexuality constitute hate speech in Alberta, or whether polygamy is a legitimate form of religious expression amongst a Mormon splinter group in B.C.

Religious differences are becoming a growing source of tension in our common life. Religion matters, now more than ever.

Only time will tell whether Canada will successfully navigate these choppy waters, as we sort through the implications of our growing religious diversity.

The recent National Household Survey, which came out last month, contains the shifting numbers you’d expect to see with Canada’s enviable mix of a relatively open immigration and our increasing secularization.

The headlines from the survey confirm that most groups on the liberal end of the religious spectrum are in decline, while there is a steady growth of what we once called “world religions,” though those faiths are now as “at home” here as anywhere else on the planet.

What has gotten a great deal of attention in this and other surveys lately is the dramatic rise of people who report having no religion—the “Nones” as they are often called.

This is the fastest growing group in recent surveys.

And these are people, I think, we need to figure out how to serve.

Most of these people don’t consider themselves to be atheists, though they tend to be highly skeptical of religion.

Most are younger—belonging to Generation X and Generation Y.

Reginald Bibby, the Canadian religious sociologist, says it's still too early to tell, but that identifying as "none" may turn out to be a transitional label for many younger people.

David Foot, the economics professor at the U of T, who gave the keynote address at our ACM in Toronto two years ago, made a similar argument.

He said that finding and committing to religion tends to be something people do in mid-to-later life—when existential questions bubble up and mortality starts to come into clearer focus.

I understand what he's saying. We see evidence of it being true for the Baby Boom Generation, who, themselves, largely rejected religion as young adults.

But, I'm not yet completely convinced that the generations my age and younger are going to suddenly take up a religious quest that will lead them into the traditional religious forms that served the generations before them.

At least not in large numbers.

As comforting as it would be to trust that these generations will follow the patterns of their parents, I'm not so sure it will pan out.

For starters, huge numbers in this age cohort weren't raised within a religion in the first place.

Unlike their Boomer parents, when they find themselves facing existential questions once they have children or hit mid-life crises, they won't so much be returning to religion as discovering it for the first time—if they're even so inclined.

And what most of them are and will be looking for isn't religious freedom. Most of them have had plenty of that already.

Indeed, the younger new people who are arriving in *our* congregation

are usually coming in search of some structure, some boundaries, some evidence of clear commitments—signs that we actually walk our talk.

They typically aren't coming to us as religious refugees from some restrictive faith tradition, though a few still do.

They come to us curious and a bit skeptical.

And most of them arrive here without any real knowledge of how a religious community like this works.

For a while I found this trend incredibly frustrating until Angela Klassen, our Director of Lifespan Religious Education, hit upon a mantra that has served our staff team well: “If they don't have it, we have to bring it.”

We can no longer assume people arrive here with knowledge of how a congregation functions.

If it is to be passed on, our faith tradition has to be spelled out to those who didn't inherit it as children.

Expectations need to be clear and up-front.

Without condescension, we must fill in the gaps, explaining, with love, what the norms of our community are.

And in all of this, we must remain open and recognise that these younger generations—these “nones”—are arriving in our congregations with some pretty well-defined norms of their own.

Generation Y or the Millennials are used to being highly collaborative and interactive, expecting to have a voice and to be taken seriously.

They are searching for authenticity and can readily sense when it's missing.

They also assume diversity.

It is the very world that most of them have played, learned, and worked in.

And, they, frankly, find it weird
to discover it missing from our congregations.

Though they like to get involved,
they also tend to resist joining organizations.

They also have different ideas about money.

Generation Y and the generation that follows after them
has come of age in an era when they are accustomed
to downloading much of what they want for free.

When they are asked to contribute to things, they usually think in terms
of user fees—of what the specific cost is for the thing they're getting.

It's not always easy to quantify such value in a congregation.
And when we do, the price tag usually comes with severe sticker shock.

Finally, this is also, of course, the generation considered “native”
to the technologies that the rest of us have likely struggled to figure out
as they've come along.

Social media isn't something to be adopted by this generation.
It's simply the way they stay in touch—and always have—with the world.

When I first started working in a church twenty-two years ago,
I remember the delivery and installation
of this new-fangled thing called a fax machine.

It was amazing to be able to send a copy of a letter or report to someone
on the other side of the planet, without having to mail a physical copy.

A few years later came email.
Can any of you remember church life before email?

Just think about how much gets accomplished today
through the use of email in this place!

We depend on it for how we do most everything around here.

The funny thing—or not so funny thing—though,
is that younger generations see email
as something, to put it bluntly, that old people use. . .

What seemed so cutting edge just ten or fifteen years ago
is already deemed old school by the people we're hoping
will carry the flame of this faith into the future.

If this faith is to survive, we must grapple with the meaning of that.

If we truly want for this faith to be passed on,
we will need to begin to speak much more fluently
the languages younger generations speak.

To be honest, at the ripe old age of 43, I find that a little daunting.
But, this isn't simply about committing to a greater social media presence,
though that is a part of it;
it's also about emphasizing what we uniquely have to offer.

For all the technology that exists to connect people,
there's still something to be said for people coming together
to celebrate and strengthen shared values.

There is a basic human hunger for connection that
religious community can help to satisfy.

There is a need for people to be called out to serve the wider world,
empowered by vision, equipped with the tools of faith,
and encouraged within a community
committed to living lives of integrity, purpose, and joy.

Offering a way to do that without dogma is where our future will be.

So, where do we stand?
We stand on moving ground, and we would do well to move with it.
We have practice at this, and, therein is my hope.
One of our most tremendous strengths is our capacity for change.

When other religions were threatened by the theory of evolution,
we took its truth to heart.
We don't stand, we move. We change and we transform.

May we, then, move ever onward, with purpose and with passion,
serving the Spirit of Life and needs greater than our own. Amen.