

“Stay Tuned!”

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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.

It was last Sunday afternoon.
I was at Sunnybrook Hospital,
just leaving after a visit with Dorene Jacobs.

I pulled out my phone as I left the building,
and there was a strange and unsettling text message.

Maybe some of you received it, too.

“Facebook Safety Check,” it said.

It asked: “Have you been affected by the explosion?”

It explained that I was to reply “SAFE,” if I was okay,
or “OUT,” if I wasn’t in the area that had been impacted.

I had read a few months ago about this new Facebook feature—
a system by which people in proximity to some disaster,
be it a natural one or otherwise,
would receive a text message, prompting them
to share their status with family and friends
in the immediate wake of some unfolding tragedy.

I knew what this text was supposed to mean.
I had read about it.
I had thought it was a good and clever device.

And so there in the foyer of Sunnybrook, my heart sank.
I expected the worst: to find out that something truly horrible
had happened somewhere in Toronto.

I had been out of the loop for hours.

I had led worship for the Easter service that morning,
made it upstairs to the tail end of coffee hour,
and then rushed out the door to Sunnybrook.

And so I opened the CBC app on my phone,
bracing myself for the terrible news I've long expected
would eventually come our way.

We are not immune, after all, in this fair city,
from that larger drama playing out on the world stage,
where one city, where one place after another,
is thrust into the spotlight by the actions of those determined
to maim and murder as many people as possible.

And yet, Donald Trump and Rob Ford
dominated the headlines that day, as usual.

Thinking the tragic news must not have yet been posted,
I pulled up the app for *The Star*, and the one for *The Globe and Mail*.

Nothing.

I went on to Facebook, and found
an almost eerie cavalcade of Happy Easter wishes
and the relentless banter between so many of my American friends
about the troubling direction of the presidential campaign.

Through all of this, with each dead-end,
I began to consider that maybe this text
had been sent to me in error.

I started to suspect that it was spam, some misguided click-bait
sent to pull me into a web-based rabbit hole.

As it turns out, it was a straight-up flub on Facebook's part.
Their system just didn't work as designed.

So, they inadvertently sent the Safety Check message out
to some significant slice of their members
scattered all over the world.

I just happened to be one of those people.

(Out of curiosity, who else got that text?)

Of course, in time, it became clear that the intent was to send the notification to people in Lahore, Pakistan, which had been hit that afternoon by a bomb detonated in a public park killing scores of people and injuring hundreds—most women and children at play.

Responsibility for the attack was swiftly claimed by a branch of the Taliban, who said they were intent on killing Christians. That it was Easter was not coincidental.

I was safe. Far, far removed from the horrors felt by these latest victims.

But I've not been able to erase the text message. Its particular arrangement of words has haunted me this week: "Have you been affected by the explosion?"

Have I? I wondered.
Have I? I wonder still.

I've never been to Pakistan.
There isn't anyone I know who is there, at present.

I don't have any close Pakistani friends, who might have connections back there, who find themselves fearing the worst, perhaps turning to Facebook to see if their loved ones checked in or sent a message confirming their safety as soon as they could in some other way.

I could, of course, claim to be unaffected.
Safe. Out of danger.

And, yet, that would not be true.

It is a bedrock principle of our faith
that “what touches the life of one of us affects us all.”

We are connected, through and through,
for better and, at times, for worse.

This perspective isn’t entirely new.
And it’s not unique to Unitarian Universalism.

But we have placed this belief at the centre of our theology.
And with each passing year, many of us are coming to see
its increasing truth and profound relevance
for this interdependent planet
on which we live, and move, and have our being.

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This morning, we launch this month’s theme by looking at the notion of “revelation.”

For those of you raised in the Christian faith,
you may be thinking we’re turning to the final book of the Bible,
with its strange and symbolic meanings.

Peter Hughes is giving a talk today on an intriguing book about
The Book of Revelation during Issues & Ideas at 12:15pm,
but that’s as far as we’ll be heading in that direction this month.

Today, I want to look at what it means to live on a planet,
at a moment in history, when revelations abound—
and when revelations are coming into
growing and dangerous conflict.

Now, a revelation can be as simple
as any secret being newly shared, some fact coming to light.

In its more traditional, religious connotation, though,
a revelation speaks to some special knowledge,
some particular claim, some assertion of a universal truth.

This sort of revelation almost always starts
with a deep-seated belief
of having the corner on the market when it comes to truth.

There's often a strong binary at work:
"We're right, and you're wrong."
"We're heading to heaven,
and you're heading some place warmer."

It's easy to say that Unitarian Universalists aren't like that.

Our early theologies were reactions against this type of thinking.

We rejected the notion of hell.
We resist a single, shared theology even today.

Our hymnal has a popular reading about cherishing our doubts.

And then, of course, there's that old joke about UUs
being the ones who burn Question Marks on people's lawns...

We do have our convictions, though.

Even with our reputation for open-mindedness,
we have a capacity for rigidity,
like most other human beings.

We can cultivate privileged assumptions,
and hang on to prejudices and preconceived notions
of what is right and true, just like most everybody else.

If you doubt me, at Coffee Hour today,
tell people you attended Rob Ford's funeral this past Wednesday.
Not out of curiosity, but to pay your respects.

I promise you'll get a very interesting and predictable reaction,
and you'll expose one of those awkward places where many of us,
myself included, struggle to be open, curious, and accepting.

We all have our orthodoxies,
whether we think we do or not.

And not recognizing that we do, I believe,
can be a very dangerous thing.

What's worse is that many of us live increasingly
within the bubble of our own beliefs,
reinforced by a media echo chamber
that affirms the way we already see the world.

It's becoming harder and harder to resist the seductive power
of keeping our cherished views unchallenged.

Indeed, you may be already feeling a bit cross with me
for bringing all of this up.

Anger is how we can often react
to being confronted with a contrarian view.

But it's becoming ever more important that we resist
the impulse to have our own biases about the world
comfortably confirmed.

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I wonder if you heard the recent story about Val-Jean McDonald,
a woman who died in December at the age of 81.¹

Val-Jean had eight sons, twenty grandchildren, nearly twenty great-grandchildren,
and three great-great-grandchildren.

Through her family, she had left a legacy in this world.

Yet, on the day of her funeral, the fact that the woman in her casket
wasn't actually Val-Jean escaped most everyone's notice.

Sure, looking back on it, a few people had their doubts.

¹ Michael Wilson, "After funeral and cremation, a dreadful shock: The woman in the coffin was not grandma," *The New York Times*, 22 March 2016.

But disease and death, embalming and tonnes of make-up can alter a person's appearance.

And there she was, in her open coffin, wearing her favourite pink blouse, white suit, and jewelry.

One of her sons wondered why they had cut her hair so short.

And one of the grandkids, a boy of ten, said aloud that the woman in the coffin wasn't grandma.

But, six days later, after that woman's body had been cremated (which, thankfully, had been her wish), the funeral home called, with a stunning revelation, to say that there had been a horrible mistake.

As it turns out, the young boy was right.

That wasn't his grandmother in the coffin.

His grandmother's body was still at the funeral home, awaiting cremation.

Now, aside from asking just how such a monumental mistake could have ever happened, the more unsettling question, to me, is how more than a hundred family members gathered around the wrong body, accepting that it was Val-Jean, their mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

Grief can upend everything we think we know.

But we should not underestimate the persuasive power to see and hear and have confirmed what we already believe, and need, and somehow want to be true.

“Cherish your doubts, said Robert Weston,
“for doubt is the attendant of truth.
Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge;
it is the servant of discovery.”

Yet, we live in a time when doubt seems to be growing less and less popular.

To doubt, to confess uncertainty, to say, “I don’t know,”
or “I’m not sure,” is thought by too many
to be a sign of weakness, the mark of someone who is indecisive.

Politicians who bluster out of stunning ignorance
are rewarded for coming off as being resolute.
And, yet, I would vote any day for the true leaders
who can reveal their genuine ambivalence about the way forward,
who admit to wavering and hesitating because they are unsure,
because they are seeking to truly discern the best next step.

In a world where many people are growing more polarized
and more convinced of the rightness of their position,
I’m finding a bit of uncertainty an increasingly attractive quality.

There’s something to be said for having the courage of one’s convictions.

But there’s something to be said, as well,
for having the moral fortitude to wait, to listen, and to discern.

I’m a huge fan of innovation and insight.
I love that we are coming to know with each day
more about ourselves and the universe we call home.

But we would do well to adopt
what scholars call “epistemological modesty” –
a technical term that points to how little we know,
and how little we can know.

Epistemological modesty can also be
an outlook, an attitude, a way of life.

It is to embrace a path of discovery and openness that begins
with acknowledging our limits, owning up to our ignorance.

Our world needs more such modesty.

And we could do with much less shrill certainty.

In its place we need a deep and sacred curiosity

about how things really are.

A curiosity that enables us to listen to what life has to say.

A curiosity that empowers us to fall in love with life
enough to want to save and sustain and savour it.

A curiosity that calls and empowers us to serve life,
even in, and especially in, the face of arrogant certitude.

This week I received a revelation via an unintended text message:
“Have you been affected by the explosion?” it asked.

Yes, yes, I have.

I received a new revelation
of the great web of being that unites all we know
(and all we don't even yet know)
on this spinning blue, green ball.

May peace prevail on this precious, precarious little planet.

May wisdom come in recognizing how much we don't know.

May hope arise in seeing how much we have yet to learn.

May love abound, in seeing each other through life's uncertainty.

May it be so, in our lifetime.

Amen.