

# “Are We Having Fun Yet?”

Reverend 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**                      excerpts from James Carse’s *Finite and Infinite Games*

There are at least two kinds of games.  
One could be called finite, the other infinite.

A finite game is played for the purpose of winning,  
an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.

Finite players play within boundaries;  
infinite players play with boundaries.

Surprise causes finite play to end;  
It is the reason for infinite play to continue.  
To be prepared against surprise is to be trained.  
To be prepared for surprise is to be educated.

The finite play for life is serious; the infinite play of life is joyous.

The joyfulness of infinite play, its laughter,  
lies in learning to start something we cannot finish.

No one can play a game alone. One cannot be human by oneself.

Our social existence has...an inescapably fluid character.  
...we are not the stones over which the stream of the world flows;  
we are the stream itself.

Change itself is the very basis of our continuity as persons.  
Only that which can change can continue:  
this is the principle by which infinite players live.

## Sermon: “Are We Having Fun Yet?”

I imagine it’s a game most of us have played, at one time or another, even if it’s been a very long time since.

It goes something like this:  
someone launches a balloon into a group of people.

And, almost instinctively, everyone knows what to do:  
we quickly understand, the object of the game  
is to keep that balloon from touching the ground.

This particular game takes on even more urgency  
if it’s played outdoors on a field of grass  
where one false move ends the game in an unceremonious “pop!”

I thought of bringing in a big bunch of balloons today  
and letting you all give it a go,  
but I feared complete chaos would break out  
and I’d never get your attention again!

There’s something about this most basic of balloon games, though,  
that speaks to me of Carse’s concept of the infinite game.

It’s not really about who wins or loses;  
it’s about keeping the game going for as long as possible.

The spirit of play itself is what keeps the game going—  
at least until energy or patience gives out, or mom calls from the kitchen that  
it’s time to stop all the roughhousing and get ready for dinner. . .

It takes some time to really grasp  
what Carse has to say about finite and infinite games.

As a religious philosopher, he’s trying to make the case  
that it matters how we understand, how we frame,  
our participation in the unfolding story of the universe.

He’s challenging the foundational myth of western culture:  
that life is all about winning, about a struggle to come out on top.  
That the one who dies with the most toys, or weapons, or resources wins.

That life itself is a finite game and that what matters most is who is the clear-cut winner at the end.

The focus, by necessity, is on ending the game, so that the victor can be named and crowned.

The alternative vision is of life as an infinite game, where the goal is to keep the game going, out of a love for the game itself.

Success is about sustaining the play for as long as possible and bringing as many people into the game as we can.

The point isn't to rack up points at all, but to keep the process of play alive.

This profoundly challenges our assumptions about how the world works.

Because it asks us to consider not how the game ends, to not focus on who wins or loses, but, above all else, to consider how the game is actually played.

It conjures the phrase many of you have heard me say many times: that how is more important than what.

What I love about the infinite game is that it contains within it infinite possibilities.

When there's the possibility that the game is about to end, new energy is invested and the rules allowed to change so that the game goes on—and on and on.

The players help each other avoid either winning or losing, bringing out the best in each other, calling out the potential in each, all while keeping the game going indefinitely.

It's like keeping that proverbial balloon from touching the ground.

And it's a very different way of thinking about the world around us and our place within it.

As players in an infinite game,

we are required to see everyone on the playing field  
as allies in the effort to sustain the game.

And we are required to think differently about the resources at hand.

To keep the game going into eternity  
means seeing the bounty of the earth as a critical element of play  
that has to be sustainable into infinity.

You can't plunder the planet and expect the game to go on forever.

Carse has said that war is the ultimate finite game—  
a game to be fought to the end  
until the outcome is clear and a winner declared.

And he has said that religion is the ultimate infinite game.

I'm not yet convinced on this point,  
but I think it might be true; at least I hope it could be true.

As I see it, too much of religion has been played as a finite game.

Religious history, which is really, of course, simply human history,  
is chock full of winners and losers.

It's tended to have an incessant focus on who's right and who's wrong.

And Unitarians have certainly been competitive in the sport.  
Even amid our aspirations toward tolerance,  
we've tended to hold pretty strong opinions  
about the right and narrow path.

It feels to me that much of religious history—  
and I would argue our history in particular—  
has been about a struggle over whether  
we are playing a finite or an infinite game.

Now, it should be said that Carse makes clear that an infinite game  
can and will contain within it many finite games.

There are struggles to endure, even battles to be fought along the way.

But the danger is being so consumed with the finite games,  
the lesser struggles, that we lose sight of the greater, infinite game  
we are invited to play by the very gift of our birth.

Carse says that religion lives with a horizon rather than a boundary.  
It tells an over-arching story that looks into the distant future  
with some deep hope that the game goes on and gets better as it goes.

At its best, religion as an infinite game beholds a future  
where we succeed when everyone succeeds,  
where our destiny is bound up with everything else.

While I don't quite agree that every manifestation of religion  
fits that definition, I believe ours does. Or could.

Our reverence for the interdependent web, in all its complexities,  
is our way of pointing to the horizon with hope and with concern.

That's why we need to be clear, or at least clearer,  
about the game we're playing.

That's why we need to look to the horizon from time to time  
and be reminded of the vision that beckons us,  
the goals that we're playing toward,  
even if we can't know or predict, by definition,  
how the game will continue to unfold.

That's why we must ask ourselves, at every turn in the game,  
whether we're playing it faithfully.

Now, I realize this is all a bit abstract.

When I was introduced to Carse's work during my internship a decade ago,  
I, frankly, found it hard to grasp, difficult to wrap my head around.

What I've found useful in digesting his philosophy, though,  
is looking to how we live it out in our every day.

On this, the day of our Annual General Meeting, this is a timely pursuit.

As you surely know, we, as a congregation,

are currently grappling with issues about our property.

For years now  
our congregation has been trying to determine  
the most prudent course of action available to us,  
given the rising value of our property  
and the challenges we are bumping up against in our current building.

We've recognized that our building doesn't work for us in many ways,  
and in some, that it actually works against us.

With the shifting real estate market along St. Clair,  
we are in the midst of deciding whether it makes the most sense  
to stay put and renovate or sell this land and start anew somewhere else.

If you've had a chance to read the report  
of the Building for the Future Task Force, you'll see they're recommending that  
we let go of the idea of co-developing our land with a developer,  
as the risks are too great and the costs beyond our grasp,  
by several million dollars.

So, we have returned once again to the scenario of whether we stay or go.

Either way, to realize our congregation's calling,  
to live into our mission and vision,  
will involve making significant changes, no matter what we decide.

I am deeply grateful to the task force  
for their good work over the last couple of years.

I think I can say, quite literally, that they have poured  
blood, sweat, and tears into this project.

We, as a congregation, have asked them, for a time,  
to hold the bulk of anxiety for these major questions about our future.

And there has been an awful lot of anxiety to hold.

We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for their commitment,  
especially given the stress and strain they've been under.

It saddens me that some members of the task force feel they've not fully completed their task.

They had hoped to provide us all with more definitive answers, with more straight-forward options.

What's become clear, though, through the last couple of years, is that the game we're playing is far more complicated than that. And, it's only gotten more complicated as the game has gone on!

Fortunately, through their work, we now know so much more about the reality of our situation than we did two years ago.

And we, of course, now know more about what we don't yet know.

The juncture we've now reached—  
a brief time-out to catch our breath, if you will—  
is making obvious that we need a great deal more clarity about the game we, as a congregation, are playing.

As the rules of the game are shifting,  
as the playing field around us is changing every day—  
whether we see that in the real estate market,  
the broader religious landscape of our society,  
or the concerning context of global and environmental security—  
we must look to the horizon and remind ourselves  
of the bigger game that we're seeking to play—  
an infinite game that seeks to increase  
the sum total of love and justice in this world.

Ultimately, whatever we do about our building is a finite game.  
But our building is a tool we use in playing the infinite game.

Now, agreeing on the nature of that game isn't easy for us as Unitarians.

We are, after all, prone to show up for a basketball game with a collection of baseball bats, hockey sticks, golf clubs, and ping pong balls, not to mention more versions of the rules than we have players, and then wonder why the game is always so confusing!

But true to our fashion, we hold discussion groups about our confusion, serve fair-trade coffee, and muddle on.

But friends, with the deepest love and respect, I must tell you  
I believe this way of playing the game needs to come to an end.

It's funny, on one level, of course.  
And our quirky approach to team sports certainly keeps things interesting.  
But it won't keep us in the game over the long-haul.

Diversity is our strength,  
but not when it comes to deciding which game plan to follow.

As a congregation—and as a movement of Unitarians in the world—  
we need to get serious about our part in the game,  
and we need to do it by becoming more playful.

By playful I mean adaptive—willing to experiment,  
willing to take risks, willing to fail, and sometimes in a spectacular way.

The game around us is moving too fast and changing too much  
to expect that things will stay the same,  
that we can just amble along in our awkward fashion,  
that we can be indecisive about the part that is ours to play.

We live in a time when the stakes could not possibly be higher.  
The future of life on our planet hangs in the balance.  
The ultimate, infinite game is at risk of coming to an untimely end.

As a result—and as a symptom—we live in an age of anxiety.  
A time of great disconnection:  
from the planet, from our neighbours, and, too often, from ourselves.

We live in a time that is crying out for a spiritual solution  
to the problems that we face.

As we try to keep this great game going,  
it seems the only way the rules can be changed to keep the game alive  
is by grounding the negotiation of new and evolving rules  
in the higher values of love and justice.

We are not, of course, the only players in the game with that vision.  
There are people in religion, and business, and government  
looking to the same horizon.

And many of them are more effective  
and you could argue more committed than we are.

That fact shouldn't be a source of shame,  
but a spur to get ourselves more fully in the game.  
This game, in the end, needs as many players of goodwill as possible.  
That's why I think we need to resolve a tension I see at the heart of our  
congregation as to whether we are to be about the work of love or the work of  
justice.

There are those here frustrated because we don't use our collective voice very  
well, and don't always walk our talk, even though we talk a lot.

And there are those who look to this place as a sanctuary in their lives,  
as a place of rest and respite and renewal  
amid the confusion and tumult of life.

Many here are just trying to hold on, from week to week,  
and make sense of the journey.

Our calling as a congregation is not about being one or the other.  
This place is big enough to be both: a place to restore the soul  
and a place to stir the soul to action.

We need both in playing this game,  
because love without justice isn't love,  
and justice without love, isn't justice.

So, what, then, of our future?  
What of this game we're playing?

We have often spoken of being a beacon of liberal religion  
in our city and this nation.

Truth be told, our flame could burn brighter than it does.

In the coming weeks, and months, and years,

we will have ample opportunity to step up our game.

So let me tell you what I think that could look like.

When I look to our future, I see a congregation willing to be bold.

I see a home for the seeker, trying to make sense of life.

I see a community where people come to connect in common cause.

I see a hub of activity that equips people and sends them out to serve life by doing ministry in the wider world.

While the congregation of the future will hold continuity with our past, it will almost certainly have to look very different to survive and thrive.

I see First Unitarian as one congregation that will eventually meet in multiple locations in the city and at different times throughout the week.

I see worship taking many different forms and our supporting a variety of smaller Unitarian communities in the constellation of our congregation.

I see the congregation embrace an outward orientation in service to the city we live in, rather than most of our volunteer energy being dedicated to sustaining the congregation itself.

In short, I see a people so devoted to playing the infinite game, that we are willing to dedicate ourselves, through the commitment of our time, our energy, and our financial resources, to inspire one another and the world around us to be valued, valuable players in the great and beautiful game of being human.

That is our high and noble calling.

So, let us look to the world and simply say, "Game On!"

Amen.

## **Closing Words**

Friends, in this great dance through life,  
in this infinite game that is ours to play,  
in the eternal quest for more love and justice in the world,  
may we always remember to have fun!