

Like a Prayer
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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.

All photographs are by Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

An abridged Reading from “**The Rules of the Game**” from *Billions & Billions*, by Carl Sagan, offered inspiration for this Sermon. A full version of this chapter is available at:
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/38162011/Carl-Sagan-The-Rules-of-the-Game-Excerpt-From-Billions-and-Billions-Thoughts-on-Life-and-Death-at-the-Brink-of-the-Millennium-Ball-an-Tine-1997>

A further inspiration is the tune “**Austria**”. A version of that tune can be found at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_chH88_--A



One of my secret vices has been an exploration of all things that encompass national symbolism: flags and languages; emblems on coins and paper money; coats of arms... national anthems.

Because of this, the hymn we just sang [Hymn # 190, tune: Austria] has a special appeal to me. The *words* were written by a writer in our faith: Samuel Longfellow. The *music* has a much more complicated history...

The tune is labeled “Austria” in our hymnals, as it was written by Joseph Haydn for Franz II—at one time Emperor of Austria—though some of you might recognize it as the music to the *Deutschlandlied*: the German national anthem.

This is probably one of the reasons why this tune is not often used in our congregations—we do, after all, have Holocaust survivors in our membership. And even to others who were not directly involved, it might leave an odd taste in its associations...

And indeed, often enough, the words associated with this tune are “*Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles*”—“Germany, Germany above all”, even though those lyrics have gone out of style since the end of World War II.

These days, it is only the words from the third stanza that are sung: “*Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit*”. Words of Unity, and Justice, and Freedom. Words that in another context might in fact resonate well with our principles.

In the 1800s, the words of the *Deutschlandlied* were seen as rather revolutionary and liberal-minded, promoting a vision in which citizens would forego the attachment to their own separate German states and kingdoms, for the sake of cooperation among a larger cause.

As we know, things didn’t quite work out that way for Germany in the 20th century... split up for almost half a century at the end of World War II, and only finding reunification at the end of the Cold War.

Amid this history, the *Deutschlandlied* continues to fascinate me because, despite its immediate associations, its history tells a much richer, nuanced, and complex story—if one is inclined to put first impressions aside and hear it out...

Perhaps it is the power of hearing out, of listening up, to the words of others that fascinates me here.

I, personally, am always amazed by the mysterious effectiveness that traffic lights have in directing cars and pedestrians. With little more than a colour code—and our willingness to understand it and comply with it—millions of people get from point A to point B every day... without colliding!

The system, of course, fails from time to time, and when it does, it can have rather tragic consequences. At the same time, I remain fascinated by the reality that the vast majority of road crossings *do not* end in collisions of *any* kind, a phenomenon that, I have to confess, still feel somewhat magical to me.

I am also amazed by the power that our words, be they spoken, written, or signed, can have on our own behaviour and that of others. That when we agree to offer these words—and to receive them—magic seems to happen.

When, like a prayer, we make appeals to others in a way that it may be well received, miraculous things occur.



In looking to find rules for the game of life in *Billions & Billions*, Carl Sagan explores a number of time-tested moral directives: the Golden¹ and Silver² Rules, the Brass³ and Iron⁴ Rules, the Tin⁵ Rule and Nepotism⁶, Tit-for-Tat⁷.

Along his exploration, he acknowledges that people—and nations—are complex, and that while game theory can offer deeper insight into how people think, strategically and ethically, the reality requires a more encompassing wisdom... and has much higher stakes.

Further in his analysis, Sagan recounts memories of people being frustrated by the heartlessness in the nature of games like Monopoly, where someone's winning is contingent in other's losing (zero-sum). It's "just" a game, but the spell that the rules put on its players have a powerful effect and, not surprisingly, oft ending in overturned game boards, with metal tokens and play money strewn all over in frustration by the players (and not just children, he remarks).

In real life the rules, and our agreement to play by them—be it conscious or not—have a similarly powerful effect, but the result has larger consequences, as we saw at the end of World War II. Next Tuesday, 6th of August, in Nathan Phillips Square, by Toronto City Hall, a commemoration of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will bear testament to the consequences of times when the rules of the game failed us.

Many of you will continue in appealing for peaceful ways to resolve conflict, looking to have our prayers of peace heard by any and all who can effect change to that purpose...

And those who can effect change, of course, are our neighbours: the very people from whom we are trying to figure out what they want to do unto us... and what we should do unto them!

I am going to speak about a recent experience I had at a meeting of UUMOC—the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada meeting—last May. Typically, such meetings are times when ministers in Canada can get together as colleagues... to let

¹ Golden: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

² Silver: Do not do unto others as you would not have them do to you.

³ Brass: Do unto others as they do unto you.

⁴ Iron: Do unto others as you like, before they do it unto you.

⁵ Tin: Suck up to those above you, and abuse those below (Golden for superiors, Iron for inferiors). [Tin for its flexibility]

⁶ Nepotism: Give precedence in all things to close relatives, and do as you like to others.

⁷ Tit for Tat: Cooperate with others first, then do unto them as they did unto you (Brass Rule, with initial cooperation).

loose and take off the robe for a while, and share in collegial relationship with the fellowship of those who have a similar vocation.

The happenings in such happenings are meant to remain amongst ourselves, as a kind of cabal among the ministry folk. But, like many other deep sharing groups in this congregation, we covenant to maintain confidentiality when it comes to personal sharings and matters that relate to our professional guild, *at the same time* that we seek to share our common learnings to better serve our congregations.

Better service to others is, after all, one of the reasons behind these gatherings.

It is in this spirit, therefore, that I share with you some of the lessons that we acquired during our ministerial meeting.

One of my colleagues, Rev. Diane Rollert, who was my minister in Montreal, and Rev. Mark Morrison-Reid, a veteran minister here in Toronto, facilitated a workshop called *Who's your Neighbour?*

Part of the workshop included taking a test of Intercultural Conflict Management—a measure of how we react to different approaches to conflict. It was quite fascinating to see the types of styles that I and my colleagues had when reacting to conflict. In this exploration, we were challenged to assess our notions of how we deal with conflict, especially with the cultures of others, and were surprised at the kinds of trappings that we can get into when we *think* we're saying one thing... but someone else ends up hearing something entirely different.

And out of this experience, we also became aware of another useful way to manage such situations, which was conveniently illustrated by the notion of the Platinum Rule.

Carl Sagan doesn't mention the Platinum Rule. I don't know if it simply slipped under his radar, or if he overlooked it for other reasons, but it rather caught my attention. The Platinum Rule: "Do unto others, as *they* would have you do unto them"

I rather like it because it includes a stage that the other rules tend to overlook. The Golden Rule, *et al*, deal with a behaviour to carry out, based on one's own preferences. The Platinum Rule goes a step further, inviting the kinds of actions that others would like. Which begs the question: *what* is it that others would like?

That's an important second step in this rule—the question into the other's reality.

How would others like to be treated?

What does our neighbour want?

Who is our neighbour?

For the most part the other rules outlined by Sagan, seem primarily concerned with one's own preferences—what one would like to have done unto themselves—or in trying to guess at the other's intentions. The Platinum Rule has a different dynamic—it lays out a different way of playing the game, by making it a requirement to actively seek out what the neighbour would actually have done unto them, to get to know them, asking the important questions of others—and to listen up!

I don't know if the Platinum Rule is the optimal rule (maybe what others want isn't what is best for them, or us... or they don't know what they want). Again, the game is complex, and I suspect that a full set of various rules makes sense, depending on how we wish to play... and with whom. But the revelation of the Platinum Rule is that, not only do we have power to appeal to others in the works for peace, but that in doing that work, an instrumental piece is taking stock of others' appeals, in ensuring we hear what they ask, and in showing ourselves open to hearing it.

The revelation of these prayers is that living in harmony with our neighbours involves more than figuring out what we want done unto us, but also in seeking to find what lies deep in the souls and hearts of our neighbours... and therein lies the power of our words!

So may the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be the channels of peace among our neighbours.

So may the words of our mouths, and hands, be our prayers for peace.

So may our words be our blessings.

Alleluia!

Amen