

Heart of the Universe
Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel, M.Div.
Summer Minister
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
21 July, 2013

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.

All photographs are by Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

A Reading from Chapter 9 “**The Lives of the Stars**”, from *Cosmos*, by Carl Sagan offered some inspiration for this sermon. A video version of the chapter is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcQIyRpxils>

An additional inspiration was music from the Samba Elégua ensemble. A short video is available here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9ud9UqtHu4>



At the beginning of the summer, I invited all of you into celebrating the fight for your right to party.

You have made me proud!

Many of you have taken some time off, to spend it with friends and family, sometimes out of town. At other times, many of you have literally taken to the streets, marching in protest *and / or* celebration! Sometimes at a rally for

environmental justice, or enjoying the food at Caribana. Last month, many of you joined the congregational contingent at Pride, either marching along Yonge Street... or watching along Yonge Street.

This was my first Pride in Toronto, and I was quite overwhelmed by the sheer energy displayed by everyone involved, from fellow marchers, the media people, the organizers, and the folks sipping their iced tea on rooftops.

It was also a sunny day, I was a bit tired from preaching in the morning, and my arms got tired holding up our sign that proclaimed our First Principle:

To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Yet at the end of the parade, I felt energized... and inspired! It was barely the middle of the afternoon, and already I felt that this had been a worthwhile day.

At the end of the parade, I met up with my sweetheart. She had also been marching with us, though her contingent was a bit further ahead than the Toronto Unitarians. As it happens, Sarah plays in a samba percussion band, and they were among the many musicians that animated the parade.

It turns out that this wasn't their only gig that day. They were also playing at "Pedestrian Sundays" in the streets of Kensington Market. In fact, she tells me, her band is one of the founding folks of Pedestrian Sundays, when the streets are shut off from traffic, so that local talent can play for the pleasure of the city dwellers that wish to frequent Kensington Market... wouldn't I want come?

To be honest, I was bit worn out from what had already been an eventful day, and I wasn't sure I understood what made this activity so appealing to her. But I was also carrying the energy of the day with me, and it seemed like something that was special to her, so I thought it'd be worth checking out.

I want to share the story of that encounter:

When we arrive at Kensington Market, I see a whole set of people in green T-shirts, nursing their instruments. It's a bit odd to me, since I've tended to think of percussion as part of a band, and I'm a bit taken off guard to see a band made entirely of percussion instruments: bass drums, snare drums, tambourines, cowbells, and something that looks like dozens of tiny cymbals arranged in rows.

I see everyone putting on earplugs, to my amusement and puzzlement.

As the band gets ready, the band leader rings everyone into order with a whistle and begins with a couple sets of call [*rum pum-pum PUM-pum, pum-pum-PUM*] and response [*rum pum-pum PUM-pum, pum-pum-PUM*]. The force of the bass drum and the cowbells is instantaneous.

Within a few beats, I get it.

I understand why my sweetheart does this.

I'm amazed by the force of the sound, and I see Sarah immersed right in the middle of it... those earplugs make sense.

She explains to me that playing in the band is like being part of another living creature much greater than themselves, with passion and zest for life.

The new musical creature starts to march down the streets of Kensington Market.



The bass drum beats.
Like the heart.
Of... a universe.

I follow along, feeling it beat in tandem with mine. They do a long... song?
“Grooves,” she explains, “we call them grooves.”

I march along for a bit. In the groove.

Then, I see a dead bird on the sidewalk, and I’m afraid the needle will skip out of the groove. But I stay in it, nodding to the groove of death as the price to pay for this life. At the moment, I don’t feel like haggling over the fee.

I keep a silent prayer in remembrance for the stars that have lived and died in the process of making the elements that make me and everyone in this room. I remember those who have shared their lives with me, and those who are no longer immediately present, yet still somehow with me.

And I give some thanks.

As the band turns around a corner, I notice them stop, and they go slightly off-beat for a moment. Up to that point, they’ve been keeping flawless timing. I wonder, what’s going on?

I see a kid at a sidewalk drum-set. It looks like his family is one among the many musicians on Pedestrian Sundays, and the kid is taking his go at the set. He’s a bit rough around the edges, but he knows what he’s doing, and even seems to be schooling the Samba band a little bit.

The Samba ensemble adapts to his beat and starts playing along. They jam together—out of sheer spontaneous enjoyment—for a good while, and for a good time, and the people on the street start dancing on the pavement, keeping their own beat with their feet, and with their hands.

The band keeps moving.



Suddenly, the green T-shirt-clad group runs into another percussion group, the Afro-Brazilian Roots club, sporting white T-shirts.

Two alternative universes are about to collide!

For a moment, I wonder if they’re going to battle it out, West-Side Story-style, and rumble in some fantastical new martial art form, like Samba-kung fu. The two bands meet head on. Worlds are colliding!

Except... that they don't. Instead of imploding in a cataclysmic clash of matter-antimatter, the two bands blend and harmonize with each other. The band leaders have a quick check-in... yes, they want to play together! They do a call and response... from group to group! And after a set of back-and-forth, and back-and-forth, they start playing in unison, as one flesh.

The two bands make love with each other through mutually-shared music. They go through a long elaborate groove, and end with an intense finale. Everyone is panting, apparently exhausted from the exertion of the set.

Or so it seems, until, from the sidelines, some wise-guy in the crowd starts shouting:

“Encore!”

The green shirts and white shirts look at each other: Encore indeed. They start playing again!

They do a whole other groove, full with intensity and soul-piercing beats. They play another song to the universe, expanding and contracting beats, like a blue super-giant stars in its multiple resurrections before going supernova.

The groove is over, but the band wants to keep on playing. They play again for multiple climaxes, with greater energy. A fellow from the white shirt band lifts up his bass drum up in the air between beats, and the cowbell pierces the air again and again, punctuating each moment for the special gift that it is.

And then the band stops again.

Ending this universe, for the time being.

With one Big Bang.

Alleluia

Amen.