

Multiple Intelligences

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

10 April 2016

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.

I was a bit surprised by the number of waivers I had to sign, just to get in.

A few weeks ago, while on a month of sabbatical, I visited a very peculiar place called Damanhur, or more precisely, The Federation of Damanhur, a New-Age commune and eco-village in the foothills of the Italian Alps, near Turin.

There is much about Damanhur that was incredibly compelling.

Over the course of four decades, from a collective started with two dozen people, the community has grown to number more than a thousand, with other centres of Damanhurians around the globe.

The citizens, as they are called, of Damanhur have their own constitution, their own language, and their own currency, the Credito.

The members of this community live in group homes, of ten to twenty people, in and around the town of Vidracco.

They have developed a comprehensive philosophy that seeks to combine ancient wisdom, meditation, and neo-pagan ritual in order to model a new way of being in the world.

They are best known for creating an elaborate series of underground temples, built into the mountainside.

Soon after their founding, the residents began digging out tunnels, starting near the back door of the original group home.

Over time, they carved out chambers of varying sizes, some rather small, some vast, and all intricately decorated with elaborate mosaics and massive painted murals that convey their understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life.

When the outside world learned about these subterranean Temples of Humankind in 1992, there was a move by local Italian authorities to have the temples destroyed because they were built without the needed legal permits—and, apparently, without proper consultation with engineers.

Which, it seems, had something to do with all those waivers I had to sign to get in...

While there was much that was impressive to me about Damanhur, there was a lot that was confounding, and just weird.

Our guide, who had lived in the community for twenty years, shared with my colleague and me the vision behind Damanhur: the goal of building a sustainable, harmonious village that grounds people in values of kindness and authenticity, while seeking to inspire human potential and transform the planet.

It was beautiful.

It was a vision that resonated with the outlook I and many other Unitarian Universalists happen to hold.

As she spoke, I would often find myself nodding in agreement, moved by the deep commitment of the citizens of Damanhur, and even a bit envious of the way their dedication has transformed the side of a mountain and built a network of connection of like-minds around the globe.

And then she would casually mention something like how they teach courses on star travel or alien civilizations, and, like the screeching scratch of a needle across an old vinyl record, my rational, skeptical brain would go hay-wire.

Over and over again, as the day unfolded, I had to resist an overwhelming urge to roll my eyes.

I worked hard to avoid eye-contact with my colleague,

Debra Faulk, the minister in Calgary, with whom I was travelling.

Frankly, I struggled to keep from showing
how very, very judgmental I was feeling.

It took all I had, at times, to keep a glazed look
of delighted fascination on my face.

A look that hopefully said, “Oh, wow, please tell me more!”

It apparently worked, as our guide did, indeed,
continue to share more and more information about Damanhur
that I found to be strange and ludicrous.

She explained that Damanhur was built where it was because
of the convergence of four synchronic energy lines at that location.

She showed us large, clear, back-lit spheres
filled with what looked like coloured water she said
provided a conduit to communicate with the wider universe,
there at the exact point where the synchronic lines met.

“Oh, my....”

“Hmmm.”

Having studied comparative religion, I reminded myself
just how very weird most every religion can be;
how bizarre it can all sound to the ears of strangers,
how strange to the uninitiated.

Throughout the day at Damanhur, I challenged myself repeatedly to take in
the experience as a cultural anthropologist would, remaining open and curious.

And not as the overly “judgy” Unitarian
that came to me more naturally that day.

The fifth of the six Sources upon which Unitarianism draws is
“Humanist teachings [that] counsel us
to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science,
and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Those phrases ran through my thoughts

many times that day in Damanhur.

“... teachings which counsel us to heed
the guidance of reason and the results of science,
and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

In the long-standing tension
between reason and revelation in religion,
Unitarianism has firmly stood on the side of reason.

It can be safely argued
that the commitment to the use of reason in religion
was central to our founding.

It gave early Unitarianism its very reason for being.
Our forebears wanted a religion that made sense.

They agreed with Galileo who said:
“I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God
who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect
has intended us to forgo their use.”

And so they sought to strip away superstition from belief
in order to uncover what was, to them, believable.

That said, they didn't go quite as far as the young Jewish boy,
who was riding home from Hebrew school,
when his mother asked him, “So how was class?”

“It was stupid,” he said.

“Come on, sweetheart, it couldn't be that bad.
Tell me what you learned today.”

“Well,” he said, “we learned about Moses,
and how he motivated the Israelites
to rise up against Pharaoh and leave Egypt.”

“Then Pharaoh chased them and they were trapped at the Red Sea.
Then Moses told the Israelites to build a bridge over the sea.
They planted explosives on the bridge as they crossed it,
and when Pharaoh's army got on the bridge they blew it up.”

“Um, wait a minute, Honey,
I don’t think that’s how the story goes.” said the mother.

“I know mom, but if I told you what the Torah really says,
you’d never believe me.”

That little boy’s revisions weren’t so far off
from the pattern set by Thomas Jefferson,
who while President of the United States,
cut and pasted his copies of the Christian gospels
to reflect his own Unitarian understanding.

Late at night, in his White House study, with a razor and glue,
he compiled what, today, is called *The Jefferson Bible*.

In his final version, all the miracles were tossed out,
including each of the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection.

He also removed most everything that might be called supernatural,
including the angels heralding Jesus’ birth,
the long biblical genealogies,
and any references to Jesus being divine.

What was left was his personal collection of Jesus’ teachings,
told mostly through parables, and a rough narrative
of his earthly and very human life.
Jefferson extracted the bits from Christianity that made sense,
and deemed that everything else had to go.

A few years later, in 1819,
William Ellery Channing,
the father of American Unitarianism,
effectively endorsed Jefferson’s approach,
by powerfully defending the use of reason
in his hour and a half address known as the “Baltimore Sermon.”

Channing said:

We are particularly accused of making
an unwarrantable use of reason
in the interpretation of Scripture.

We are said to exalt reason above revelation,
to prefer our own wisdom to God's.

We profess not to know a book,
which demands a more frequent exercise of reason
than the Bible....

[W]e [Unitarians] feel it our bounden duty
to exercise our reason upon it perpetually,
to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit,
to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer,
his true meaning; and, in general,
to make use of what is known,
for explaining what is difficult,
and for discovering new truths.

It was bold to say these things
from a pulpit almost two centuries ago.

And, though it stirred controversy outside of Unitarianism
and caused some consternation within,
it's fair to say that we've never really looked back.

By the middle of the 19th century,
just a few years after this congregation was founded,
the Free Religious Association was created
by disenchanted Unitarians in North America
to "promote the interests of pure religion,
to encourage the scientific study of theology,
and to increase fellowship in the spirit."

In the years that followed, tensions between
those who defended a Unitarianism rooted in Christian theism
and these earliest Unitarian humanists,
who wanted a broader understanding of Unitarianism,
resulted in a new statement of faith
meant to bridge the growing divide between them.

Written in 1887, and called
Things Most Commonly Believed Today Among Us,
the compromise statement asserted that:
"We hold reason and conscience

to be final authorities in matters of religious belief.”

It was a way of saying, “we agree to disagree,”
while still giving reason the upper hand.

An interesting footnote.

Jabez Sunderland, who served as the minister of this congregation
in the first decade of the 20th century
and for whom this room is named,
led the battle against the statement,
because he felt something vitally important was being lost.

He said, “By hauling down our Theistic and Christian flags,
and running up in their place the Ethical only,
I am convinced we should seal the fate of Unitarianism...”

Over the ensuing decades, Sunderland’s approach was sidelined,
as Unitarianism moved to embrace and incubate religious humanism:
a 20th century reformation from within our tradition
that rejected supernatural notions of God, revered science,
and revised traditional rituals and beliefs to fit a new era.

It was an iconoclastic age, as many Unitarian congregations
threw out all the trappings of church.

The purifying impulse that drove our Puritan forebears
had driven generations that followed
to strip away anything that could not endure the light of reason.

This form of Unitarianism served us well
for much of the 20th century.

It may be the form many of you recall,
the one that first welcomed you,
the one to which you were powerfully drawn.

While this form of our faith is still to be found,
Unitarianism has continued to grow and change.

We have recognized the limits of reason—limits pointed out
by Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, no less.

Limits argued over the ensuing two centuries.

Through it all, Unitarianism has carried the banner for reason in religion.

And while that purpose must always be ours,
we must be careful not to so privilege reason
that we miss the dawning of new revelations.

There are other banners.

There are other ways of knowing.

Reason itself is teaching us this, as scientists reach deeper
into the mysteries of the universe and of life itself.

To be freethinking in our time
requires holding our minds open to the possibility
of answers that don't fit squarely with our worldview.

It requires the "epistemological modesty" I spoke of last week.
The willingness to be humble in the face of all we don't yet know.

The openness to listen to the world around us
through all of our senses,
relying on our differing areas of intelligence,
to understand this great gift of life we are given.

Each of us in an expression of the universe,
a piece of the puzzle of what it means to be alive.

May we always use our faculties of reason
to grasp this wild and wonderful ride we are on.

May we bask in the wonder of it all,
and with gratitude strive to play our part
in the unfolding of this miraculous story.

Amen.