

Who Are We?

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
12 November 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.

Reading “Rooster” – Alison Luterman

At first crack
in dawn’s black eggshell
my neighbour’s rooster crows
with a voice
like rusty tap water. He knows
nothing about
childhood asthma rates
from a nearby freeway,
or the incinerator on High Street
that burns up medical waste
and spews poison.
He dreams of a harem of plump hens,
but poverty has forced him to be monogamous
with one scrawny, lackluster egg-layer,
so he makes do like the rest of us.
O inner-city rooster
with scabby red wattles
and tough yellow feet
to pick through the asphalt and pebbles,
precious souvenir
of my exiled ranchero neighbour
who cultivates a towering cornfield
on his tiny scrap of lawn and scatters birdseed at 6 A.M.
before he leaves for the first of three
factory jobs. Last poet
of the barnyard in Mexico...,
you goad us with your call:
Wake up! Wake up! The sun is rising! It is I,
cacophonous prophet of morning,

who brought it forth!
How many times have I heard you
from the gray depths of sleep,
or from waking alone
in the silence of my own sweaty dream.
Brother Rooster, displaced
ghetto oracle,
rouster-out-of-bed, world-jouster,
like you I am directed to bungle
praises to dirt and light,
morning after morning,
no matter what.

Sermon

I don't know about you,
but I followed the debate at City Hall last month
with incredibly keen interest.

Would chickens be allowed in the backyards of Toronto, or not?
That was the delicate but pressing question put to the Council.

Admittedly, living downtown, I don't have a backyard.
And, being vegan-ish,
I don't have a particular interest in raising chickens myself.

But this question is of paramount importance to me,
as I do have an unfortunate history with a rooster
I would very much like not to repeat.

Two years ago,
while visiting the Unitarian congregations in Kenya,
I stayed in the centre of Kisii,
a small city in the lush, green, western part of the country.

Our hotel was humble.
It had cold, but barely running water.
The bed came with a mosquito net hanging overhead,
though it was riddled with holes.

All of that was fine.
We made do.

But what was not clearly explained upon check-in
was the problematic morning wake-up call.

And what a call it was. . . !

Just a few metres beyond my single-paned window
lived an incredibly ambitious rooster,
who seemed to take very seriously
his responsibility to signal the sunrise.

Wake up! Wake up! The sun is rising! It is I,
cacophonous prophet of morning,
who brought it forth.

Now, mass media had given me a false understanding
of how all of this worked.

The mistaken image I had always held
was of a rooster cockle-doodle-doing
as the first slice of the sun broke forth on the horizon.

Oh, no.

Perhaps, you already knew this.
I didn't. Not at the time.

As it turns out, a zealous, determined rooster
can begin to crow long—long, I say—before dawn.

Scientific studies have shown
that while a rooster can crow at any hour, day or night,
they, most often, tend to take up the task
two-and-a-half to three hours before the sun actually rises.¹

No wonder they feel they're doing such hard work
to bring about the dawn—they're at it for hours!

¹ <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/what-time-does-the-cock-crow/>

And no wonder I took such great relief
in the wisdom of the Toronto City Council,
which, in the end,
decided to allow a three-year pilot project.²

In four neighbourhoods in the city,
you can now keep up to four chickens.

But, I'm very happy to report, no roosters!

That said, as I've sat with Alison Luterman's poem
and this month's theme of Identity,
I've had to rethink my bias against roosters.
But I'll come back to that later.

Last week, Lynn preached to the question of "Who Am I?"
This week, I take up the question of "Who Are We?"

It's not exactly an easy question to answer.

We are many things, after all.
We are many different people.

People who sometimes barely know ourselves,
let alone know ourselves collectively.

At times, for example, I'm perplexed to hear people assume
that others here see the world as they do—
assuming that others share the same view
on questions ranging from theology to politics.

At other times, I'm baffled to hear people
assume a diversity that doesn't quite exist here.
In many ways, we are more alike than we are different.

As with the proverbial elephant,
we hold different perspectives on what this congregation is,

² <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/toronto-to-allow-backyard-chickens-in-some-neighbourhoods-in-pilot-project/article36468706/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>

based on how we relate to it.

And to some degree, many of our understandings
can be—and are—true at the same time.

Living with such contradictions and complexities is, I think,
an essential part of the spiritual practice of being Unitarian Universalist.

It means having a willingness to live with ambiguity
when we may crave certainty.

It involves ambivalence—feelings of both/and—
sometimes within our own heads,
sometimes within our own hearts.

It means being challenged and sometimes being offended.
Our faith doesn't promise your feathers will never get ruffled.

A friend of mine quipped recently that we should assume
at least 20% of what happens in our congregations will upset us.

That sounds about right to me, though your mileage may vary.
And past performance, of course, doesn't predict future results.

But this faith of ours is also
an enduring call to deep engagement—
with life's big questions,
with ideas not our own,
with experiences and views beyond our understanding.

There is at the heart of this faith and this congregation
an open invitation to expand our thinking,
and to grow the capacity of our hearts—
that we might become more compassionate, loving people,
who are moved to use the life we are given
to help make this world a better place.

Though the language used to describe it at the time was different,
this was the founding purpose of our congregation in 1845.

To be a place, as our children's covenant reminds us,

of open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands.

Or in the words of our vision statement today,
to seek, connect, and serve
that we may increase the sum total of love and justice on this earth.

* * *

Last weekend, I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico,
to give the “Charge to the Congregation” to the First Unitarian Church
as they installed their new Senior Minister—
my friend and seminary classmate, Angela Herrera.

The charge on this occasion
is an opportunity for a visiting minister
to offer some friendly advice and, perhaps, a gentle challenge,
as a congregation begins a new ministry.

It is a visiting minister who offers such a charge,
because, simply put, there are things
that it’s sometimes better to have an outsider say—
just before they get on the next train out of town.

In crafting the charge for that congregation,
I gave thought to what an updated charge might be for us here,
at this point in our history,
at this stage of our evolution,
as we explore the move to a new home,
and as we find ourselves in a world
that seems to grow more confounding by the day.

So, with the question of identity, of who we are,
and who we are becoming, weaved in,
and without a train ticket booked to get out of town...,
here are a six areas where I charge you:

I charge you to:

1) Continue to grow the heart of this congregation.

This little loving laboratory of the human spirit

offers each of us endless opportunities
to expand the size of our hearts.

So practice kindness, cultivate compassion,
offer forgiveness, and study love.

In other words, do your work.

Do the heavy lifting required
to live with a generosity of spirit towards others,
and towards yourself.

For the heart of this congregation
is ultimately made up of each of our hearts.

And the heart of this place
is only as healthy as we make it.

As I've said countless times,
how we live out our life together in community
is far more important than whatever we may accomplish.

How we are with each other
speaks powerfully to what is within us.

2) Let this place change your life and our world for good.

Come here to be fed and empowered and inspired,
and then carry something of yourself
out into the world to be of service.

We will never agree about the specifics
of what must be done to create more justice and peace.

And we don't have to.

But endeavour to find common cause, as often as you can.

Work across differences.
Take risks that ask you to grow.

But, above all, stay nourished.

We can only be sustained in the work of healing the world
if we protect and tend the tap root that gives each of us life.

3) “Honour thy limit.”

In the words of one of our hymns,
we must honour our limits.

We must understand the realities of our situation,
and carefully discern when those realities
can be challenged and changed,
and when they must, instead, be embraced and accepted.

This can be difficult to do in a world with so much need,
with so much in need of healing and repair.

But the test of our times is to be strategic with our energy.

To grapple with the tension between the things we can change,
and the things we cannot.

If we are depleted without being effective,
our efforts will come to naught.

So may we do everything we can.
While being both strategic and sustainable about it.

4) Be as generous as you can.

Support this place with a measure of your devotion—
through the commitment of your time,
the gifts of your energy,
and with your financial support.

Though scores of people are involved
in the running of this place,

we struggle to find enough volunteers
to carry out not only everything we hope to accomplish,
but sometimes even the simplest of tasks.

It can, of course, be healthy to say no, when needed.
As I said a moment ago, “honour thy limit.”
We respect that around here.

Our goal must always be to find the right person
for the right job at the right time.
If one of those things isn't true, it's not a fit.

And, yet, we are held back by never having
quite enough people to help row our boat.

If you haven't taken up an oar around here in the past
—or in a while—I know for a fact that volunteers
at the Engage & Connect table upstairs
would be delighted to talk with you today,
or any Sunday after service.

This dynamic echoes in our financial life, as well.

As a congregation, we tend to scrape by.
We make do.
Budget creatively.
Squeeze when and where we can.

But we haven't come close
to tapping into the transformation that would be possible
if we were to give to Unitarian Universalism
at a level comparable to what many other people
give to their faith traditions.

While UUs are typically found in surveys
to have the highest levels of education and wealth,
we are also routinely at the lowest levels
when it comes to the financial support of our faith.

There is an often-stated hope around here
that we could be a brighter beacon

to the City of Toronto than we are.

There are frequently expressed hopes
that we could do more than we do.

Yet, it is always a question of limited resources.

While many people in our congregation
have learned to give until it feels good,
and have stepped up in such significant ways
to help when needed,
our capacity as a congregation
to have a greater impact
is tied directly to our generosity.

As you make your pledges for the year ahead,
may your commitment to First
and the level of your giving,
make a meaningful difference in your life.

5) Become an ever-bolder people.

Our congregation has shown remarkable courage
in opting to sell our building and set out to find a new home.

Making a move at this point in time
will go a great distance to strengthening the congregation's prospects
in a changing world for generations to come.

But simply "moving house" won't be enough.

The times in which we live,
when religious institutions are facing serious headwinds,
are asking us to do things in new ways,
to take risks, to be creative, and to change.

I'll say more about this in next week's sermon.

6) Finally, hold on to the hope at the heart of our faith.

Which brings us back to the rooster.

We may not always be cacophonous prophets of morning.

The power to summon the sun
may actually be beyond our ability,
though I know that comes as a shock to some of us—
not least myself.

In this beautiful, hurting world, though,
may we be faithful stewards of the sunrise.

For ours is a faith committed to the dawning
of a brighter future.
May we labour to bring forth the light that stirs the soul,
the hope that burns in our hearts—
the saving, sacred hope
of a just and peaceable world,
with all her people one.

And when tempted to give into despair,
when hope seems a luxury
in a world so shot through with suffering,
may we return to Brother Rooster,
and the wisdom of the poet,
who reminds us that like him, we are
 “directed to bungle
 praises to dirt and light,
 morning after morning,
 no matter what.”

In doing so, may we come to truly know who we are.

Amen.

Closing Words

May we, like Brother Rooster,
roust the world with the rising of the sun.
May we direct praises to dirt and light,

morning after morning, no matter what.
May we go forth to herald the promise of this day,
and every day we are given by the grace of life itself.