

“A Vision for this Place”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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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.

Reading from *Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power* by Rebecca Solnit

Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal and change comes upon us like a change of weather. All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty are better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk.

I say all this to you because hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say this because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope.

Sermon: “A Vision for this Place”

“Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.”

So said the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.

“Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.”

We can't understand our lives by looking into the future;
we can only comprehend our life's meaning
by looking back over what has now become the past.

And, still, with each moment, we live life forwards,
propelled by every breath into the unfolding of the future.

Most every great religion has an overarching story about time,
some explanation to help its followers
understand where their lives fit into "the grand scheme of things."

A story that explains the meaning
of the past, the present, and the future.

A story that plants a seed of hope.
A story that promises change.
A story that holds out the possibility of transformation.

It's common for religions to revere the past
and point to a promised, improved future.

And most assign a very high level of importance to the present,
emphasizing that what we do today
makes a difference to that which is to come.

Unitarianism is no different in this regard.

We look to the story of human progress in the past
and recognise that what we do in the here and now
has a lot to do with how the world will be different
in days and years and even centuries to come.

Our faith doesn't offer any lofty promises
about a world beyond this one—
only an abiding hope that here, with each day we, together,
might help bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

That bending is a central element,
as I shared in last week's sermon,
of our national identity and purpose as Unitarians.

But it is also core to our identity as a congregation.

* * *

Most every week, I or the person sharing the announcements opens the service with some variation on our mission statement:

Committed to love and justice,
we seek to understand the meaning of our lives,
connect with others in common purpose,
and serve life to build a better world.

Seek. Connect. Serve.

Boiled down to these three words,
it's hopefully easy to dedicate our mission to memory—
and, much more importantly, to put into practice.

“Seek, Connect, Serve” is meant to be a description
of what we do and what we aspire to do better.

As a community, we are about
bringing more love and justice into the world
by seeking, connecting, and serving.

And these three words describe not only what we do,
but how to do it.

The “what” and the “how” are one and the same.
The way to seek, connect, and serve
is, simply put, by actually seeking, connecting and serving.

But you may be wondering about the “why?”

Why should we bother to seek, connect, and serve?

Because it matters—
because it matters if we are to summon the strength and courage
to increase the sum total of love and justice on this earth.

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We seek, then, to understand the meaning of our lives
because more and more we live lives driven to distraction,
with our focus too often diverted in a thousand directions,
and, at times, away from what truly matters.

We seek to understand the meaning of our lives,
because our culture veers dangerously toward
the shallow and superficial,
keeping us entertained and “infotained” at our own peril.

We seek to understand the meaning of our lives,
because we are too easily numbed to violence
carried out on the streets and in corporate board rooms.

Because we are too readily seduced into being cogs
in the relentless wheel of a consumerist machine
damaging and destroying life at a staggering pace.

Because we can be so preoccupied with things
of little to no importance, that we risk wasting away our lives,
while the work of love and justice is left undone.

We seek to understand the meaning of our lives,
because we know we were made for more than this.

To seek to understand our lives
is to delve into the heart of being human.

It is to sit with life’s capacity for joy and heartache,
to grapple with the facts of life and the fact of death.

It is to hold life’s blessings and its burdens together,
and still wonder at the miracle of it all.

And it is to give ourselves over—over and over again—
to the work of living an examined life.

To ask hard questions about the human condition—
and about the condition of humans everywhere.

And if we are fortunate,
in seeking to understand the meaning of our lives,
we come to know who we are,
and what life is truly asking of us.

* * *

We, then, connect with others in common purpose
because we know that what life asks of us we cannot do alone.

And, yet, we live in a time of terrible disconnection.

Too many of us live disconnected from what we consider sacred,
disconnected from each other,
and disconnected even from ourselves.

Too many of us live isolated lives, feeling vulnerable and alone.

In the past when I've polled the congregation
to find out what topics you'd like for me to preach on,
loneliness is always in the top three.

We no longer live as humans have almost always lived:
in tight-knit community, with most
of the intimate details of our daily lives witnessed,
for better and for worse, by the people surrounding us.

To some degree, for many of us,
this sense of community has moved online.

But while technology is certainly helping
to knit our lives together with others, it's also driving us apart.

Perhaps you've seen the art project of the photographer
whose photographs show people together, but alone.

The people in the photos are seemingly lost to the world,
completely absorbed with their smart phones.

If you haven't seen these photos,

it's not hard to conjure up what they look like.
I'm sure you've already seen similar scenes many times.

What's striking about these photos, though,
is that the phones have been digitally removed from the image.

What we are left with are bizarre photos
of a group of friends sitting around a table in a restaurant
or a couple lying together in bed,
all with blank stares on their faces
as they look into their cupped, upturned hands.

The genius of the photo series is
that simply removing the phones from the image
reveals just how very disturbing and anti-social the behaviour can be.

I wish I could plead not guilty to this behaviour myself,
but, like many of you, I cannot.

And, so, we connect with others
because it is with other people
that we are able to overcome isolation.

And because it is in community that we most effectively
carry out the work of the world.

That's not to say it's easy or always fun.

Community almost always confronts us
with unwelcome opportunities to grow.

As the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer puts it,
religious community exists so that you will
have to sit next to the very person who pushes all of your buttons,
and come to know that they have something to teach you.

As I often say, we are each other's spiritual practice.

There are plenty of times when we might be tempted
to feel we would be much better off by ourselves,
trying to live out our life's purpose alone.

Those feelings are understandable,
and at times completely justified.

And, yet, it always comes back to the reality
that we need one another to accomplish great things.

As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;
therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good
makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
therefore we must be saved by love.¹

* * *

Our mission statement ends: we serve life to build a better world.

A friend of mine is an Orthodox priest.

One day not too long ago, as we compared our traditions,
and the role social justice plays in each,
he was struck that so many Unitarians are atheists and agnostics,
without any particular plans for an afterlife.

I mentioned our fabulous production of *The Vagina Monologues*,
you know, as any minister does...,
and the \$15,000 we raised last February
to support Sistering, the wonderful organization
that helps women in need who are in times of transition.

I told him about the five Syrian refugee families
we've helped to bring to Canada this year
by partnering with a mosque and raising some \$300,000.

¹ From *The Irony of American History*.

I told him we recently committed to trying to sponsor even more refugees.

I went on and on, as we walked through Queen's Park that afternoon after a class we were taking together.

He found it telling—and powerfully so—that we do the work of justice, not out of any hope of heaven or some final, eternal reward—but that we work to build a better world because we simply believe it is the right thing to do.

I think the theology that undergirds this outlook on life is as rich and profound, if not more so, as the theologies of any of the world's other great religions.

That theology, plainly put, is this: we are a people of grace, gratitude, and generosity.

We recognise life as the precious, priceless, bittersweet gift that it is. A gift of grace—something we did nothing to earn or deserve.

When feelings of gratitude for this gift sink deep into our hearts, we respond with generosity to serve life itself.

It is our way of keeping the song of creation going. Our feeble attempt to repay the universe for the astonishing ability to just be alive.

That is, I believe, the basis for a Unitarian life of service.

Out of gratitude, we listen for life's compelling call to be of use.

We hunger for work that is real, and know that something of life's deepest meaning is bound up in what we do to make this world a better place, not merely for ourselves, but for all of life.

* * *

Finally, I want to return to the topic of hope.

We Unitarians can, at times, be a serious, somber lot.
We are, of course, descended from the Puritans.

We are often overwhelmed with all that's wrong in the world.
And, yet, hear me when I say that ours is ultimately a faith of hope.

To the surprise of many, ourselves sometimes included,
we share a faith that is fundamentally optimistic—
a faith that holds a core belief that we can actually make
a vital difference in improving the health and well-being
of life on this planet.

Many of us might not readily admit to that optimism,
but, still, I think it is there, seen in the dedicated work
of our hands and our hearts.

Even when we are besieged with despair and doubt
that our meager efforts will come to anything,
to take action anyway, to do what we can to be of use,
is a defiant, life-giving act of faith.

“Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.”

We may not comprehend the meaning of our actions
while we are doing them.

It may only be in the fullness of time, if ever,
that we know the impact of what we have done.

And, still, to do something anyway is to put one's faith in action,
to set our hearts to a forward-facing hope.

Rebecca Solnit, the author of the reading I shared earlier,
tells a story of the sometimes unknown impact of our actions.

It's the story of a woman who was part of Women Strike for Peace,
the early antinuclear movement
that successfully brought about the Limited Test Ban Treaty

in 1963, after nuclear fallout was showing up
in mothers' milk and babies' teeth.

Following this early victory,
the group turned their efforts toward the
House Un-American Activities Committee in the U.S. Congress.

Dressed as housewives and using humour as their weapon,
much as Canada's own Raging Grannies do today,
the women protested, making the anti-communist committee's tactics look ridiculous.

At the time, this unnamed woman² told others
how foolish and futile her efforts felt, standing in the rain protesting
in front of Kennedy's White House.

Decades later, Dr. Benjamin Spock,
who ended up being one of the highest-profile
and most adamant activists against the House Committee,
shared the story of what inspired him to take action.

He told about feeling a deep call to do something
when he witnessed on television a group of housewives
standing in front of the White House protesting in the rain.

He thought that if they were so passionately moved to do something,
then he could be and should be, too.

“Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.”

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As we face forward into the days we are given,
may we use our lives to seek, connect, and serve.

May we seek to understand the meaning
of this gift we have been given.

² Though Rebecca Solnit doesn't identify the woman by name, it seems she is speaking of Dagmar Wilson, one of the founders of Women Strike for Peace.

May we listen for life's call
and connect with others who have heard it, too.

May we, then, set ourselves to the work that is ours to do,
that we may be called forward into the fullness of our lives.

That with each breath we draw,
we may proclaim that “always, always something sings.”

Amen.