

# **“For all that is our life”**

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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*On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our shared ministry.*

It's something of a running joke between us.

On our anniversaries, Bob or I or both of us will reference the lyrics of a song by William Finn, which speaks of a couple's anniversary.

“Fifteen years,” the line goes.  
“Seems like thirty.  
Sometimes feels like five.”

Such is the nature of long-lasting relationships.

There are times when it's hard to believe so many years have passed.

Times when it feels you've been at it so long, you assume it actually has been forever.

There are other times when it feels you just got started.

And, of course, times when the years have felt a whole lot longer than they actually were.

Ten years. Seems like twenty. Sometimes feels like five?

It boggles my mind that ten years ago yesterday, I preached the final sermon of candidating week, walked down the aisle, and right on out the doors on to St. Clair.

Rod Branch, the president of the congregation, immediately called the business meeting to order, while I sat out in the sunshine on the patio

at the home of Paul LeVay and Anne-Lise Diehl.

While the congregation deliberated,  
I was down the street,  
hosted by their young daughter Charlotte,  
who brought me a nice cold beverage  
and a bouquet she had picked of those tiny blue flowers  
that explode all at once on lawns this time of year.

As I sat there waiting to hear the outcome of the meeting,  
I wondered how the vote would go.

I reflected on what my response would necessarily be,  
if the results were less than 95%,  
the usual margin for a clear call to ministry.

Though the meeting went swiftly, by all accounts,  
that time there on the patio that afternoon  
allowed me the space to affirm that, after a wonderful week together,  
this was, indeed, the ministry to which I felt called.

I knew my heart was ready to say, “yes.”

And I hoped the feeling would be mutual.

So, it was a tremendous relief when Paul called  
to inform me the vote had been unanimous.

It was a deeply affirming and powerful way  
for our ministry together to begin.

I will always be grateful for that strong show of support,  
and I will always remember what it was like  
to walk back into this building  
and be so absolutely overwhelmed by your love.

Now, I, of all people, know that,  
if you had it to do over again,  
the vote wouldn't be 100% today.

Such is the nature of long-term ministries.  
Such is the reality of any enduring relationship.

Familiarity can, indeed, breed contempt!

Over time, you have come to see my many shortcomings,  
just as I come to see yours.

And this is as it should be.

To wit, Barbara Rhode says there are five predictable stages  
to every long-lasting marriage—which is, at times,  
an apt metaphor to describe the relationship  
between a minister and congregation.

- (1) Darling, you are perfect.
- (2) Good grief. You seem to have a few foibles.
- (3) Let me help you get rid of your foibles  
so you will, indeed, be perfect.
- (4) Okay, I love you in spite of your foibles.
- (5) I can't believe this has happened,  
but I sometimes love you because of your foibles.

I can tell you that after ten years,  
I have truly fallen in love with this congregation,  
not only in spite of its shortcomings,  
but very often because of them.

When ministers and congregations  
are successful, or effective, or at least very lucky,  
they learn to compensate for the other's shortcomings,  
they learn to balance out the deficits  
that are part of the bargain of being together.

I am grateful for the ways  
you've done your part in this so very well.

The fact is that you have made me a much better minister than I ever could have become on my own.

UU minister Jack Mendelssohn once said that the thing about great ministers and great congregations is that they create one another—that they draw the best out of each other.

I very much hope the same can be said of us.

For my highest hope for this shared ministry is that in my service to you, I will call you to your best selves, both as individuals and as a congregation.

Not that we will be perfect in this, and not that we should.

But that we might, as a community, strive onwards to be faithful to our vision to live out the principles at the heart of this great tradition, that we might be a beacon to those who seek us, and that, together, we might do our part to help build a better world.

\* \* \*

In a few minutes, we will renew the covenant of ministry between us, giving new life to the promises we first made a decade ago.

A few months ago, in conversation with a group of emerging leaders in the congregation, it became clear most of them weren't part of First when I was installed, and were largely unaware of the commitments between us.

It seemed clear that it was time to renew our covenant.

In our liberal religious tradition, we put a great deal of emphasis on covenants.

So much so that we often say,  
when pressed to explain our faith to the uninitiated,  
that we are a covenantal, not creedal tradition.

That is, we are not held together by a set of shared beliefs,  
but by our promises—by the commitments of our hearts  
in how we intend to be with each other and the world around us.

Each year, on the anniversary of key moments in my life,  
I return to the promises I have made.  
I reflect on the commitments that give shape to who I am.  
I take stock of how well I am living up to those promises.  
And I resolve to continue growing  
ever-more deeply into the covenants I have made.

It is something I do with the marriage vows I have made to Bob.  
And it is something I have done here,  
each year since I arrived,  
on the anniversary of my ordination and my installation.

The best relationship advice I've ever been given  
came from a mentor many years ago.

Make promises you can keep.  
Keep your promises.  
And your promises will keep you.

That advice has been a guiding light in my life.  
And it prompts me to return, over and over again, to the promises I have made.

\* \* \*

A couple of years ago, Bob and I decided to renew our vows.

More specifically, we wrote new vows.

On our anniversary, we went up north.  
And sitting next to a stream, all alone  
but for the chorus of crickets around us that late afternoon,  
we exchanged a new set of promises.

That day marked sixteen years together.  
The vows we made spoke  
    to the person each of us had become over that span of time.  
Both of us different in (early!) middle age  
    than we had been in our younger years.  
Each so much better known by the other.  
Each deeply loved beyond our foibles,  
and even because of them.  
And both entering into a new covenant  
    to reflect the next stage of our lives together.

\* \* \*

Today, in renewing our covenant,  
my hope is that we will give new life to the promises  
which hold us together.

And that we will, with hope and resolve,  
deepen into our commitment to this shared ministry  
as we begin the next stage of our journey together.

While the words are largely those we exchanged ten years ago,  
they've been slightly updated to reflect some of the things  
that have obviously changed over the past decade.

But, more than anything, it's how we've changed  
that make these words different than they were before.

We now know each other much better than was possible  
when you called me and installed me.

I have grown and continued to evolve in many ways.

With your help, I have figured out what it means to be a minister.

And I think I've mostly figured out what it means to be your minister!

I am better at this wild and wonderful work because of you.  
And I thank you for that. With all of my being.

And, if I may say so, you have also changed.

Today, building on the efforts of the generations before us,  
our congregation has come into its own,  
with renewed strength and vitality.

We are guided by a wonderful team of leaders and staff  
who have brought so much skill and devotion to their work among us.

We are more focused than I've ever seen us.

Which is a very good thing, given that we are gearing up  
for real estate decisions that will affect the future of our congregation  
for decades to come.

For years now, we have been preparing in countless ways  
for these next steps.

And I feel confident we are now ready.

When I first arrived, I didn't feel this way.

The congregation was at a low ebb, having just come through  
a challenging interim period between settled ministries.

And though there was much talk when I arrived  
about possibly moving to a new location,  
I deeply worried the congregation wouldn't survive the move.

The congregation felt fragile to me back then.

But that's not true anymore.

Most encouraging to me is that  
our endless conversation about relocating  
has found its grounding, at last, in the essential questions  
about who we are and who we seek to be, as a congregation, in the city of Toronto.

Our conversation about moving

is now centred on where we can best be situated  
to live out our vision to seek, connect, and serve.

On how to build a sustainable congregation for the future,  
in a religious climate that is dramatically changing.

On how, even, to “do church” differently,  
in order to remain relevant to the times in which we live.

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Back when I was in search for a congregation,  
I narrowed my list to the seventeen  
I was interested in applying to.

I showed my list to Bob and asked him to mark off  
any of the places he was unwilling to live.

He immediately took Atlanta off the list,  
and then handed it back to me.

As a minister in search, my job was to find the best possible fit.

To seek to truly understand each congregation’s story,  
to see its strengths, and to try to glimpse its shortcomings.

And to gauge whether that glorious mix  
somehow matched up with what I had to offer.

As I began interviewing with congregations,  
I was struck by my initial conversation with your search committee.

It felt there was a spark, so, I was thrilled  
when they asked me to come to Toronto  
to spend a weekend with them as a pre-candidate.

I recall sitting in Edith Burton’s living room on a snowy February day  
and being graciously grilled by the committee.

I remember trekking that night

with Helen Iacovino and Edith to Amherst, New York,  
where I would preach the next morning,  
with the search committee in attendance.

While the search committee is supposed to be  
incognito on these occasions, known as “neutral pulpits,”  
I think it was, quite frankly,  
pretty obvious why seven visitors from Toronto  
happened to be in the congregation that morning.

After all, there had been a blizzard overnight.  
No one was casually popping in from Canada  
without a very good reason...!

I mean, their pianist didn't even make it to the service that morning  
because there was so much snow.

Fortunately, I made it through the service.

The search committee and I had a wonderful lunch that afternoon.

And that evening Bob and I flew back to Boston.

The following weekend, I was doing it all over again,  
with another search committee in another city.

And the surest sign to me that I felt called to First Unitarian  
was that I couldn't stop thinking about this congregation  
while I was busy talking about the other one with its search committee.

That congregation was significantly larger and paid a good deal more.  
It would have been an interesting place to live. The people were lovely.

But it was clear to me I had left my heart in Toronto the weekend before.

When Bob and I flew back to Boston that night,  
it was a great joy, when we got home,  
to get word, from the search committee here  
that they hoped I would be your candidate.

The rest, as they say, is history.

And the rest, what has been to this moment, is also prologue.  
Prelude to the great work that is still ours to do together.

We are heading into an incredibly exciting chapter  
in the story of this congregation.

It also promises to be incredibly complicated,  
and deeply challenging in ways we can't even begin to imagine.

There will be days when we will surely question  
if we're up for this, if we're doing the right thing,  
if it wouldn't just be a whole lot easier  
to make due by staying where we're at.

Those are natural questions, and part of the process of discernment  
that we're in the midst of now.

What you need not question, though,  
is my enduring commitment to you.

It is for the hard times that we make promises.  
We make covenants to carry us through life's challenges.

And so I renew my covenant with you today,  
with my heart wide open to all that is our life—  
for all that is yet to come.

And I tell you this because I believe you deserve to know  
the depth of my commitment as we prepare to make  
such significant changes as a congregation.

My heart is with you for the long haul.

And if we keep our promises,  
our promises will keep us,  
come what may.

Amen.