

“Survival of the Fittest?”

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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 - “Church Going” by Philip Larkin

Once I am sure there’s nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don’t.

Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
“Here endeth” much more loudly than I’d meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.

Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frosty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie round.

Sermon: “Survival of the Fittest?”

Part I. (Shawn Newton)

Last month, at the Wednesday night Dinner Table,
a member of our congregation delightfully described
her father’s work in the world as being a “bovine manicurist.”

In other words, he tends the hoofs of cows.

He cuts and clips and sands the toe-nails of cattle,
all over southwestern Ontario.

As she put it, his job is downright *medieval*.

He does work that’s been done for hundreds if not thousands of years.

Hearing this, I felt a quick and certain affinity with this man.

As a minister, I’ve long felt a connection with other people
who are also in jobs that would be largely recognizable to people
who lived a century, or five hundred, or a thousand years ago.

I feel that particularly with ministers across the centuries.

Sometimes, I think about what it would be like
to meet a minister from the distant past—
from an earlier stage of our history.
What a strange and familiar encounter it would be. . . !
I suspect it would be a shock to us both to find,
that we have, at once, so much and so little in common.

For that matter, I also often wonder what our spiritual ancestors,
the Puritans of the UK and New England, would make of all of us today.

If a Puritan family wandered through the doors
of our congregation some Sunday morning,

with their somber clothes, their archaic English, and their dour reputation for being haunted by the fear that “someone, somewhere, may be happy,”¹ I wonder how they would make sense of the fact that their spiritual descendants had changed things up quite a bit from the way they were back in the day.

I’m sure they’d find it baffling that so many of us had moved beyond their understanding of God—often to the point of not really believing in God, at all. At least not as traditionally defined.

How strange they would think it that we don’t know by heart the sacred texts that gave their lives such depth and meaning.

How surprised they’d be that talk of heaven and hell don’t come up more often than they do.

I’m sure it would be a shock to many of them to see women serving as ministers—and to learn that, actually, a growing and sizable majority of our clergy today are women.

I can’t imagine they’d even know where to begin in understanding that our congregations have not only become beacons of inclusion for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, but that many queer people have become pivotal leaders in our tradition.

Yet, as much as they would quickly note how things had changed, I take some comfort in knowing that they would recognize, at least in part, something of their own time in ours.

They’d spot a pulpit, and instantly understand its enduring purpose, even if ministers don’t preach three-hour sermons anymore.

They would see a preacher—someone they’d call a minister—and understand from their personal experience just what that role entails.

Though they wouldn’t understand why a modern minister spends half his week managing email, they’d know this person

¹ Quote attributed to H.L. Menken.

to be a spiritual leader, and they'd recognize the role of one called from their midst to take on a particular responsibility for the care of others.

And, yet, all of that—all of what they might be able to recognize as church, and, frankly, much of what we might recognize, is rapidly changing.

The character of religious community—
and with it, the meaning and the methods of congregational ministry—
is being transformed by many different and dramatic forces.

In 1845, the same year this congregation was founded,
a law was passed in Upper Canada that forbid anyone “to do or exercise any worldly labour, business or work of one’s ordinary calling” on Sundays.

My how times have changed!

Today, we live in a largely secular society, in which gathering in religious community on a Sunday morning is considered counter-cultural.

But that’s the least of it.

It’s been argued, and I think quite rightly, that there’s been more change in the religious landscape over the past two decades than across all of the generations that lived between the Reformation and the start of this new era that’s taken hold.

The status that church and clergy once held in our society is long gone.

The well-established Protestant traditions are in rapid decline.

Even the large evangelical megachurches that seemed for a time to be taking their place, are now losing steam and losing members.

The formulae that worked for centuries to sustain congregational life are no longer working as they once did.

Now, here, in a congregation that is vibrant
and by most measures bucking the larger trends,
it would be easy to think ourselves exceptions to all of this.

And, yet, while we may be exceptional...

it would be foolhardy to assume we can ignore the changes taking place around us and simply continue on doing what we do.

We are moving into a time of greater uncertainty about how to strengthen and sustain existing congregations.

And we are moving into a time that invites, if not demands, of congregations greater innovation and experimentation to find what works for the times in which we live.

In a word, we're being called to evolve.

Part II. (Karen Dunk-Green)

I'm kind of a purist when it comes to talking about evolution. I think we owe it to Mr. Darwin, given that he completely revolutionized the way a lot of the world thinks about life, to hold pretty tightly to what he meant when we use his terms.

So I tread carefully in any conversation that suggests we can "evolve" ourselves.

I understand evolution as something that happens to a species, over a long period of time, as a result of external forces interacting with internal characteristics ... not something one chooses to do in the present, as an individual, in order to succeed in the foreseeable future.

I'm also fond of reminding people that we can't predict the future.

But of course that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't look towards the future and take deliberate steps in one direction instead of another. What is it, then, about the concept of evolution that can be useful in contemplating the future of our congregation? Why does this topic matter in our Future Focus Program?

I suggest it's the idea of "fitness", as in the notion of "survival of the fittest."

The question is, in the absence of clear knowledge of the future, how can we increase our fitness to thrive within it? Referring back to Darwin, I'd say the

most fundamental characteristic of fitness is adaptability. Evolving is, by definition, *adapting* to our changing environment.

And there's no doubt our environment is changing.

We kicked off the Building for the Future Task Force because we could see the local streetscape changing around us. But that's not all.

We are changing ourselves ... new members, aging members, young members, desired members.

On top of that, the whole world is changing around us ... economics, diversity, technology ... and possibly our role in it.

While we believe that people are still seeking meaning, we don't always see them seeking to find it in a Sunday morning service.

While we are thrilled to have visitors and new members all the time, do we want to wait for people to show up to connect to us? Or should we be finding more ways, and more places, to go to them?

And while we each serve in our own individual ways, many members sense a craving among us, and a changing urgency around us, for a greater commitment to service.

When I think about what it means to be adaptable, I can come up with five characteristics that I think are relevant to us as a Unitarian "species" facing these types of changes and an uncertain future.

First: *Flexibility*, the ability to shift and bend, and to respond to your situation quickly without breaking.

Second: *Portability*, the ability to pick yourself up quickly and easily, without a lot of excess weight, maybe in order to move yourself somewhere (either permanently or as a visitor), or maybe just because it's time to brush yourself off and start all over again.

Third: *Efficiency*, the ability to maximize what you gain from your limited resources.

Fourth: *Sociability*, the ability to interact with those around you, perhaps to form a mutually beneficial partnership or to ask for or provide help to a friend, and

Last but not least: *Intentionality*, a conscious awareness of taking steps, one after another (even if you can't see more than one or two steps ahead)

If we were to take a “fitness test” as First, how would we translate these characteristics of adaptability into things that matter for the way we operate? What would a personal trainer recommend?

Consider first our *Flexibility*.

The fact is, despite many people's best intentions, it can take months for us to make relatively simple decisions. Things like where to hang a painting, how to arrange tables, whether or not it's OK for someone to set up a table outside Workman Hall ... these things seem to take dozens of emails, meetings, and phone calls, engaging multiple people in multiple positions of, quote unquote, authority.

I think that means our fitness meter for flexibility would register pretty low. The people we've invited into leadership roles in order to get things done, seem to feel stuck instead of nimble. They hesitate out of an abundance of caution. Whole committees feel they need to bring their recommendations to the Board for review and a stamp of approval, when their mandate already empowers them to work directly with the congregation and to lead the way to making things happen.

Sometimes, in our caution to respect everyone's opinion, we tie ourselves to the status quo instead of setting our sights on what might come from getting *through* relatively minor changes and *on to* the things that matter most to us all.

We can't throw caution to the wind, but we could limber up our decisions, by exercising our trust and empowerment muscles. That would allow responsible people to take advantage of a burst of energy, an opportunity or an inspiration for First.

Maybe people who knew they could “Just Do It” might change some small thing you really liked ... and maybe that change would open the door to some new thing you never knew you could love so much.

No fitness test would be complete without a “weigh in” ... so that’s where we talk about *Portability*.

It’s tricky to pack for almost any trip, and frustrating to not be sure about what kind of weather or living conditions you’ll be facing. Imagine packing a suitcase for a trip with a completely unknown destination. What would you take with you?

You might think first about the things you simply couldn’t be without because they are essential to who you are and what you need to do every day: your glasses, your most comfortable shoes, clothes that could be mixed and matched. Before you were done you might go through your bag once again to take out anything excess that had crept in - because you realized you might have to carry the whole thing on your back every step of the way.

As we face an unknowable future, do we know what the essential pieces of First are? If we became eager to move, or had to relocate temporarily during a renovation, what programs would we consider the most important to take with us and which would we decide had to be left behind? Even here, as we stand where we are, could there be things that create too much weight for us to adapt to new possibilities?

When Shawn talks with the leadership team about the possibility of multi-site ministry, for example, and the potential for a church service to happen in a storefront or a library, I sometimes struggle to figure out what parts of our typical Sunday morning we would take into such a service. What would be enough, and what would be too much? Where can we find greater simplicity in what we do, so it could be re-created for us someplace else if necessary, and created anew for others if the opportunity arises?

I think simplicity plays well with the next item on our fitness test: *Efficiency*.

Efficiency is important to adaptability because responding to change takes energy. If all of our energy is used up just getting through a basic day, we won’t have enough left to build new ways of being. Energy can mean almost any part of what we would call our resources at First. That includes the energy of our professional staff (Shawn, Angela, Dallas) who seem to have unlimited skills but definitely have limited hours in their days. It also includes our volunteers, and the classic risk of volunteer burnout.

The fitness test question around efficiency asks “Are we getting as much value as we possibly can out of these precious resources for the time they spend?” If their jobs were simpler, would they have more time and energy to do more valuable things? And if we got really clever, could we get more value out of what they already do?

My favourite example here comes from learning that it takes approximately 140 person hours to create a single Sunday service, if you count staff, volunteers, and choir members. Sure, we can count on it being a *glorious* Sunday service, but it’s still only *one* service. What if we could leverage all of that work, with a small addition of effort, into multiple services, for multiple audiences?

Lots of churches are finding ways to do just that, by taking the core elements of their Sunday service out to multiple sites, using a combination of shared professional staff, technology and lay leadership. That kind of efficient adaptability multiplies our impact and gives us options to operate in a variety of locations and formats to fit what our changing environment offers to us.

Turning that phrase around, we can also test our fitness by asking what connection we make back to the others that inhabit our environment, or in other words, our *Sociability*.

Like most churches, especially in these days of declining church membership, we’ve had lots of growth initiatives. For years we have asked, "How do we bring them in?" A “growth” initiative sounds pretty sociable. But perhaps the really sociable church asks instead, "How do we send them out?"²

It’s a great question. What do we do, not as socially active individuals but as a sociable congregation that reaches outside our building and immediate community? How do we make ourselves known to our potentially huge constituency, those people who share our fundamental values but may not even know we are here?

When congregations have financial struggles, they often ask, "How do we survive?" A different kind of wisdom suggests a different question: "How do we serve?"

² Jeffrey D. Jones, *Facing Reality, Finding Hope: New Possibilities for Faithful Churches*.

These questions challenge any notion that we should wait until we have our building questions and our money questions and our mission questions figured out before we can engage as a congregation in ambitious outreach projects or experiment with different forms of ministry. Using some of our energy now to step further outside our walls may be exactly what opens our eyes to the path we want to be on.

I think of what Annette Wilde and her team are doing with the Syrian Refugee initiative ... how far that might take us into open dialogue and collaboration with people of a different faith and immigrants living in very different conditions from many of ours.

I'm not worried at all about whether or not any of those people or their friends might become Unitarian one day.

I am thrilled by the possibility that we may touch each other's lives in ways that will send us out into the world, again and differently, and we will know and respect each other and each other's faiths for that reason.

Our last test for fitness today is about *Intentionality*.

For this fitness test, I'm reminded of one of the Changing Lives stories we published earlier this year. If you read the one from Wendy Ounpuu, you know that when Wendy was searching for a new spiritual home, our minister at that time, John Morgan, had the presence of mind to turn her away. What a shocking thing to do! To be clear, Reverend Morgan wasn't turning Wendy away because he didn't want her as part of the UU community at First. What he wanted was for Wendy to take her curiosity and her energy to a newly forming congregation elsewhere in the city. He was alert enough to the possible future, that he could risk losing a new member for his existing congregation in order to seed a completely new one. That decision was fueled by a long term view and an intention to build beyond what was obvious that day, one prospect at a time.

Is our intention as clear as John Morgan's was in that instance? Is it as clear as Wendy's was, when she showed up at our door seeking a new place of faith? This element of fitness might be the most fundamental. What is it that we intend to do here and are we putting one collective foot in front of the other in a way that, however meandering, takes us toward that goal?

Part III – Shawn Newton

“It sounds along the ages...”³

It. Now just what is this “it” that sounds?
From the cliffs of Sinai to the Buddha’s bodhi tree?

What is it that has echoed through Athens and Galilee,
and danced on the tongues of prophets and sages?
What was that “it” of which we sang earlier?

I believe that “it” is at least part of the answer
the poet Philip Larkin found himself seeking
when he stopped by that quiet, ancient church.

.... For, though I’ve no idea
What this accoutred frosty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

That surprising hunger is something I imagine known to us all, on some level.

A hunger for meaning, for understanding,
for connection, and for purpose.

A hunger amid all the uncertainties of this life
to more fully know what it means to be human.

It’s not a hunger long sated by easy or simple answers.

³ The opening hymn of the service was “It Sounds Along the Ages” from *Singing the Living Tradition*, #105.

It is, instead, an unrelenting hunger to touch the depths of life,
even with all of its complications and confusion.

A hunger to fully behold the terrible beauty of being alive
as the sacred, wondrous, and bewildering gift that it is.

* * * * *

There is an increasingly desperate need in this world of ours
for religions that can speak to life's real and confounding complexity.

That can see the world as it is—
and call us to take on growing responsibility
to nurture the sacred bonds that hold life together on this planet.

I want to trust that natural selection will ensure
that such religions will be the ones to survive
the changes and challenges of our time, yet I'm honestly not so sure.

As the world grows more complex,
there is a sure and certain appeal found in systems of belief
that I feel fail to grapple with the world that we are living in.

And we, of course, shouldn't be too self-congratulatory.
We need to sit with the questions Karen raised earlier.
We need to assess our fitness,
and increase our capacity for resilience in a changing world.

And we need to let go of whatever holds us back
from being as responsive and relevant to our times
as we hope and need to be.

For this isn't merely about survival, but about a calling to serve life—
to be of service in the unfolding story of life on this planet,
by increasing the sum total of love and justice on the earth.

* * * * *

The great 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker
preached one of most important sermons in our history
on the question of what is transient and what is permanent.

He cautioned against being too bound to the outward forms of faith
that pass away, that fall in and out of fashion.

And said instead that we must give due reverence
to what endures, what is lasting, what is permanent.

What endures, I believe,
is that surprising hunger at the heart of being human.
And the ineffable, eternal “it” with which we grapple
as we seek to understand the meaning of it all.

May this house of peace, and the faith that we share, then,
be always dedicated to the service of life.

May we hold open and defend the sacred space
where our deep human hunger is fed
by what endures, even when cloaked in mystery or doubt.

And as we look to the horizon,
may we be courageous enough to let go of what no longer serves,
that we might be ever-committed to embracing change as it comes.

For out of the stars were we born
to carry forward the triumph song of life.

May that song sing in us today,
and through us, in ages and ages still to come.

Amen.