

“On Purpose”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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I don't know about you, but I could barely get to sleep last Sunday night.

After the congregational meeting earlier in the day,
I was both excited by what the members of our task force had to say,
and completely daunted by their description of the challenges we face.

To remain here means starting again from scratch,
tearing down this building and building from the ground up.

To move means finding a suitable location (if there are actually any left) and
erecting a new building, or altering one that might already be on site.

To do either—to stay or go—
will likely cost a heart-stopping sum of money.

Where a wiser person might have started counting sheep to doze off,
I found myself, the other night, tossing and turning,
counting the many of millions of dollars that we do not have. . .

When we set off on this journey into “building for the future”
a year and a half ago, the goal was to determine
the best options that would support and sustain
the mission and the long-term interests of our congregation.

In this process, the choice between do we stay here and renovate
or move elsewhere and build something new
has grown much more complicated
the deeper we've delved into the realities of our situation.

There seem to be no easy answers. No simple solutions.
And likely no option without a serious and significant financial commitment.

What's becoming clear is that if a workable solution to our problems
is to be found, it's going to require some real outside-of-the-box thinking.

It's going to require creativity and wisdom.

It's going to involve commitment and risk.

It's going to take being bold and it's going to take money.

And, it's going to ask much more of us, as a congregation, than anything we've had to face in generations.

All of which has left me—and maybe many of you—wondering if it's all really worth it.

Wouldn't life be a lot simpler around here, say, if we just dropped the whole thing?

If we decided to simply stay put and make do?

If we remained here, where we are, and as we are, hoping for the best, with our fingers crossed for the future?

Life would, no doubt, at least for a time, certainly be much simpler if we decided to do nothing.

But the question with which we must grapple is whether that life would be the life we've been called to create together.

Whether we'd be fulfilling our highest purpose as a congregation.

Whether we'd be worthy of all we've inherited from those who came before us, and faithful to those who might still follow after.

These questions, for me, make this a very different calculation than a simple matter of whether we stay or go.

This is and will always be for me, not a debate about a particular building or where it's located, but a pressing spiritual question about whether or not we, as a congregation, are working steadily to fulfill our purpose and our promise.

I hope you've often heard me say that *how* we do all of this is more important

than *what* we actually, eventually do.

And I would now add to that my belief
that *why* we do any of this is most important of all:

why would we bother,

why would we stretch and struggle and sacrifice,

why we would invest of ourselves and our resources
to make of this community the most and best it could be.

So, what, then, is our *why*?

I believe it is to be a bright and shining beacon
of religious freedom in this city.

That idea goes back to our founding purpose in 1845,
though the meaning of being such a beacon
is quite different today than it was back then
or has been at most any point along the way.

Certainly a century and a half ago
and for much of our history since,
First Unitarian has been a counterpoint
to the more conservative religious voices in our midst.

In Toronto's more dogmatic days, there was a felt need among some
for a refuge from the narrow creeds and constraints of other traditions.

This congregation offered to them an alternative vision
which upheld freedom, and reason, and tolerance
as the guiding principles of an innovative approach to religion.

It celebrated the latest advances of science,
enshrined the value of doubt and debate,
and committed to building up a better world in the here and now.

Deciding hell wasn't a place to fear in some afterlife to come,
but a condition in which too many people lived in the present day,
our forebears committed themselves to creating heaven on earth

by eradicating as much of hell as humanly possible
in the world around them.

That deep commitment to justice and equity
was rooted in a radical belief in the power of love to transcend
the false barriers we humans erect between ourselves,
and it was driven by an abiding awareness
that we live in a connected web of being with everything else,
sharing but a single destiny.

All of this, all I've just said of our history,
remains to this day as an essential part of our *why*,
as part of our mission, as part of our purpose.

But the times in which we now live are asking for something more.

For most of our history, Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian
Universalists have provided sanctuary, a place of safety and succour,
to the religious refugees who have made it through our doors,
seeking freedom from the traditions they found oppressive and wanting.

Indeed, that is why a vast majority of us are here today.

But it is not the reason most people will turn to us tomorrow and in years to
come.

One of my dearest colleagues and classmates from divinity school
serves a wonderful congregation in Texas.

I've found my conversations with him about who is coming through our doors
today to be both enlightening and unsettling.

Living in the Bible Belt, his congregation
is still able to grow by leaps and bounds
by serving those seeking a spiritual alternative
to the dominant Christian fundamentalism
in which they are so thoroughly situated.

Obviously enough, that's not how it works for us, here in Toronto.

Rather than welcoming in people who are refugees from conservative brands of Christianity, we are confronted with a very different challenge: to welcome in and embrace people who are refugees from a superficial, vulgar, consumerist culture, that is failing both us and the planet that we live on.

More often than not, the people who walk through our doors for the first time are desperately seeking a place to bring their questions and their doubts, their fears and their hopes.

They are seeking a place that is relevant to their lives, and that can help them make meaning of the confounding times in which we live.

Increasingly, people show up here with no religious background at all.

They arrive instead with a hunger, a yearning they barely understand, to connect with something more profound, than what can be found at the mall or is served up among the endless distractions of our media.

People are seeking ways to put their purpose into practice.

To make the actions of their lives match up with the values they profess.

To work in common cause with others to say that the status quo is no longer acceptable—that things can and must be different, and that they want to be part of making real that alternative vision for our world.

These new people, you see, are not unlike us.

Now, one doesn't, of course, have to be part of this or any congregation to be part of this larger project, this desire for transforming our way of life—to be just and sustainable and marked with meaning.

But, it certainly helps.

One way to get at the question of purpose is to consider what breaks your heart.

That can be a powerful question for us to sit with as a congregation.

What breaks our hearts?

What so moves us,
what is in such need of fixing in the world around us,
that we simply must act,
that we can't resist but to reach out,
to work to mend and rebuild and transform?

I believe our great task, in solidarity with our Jewish friends,
is summed up in the phrase *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world.

We live in a time of increasing disconnection—
from ourselves, one another, our planet,
and from the great sense of life's immensity
that calls us forth to love and to sustain
the grand and glorious experiment that is life itself.

For one who doesn't believe in traditional theological definitions
of either souls or salvation, let me say that I adamantly believe
that there are souls out there truly waiting and wanting to be saved.

People who need what this place—this temple to the Spirit of Life—
has to offer, and, yet, who have never even heard of us
and the life-giving faith that we share.

Friends, we cannot be a very effective beacon if we can't be easily found.

It should come as no surprise to you that my deepest hope for this
congregation is that it will grow as vibrant and vital as it possibly can.

That means making room for others who are still out there,
scanning the horizon in search of the beacon that might guide them home.

To do that, to guide them, to raise our light to a higher perch,
where it can be seen from every corner of this city,
will require our willingness to take our little light from under a bushel
and begin to truly understand ourselves as a powerful, transformative faith that
has much to offer to the people and the overall well-being of our city.

That is the *why* that comes to me

whenever I begin to wonder whether it's worth
our trying to build for the future.

When I think about the challenges and the costs,
I recall the vast scale of the work to be done in this world,
and I realize that our faith is not well-served by whittled-down dreams.

Which brings me back to those many millions of dollars. . .
you know, the ones we don't presently have.

Frederich Nietzsche said that one
"who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

I believe that to be true, and I believe it to be true for us.

Where there is a will there is a way, and I believe we can find it
if we commit ourselves as a congregation to a purpose beyond ourselves.

If we root our purpose in a burning desire
to reach out to a hurting world, to make more room,
to empower people to heal their own lives
and then their own corner of the globe,
just imagine what might be possible.

Imagine First not merely as the people
you see around you on a Sunday morning,
but hundreds of people engaged
in the spiritual work of theme groups, worship and social justice,
people working to reflect on and change their lives for the good,
and in doing so, being empowered and equipped
to reach out to help heal the world around them.

We're slowly getting there, though we're running out of room
and have been bumping up against the ceiling of what's possible
for years now.

I believe it's time to take our congregation to the next level.
Time for us to be bold and confident in what we can accomplish.
And time for us to deepen in our dedication and commitment.

When I lay awake this week wondering how we might ever raise the millions of dollars we will likely need to build a future home for First, I reflected on how we struggle each year to meet even our modest budget increases.

Every December and January, as pledges come in slowly, there is always a significant gap between the budget your leaders put together and what the congregation commits to giving in the year ahead.

That gap, usually often still in the tens of thousands in mid-January, takes the leadership of our congregation on an annual weeks' long discussion about how to bridge the shortfall, how or whom to cut from the budget, whether to scale back this program or that, eliminate this staff role or that one over there.

It is an incredibly disheartening process, every single time.

Often we come close to closing the gap, and did so in a remarkable way last year. This year, as you also likely know, we only did it by adopting a budget with a \$12,000 deficit.

We can't go on like this.

We are using savings that we have in store for such rainy days, but these funds will not last forever or, frankly, for much longer.

I've often lamented that the vast majority of our problems around here could be solved with an extra \$100,000 in the budget each year.

That may sound like a lot of money, and it is, but it's not an impossible increase for a congregation of our size and with our resources.

When I give thought to the transformation that is underway and how we are coming into our strength as a congregation, I hope with that will also come a growing appreciation and commitment to putting our money where our values are— that we might build on the foundation that is already in place and together go on to do marvelous things.

And, yet I know that if we don't come to that commitment sooner than later, we will have no choice but to scale back on what First has become in recent years.

In the coming weeks,
you'll be hearing a great deal from our Canvass Team.

I ask that you let their work speak to your heart,
and that you give fresh consideration
to the financial commitment you're able to make
to sustain this wild and wonderful place that we love.

If we're, one day, going to do momentous things, we better start practising now.

The beacon that is First Unitarian is growing ever brighter.

And there are people out there searching for the light
that we kindle in this place.

May we then, in this month focused on the theme of purpose,
take time to consider how each of our life's purpose—
our ministry—is carried out with the help and support of this place.

May we all find our promise renewed
as we come together to live our lives on purpose.

So may it be.

Amen.