

“A Home for All Souls”

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 Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

There are some things in our social system
to which we ought to be maladjusted.

Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear,
only love can do that.

We must evolve for all human conflict a method
which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation.
The foundation of such a method is love.

Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm
between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds
which precipitate and perpetuate war.

One day we must come to see that peace
is not merely a distant goal that we seek
but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.
We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

Sermon: “A Home for All Souls”

Repeatedly, through all the years I’ve been a Unitarian, I’ve heard it said that Unitarian Universalism is the quintessential American religion.

Now, I realize those are fighting words to utter from a Canadian pulpit, but hear me out. (And trust that I’m not quite done.)

The argument goes that the founding values of the United States were shaped by the emergence of democratic religion as expressed in the Puritan churches of 17th and 18th century New England—a good many of which would go on to become Unitarian Universalist congregations in the centuries that followed.

Their commitment to freedom of conscience in matters of belief, paired with the exercise of the democratic process in church life, gave many American colonists religious laboratories, if you will, to sow the seeds of revolution that would eventually throw off the Crown and establish a republic in its place.

Key founding figures in the American story were Unitarians—as you’ve no-doubt heard from proud modern-day Unitarians.

Indeed, the core American values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness fit snugly with much of the storied past of Unitarian Universalism, which has long championed the cause of freedom, the rights of the individual, and the cultivation of human character.

And while there is the ring of truth to much of that argument, I think the time has come for a crucial change to be acknowledged.

While UUs on both sides of the border are still, of course, proponents of freedom of conscience and the rights of the individual, our faith has undergone a significant shift in recent years.

We have embraced a growing awareness of our interdependence.

Our first principle promoting the inherent worth and dignity of

each person is now balanced by the seventh, which reminds us of the interconnected web to which we, with all of life, belong.

There's been a remarkable move underway from "me to we," from the individual to the collective.

It's clearer than ever that we're all in this together.

We're finally taking to heart the words of MLK, that: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

We've come to see the growing need for the guiding values of compassion and cooperation, and the celebration of human difference.

And in our congregations, we're choosing, more and more, compromise over combat, dialogue and consensus over independent declarations, radical equality over rugged individualism.

Perhaps you see where I'm going. . .

I believe Unitarianism has become a quintessentially Canadian religion. At least Canada, at its best.

Earlier this week, I attended the last of this year's Massey Lectures, given by Adrienne Clarkson on the topic of "Belonging."

Over her five lectures, which have now been published and will be broadcast by the CBC's "Ideas," starting a week from tomorrow, she discusses "the paradox of citizenship."

As a permanent resident steadily but slowly moving toward Canadian citizenship, I appreciated her reflections on what it means to belong in this country.

And as a minister, there were many times when I reflected on how easily her words about Canada could apply to our congregation, and to our faith.

She spoke of how leaders the world over are baffled
by the relative success of multiculturalism in Canada.

And she shared that she's had Europeans suggest to her
it's because this is such a vast country—
as though we've all been able to spread out evenly across the land,
with a hundred or more kilometres between us!¹

She spoke of our stunning diversity and comparative harmony.

And the gifted ability that particularly younger people
have been given growing up here in recent years
to easily embrace difference and befriend the stranger.

She says, poignantly, that what is “hard
for people from other nations to understand [is] that
we do not treat people as outsiders because they are different from us;
we have learned over the past forty years
how to accept difference because we ourselves were different.”²

Her point echoes God's admonition to the Jews in the Torah
to not oppress the stranger, reminding them
that they themselves were once strangers in a strange land.³

It is a fitting commandment, for us, too, in a country full of immigrants.

A commandment clearly at work last week
when so many people in Cold Lake, Alberta,
turned out to paint over hateful graffiti emblazoned on the town mosque,
replacing the words “Go home” with “You are home.”

In all of this, there is a noble and ancient ethic at work
by which those who've most recently arrived
are taken in by those who've been here longer,
or even by those who've been here from the beginning.

¹ Adrienne Clarkson, *Belonging: The Paradox of Citizenship*, p. 99.

² Clarkson, p. 99.

³ Paraphrase of *The Book of Exodus*, 22:21.

Such an ethic seemingly defies so much of what we know of human competition and the survival of the fittest.

It begs the question of what could possibly ground such an ethic of kindness.
Of what could inspire such acts of ongoing inclusion.

Early on in her lectures,
Clarkson quotes Grand Chief John Kelly's testimony before the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment in 1977, where he described how "the Ojibway were cheated by Treaty 3, originally signed in 1873 by the Ontario government while the federal government stood by."

Despite his people being cheated, he makes the point that, "we work together by enlarging, by allowing more people to join the circle..."

It is that commitment to the ever-enlarging circle that has become the Canada that Clarkson, like her husband John Ralston Saul, credits to the First Nations and aboriginal peoples of this land.

Chief Kelly said:

It appears that as the years go by,
the circle of the Ojibway gets bigger and bigger.
Canadians of all colours and religions are entering the circle.
You might feel you have roots somewhere else,
but in reality, you are right here with us.

And then the chief goes on to speak powerfully of our interdependence.

I do not know if you feel the throbbing of the land in your chest
and if you feel the bear is your brother
with a spirit purer and stronger than yours,
or if the elk is on a higher level of life than is man.
You may not share the same spiritual anguish
as I see the earth ravaged by a stranger,
but you can no longer escape my fate
as the soil turns barren and the rivers poison.
Much against my will, and probably yours,

time and circumstance have put us together in the same circle.
And so I come not to plead with you to save me
from the monstrous stranger of capitalist greed and technology.
I come to inform you that my danger is your danger too.
My genocide is your genocide...⁴

For better and for worse,
Chief Kelly speaks of the ways we are bound together
by the threats and challenges that we face.

He points to our shared vulnerability, and the deep need
for us to recognize that our lives are knitted together,
“for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

If there is anything that I would easily define as sin
from a Unitarian perspective, it is our capacity to lose sight
of the ties that bind us one to another, and to all of life.

When we forget that we share a common destiny.

When we forget that we, too, were once strangers in a strange land.

When we forget that we belong to each other,
and think that we can somehow manage better on our own,
set apart from the web of life itself.

It can be a tempting story to tell.
To imagine that we're self-sufficient, self-made.
In control, and on top of everything.

It can even work out for a time to seem true.

But the hard truth of this world is that we are all vulnerable,
susceptible as any other to hardship and heartache.

We all face material, emotional, and spiritual needs
that we cannot wholly supply on our own, and so we live

⁴ Adrienne Clarkson, *Belonging: The Paradox of Citizenship*, p. 5-6.

in a web of interdependence, with everyone and everything else.

I think the clearest sign of maturity as a human being is the deep recognition that we are in need—and that we are needed.

It is the covenant at the heart of life.

Earlier, I suggested that Unitarianism had become more Canadian than American.

What I didn't say is that the recognition of our shared vulnerability goes back to the beginning of the American story, too.

As the English Puritans were landing on the shores of this continent almost four centuries ago, they recognized that they were truly dependent on one another for their very survival.

They established covenants with one another to ensure their mutual well-being.

Such covenants were vital, as these early settlers faced their uncertain futures in a strange and often hostile land.

Our move, then, as a faith in recent years toward a renewal of the role of covenant among us, is really a return to our earliest roots on this continent.

And as in days of old, our congregations can be religious laboratories for learning how best to contend with the challenges we face in our time.

That's why it's important that we gather today to renew our covenant and our commitments to the well-being of our congregation. For this community is a home for us all—a home for all souls—who seek to journey together amid the vulnerabilities that come with being alive.

Recently, I learned about the work of Suzanne Simard, a professor of forestry at UBC.⁵

⁵ <http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=2764>

She spends a lot of her time studying tree fungus.

She's looked at how the roots of every tree spread out in all directions, and how trees send carbon down into their root system.

Down in the ground, there is also a lot of fungi to be found, growing on the roots.

The fungi capture carbon and nitrogen and then transport them back and forth along the roots of the trees, sending the nutrients to the trees that need them most.

The trees even, apparently, use the fungi to communicate, to make clear where the greatest need for nutrients is in the forest.

And in every grove of trees, there is a Mother Tree, with a vast set of roots that is linked with all of the trees around it, who are all shuffling nutrients along to each other, to the outer reaches of their neighbourhood.

What's remarkable is realizing that these trees are not "individuals," but part of a forest full of interdependence.

Friends, as we dedicate ourselves anew to this congregation, may we strengthen our resolve to be a true Mother Tree in this forest.

May we come to see ourselves as living in the great forest of Toronto, with our roots outreached far beyond these walls, carrying nutrients out to the world around us.

To feed the hungry,
to strengthen the weak,
to support the lonely and the lost.

To build up a better world, with the sustenance we find here, together.

So may it be.

Amen.