

Seek • Connect • Serve

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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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.

Reading

Our reading this morning comes from the address by Martin Luther King Jr. to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 1966.

When he spoke, he praised Unitarian Universalists for our work in civil rights, commitment to diversity, and our considerable leveraging of privilege. And he also admonished us – that it would be easy for a comfortable people to become so seduced by the promise of progress that we forget that there is always more work to do.

“I would like to use as a subject the church remaining awake during a great revolution. I'm sure that each of you has read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled Rip Van Winkle. One thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that he slept twenty years. But there is another point in that story which is almost always completely overlooked: it is the sign on the inn of the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountains for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington he was amazed, he was completely lost. He knew not who he was. This incident reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains a revolution was taking place in the world that would alter the face of human history. Yet Rip knew nothing about it; he was asleep. One of the great misfortunes of history is that all too many individuals and institutions find themselves in a great period of change and yet fail to achieve the new attitudes and outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. And there can be no gainsaying of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our world today. . . . Victor Hugo once said that there is nothing

more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come. The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of a freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being.”

Sermon

I don't know about you, but it was sex that made me first take religion seriously.

More accurately, human sexuality, and more specifically, my own.

Long before I had words to describe it,
I knew, even as a kid in grade school, that I was gay.

I also knew that this meant big problems ahead for me
in the fundamentalist religion in which I was being raised,
as I tried to reconcile who I knew myself to be
with my sense of the religious impulse that stirred within me.

My questions, in the years to come,
drove me beyond the Bible to the library and the bookstore.

And there, in the wonderful world of books,
began for me an intentional religious quest
to understand who I was, to make sense of my life,
and to find meaning amid my confusion.

That quest led me in high school to the stacks of St. Anselm's,
the nearby university library where I would sometimes study—
and where I frantically skimmed books
I was too frightened or embarrassed to check out.

Books on homosexuality, but also books on theology.
Rarely did I find a book with any positive mention of both.

Looking back, it's now no surprise that I would go on
to major in comparative religion as an undergraduate.

In university, I thrilled in studying philosophy
and encountering book after book that opened to me new worlds—

and ideas that sometimes turned my worldview completely upside down.

For quite some time, I worshipped proudly at the feet of Voltaire and the *philosophes* of The Enlightenment.

Later, I found abiding guidance—
guidance that informs much of my theology to this day—
in ancient Buddhist scriptures,
in the transcendental essays of Emerson,
and in the writings of the 20th century Existentialists.

Somehow in all of this, I, for the most part,
made peace with my Christian past,
carrying forward in my life, I hope,
the best parts of that tradition that reflect,
in the immortal words of Theodore Parker,
“the religion *of* Jesus, instead of the religion *about* Jesus.”

Long ago, I let go of God,
or at least any traditional understanding of a personal and personified deity.

If hard pressed, it's easy enough to call me an atheist,
though that's far too simple and not quite accurate.

Intellectually, I find an unquestioning atheism as impossible to defend
as an incurious, immovable belief in God.

And, so I find myself very much in the same boat with Jean-Paul Sartre,
who put it so well:

“That *God* does not exist, I cannot deny;
that my whole being *cries out for God* I cannot forget.”

My deeply agnostic soul—and I use the word soul here
without a hint of irony or a notion of anything supernatural—
is most comfortable being labeled a religious humanist,
with a strong bent toward naturalism.

Though Humanism is my primary theological identity, I'm inclined to pass whenever I receive an invitation or even a flyer to an upcoming Humanist Convention.

My experience has been that religious humanists are rarely welcomed in such gatherings.

And to their apparent frustration, that's what I am,
a humanist who finds that we make meaning by looking at life religiously—
in honouring through worship what is of greatest worth,
in marking life's passages and turning points with powerful rituals,
and in celebrating the best and enduring answers humanity has crafted
to make sense of the improbable gift of our being alive and aware
on this spinning speck of dirt in a vast cosmos
we are only beginning to comprehend.

On Sundays when I introduce Our Covenant,
I use words that I inherited when I arrived here as your minister.

You could probably recite them with me:
“From our many and varied paths, we arrive here as individuals
to build up within and beyond these walls
a community of love, and commitment, and hope.”

I have shared with you the brief outline of my own religious journey—
how I arrived here as an individual by a circuitous path—
as a way of acknowledging that it is a journey that each of us has taken,
as individuals, in our own way and time—
whether we were raised as a Unitarian from the cradle,
or found our way here through a series of twists and turns,
dead-ends, and wild roller coaster rides of confusion and doubt.

This personal religious quest, which doesn't in any way end
when you first walk through the doors of one of our congregations,
is central to what it means to be a Unitarian.

And, so the word “seek” is the first of our new three-word vision statement—
seek, connect, serve—that we'll be living with,
and, hopefully, living into as a congregation.

Seek: it speaks to that ongoing quest each of us is on to know

and understand the meaning and the miracle of our lives.

Words echoed in the Fourth Principle of our faith:
as “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

The second word of our vision is “Connect.”
On paper, our vision statement explains that
we “connect with others in common purpose.”

I’ve had a couple of people already ask me if that’s actually, truly possible.

It’s a good question.
After all, we Unitarians certainly have an independent streak.
We like to have it our way, to do our own thing, to not be hemmed in.

There’s obviously something to that old joke
about Unitarians being like a big bunch of porcupines
trying to huddle close together for warmth.

It’s not particularly easy to pull off.
Some of us make a spiritual practice of being prickly.

And, yet, even the most fiercely independent among us discover
within this community others with whom they find common cause,
be it in exchanging parenting tips, or in battling climate change,
or just in cherishing their shared identity as self-proclaimed misfits.

There are countless common purposes to be found here, if we look for them.

Occasionally, we’ve even found common purpose collectively as a
congregation, notably in things like responding to Hurricane Mitch
with an outpouring of energy
or by building a home for Habitat for Humanity.

(By the way, I think we’re long overdue for such an undertaking.
So, if you’re interested in helping to lead something big like that,
I’d certainly love to hear from you!)

A community of common purpose, or at least purposes, is a precious thing.

We live in a time, ironically, given the explosion of social media, of

great disconnection—from others, from ourselves, and from what sustains us.

It's more the exception than the rule
that we live in proximity to our extended families.

Our friendships require more planning and scheduling
than they likely once did.

In the past when I've asked you for the topics you'd like for me to preach on,
loneliness has tended to top the list.

We lead lives that are often atomized, so busy that we struggle
to stay connected to the people and the things that we most love.

It seems we increasingly need to be reminded, encouraged, and even
nudged, to break through the walls that would separate us
from the rich gifts of community.

A congregation such as this is one of the last places in our society
where multigenerational community is naturally available,
where it's possible to collect an network of cherished souls
that might even figure into your own family of choice.

Now, being part of an intentional community,
especially one held together in covenant, is not for the faint of heart.

It's harder than most any of us ever imagine.
It requires deep commitment to a group of people
with whom we sometimes disagree or feel disappointment.

It means taking the risk of seeing how very human people can be,
including ourselves, and yet finding the courage to forgive and love again.

Connecting with others in common purpose
can be understood in many ways—from taking on some social justice cause,
to building bonds through deep conversations of the heart.

It happens in protest marches on Queen's Park, in shared confidences
during coffee hour, and around the table at meetings in the board room
downstairs.

The goal, whatever form connection takes, is that we do it authentically, which can, of course, be a spiritual discipline in and of itself, as we make ourselves vulnerable and real.

The last of our three vision words is “serve.”

Each Sunday, as part of our Covenant, we affirm that “we serve life.”

And, so we do, in myriad ways.

This new articulation of our vision, drawn from words and concepts that have long been part of earlier statements of who we, as a congregation, aspire to be, goes on to state that “we serve life to build a better world.”

On a practical level, we do this in many obvious and outward ways—through our support of organizations like Amnesty International, the United Nations, the Regent Park School of Music, and our Central America Project.

But we build a better world, as well, when we graduate a class of young people from Our Whole Lives, our human sexuality program, that imparts to them vital, frank and factual knowledge about their bodies, and a lasting appreciation of the values they bring to their relationships.

We build a better world when people are given the time and space in their theme groups to truly hear themselves think, and then commit to undertake lives that are more loving, generous and compassionate.

We build a better world when we reach out to help those around us who are in need, be they part of this congregation or beyond.

We build a better world when our conscience is stirred by what we hear in this place and then go forth to live greener and love healthier and act in ever bolder ways.

Indeed, one of the key functions of this congregation is to support and sustain each of you in the work you do in your own little corner of the globe to make this a better world, not merely for yourself, but for all people, and all of life on this good green earth.

If Martin Luther King, Jr. had lived into our time,
he would have turned 85 this month.

Though he's now been gone longer than he lived,
it's not difficult to imagine what he would have to say
about the critical moment in which we find ourselves,
and the needed revolution through which so many of us risk napping.

The scale of the revolution required to mitigate, let alone stop, climate change,
to halt the human penchant to resolve conflict with violence,
and stamp out the evil of inequality in all its vile and vulgar forms,
is staggering, and, if we're honest, completely overwhelming.

It can often feel that the challenges we face
far outstrip our courage to rise up and meet them.

And, yet, I believe our faith was made for just such a time as this.

We cannot and will not tackle every problem that plagues humanity.
But we must never forget that we possess more power than we often know or
utilise.

In the years Dr. King studied theology at Boston University,
the great black preacher, Howard Thurman,
served as the school's chaplain—and as a mentor
to the young doctoral student who would go on to change the world.

Thurman memorably advised:

“Don't ask what the world needs.

Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.

Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

And, indeed, it does.

I believe that call to be the guiding light embedded in the three words
of our vision: seek, connect, serve.

They are not merely a description of what we do or what we aspire to
accomplish; they are also the means, the practice, the path, the spiritual
discipline, if you will, to get there, to come alive, to change our world—for
good.

Let us then rededicate ourselves to the well-being
of this little loving laboratory of the human spirit,
where we bring our questing, questioning hearts,
where we build bridges of understanding and shared intention,
where we labour in service to life itself, in the sacred hope
that we might use our lives to increase the sum total
of love and justice in our world.

So may it be.

So may it always be.

Amen.