

Technology and Tradition

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

1 May 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.

Reading – Kathe Palka

“My son calls me while I'm in line at the Stop & Shop”

and I freeze, transporting tea from the cart
to the conveyer belt, mind racing to places
he might need me, as I answer my cell.

But he's not calling for rescue from the scene
of an accident, a highway wreck or more
natural disaster, rather calling, as if I were
only in the next room.

Home early
from school, he's wondering what's
for dinner and after being told, asks if I might
make mashed potatoes instead of rice.

I sigh a little yes, slightly annoyed at his
casualness, but glad to be able to heed the call,
reminded, I'm the one who thinks of this
accessibility as a way to keep the world
at bay, able now to respond anywhere,
yet burdened by availability.

Born into this expanding, more connected
universe, he can't imagine why anyone
would want to be out of reach, my child who
wears new technology like a second skin
and for whom the whole world
is an easy touch away and should be.

Sermon: “Technology & Tradition”

For reasons I still don’t understand,
and for reasons I still can’t quite believe,
someone stole our fax machine.

Three years ago, when the door wasn’t as secured
as it arguably should have been,
someone seemingly waltzed into the office downstairs
and made away with, of all things, our fax machine.

You might ask, “Who steals from a congregation?”

And that would make for a very interesting conversation.

We could discuss the theological implications of it all.

We might wonder about what desperation would drive such an act.

We could delve into broader questions of economic justice,
grapple with what it means to live in a society with increasing inequality,
or probe the possibility of underlying, untreated addictions.

We might hear the call to forgiveness,
or wrestle with the challenge of honouring
the inherent worth and dignity
of someone who has taken something that was not theirs.

Or, we might simply ask: “Who on earth steals a fax machine?!”

Even three years ago, a fax machine was pretty much an artifact,
an antique from the dark ages of 1990s technology.

I don’t imagine that the fax machine generated a tidy sum
at a pawn shop or on the proverbial street.

While they were all the rage twenty-five years ago,
they’ve effectively become obsolete as we have embraced new technologies.

Still, I remember the day, in 1991, when the fax machine
was delivered and installed in the office of the church where I worked then.

Miracle of miracles, we could print off a letter, sign it,
and then send it half-way around the world,
after punching multiple buttons
and enduring that strange hissing sound.

On the other end, someone would receive—
if everything went according to plan, which it often didn't—
a sorry facsimile of the original, printed out on that weird paper
that always smudged, and would stain your hands.

If you were lucky, you'd get a confirmation message that the fax had gone through.

For good measure, you'd send along a cover sheet,
carefully noting the number of pages meant to be sent,
and then telephone the recipient, just to be sure the entire fax arrived.

Given the vast progress we've made in communications
over the ensuing quarter-century, it, again,
boggles the mind why anyone would steal a fax machine.

Yet, it can, of course, be very hard to embrace new technologies.
Perhaps that someone really, really missed the distant heyday of the fax...

I recall hearing a story about The Grange, the Georgian mansion
attached to the AGO¹ that was the original Art Gallery of Toronto.

The house was built in 1817, and was the home
of prominent Torontonians for most of the 19th century.

One of those families, apparently, near the turn of the 20th century,
decided to renovate the kitchen,
installing a hulking, state-of-the-art cast iron stove
to replace the bricked-in hearth that had been used
by the household staff to churn out meals for decades.

¹ For those not from Toronto... The Art Gallery of Ontario, the city's major art museum.

It seems years passed before the family living upstairs came to realize the innovative upgrade downstairs had gone completely unused.

The stove had never even been lit.

And the family was blissfully unaware, as their servants continued to serve up the meals to which they were accustomed, using the tools and traditions that had always guided their cooking.

Sometimes, it's better to not mess with a good thing.

And, sometimes, it really does require training and education, an openness to change and a true commitment to trial and error, if we really are to have any hope of evolving.

Keeping up with the times in which we live involves a certain amount of discomfort, as we stumble our way forward into a new and different future.

Now, it's rare that religious communities take up such a commitment. We tend to be set in our ways.

The tried and true is, for better and sometimes for worse, our "tradition."

There are three common phrases that are the stuff of church legend when it comes to trying to bring about change:

"But, we've always done it this way."

"But, we've never done this before."

"But, we tried that a long time ago, and it didn't work."

It might be easy to dismiss these voices as sticks-in-the-mud. In terms of technology, we might label them Luddites.

And, yet, I have compassion for those voices, in our congregation and in our larger culture, and an appreciation for the conservative causes they sometimes cling to.

Because what I also hear in their voices is a real mix of fear and love.
Fear for what is being lost or at risk.
Love for what is precious and worth saving.

Those voices are important given that we live
in an era of unprecedented change.

No generation in the vast expanse of human history has lived
through as much innovation as we have in just a few short years.

Our world is growing more complex and more connected with each passing day.
There are blessings that come with this, and there are significant challenges.

It has become fashionable to embrace
the latest and greatest innovations as an early-adopter—
to stay on life's cutting edge by making the most
of every break-through and each new gadget,
riding the wave of novelty into the next revolution.

And it has become equally fashionable
to decry the overwhelming acceleration of life,
to bewail the pace of change,
to lament the evils of technology,
and the general direction humanity seems to be headed.

It's no surprise that many people are opting out,
unplugging from the rat race, and seeking a simpler life.

I imagine we all know people who have left Toronto because they
refuse to endure any longer the demands of urban life.

There is, understandably, something powerfully persuasive
about the ability to sit by a lake
or to gaze upon a landscape slowly changed by the seasons
in order to catch your breath, to gain perspective,
and make sense of what it means to be human.

And, yet, I don't see this as a choice between "either/or."
The true challenge of our times is to embrace a "both/and" approach.

To honour and cherish tradition,

while making the most of technology and change.

In both cases, it's a matter of how we rely on each,
of how we understand these to be tools for simultaneously
preserving the world and for creating the world we most want to bring into being.

As is so often the case, tools are morally neutral.
It is how they are used, and to what ends, that is the true test.

I invite you to pause here for a moment and give thought to some recent innovation,
some technology that excites you, that gives you hope,
that holds genuine promise for making life better, for you or for the planet.

And I now invite you to consider a technology you find troubling.
Some innovation that gives you the willies, that leaves you baffled,
or causes you to fear for the future of humanity.

What is it like to hold these images in tension with one another?

What is this moment in time asking of us?

I believe we are being asked to hold on to what is of enduring worth,
while holding ourselves open to the ingenuity that has the power to serve life.

To do this involves giving serious consideration to what we value,
to give thought to what is most worthy of our devotion, our care, and our protection.

So much so that we are moved to action in its defence,
when we come to truly see how high the stakes are.

This is what I hear as the deeper concern, by way of example,
when people complain about how technology is driving people apart.

These aren't necessarily the voices of cranky technophobes,
but the voices of those worried for what is being degraded and abandoned and lost.

A few weeks ago, when I was spending part of my sabbatical in Barcelona,
I found myself absolutely unable to exit the subway car I was in
when we reached my intended stop.

I was only a couple of metres from the door,

and the train wasn't even as packed as it might have been.

Still, there were almost a dozen people between me and the platform who couldn't hear my polite request that they make way for me.

It didn't help that my capacity to speak Catalan is almost non-existent, but the clearer culprit was that almost every one of these people was in a world of their own, with ear buds playing out their personal soundtrack.

Now, I love great music, and I don't begrudge anyone its benefits, even on the Metro or the TTC.

But in that moment—and in so many moments like it—
I see us being a cast of oblivious individuals,
rather than the interdependent human family we actually are.

And when we're in our own little worlds,
we seem to have less ability, and maybe even less willingness,
to see, and understand, and engage
the other little worlds with which our own lives collide.

I, for one, lament the loss of civility in our common spaces,
and I regret the ways I myself contribute unintentionally to that loss,
and, if truth be told, the ways I do so willingly.

There are times, especially at the end of a long day,
when I get on the TTC and I become engrossed
in reading email on my phone, checking out the news,
or just wanting to see what's happening on Facebook.

There is, after all, balm for the weary soul to be found
in watching those much-maligned cat videos on YouTube.

And there is genuine community that is created and strengthened
through our online activity.

Friendships are tended and important support found
through our online lives.

We can be connected more deeply with the reality of our world
through what we are able to learn through social media and beyond.

Yet, again, it's all about how we use these tools—
about how we hold the tension,
about how we honour what we most value—
that speaks to whether we truly live out our commitments as we might hope.

A few weeks ago, there was a gathering of people in my office.

We were awaiting the arrival of one last person,
so I quickly checked my phone to see if there were any pressing emails
I needed to respond to before beginning the meeting
that would last a few hours.

I apparently spent more time entranced by my phone than I realized.
I thought I was just quickly glancing things over.
I didn't, of course, want to be rude.

But when I looked up, when I came to, the four other people
sitting in my office were, by that time, also staring intently into their phones.

I sat there for a couple of minutes taking in the scene,
a scene I had helped to initiate by my own behaviour.

Eventually, another person pulled themselves away
from the small screen in their hand, and then another,
until we all rejoined the group of living, breathing people
with whom we had committed to meet.

I don't want to judge that moment too harshly, and I hope you won't, either,
but it is staying with me as a symbol of that challenging tension to stay connected.

In some ways, that day, we were all potentially meaningfully connecting
with people beyond the walls of my office; but in other ways,
we weren't giving priority to the gift of time before us to be in each other's presence.

The strictest interpretation of tradition, from a maven of etiquette,
would have clearly dictated the need to put our phones completely away.

But for those for whom the latest technology is second nature,
often younger people who are described as “digital natives”
(like that boy calling his mom in the poem I read earlier),

the idea of tucking a phone away is akin to amputating a part of the body.

Either/or? Or both/and?

I think this is the true test: do these tools of tradition and technology serve to bring us closer together, or do they distract us from the connections that sustain our lives?

Does the use of either, or any, of these tools drive us to distraction, lead us to greater isolation, to growing alienation from others and from the tap root of life itself, or do they foster powerful connections that uphold and honour the sacred bonds that bind our lives together?

As we wander through this brave new world, may we be attentive to the world-wide webs that knit our lives together, both virtually and in the flesh.

May we celebrate our connections, however they are made, using the best that tradition and technology have to offer.

And, in the meantime, if anyone happens to know where to find the fax machine, please let me know.

Amen.