

“Keeping Covenant”

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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.

Her name was Gussie, Gussie Brock,
but to the members of her Unitarian congregation
she was simply and lovingly known as “Gussie the Viking.”

As my colleague Robert Fulghum, her one-time minister, tells it:

“Long ago her Norse ancestors migrated west
in open wooden longboats across the North Atlantic
to settle in Iceland” in the ninth century.¹

“The restless gene in Viking blood must have remained potent
because, when Canada opened [the] western prairies to homesteaders
after World War I, Gussie’s family left Reykjavik
and immigrated to. . . Alberta
to settle near. . . Medicine Hat on the South Saskatchewan River.”

“They dug in on raw land, built a sod house,
and went to work farming” in “harsh country.”
Through “mean winters.
Hot summers. Relentless winds. [And] drought.”

A “tough life” in “hard times. Matched by strong people.”

“[Yet,] Somehow they hung on. But just barely.”

Several Christmases ago, Fulghum asked the members of his congregation
to share Christmas stories from their lives,
which he planned to compile into his Christmas Eve sermon.

The one that moved him most was Gussie’s.

¹ Robert Fulghum, *What On Earth Have I Done? Stories, Observations, and Affirmations*, St. Martin’s Press, 2007.

Looking back almost eighty years, she said:

“...life was so desperate out there on the prairies,
and we were so poor that the most
we could ever expect for Christmas
was to be alive, warm and [with] something to eat.

The worst Christmas of all came after a week of heavy snow.
Firewood was scarce.

We were burning dried cow pies for heat
and huddling together in a heap under all our blankets
in all our clothes to keep from freezing to death.

We were living off boiled potatoes and turnips,
and [it looked like] there might not be enough
to last until spring. . .

On that Christmas morning my father got up
and made a fire as usual.
He was a solemn, stubborn, hard-working man.
We knew he loved us, but like most Icelanders
he didn't express his feelings openly.
It took all he had just to keep us alive.
But he did that with all his heart and soul and strength.
My mother was ill—too sick to get up or eat.

When father called us kids to the fire,
we didn't expect much—least of all any [gifts].

[But,] as we crawled sleepy-eyed and shivering out of bed,
we stopped, astonished.
For there in the dim light we saw on the table—an orange.
A single orange on a white napkin.
We were dumbstruck. An orange. An ORANGE!

Out here in the middle of nowhere in the middle of winter.
An honest-to-God orange,
glowing in the dim light like a golden ball.

“Merry Christmas,” he said, “the orange is for you [all].”

We wondered, “how on earth did he get that orange?
Where? When? How long had he had it?”

It was two days’ ride on horseback to the railroad line.
Three days to the nearest village.

He was capable of doing something like that,
but we wanted. . . details.
We begged him to tell us. But all he would say was,
“It’s a miracle.”
And we might as well believe [it], because there it was.

We sat still as he so carefully peeled the orange
and divided the sections to give each child an equal share,
along with pieces of the peel.
The smell filled the room.
Our mouths watered in anticipation.
We were almost afraid to touch the miracle in front of us.
And then, oh my, what a moment,
we began to eat the orange,
the juice dripping on our fingers and down our chins.
I can still taste it. The sweetest thing I ever ate.

[But, then,] my oldest brother suddenly said, “Wait.”
He pointed at Dad.

We saw that Dad had given all of the orange to us, the children.
Every bit. [Leaving] none for him[self].
So my brother took a knife and cut a piece of his orange
and placed it in front of my father.
And the rest of us did the same.
My father divided his share in two parts.
“These are for your mother when she’s [well],” he said,
and then we watched as, slowly,
like a man taking holy communion,
he ate his share of the orange.

It was the only time I ever saw my father cry.
As the years went by, the story of the orange became a family legend,
told by [the] generations.

The kids always said the orange
“was the finest gift [they] ever got.”

[But, our father said it was different for him.]
He said his best Christmas present ever
was the moment when his children noticed he was without
and gave back to him part of what he had given to them.

I suspect we all have our own oranges.

At least I hope each of us
has gathered up the moments of our lives
that tell of gifts freely given,
gifts gratefully received,
and gifts shared from the abundance of our own being.

Those unexpected moments that enrich our lives
because we never really saw them coming.

What Gussie’s father said was a miracle.
What some might call grace.
Or what we might simply see as love in action.

But the only miracle behind that improbable orange
was the love of a father who carried it in his very human hands
across the hard odds of an Alberta winter
to place it on that table for those he loved.

That orange was nothing less than an act of great devotion,
and Gussie and her siblings knew it.

And, led by love, they responded in kind.

It is a powerful parable.

And it causes me to wonder what oranges have touched your life,
and maybe even changed its course?

What act of kindness, or grace, or gratitude
has so moved your heart that the only meaningful response
you could make with your life

was to give back something of yourself?

Often, I find that when I ask people
why they do what they do in the world,
there's usually some sort of orange in the story:

the mention of a mentor who inspired them
beyond what they had thought were their limits;

the kindness of a stranger
who in a moment of need altered everything;

or the precious opportunity they would never have had,
had it not come wrapped up in someone else's sacrifice.

Whatever the moments you might name,
they are worth paying attention to,
because very often these are the defining moments of our lives—
the ones that give shape to how we answer
the questions at the heart of being human:

Are our lives being lived in service to others and the greater good?

Are we known not only for being generous,
but for a generosity of spirit?

In how we spend our days,
are we striving to repay the debt of gratitude
we owe for the great gift of life itself?

I pose such personal and prying questions,
because they are the ones that matter most in the end,
the ones that will cause us to look back
with either satisfaction or regret,
the ones by which the meaning of our lives
will ultimately be measured.

Today is what we have, and though we might wish it otherwise,
nothing more is ever promised to any of us.

The sober truth has always been

that we make a life out of what we do with our days.

And that's why our oranges matter—
because so much of what we make of ourselves in this life
is an unfolding response to whatever has come our way.

And those responses, those choices,
stacked one atop the other,
come to tell the story of who we are.

Often, we don't put a lot of thought into these choices.

We simply go along to get along.
We let life wash over us.

There is, at times, something to be said for this approach.
Moving through life with calm equanimity
should be a goal for us all.

Yet there is also something to be said
for bringing real intention to the choices we make,
to taking seriously the commitments that hold and guide us,
and, from them, to create a framework, a map, a vision
for how we wish to be in the world,
for how we will live, come what may.

This is, to me, the work of living by heart,
and it is the gift of living in covenant.

It is to bring what we love,
what we most treasure,
what is worthy of our heart's deepest devotion,
to the central and sacred work
of becoming who we long to be in this world.

That is why our religious forebears long ago let go
of battling over creeds, and turned, instead,
to the making of covenants.

We are a covenantal rather than a creedal faith today
because our spiritual ancestors decided

that how we treat one another is more important than whether we believe the same thing.

We are a covenantal rather than a creedal faith today because those who went before us discovered that what we do with our lives speaks much more powerfully to the faith within us than any belief statement ever could.

And, so, we, as a congregation, each week, renew our promises in covenant “with each other and with all,” using words from our heritage that have been edited, in slight but sometimes significant ways to pledge that:

Love is our doctrine.
That the quest for truth is our sacrament
And that service is our prayer.

We covenant:

To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
And to serve life,
To the end that all souls shall grow
into harmony with the divine...

These noble and ennobling words call us into the depths of our life’s true work, and into the fullness of our human promise.

They call us out of isolation and self-centredness, and into the heart of relationships that endure.

As any of you who have served in leadership around here know, this covenant that we speak on Sundays is only one of a number of covenants that exist in and guide this community.

There is a covenant among the staff, and one among the Board of Trustees. So, too, with the Convenors and the Choir,

and many other groups.

Lynn and I have a covenant with one another, as well.

These are all written documents.

Each a living, life-giving document open to revision and renewal.

Each a set of promises undertaken with our highest ideals in mind.

And each written with a clear awareness of our human capacity
to not always live as our best selves.

And, so, they are, more than anything,
covenants of the heart,
setting before us our loftiest goals,
while remaining grounded in the reality
of our failings and our short-comings.

The best of our covenants include a provision
for mending relationships when promises have been broken.

Offering a way back in. A way to heal.
A way to move on, stronger and better than before.

This part of the staff's covenant
is taken from the "Litany of Atonement" in our hymnal.

When we fall short, we pledge to do the hard work to
"forgive ourselves and each other, and begin again in love."

Which brings me back to oranges.

A covenant must spring from a foundation of love.

A covenant must be rooted in love if it is to come to life,
if it is to endure, and if it is to be repaired and returned to
when it has been broken or neglected.

That explains why enemies cannot create a covenant.
They deal in truces and treaties, perhaps, but not covenants.

Even ambivalence won't give life to a covenant.
That's because a covenant is not a contract.

It is not some transactional arrangement, a mechanical tit for tat.

A covenant is a commitment to being in relationship for the long-haul,
of wanting and working toward the best for each and all,
of seeking the glory of human flourishing
from a spirit of generosity, and with a heart full of love.

As Unitarians, we don't always get this right,
even after centuries of practice.
More often than we would like,
we have to begin again in love.

But it is the orange, or the oranges, I believe,
that keep calling us back—back into relationship,
back to our ideals, back to the promises that if held,
hold us in return.

So remind yourself often, remind yourself today and every day,
of what it is that you cherish above all else.

Give thought to how what you love
shapes the promises that guide your life.

Consider how moments of grace and generosity
have taught you the meaning of a life well-lived.

And then take those threads of love
and weave them into covenants that help you
to dwell together in peace,
to seek knowledge in freedom,
and to serve life
to the end that all souls
shall grow into harmony with the divine.

It's an amazing recipe for living.
So be sure to stock up on oranges.