

“Looking to the Future”

Danielle Webber

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

4 June 2017

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.

The Unitarian Church of Calgary, which is my home congregation, has spent the last 5 years hosting a Service auction, as one of their primary fundraisers. Every year the Minister, Rev. Debra Faulk auctions off a sermon title, which means that the person who bids the highest is allowed to pick the focus of a sermon that she will deliver during the next church year. Sometimes the person would choose a topic that they wanted to share the service with, but others would offer ideas that they wanted to hear Debra’s opinion on. Two years ago the person who won this auction item was Gorham H. Now I have known Gorham since I was 10 or 12 years old, he has been a patriarch of the Calgary Church for several decades, and when I decided to do an internship in the Calgary church I asked Gorham if he would be willing to sit on my intern committee. He is an incredibly endearing, generous man who really cares about his community, and is often in the church garden and the community garden tending to the dehydrated plants during the peak of Alberta’s hot summer months. He would deliver extra produce to the food bank, and teach the children and youth about the composting red wiggler worms in the fall and spring when they had to be brought inside and taken back out of the composting bins.

I knew Gorham to be a Universalist, Unitarian – holding onto pieces of the Christian Science theology that he grew up with (such as the ideas that sin was an illusion – but refusing to believe that pray and faith would heal all things), so when he won the Sermon Title at the auction I assumed that he would ask Debra to preach along these lines. But oh how I was mistaken. Later on, during one of our Intern committee meetings Gorham told us the title he had chosen was “Unitarian Universalism - Out with the Old and In with the New.”

Gorham explained that when he joined the church 50-plus years ago he and his wife were looking for a community that was “paying attention to world events” and doing something about them. That they wanted to be in a community that was engaged in social action and justice work, and that they wanted to raise their four kids to live into the values that would make them better, more socially aware people. But that now,

Unitarian Universalists are no longer the only church that is engaging in these initiatives. He believes that we have lost our edge, that we are just one of multiple faith communities and innumerable other organizations that offer people a space to engage this work. He also argued that it no longer mattered whether we were a church that was free, much like the way that James Luther Adam described in the reading that we shared earlier. He argued that the prophethood of all believers was no longer a thing that UUs could claim as their own. With trainings for every single type of community leadership available, and communities of belonging coming in multiple different forms, Gorham believed that it no longer mattered if we were a free church.

Although Gorham believed that we had lost our “edge” he also full heartedly believed that Unitarian Universalism still had things to offer the world, that their theology was life saving, and that the work we do is necessary in the world. And he wanted to hear a sermon about how we were going to deal with this, how were we going to enact into the world our understanding of faith and our visions of truth?

I never got to listen to Debra’s sermon about the future of our faith, although I would have loved to have heard Debra’s ponderings. But last year when in Vancouver attending the CUC’s Annual Conference and Meeting, we were introduced to the proposed vision statement of Canadian Unitarian Universalists, this was the piece that Shawn and I read before the last hymn, and I believe that this vision offers us a great opportunity to live into the future exactly what Gorham was asking for. An opportunity to breathe life into our faith, in a new and yes, an already existing way, and it definitely offers us a shared language to express our communities’ and our ideals to those who don’t know Unitarian Universalism.

And not only is the vision statement of “we envision a world where our interdependence calls us to love and justice” a strong statement to share with the world, but the Aspirations offer us an understanding of how to live into this vision. We aspire to be Deeply Connected, to be Radically Inclusive, to be Actively Engaged, to be Theologically Alive and to be Spiritually Grounded.

But what does it mean to be Actively Engaged or Theologically Alive? And how can this vision statement, of radical inclusion and spiritual grounding, move us to a place of more visibility in the wider world? What is it about this statement that moves us into a deeper sense of our faith?

Let’s take a step back for a minute. First Toronto has a Mission Statement – we say it every Sunday morning during the Welcoming. The words again are “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.” This mission statement

identifies the What of our congregation: What do we gather for, What is it that we intend our community and our relationships to do? Whereas a vision statement is supposed to offer the “How” in this equation. How is it that First intends to seek, connect and serve? There are many different ways that I have seen this work lived out in this congregation, from Lynn’s At First sessions for newcomers and new members, to the format of the Journey Groups, and even in the way some of the committees go about their work. Of course there are different ways in which the congregation could further live up to their Mission – but that is part of the point, we all need things to strive for.

What is different with the Vision statement that was approved last May at the conference is that this is a Vision Statement for Canadian Unitarian Universalists. It isn’t supposed to offer a how for a specific organization, such as the Canadian Unitarian Council (although they have adopted the language as their own vision statement) and it is not supposed to override the work that individual congregations have done around creating their own mission and vision statements. It was intended to bring all people into a common language, whether we are a part of a community, or live in a city without a congregation. Whether we are a regular attender on Sunday mornings, and sit on boards and committees or come by when we can find time in our busy schedules. This Vision statement offers space for all communities to identify with it, be they churches, congregations, fellowships, or start up communities, small gatherings, or individual people.

I find comfort in it, because as a Unitarian Universalist who lives in a different province than the congregation that I hold membership with, and soon to be leaving a congregation that I have come to call my own, I know that I still belong to this community, it reminds me that I do not need to belong to a congregation, or attend it regularly in order to be living into my faith. It also gives me the language, and the imagery that I am called to live into. To be Deeply Connected – both to my church community and to other Unitarian Universalists, to find connection with individuals I have not yet met, or to find deeper connection to those that I do know.

To be Radically Inclusive – to recognize that I have ingrained stereotypes, and to learn how to change my behaviours and my thoughts when someone brings these to the surface. But also to engage with those who are different from me, to make connections with people who I meet outside of my normal cohort – to learn the wisdom of those who are different than me.

To be Actively Engaged – to pay attention to world politics, news and current issues. I will stay involved in social justice work, and engage with activists who hold similar

values; as well I will listen when someone has a different opinion than mine, in hopes to deepen my understanding of the world and its inequities.

To be Theologically Alive – to continue to grow in my understanding of the world, and how I interact with it. To continuously examine my own sense of the holy and to contemplate how that fits with the way that I interact in the world, and how I connect with life. To constantly be engaging my ideas and ideals with others around me, attempting to discern my truth.

And to be Spiritually Grounded – I know that the work of being connected, inclusive, engaged and alive will be exhausting, and at times it will be overwhelming. In order to feel connected to the work that I am called to do I will continue to be grounded through my spiritual practices, living intentionally, and with connection to the sacred, so that I won't forget the reasons of my call to ministry and the call of Unitarian Universalism.

Being raised Unitarian Universalist and continuing to call it my faith and striving towards understanding myself and the world through the lens that is Unitarian Universalism- is not an easy task, and not something that I take lightly. But having this Vision statement to help guide me toward that world I dream of has made the path a little clearer.

I hope that the congregation and the Canadian Unitarian Council are able to see this vision statement as a way to live into their potential, and to understand how Unitarian Universalism can continue to recognize our interdependence and move toward love and justice.

I am not certain that this is what Gorham would have been looking for, when he asked for a sermon about the future of Unitarian Universalism, but this speaks to me of a future with direction. Looking at the future of my faith I can envision a sense of belonging that does not revolve around congregational members, or pledging or financial contributions; where belonging means that you are connected to Unitarian Universalism within your heart and your soul; whether that means that you practice it in a church, or on your own in a way that doesn't necessarily look like church. Looking to the future I see a faith where barriers have been removed, where we recognize the harm and the exclusion that our words and our actions can have and we change our behaviours. And not only are we actively seeking to improve our relationships with marginalized groups and individuals, but that they are at the center of our faith, leading the way forward. In this future Unitarian Universalists will be involved in policy change, educational work, public action and other ways of engaging with the issues of the world. We will call the leaders of our world to a higher standard,

we will seek ways to build communities for those on the outside of society's framework, we will support growth in our faith in ways that we currently don't realize are needed. In this future Unitarian Universalism greater depth of our own very rich theology will be understood more broadly, and we will continue to seek new truths and ways of relating to the world and each other – also recognizing the challenges and effects of misappropriation and misuse of other cultures' beliefs. In this future Unitarian Universalism we will have strong spiritual practices that support our work within and without our communities. We will find strength within our community practices and rituals – allowing ourselves to be filled up by the music, words, and practices of worship, and not forgetting that we can have the same practices while outside of our communities.

The future of our faith has never been in danger, but now – with clearer understandings of a collective vision and language to connect our communities together in new and not so new ways – our future seems much clearer. May it be so, and may we make it so.