

“Hello From the Other Side”

Sermon by Ben Robins, Jan 31, 2016
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Note that sermons are written to be spoken, and do not always follow conventional grammar, paragraph structure or timing. Minor changes and corrections have been made to the text.

By the time I turned 20, I had created a life for myself in which I was surrounded by people who loved doing math. If I had a question about math, or a comment to make, or a puzzle to work on, I was surrounded by people to engage with. But when I was 20 years old, my questions changed. I started asking questions about social justice, about personal growth. I felt like I didn't have anybody to talk to about these things. I had somewhat of a breakdown.

I felt that I had to hit the road, hitchhiking, to search out the support that I needed, to find people like me. Calgary, Vancouver, Vancouver Island. Heading south into the mountains, the rainforest, the Castro.

The world opened up to me, but every day was a test of my resilience, and most of what I learned didn't make sense in my life back home.

In the movie Groundhog Day, Bill Murray's character wakes up to a day that doesn't make any sense to his life back home. He plays a charismatic weatherman named Phil, with a career trajectory aimed at doing the weather on prime time television. But he's stuck in a small town called Punxsutawney for the day, covering their annual Groundhog Day celebrations.

As he drives into town with his producer, he sneers at the town sign, a massive sign, a cheesy sign in the shape of a Groundhog. At the Groundhog Day celebration, he sneers at the town elders, dressed in over-the-top tuxedos and top hats. They are a little too eager in their whispered conversation with the groundhog about its shadow.

Bill Murray, Phil, quickly and cynically tapes his spot for the TV station back home. But suddenly a blizzard hits, and they're stuck in Punxsutawney, with nothing for Phil to do but lie in bed in his hotel room, reading a magazine.

It reminds me of a lyric from the song Hello, by Adele. She calls out, “Did you ever make it out of that town where nothing every happened?”

Phil falls asleep in that hotel room, and when he wakes up, it's as if nothing has happened. There is a plot twist, provided by the scriptwriting gods: Phil wakes up, and it's Groundhog Day again. He has to relive Groundhog Day again. To make a long story short, he has to relive February the 2nd, 1993, over, and over, and over.

He's alone, with a producer who is way too chipper, and a town that doesn't meet his need for fame and fortune. His ego is too big for this town, and as he makes his way yet again to the Groundhog Day ceremony, he resents having to say hello to anyone.

Reliving February 2nd over and over again, Phil starts acting erratically, and stops caring about his job. His producer thinks he's becoming more and more egocentric.

In the song Hello, Adele calls out, "It's so typical of me to talk about myself, I'm sorry."

After reliving the same day again, and again, Phil eventually gives up talking about himself, and ends up spending a night at a bowling alley, drowning his sorrows. He asks the 2 guys next to him, do you have any idea what's it like for every day to be exactly the same? It turns out that that actually describes their life in Punxsutawney pretty well. But that doesn't make Phil feel any closer to them.

In the song Hello, Adele calls out, "There's such a difference between us, and a million miles."

Who Phil is is not reflected in this community. He can't take it. Any resilience he has for life disappears.

He's as fragile as those aristocrats in the books of D.H. Lawrence and George Bernard Shaw. With their own kind of people, these lords and ladies are charming, charismatic, engaged. But outside of their tight circle, they are incompetent. There is no coherent communication.

In the movie Groundhog Day, there is shouting. In the movie Breakfast Club, with a similar theme, shouting, and more shouting. In the video for the song Hello, shouting and more shouting. People are so complicated. People are so different. It can be so hard to connect with another person. You say potato, they say potahto. It's so much easier to put up a wall, to call the whole thing off. It can be so hard to connect with someone who votes differently than you. It can be so hard to connect with people when you tell them about Unitarian Universalism. Why doesn't a light bulb go on for people when we tell them about Unitarian Universalism? Hello? The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Bing. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Bing. Sometimes I look around the room at the start of service, and it's a room full of beautiful people, saying together, "Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament, and service is our prayer." I want to call out to the world, call out to those people on the other side, come here, it's so good over here. Join us. Join us. But of course many of those people are saying the same thing to us.

We won't connect with others if we act like a monoculture, unwilling to be changed by the encounter. Monocultures aren't resilient when there's a need for change. The social justice activist Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, says that "If you're comfortable, you ain't doing no coalescing." She says that there's no such

thing as a community of people just like you. You have to be willing to encounter the other.

“There’s such a difference between us, and a million miles. Hello from the other side.”

When you reach out to the people around you, it doesn’t always go as expected. You might say to the person next to you at the bus stop, “I just had a great Sunday morning, centring myself on love and justice,” and the person might take that as an opportunity to tell you about the injustice they feel at being a Toronto Maple Leafs fan. So reaching out to people doesn’t always create a communion of souls. Sometimes the gap between you and your neighbour can feel like a chasm.

And unlike in the movie *Groundhog Day*, here in the real world, we don’t get a fresh start every day, when things don’t go as planned. Striving for a broader social resilience would be one more chore to do in our already overburdened lives.

Maybe we can occasionally connect with those around us, when it really matters. Like, if there’s a social justice project. We can connect with people to save a family from Syria (or five families from Syria). If there is an all powerful ring that needs to be destroyed, we as human beings can work together with those hobbits who live way over on the other side, and we can work with those fairy people who live on that misty lake, and we can work with those trees. But once the ring is destroyed, the hobbits better go back to their hobbit hole, and the trees better go back to their forest. Speaking as an introvert, we can feel more resilient when we can return to ourselves. A global communion of souls? Too difficult. More sustainable would be a friendly neighbourliness of souls. And good fences make good neighbours.

In the movie *Groundhog Day*, Phil could try to build a fence between him and his neighbours. But every day he would have to build it again, and again, and again. And surrounding yourself with fences is a dark experience. Before Phil is ready to see the light, he has to relive *Groundhog Day*, day after day and week after week, looking at his own shadow.

But something shifts. One day, Phil wakes up to winter’s soft morning sun, and he learns to trust the dawning future. He has learned to trust his neighbours. He knows that every time he relives *Groundhog Day*, a nice couple named Debbie and Fred are going to have lunch at the local diner. He knows that every time he relives *Groundhog Day*, a group of old friends out on the town are going to get a flat tire. So why not help them.

I learned from Richard’s email signature that it was Lilla Watson, an Australian Aboriginal artist, who said “If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Bill Murray’s character knew that he wasn’t really helping the people of Punxsutawney - the consequences of the day did not exist for them, because the day was erased for them when he relived it - but his life had resilience by helping them. He

became a good Samaritan because it gave his life meaning. He had a role in the life of Punxsutawney. Punxsutawney became a part of his identity.

Living the same day over and over again, Phil had a lot of time on his hands. He decided to learn to play piano. He could have learned to play his own favourite music, but instead he learned to play music that brought people together. At the Groundhog Day dance, in his dashing suit, with his sunglasses on and his fingers flying, he wasn't the life of the party. He brought the party to life. He helped his neighbours connect, by sharing life with them.

Sharing life, like we do every Sunday. Sharing life, like we do in our monthly Journey Groups. When we light our candles of joy and sorrow, a lot goes unsaid. A lot goes unsaid. But when we stop to think about it, we know that there's a lot of life in this room. A lot of life in this room. A lot of wisdom in this room, a lot of experience. A lot of resilience, and a lot of need for resilience (they often go hand in hand). How would it be to have a look around the room right now, how would it be to look around the room, and see people as if you were seeing them for the first time. Maybe have a look at the person next to you. Maybe look along your row. Maybe somewhere in front of you, you see a head that you see week after week, and maybe it's time to have another look, for the first time. If you're able, maybe look around the room. There's a lot of history in this room. Maybe notice the paintings on the wall. Maybe see an old friend, for the first time. Try looking around, to find your own reflection in the eyes of another. If you're new here, maybe notice how it feels to be sharing this space. How would it be for all of us to have our sense of identity changed by our experience today. How would it be for all of us to have our sense of resilience changed by sharing this space.

Olympia Brown understood the resilience of connecting with the world around her. Universalist minister Olympia Brown was willing to let her identity be changed, as her ministry adapted to changing conditions in the Midwest. She was a contemporary of the Iowa Sisterhood, a cohort of 19th century Unitarian ministers who went wherever they were needed, who found a way to connect with the world as it was. I'm proud that the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism has been shaped by these resilient women.

The Canadian Unitarian Council has announced a new program to help us connect across Canada's great distances. The Northern Lights fundraising program is becoming more resilient by helping us to connect directly with each other. Whether you have a plan for ministry and need money, or vice versa, the Northern Lights fundraising program uses crowdsourcing to connect Unitarians directly. Our deeper connections across Canada build resilience.

But the most resilience happens when you connect with those close to home. We do our social justice work so that nobody is left behind, nobody is left out. But it can be so easy to ignore the person right in front of us. How can we help everyone in the world, if we can't even help everyone on our street? This isn't a pep talk to do more, to help more people. It's kind of the opposite. It's saying that you don't always have to run off to help more and more people. In the movie Groundhog Day, after Bill Murray connected

with the people of Punxsutawney, he didn't run off and connect with the people of Warton. There's a value in simply connecting with the person who is right in front of you.

When I was 20 years old, I had somewhat of a breakdown. I felt that I had to hit the road, hitchhiking, to search out the support that I needed, to find people like me. And when I came home, a friend of mine from high school invited me over to watch a movie, *The Breakfast Club*. It's about five very different high school students who feel vulnerable and alone. They gain resilience by learning to see their shared humanity.

Resilience grows when we see beyond our differences and connect with those around us.

Hello.