

# “The Church of our Imagination”

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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.

Church is a funny word. It is also a slippery one, since it refers to a place and an institution, as well as an idea, a human community, and an affiliation of the soul. I know it can be a loaded word for some of us, but there aren't many others that encompasses the same range of meaning. In the years to come, we may need to learn to let it encompass even more, as we move from thinking of church as a collection of static places we attend once a week, to an interconnected web of places, projects, and people, united by shared values, and by a vision of increasing love and justice in the world.

Don Stevenson is neither a Buddhist nor a follower of any organized religion.” So reads an article I stumbled upon earlier this week. And yet he has helped do something not many religious people can claim to have done. Stevenson lives in Oakland, California, and the story goes that he was just “feeling hopeful” when he went to a hardware store and purchased a 2-foot high Buddha statue, and set it up on a strip of pavement dividing two roads in his neighbourhood. He thought his little gesture might be a symbol of peace and calm in an area known for being crime-filled and unsafe. You might expect that someone would deface the statue, or that it would simply disappear after a few days of sitting forlorn on the asphalt. But instead, what happened is that people in the neighbourhood discovered the statue, and began to leave offerings there: “flowers, food and candles. A group of Vietnamese women in prayer robes began to gather at the statue” for worship. To this day, the author continues “every morning at 7, worshippers ring a chime, clang a bell, and play soft music as they chant...prayers. the original statue is part of an elaborate shrine that includes a wooden structure standing 10 feet tall” and is filled with fruit, religious portraits, and offerings of all kinds. The photo on the front of your order of service was taken at the site.

If this wasn't remarkable enough, police statistics say that, in the 2 years since worshippers started showing up at the shrine for daily prayers, the overall crime rate has dropped an astonishing 82 percent. Robbery reports went from 14 to 3, aggravated assaults from 5 to Zero, burglaries from 8 to 4, and narcotics from 3 to none. A police spokesperson went on record to report: “I can't say what to attribute it to, but these are the numbers.”

It is a remarkable story. So much so, that had to double-check and see if it was a parody, but I can find no indication that it is. Whatever you may think about the ethics and esthetics of selling Buddha statues in hardware stores, in this case it seems to have

sparked something of a miracle. A small offering from an unassuming person, and a piece of pavement transformed into holy ground. Less a case of “if you build it, they will come,” and more like “they will build it when they come, and they may come out of nowhere.” By his own admission, Don Stevenson didn’t really have a sense of what he was trying to do. It seems that he just gave what he had within him to give.

Now what is the lesson here for us as the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, or as Unitarians in Canada? Does it provide some guidance for us as we explore new ways of being in the world? Perhaps we could choose to express our faith by setting up a giant flaming chalice at the corner of Yonge and St Clair. Would office workers on their lunch breaks set up a spontaneous shrine to the inherent worth and dignity of every person? Would all of the fast food chains be gradually replaced by locally owned co-ops selling fair trade coffee and sandwiches on gluten free bread? Maybe. Or, maybe someone would just call the fire department, and they would take away our charitable status. As remarkable as the story of the Buddha statue is, maybe we need to take our inspiration from it in a less literal way. Maybe the lesson for us is to reflect on what gift we have to offer the world, and find a way to give it simply and without pretense.

A few weeks ago in this pulpit, the Rev. Shawn Newton spoke about “how to tell the story of our faith,” and suggested that we explain our faith best by telling the story of how it has changed us. Here is a story of mine: I was a member of the extremely close-knit Youth Group at the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa, when, in the summer of 2001, we were struck by tragedy. One of our members, named Anya, was killed, when of all things, she was struck by lightning. She had gone away to a bed and breakfast in the country for the weekend, and had gone out walking in the fresh air following a thunderstorm, and a stray bolt of lightning had hit the ground right next to where she was standing. She was killed immediately.

A friend from church called me later that day to tell me the news, and I took my turn calling others, sharing tears and disbelief at the loss of someone we had seen only days before. We were all in shock. It was the sort of thing you never expect to happen to anyone, let alone someone so young. None of us knew what to do, but we knew that we needed to be together, and it was obvious that we would gather at the church.

We all made our way there that evening, hugged each other and wept as we gathered in the youth room in the back corner of the building. Our adult advisors joined us, and we sat in a circle and lit a candle, passing it around and around for hours, sharing stories and expressing our grief, until we were finished. We went to my friend Joel’s house after, and slept in sleeping bags on his basement floor, none of us wanting to be at home alone that night. We arrived back at church the next morning at 10:30, claiming a few pews for ourselves in the front right corner of the sanctuary. We wanted to be there when the minister shared the news with the congregation.

I don’t remember the sequence of events, but Brian, the minister, got up and told the congregation of Anya’s death, and at some point the congregation started singing: “There is more love...somewhere.” We huddled together, and though my eyes were a

blur of tears, I saw that all the adults in the congregation were making a circle around us, gathering in protective love around a group of weeping teenagers, singing “there is more love...somewhere. There is more hope...somewhere, and I’m gonna keep on, ‘til I find it.”

(I love that hymn, but I rarely choose it for a service, because there is still no guarantee I can get through it without crying.)

Some of the 200 or so adults in church that morning were people I knew well ,and many of them were people I knew barely, if at all. Some of them have now passed away themselves, and many more may have only a faint memory of that Sunday morning. But they have left me with a gift: a felt experience of the way love can burst through in the midst of anything, and point the way back to life.

I know what love is, because I have felt it.  
I know what religion is, because I have lived it.  
I know what community is, because I have been inside the circle of its care.

If there is such a thing as salvation, it must be a little bit like that.

Silence and then sing #1007: There’s a river Flowin’ in my soul

“Come, come, whoever you are  
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.  
It doesn’t matter  
Ours is not a caravan of despair  
(Come, Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times)  
Come, yet again, come.

Many people know these words as the work of the poet Rumi, who lived in 13<sup>th</sup> century Persia. Fewer people know them as the work of Coleman Barks, the pre-eminent contemporary English translator of Rumi. Barks’ fresh, accessible translations are largely responsible for the resurgent popularity of Rumi in the English speaking world. It’s a little strange that Barks should be famous for translating medieval Persian poetry, since he doesn’t actually read or understand Persian. His translations are really free-form interpretations, based on comparing multiple earlier English translations of the poem. When I first learned this, I felt a little miffed. Betrayed, even. Who does this guy think he is, claiming to translate poems in a language he doesn’t even understand?

I’m not aware of much controversy about Barks’ work, but I can imagine he might be resented by more traditional scholars and translators, particularly given how commercially successful his work has been. And even if Rumi died long before any kind

of copyright laws, there are legitimate questions to be asked about appropriation and accountability, and the limits of what can be called a translation.

Still, it's hard not to see Barks' interpretations as something of great creativity, genius even. Barks is a poet in his own right, and the story goes that a friend handed him a collection of Rumi's work in a classical English translation and told him: "These poems need to be freed from their cages." Maybe he should have left the work to an expert, but then maybe it needed someone to look at it with the eyes of an amateur. Sometimes, experts can only see as far as their own knowledge, and have a hard time imagining what's beyond. Sometimes, it takes the mind of a beginner to give birth to something truly new.

Learning to see with the eyes of a beginner, to think with the mind of an amateur, these are essential tasks for us as we set about re-imagining our religious communities. Liz James, a student at Meadville Lombard Theological School, once proposed a thought experiment to a group of us: if church didn't exist, and we had to start it now, what would we start with? Think about it for a second. Would it look like the communities and organizations that we know? Would it be totally unrecognizable? Or would we recognize its heart and soul, even if its outer structure seemed odd? Could we learn to see church in a cafe, a bike shop, or a non-traditional Unitarian monastic community based around intentional, sustainable living? Communities like this are slowly being born, with many more in the early stages and likely to emerge in the coming years.

We love our congregations, and we are called out of them. We love our congregations because they have loved us, given us a sense of possibility and a sense of worth which is hard to shake. We are called out of them, because it is the nature of love to expand, to give freely what has been freely given.

Building the church of our imagination is not primarily about being innovative or funky; it is not even necessarily about becoming leaner and more focused so that we can continue to thrive in a changing society and uncertain economy. It is simply harvesting the fruits of our experience and our tradition, and scattering the seeds of grace as widely and generously as we can. It is about letting our hearts break open until they can. More than anything, it is about setting our imaginations free from their cages, of letting our hearts break open to make room for the world as it is. May we love ourselves and each other just as we are, and never cease imagining that we might love even more.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Kendall Gibbons closing words

