

# “A Mosaic in the Making”

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22 March 2015

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** from *What We All Long For* by Dionne Brand

Have you ever smelled this city at the beginning of spring? Dead winter circling still, it smells of eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all, longing. Garbage, buried under snowbanks for months, gradually reappears like old habits — plastic bags, pop cans — the alleyways are cluttered in a mess of bottles and old shoes and thrown-away beds. People look as if they’re unravelling. They’re on their last nerves. They’re suddenly eager for human touch. People will walk up to perfect strangers and tell them anything. After the grey days and the heavy skies of what’s passed, an unfamiliar face will smile and make a remark as if there had been a conversation going on all along. The fate of everyone is open again....

It’s 8 A.M. on a Wednesday of this early spring, and the subway train rumbles across the bridge over the Humber River. People are packed in tightly, and they all look dazed, as if recovering from a blow....

Mornings are like that on the subway trains — everyone having left their sovereign houses and apartments and rooms to enter the crossroads of the city, they first try at not letting the city touch them, holding on to the meagre privacy of a city with three million people. But eventually they’re disrupted like this. Anonymity is the big lie of a city. You aren’t anonymous at all. You’re common, really, common like so many pebbles, so many specks of dirt, so many atoms of materiality....

What floats in the air on a subway train like this is chance. People stand or sit with the thin magnetic film of their life wrapped around them. They think they’re safe, but they know they’re not. Any minute you can crash into someone else’s life, and if you’re lucky, it’s good, it’s like walking on light.

There are Italian neighbourhoods and Vietnamese neighbourhoods in this city;

there are Chinese ones and Ukrainian ones and Pakistani ones and Korean ones and African ones. Name a region on the planet and there's someone from there, here. All of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care because that genealogy is willfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself....

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Colombian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with Jamaican accents, Fushen deejays, Filipina-Saudi beauticians; Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bakers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers.

Lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated — women and men all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads.... In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but it's hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension.

## “A Mosaic in the Making”

“In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but it’s hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension.”<sup>1</sup>

“The certainty of misapprehension.”

I looked up the word misapprehension, just to make sure that I apprehended it!

It means a mistaken belief or interpretation of something.

As much as I love the reading I shared with you earlier from Dionne Brand, I’ve always been a bit jarred by that last line.

I love the way she captures the splendid diversity of this city.

But, what on earth does she mean  
by saying it’s hard not to wake up in Toronto  
without the certainty of misunderstanding?

Are we, one of the most diverse cities the world has ever known,  
a metropolis of misapprehension?

Hold that thought.

Nearly eight years ago, the week Bob and I moved to Toronto, to be precise,  
I read a profoundly uncomfortable article about the downsides of diversity.

The article caught my attention because I had, just days earlier,  
arrived in the city billed as the most multicultural place on earth.  
And it disturbed me because it reported on the research of Robert Putnam,  
a much-loved Harvard professor known for his progressive political views,  
who had, a few years earlier, written an influential book called *Bowling Alone*.

In that book he decried the breakdown of social capital,  
noting how people in recent decades  
are living in ever-smaller social circles,  
with less connectivity and commitment to the community around them.

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<sup>1</sup> Dionne Brand, *What We All Long For*, Penguin, Chapter 1.

As his title suggests, people these days are bowling alone. More often than not, the time we once spent with others, we now spend by ourselves.

His book called for people to come out of their bunkers and to reweave the fabric of community.

Liberal thinkers loved him and his work. I can't tell you how many UU sermons I've heard quoting him (or preached).

Which is why the article was so upsetting.

What Putnam had found, to his own great discomfort, was that the more diversity there is in a place, the lower the social capital, the lower the social cohesion.

He said in more diverse communities, people tend to:  
“distrust their neighbors, regardless of the colour of their skin,  
to withdraw even from close friends,  
to expect the worst from their community and its leaders,  
to volunteer less, give less to charity  
and work on community projects less often,  
to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more  
but have less faith that they can actually make a difference,  
and to huddle unhappily in front of the television.”<sup>2</sup>

To put a finer point on it, he said: “People living in ethnically diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’ – that is, to pull in like a turtle.”<sup>3</sup>

Putnam spent years between announcing his findings and publishing his paper. How, he wondered, could this be?

He tested the data over and over again, playing with every variable. The results stayed the same.

He looked at “contact” theory and “conflict” theory,

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Jonas, “The downside of diversity: A Harvard political scientist finds that diversity hurts civic life. What happens when a liberal scholar unearths an inconvenient truth?,” *The Boston Globe*, 5 August 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

the two leading schools of thought on ethnic and racial diversity, and concluded that more contact amongst people of differing backgrounds didn't necessarily lead to stronger bonds, and fortunately, didn't result in heightened tensions either.

What he found, though, was that it just caused "a general civic malaise."

One of his most surprising findings was that, in more diverse settings, "levels of trust were not only lower between groups... but even among members of the same group."

"Diversity," he says, "seems to bring out the turtle in all of us."

Now, hold that thought, too.

Another study suggests that the reason behind all of this might be oxytocin, as in the hormone that plays a central role in our brain's experience of intimacy.<sup>4</sup>

It's the magic ingredient that helps couples to bond, and what prompts mother mammals to nurse their young after giving birth.

It's also what helps humans to trust each other.

A Dutch researcher has found, it's also what causes us to trust those most like us and hold a bias against those who aren't.

It's "the hormone of the clan" and a key "agent of ethnocentrism."

A few moments ago, I asked you to hold the thought about "the certainty of misapprehension."

I invite you to now link up that thought with this finding about oxytocin and the human tendency to distrust those different from us—and then, when you've put those ideas together,

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Wade, Depth of the Kindness Hormone Appears to Know Some Bounds," *The New York Times*, 10 January 2011.

bring in Putnam's research about how diversity brings about less social capital, less social connection, less social cohesion.

So, the pressing question before us all, then, is whether we, living in this great city, are really just a bunch of hormonal turtles incapable of understanding one another...!

The science would seem to suggest that it is so.

The science makes the case that difference should drive us into lonely caves of distrust.

But, I for one believe that such data need not be our destiny.

While we humans may have evolved with hormones to help us sort between family and friend and foe, we are more than capable of overcoming the fears that would keep us apart.

That's a very vital point to remember as the spectre of human difference is raised in our national discourse by politicians who would sow discord, rather than call us to the better angels of our nature.

That they would cynically do so as an election nears is, in my book, beyond the pale of decency.

As I mentioned this week in *First Light*, I've been told countless times since arriving in Canada, that this country is a mosaic, not a melting pot.

People have said it with pride in Canada's commitment to being a truly multicultural society that honours the diversity of her peoples, that sees human difference as a thing to celebrate, rather than as something that needs to be diminished in order to fit in.

As an immigrant to this country, I deeply revere this particular piece of Canadian identity—even while acknowledging that the American melting pot isn't quite as problematic as it's sometimes made out to be.

But I do believe that inviting people to be who they truly are seems to be key to Canada's relative success in maintaining multicultural harmony.

I don't in any way mean to suggest that things are perfect. They, of course, are not. There is still much work to be done to achieve real and enduring equality in Canada.

But for all our diversity, this country and its major cities have largely, at least thus far, been able to avoid the kind of violent ethnic conflicts that have erupted in recent years in other places in the world with pronounced multicultural populations.

If we're lucky, we are learning the lessons of what some people call the "diversity paradox"—the idea that there's an upside to the discomfort that diversity can sometimes cause.

There is emerging research that shows that "different ways of thinking among people from different cultures" can drive productivity and innovation in areas with diverse populations.

Being with people who see the world through lenses dissimilar to our own can open up new and exciting ways to see what's around us, as insights emerge that would never occur to us by ourselves.

And on a deeper level, when we live into our diversity, it becomes increasingly possible to see the greater whole to which we all belong, and to imagine what it would mean, at last, to heal the divisions that keep us from the promise of a just world, at peace.

Such is, I believe, our high calling in this life.

Such a vision is at the heart of what I mean when I speak of building Beloved Community, which, I realize, I do often.

Beloved Community is a phrase made widely known by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1950s, when he called for racial reconciliation in the States.

Yet the term was actually coined by the American philosopher, Josiah Royce, just over a century ago.

In his book, *The Problem of Christianity*, he wrote:

Since the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community, the future task of religion is the task of inventing and applying arts which shall win all over to unity, and which shall overcome their original hatefulness by the gracious love, not of mere individuality, but of communities.

The summons to “win all over to unity” through the “gracious love... of communities” has resonated deeply in our tradition ever since.

And it is an idea taken up by people throughout time and in our own day longing for a better world.

It is what Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka calls Love Beyond Belief.

What Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls Interbeing.

What environmentalist Joanna Macy calls The Great Turning.

And what author and activist Charles Eisenstein calls “the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.”

By whatever name it is known, it is about working to increase the sum total of love and justice in this world.

Josiah Royce said, “When one cannot find the ‘beloved community,’ she needs to take steps to create it and if there is not evidence of the existence of such a community then the rule to live by is *To Act So As To Hasten Its Coming.*”

To act so as to hasten its coming.

There are many of us who see this as the core of our work in the world, especially as Unitarians.

And it’s central, I believe, to the work of our congregations, which I think of as little loving laboratories of the human spirit.

The place where we do the deep soul work required to help us build genuine beloved community

by overcoming that which would separate us.

But we should be under no illusion that this is an easy path.

As the explorer Freya Stark put it, “Few are the giants of the soul who actually feel that the human race is their family circle.”

Mindful of the research I shared earlier, we now better understand why.

It takes a determined commitment to draw wide the circle of human kinship, to see across the barriers of difference, the very same sacred human essence staring back at us.

It takes a leap of faith to move beyond what oxytocin alone would tell us, to know in the deepest parts of our being that we are, indeed, one with all.

Four years ago, I preached a sermon on the need for us to question the culture of our congregation.

I invited others to join me in working to deepen our congregation’s commitment to diversity.

It won’t surprise many of you to learn that Bruce Schwartzentruber was the first person to respond to my call.

And with his typical enthusiasm.

He, with the help of others, founded our Diversity Working Group.

The recommendations from their recent report are highlighted in your Orders of Service this morning.

Following next Sunday’s Coffee Hour, members of the Working Group and I will welcome any and all who wish to join us in continuing this work.

My hope is that, as we continue this journey here at First, we will grow in our capacity to appreciate and honour the many splendid differences that comprise this congregation and the wider community.

This will involve practical steps to expand the language of inclusion in our by-laws and the signage on our washrooms to better welcome people of all gender expressions and identities.

It will involve making improvements and removing barriers, physical and otherwise, to better accommodate all who wish to join us.

But mostly, it is about undertaking the growth of our hearts and our souls.

To behold one another with a holy curiosity.

To resist the temptation to assume we know someone else, and, instead, endeavour to understand the variety of our experiences—to ask how and why someone holds a different perspective—on matters of theology, or politics, or deep moral questions.

Such growth is about emerging from our lovely, lonely turtle shells to bask in the wonder of the world around us.

A world made ever more whole, when we dare, against the odds—and even our hormones—to place our trust, our faith, in others.

May we, this and every day, strengthen the fabric of our lives, in this country, in this city, and in this congregation, by building up the Beloved Community.

By imagining a nobler world, and, with our lives, bringing it into being.

Amen.