

“This I Know”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
2 March 2014

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.

Reflection “No Going Back” – Rev. Shawn Newton

I am continually astonished by how much
the world has changed over the course of my life.

Every so often an article pops up on facebook,
reminding me of the fact that facebook was created only a decade ago.

Or that it’s been less than that
since smart phones came on the scene
or Google became a verb.

Things that weren’t part of our lives just a few years ago
can now seem either difficult to imagine living without—
or have become the very bane of our existence
we only wish we could eradicate.

Each fall, I’m daunted by the list of things
the new class entering university doesn’t know.

The gems from this year’s list include:
not necessarily knowing what a VCR tape is,
or that *Star Wars* existed for a long time simply as a trilogy.

With GPS, they’ve never lived in a world
where they had to look up maps, or print one off.

To them, GM means food that is genetically modified.
Java has never been just a cup of coffee.
And the Olympics have always been held every two years.

Seeing such markers of time and culture change—
or being surprised to learn that they have without our even noticing—
can surely make us feel old.

It can be hard to keep up, if we even feel the need to try.

And, yet, whether we give it our attention or not,
the world we think we know is continually passing away,
melting into yesterday, giving way to tomorrow.

“Like sands through the hourglass,” the old soap opera reminded us,
“so are the days of our lives.”

And, in case you’re wondering, I looked it up:
Days of Our Lives is about to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary on television.

I often marvel at what it must be like to turn 100
and to try to make sense of the vast changes
that have unfolded across the years of one’s life.

I wonder if those who live so long
were able to spot the turning point moments as they whirled past—
the great upheavals in the world around them.

I wonder if they recognized they were living in the midst of history.

I wonder if we do, here and now.

In the fall of 1989, I was backpacking across Europe.
I was in Austria when I learned the Berlin Wall had fallen.

At 19, I knew this was important,
but it was only after being in conversation
with an old woman on a train
who talked about what it meant for her to finally see
the changes she had longed for for years finally come to pass,
that I began to truly appreciate what a very big deal it was.

Like every other backpacker in Europe at that time,
I changed my plans and hopped a train for Berlin.

I arrived to see an old order crumbling
and something new and totally undefined beginning to emerge.

I was witness to a dramatic, joyous moment in history,
and I almost missed it because I had failed to really grasp its significance.

That experience causes me to this day to wonder
at the history in which we are now caught up—
the present circumstances in which we find ourselves—
and puzzle at what we're missing,
and what I, in particular, am failing to see.

It's not always easy to find ourselves in the unfolding of history,
to situate our lives in the continual transformation
that marks our very existence,
and understand the responsibility we bear by simply being alive.

What might it mean for us to pay closer attention to the pace of change?

What would it take to see ourselves not as props or scenery,
but as agents, as actors, as stars in the story of the world?

I think it would require being awake to the shifting currents around us.

Being willing to let everything we know
be challenged by what we don't know.

Questioning what we've always known
and opening ourselves to the in-breaking possibility of the new.

One of the most powerful examples of this I know
is found in the musical *Ragtime*, which depicts the vast social changes
unfolding in the early years of the 20th century.

The main character, known simply as Mother, is a well-off woman,
married to a titan of industry who, with his wealth,
has taken care of her every need—or at least all her material desires.

In the song that Stephanie will sing in a moment,
Mother explains to her husband
who has just returned from sailing the world, that his absence,

and more importantly the struggles she endured while he was away, have left her forever changed.¹

She has come into her own power.
She has found her voice.
She is aware, for the first time,
that the world is changing for women,
and with it, she is changing, too.

Half a century later, Betty Freidan, in *The Feminist Mystique*, would give an answer to “the problem with no name,” that deep dissatisfaction felt by countless women, including Mother, about the meaning of lives lived within the confining conformity of society’s expectation simply to be dutiful wives and mothers.

Fifty years on from Freidan’s classic text,
it’s heartening to see the progress that has been made.

To know that the lives of the children
that sat on this chancel a few minutes ago will be quite unlike ours
in terms of gender expectations and socially proscribed roles.

The world they know and will know
is blessedly better than the one we know and have known.

In this week, as we approach International Women’s Day,
that is something to celebrate—
even as there remains so much work to be done
to bring about full equality in this country and around the world.

As we celebrate, and mark our place in history,
may we resolve anew that there’s no going back to before. Amen.

To hear “Back to Before” from *Ragtime*, click here:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgyYvMNCIRg>

¹ “Song: “Back to Before” from *Ragtime*.

Reading “The Love Truck” – Meg Barnhouse, *Broken Buddha*

I used to love yelling at big SUVs on the road. You big-butt trucks are the reason we’re having to accede to the demands of foreign oil and human-rights abusing fundamentalists! Those were not my exact words. The actual vocabulary might have been a tad more salty. I would give SUV drivers a scornful glance as I zipped past in my fuel-efficient Honda.

Those were the good old days of righteousness. These days I will begin a soul-satisfying rant at the master-of-the universe Suburban in front of me at the stop light, and then I remember: One of those things is parked in my driveway. Yeah, it’s mine. Here’s how it happened.

My sister in Texas needed a new car. They are doing very well in their business. Good people, they give a lot of money away; they work with their church resettling refugees from Afghanistan, hauling whole families and their belongings from place to place. My sister always drives a Suburban. They came to visit us here in South Carolina, bought a new Suburban here, where the prices were lower than at home, and gave us their old car.

I can’t re-sell it and I can’t trade it in without seeming to curl my lip at a gift of love. It’s a love car, pure and simple, and when someone gives you a love car you’d best just hush up and drive it around town. Go on and put UU bumper stickers on the back. Just live with the jangle, with the incongruity. It’s good for you. Life is complicated.

I have a sneaking suspicion that the Karma Fairy is laughing her head off. She is the force that helps tickle, nudge, or blast us out of our self-righteousness. If we scorn something thoughtlessly enough, she will make sure we have an opportunity to squirm and learn a little something. She wants us to lose the scorn, open our hearts, understand that there are reasons we may not be thinking of behind the things people do, that if you think you’re clean, you’re dreaming.

I have a friend who, whenever someone cuts him off in traffic, says, “Bless his/her heart, s/he probably just got out of the hospital.” Now I have to look at the SUV drivers and think to myself: Her sister probably gave her that car, and it’s a love car, so she has to drive it.

I have read that Unitarian Universalists don't have a strong sense of sin. I beg to differ. Following is a list of some UU sins. If you admitted these at coffee hour, there would be some throat-clearing, some uncomfortable fidgeting, maybe even a stern talking-to: driving a big old gas-guzzling SUV, tossing glass and plastic bottles in the trash, belonging to the National Rifle Association, watching reality TV, throwing a book away, using a word incorrectly, and feeding the kids sugary snacks, just to name a few.

I think people should drive fuel-efficient cars, build green sanctuaries, eat organic food, keep their engines tuned, and go to the dentist regularly. Here is the problem: all of those things cost money. We have to be careful not to be classist in our distaste for old gas-guzzlers, people who eat bad food or use incorrect grammar, or folks who don't have all of their teeth. The Karma Fairy will get busy with us, shaking us out of our gleeful middle-class moral uprightness. She just wants us to be better people. So if you see a Suburban with "Uncommon Denomination," "Peace is Patriotic," and "Only one six-billionth of this is about you" bumper stickers on it, it's me or someone in my family. Just wave.

Reflection "This I Know" – Rev. Shawn Newton

I'll confess that there's a certain risk in titling a sermon, "This I Know."

Especially if it's as short as this one promises to be.

Truth be told, there are days
when I feel everything I know could be conveyed
in less time than it takes for the bread to toast or the kettle to boil.

The longer I live, the less I often feel I know—
about the world, about other people, about myself.

Oh, sure, there's wisdom that comes with age, I guess.
Experience does tend to teach us what things to avoid trying ever again.
Such lessons are, of course, a way of knowing.
And a highly helpful one at that.

And, yet, the more objective stuff—

the things that are supposed to be
definitive, reliable, timeless and trustworthy are not so easy to come by.

It seems that, quite literally, the maps of the world
are being remade as I speak,
with Russia on the move and Syria fracturing into further chaos,
with climate change drowning The Maldives
and ominously opening up the Northwest Passage.

Pick most any topic and then brave
the seeming and sometimes very real contradictions
between the latest studies published and publicized.

I struggle at times to know what and who to believe.
Do I trust this researcher or that scientist?
Does this study settle it once and for all,
or will it be the one that comes out next week?

Sure, there can be and is an emerging consensus on big-ticket topics,
but even there, we can be too easily swayed by the latest findings—
especially when presented to us by profit-driven media
and publically massaged by self-interested parties.

In the face of all that, it's hard not to grow jaded or just want to give up.

Whether we like it or not, our understanding of the world
is always a bit out of date, always a bit behind,
no matter how much time we devote to monitoring our news feed.

It begs the question of what we can know and how much we can grasp.

And it teaches us, as always, to cherish our doubts
and to make a spiritual practice of skepticism.

Fortunately, that seems to come easily for many of us.

In matters of faith, Unitarian Universalism long ago deviated
from the norm of building a religion upon the foundations of
divine revelation, inerrant scriptures,
and the infallible pronouncements of history.

Instead, in our tradition we draw upon six foundational sources that speak to our history, but are not constrained by it.

I'd like for us to hear these six sources anew, particularly at the start of this month's theme which asks what it means to live a life of knowing.

So, if you would, I invite you to turn in your hymnals to hymn #1.

Then turn back one page to the left.

Our sources are found on the bottom half of the page.

I'd like to ask this side of the room to read the first source. When we get to the second source (and it's not completely clear, unless you keep out a careful eye out for the semi-colons), I'll gesture for this side of the room to read. And so forth, down through all six.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Though our Seven Principles at the top of the page get all of the attention, I find the Sources in many ways even more important to my understanding of what it means to practice this faith and to grapple with integrity over questions of what I know and what I don't.

For me, among the most meaningful lines are the ones that call us to: "heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

As a humanist, theologically, I prize reason as a tool for understanding the world we live in.

And, yet, reason also requires that I take seriously the emerging science that shows that reason and logic have their limits and can't always reveal to us everything we might want to know.

Reason tells that there are ways of knowing that are beyond reason.

That's why I am stirred by the admonishment against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Because it can be so seductive to think we have it all worked out. To think we know it all—that we have all the answers, that we have a firm grasp on life.

I dread those moments in my own life and in the lives of those I love. Because it often is when, it seems, the Karma Fairy comes along, come calling, to prove that the world and our place in it is much more nuanced than we might like for it to be.

It seems the Karma Fairy detests arrogance and trades in humility. Rather than leaving money under the pillow like her cousin the Tooth Fairy, she tends to leave a serving of humble pie instead.

I think Meg Barnhouse is spot on in her tongue-in-cheek depiction of this quirky aspect of life—that what we think we know if held too tightly will be challenged or upended or completely overturned.

It just seems to be the way of the world.

Let us, then, help the Karma Fairy with her work.

Let us be willing to test the truth of what we know.

Let us guard against arrogance and practice humility.

Let us open ourselves to the coming of ever-new ways of knowing,
and live in wondrous awe of all that remains to be learned.

Amen.