

“Where Are We Going?”

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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.

Meditation “The Road Not Taken” – Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Reading “Consolation” - Billy Collins

How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer,
wandering her cities and ascending her torrid hilltowns.

How much better to cruise these local, familiar streets,
fully grasping the meaning of every roadsign and billboard
and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots.

There are no abbeys here, no crumbling frescoes or famous
domes and there is no need to memorize a succession
of kings or tour the dripping corners of a dungeon.

No need to stand around a sarcophagus, see Napoleon's
little bed on Elba, or view the bones of a saint under glass.

How much better to command the simple precinct of home
than be dwarfed by pillar, arch, and basilica.

Why hide my head in phrase books and wrinkled maps?

Why feed scenery into a hungry, one-eyed camera
eager to eat the world one monument at a time?

Instead of slouching in a café ignorant of the word for ice,
I will head down to the coffee shop and the waitress
known as Dot. I will slide into the flow of the morning
paper, all language barriers down,
rivers of idiom running freely, eggs over easy on the way.

And after breakfast, I will not have to find someone
willing to photograph me with my arm around the owner.

I will not puzzle over the bill or record in a journal
what I had to eat and how the sun came in the window.

It is enough to climb back into the car
as if it were the great car of English itself
and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off
down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna.

Sermon: “Where Are We Going”

Well, if, having read my sermon title, you turned out today with high hopes of learning where our congregation will be moving in two years time..., well, I’m very sorry to disappoint you.

This isn’t that Sunday.
And it won’t be next week either.

Quite frankly, neither I nor the Real Estate Task Force know the answer to the multi-million dollar question of where we, as a congregation will live once we sell this building and begin the two-year leaseback period before actually moving.

That’s not to say that the task force isn’t busy at work looking for our next home.

They’ve been at it for years now.

They are, in fact, the hardest-working group of people I’ve ever seen in our congregation.

While riding the proverbial roller coaster to sell our present building, and even for a few years before that, there have been dedicated volunteers scouting out a new location for First Unitarian.

A number of options have been explored.
Interesting possibilities are on the horizon.
And significant hurdles still exist as we work to find the best possible solution to our real estate needs.

As we’ve already seen, this will take time.
It will also take patience. And stamina. And courage.

And it will require a beautiful blend of vision,
a sometimes sobering dose of reality,

and a gracious and ongoing capacity for compromise.

Our new building will, we hope and plan and pray(!),
be a lovely, efficient, and sustainable solution
to as many problems as we can possibly anticipate,
and as many challenges as we can reasonably solve.

I am completely confident we will find a new home,
even if it takes longer than we might like.
And even with all the complications and compromises
it will surely entail.

But, I'm not here to speak this morning to where we're moving.
Instead, I want to talk to you about where we're headed.

* * *

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,” the poet tells us.

And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I don't know that anyone has ever captured
quite so eloquently as Robert Frost
the quandary of finding ourselves at a fork-in-the-road.

Of standing at a crossroads, with two paths before us,

confronted with a choice between possible futures.

Do we take the more well-worn path?

Or do we venture onto the one not so heavily trod?

How long do we stand at the fork pondering our options?

How long before our not deciding becomes our decision?

These are defining questions.

For how we handle life's crossroads comes to define us.

The choices we make, for better and for worse,
give shape to our identity—
with each decision, with each branching off,
making the return to what was before
less and less likely, if not altogether impossible.

Frost names this poignant truth as only a poet could:

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

Yet, sometimes, that can be a very hard truth to accept.

Several years ago, I heard Cheryl Richardson,
a big-name life coach, in a discussion
with a woman about the clutter in her life.

The woman explained she was burdened
by the heaps of stuff in her home.

Richardson asked her to describe what comprised her clutter.

She listened, at length, and then, quite astutely,
pointed out that much of the list was a litany of grief and loss.

The woman had listed her violin, her books, and her art supplies,
her old clothes that didn't fit anymore,

and tons of stuff she didn't even know why
she had bought in the first place.

As Richardson engaged the woman,
it became clear that so much of what she was holding on to
was the stuff of broken dreams or dreams deferred.

Aspirations to be a concert violinist and a great artist.
Hopes of losing enough weight to fit into her former wardrobe.
A fantasy that somehow a houseful of stuff
would help her feel whole,
would somehow make her life complete.

She was holding on to the hope
that she would someday return to take the other road.

In his book [*Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*](#),
Adam Phillips speaks to roads untraveled—
to what we missed,
the paths we chose not to take,
the lives we chose not to live.

In the book's introduction, he writes:

There is always what will turn out to be the life we led,
and the life that accompanied it,
the parallel life (or lives) that never actually happened,
that we lived in our minds, the wished-for life (or lives):
the risks untaken
and the opportunities avoided or unprovided.

We refer to them as our unlived lives
because somewhere we believe that they were open to us;
but for some reason—
and we might spend a great deal of our lived lives
trying to find and give the reason—they were not possible.

And what was not possible all too easily
becomes the story of our lives.

Indeed, our lived lives might become

a protracted mourning for, or an endless tantrum about,
the lives we were unable to live.

“But the exemptions we suffer,” he says,
“whether forced or chosen, make us who we are.”

As a congregation, we now stand at a crossroads,
looking down various road as far we can,
to where they bend in the undergrowth.

Actually, we’ve been at this crossroads for quite some time.
And we’ve been asking some pressing questions:

Do we stay, or do we go?

Do we build condos here, or do we start fresh someplace else?

Can we make enough from the sale of this site
to create a new home for our congregation?

In many ways, these have been the easy questions.

They are all largely technical problems,
with predictable, practical solutions.

If all goes according to plan,
we sell this building.
We buy or build another one.
We hire movers.
We unpack our things.
We start a new chapter.

But behind these relatively straight-forward questions
are much larger questions about our identity.

Who are we?

Where are we going—and when and why?

Who will we be when we get there?

And how will we know if and when we've arrived?

There are no easy, technical answers to these questions.
They're much more complicated to answer.

Fortunately, we've been working on these questions for some time, as well.

We have our vision and mission statement.
We have annual goals, and budgets, and our pledge campaign.

Week after week, by everything we do here
(and everything we don't do),
we write the story of who we are.

We travel farther down the road we're on.

We could, of course, keep at this for some time to come.

We could, stay put, and remain on this road as long as it serves.

But, as you've surely heard by now,
this road gets very rocky
when we look a few years into the future
and are forced to grapple
with the mounting costs of maintaining this building.

We are fortunate to have other roads before us.
Other paths available to us through the sale of this place.

But choosing the road for the journey still ahead of us
is a daunting prospect.

For, as Frost reminds us, "way leads on to way."

But, in our case, that can be a very good thing.

The religious landscape of 21st century Canada
is not offering many ways forward for most churches in Toronto.

As our society grows increasingly secular,
with just 21% of our population

considering themselves religiously committed,
most congregations are stuck on a road to ruin,
with no exits, no turnoffs,
and very few options but continued decline.

That means the crossroads where we find ourselves
presents to us the rare opportunity to take another path.

Though we have much more vitality
than many congregations in this city, we are not immune
to the headwinds facing religion in our culture,
even while being somewhat uncommon in our approach.

But we have a very strong hand to play at this moment in time.

We have a storied history on which to build.
A legacy that has left to us a strong congregation
with millions of dollars in assets.

(Millions, I will point out, that are held in real estate—
and not in our annual operating budget!)

And with this legacy, we have the rare and enviable opportunity
to do something new, something relevant, and perhaps—
if we are so bold—something radical.

I believe we need to approach the opportunity we face
as though we are newly launching Unitarian Universalism
in Toronto, as a compelling religion for our present age,
as a movement of committed souls
working to bring more love and justice into this world.

I believe we need to take on this task with a long view,
looking to how we can make not only the building,
but the congregation, as sustainable as possible
for what promises to be a future very different
from our present day.

We need to ask what it will take
to help this congregation live for another 172 years,
amid the impact of climate change and a less stable world order,

and in a very secular city, and through times of uncertainty.

But please hear me say this:
though I am a deeply devoted institutionalist,
my highest concern is for shoring up the future of this congregation
so that the people gathered under its name—
now and for generations to come—
may hold forth a beacon of hope,
may lift up a voice for justice,
and may call upon the transformative power of love
to heal the wounds of a hurting world.

Though it's not possible to know the future,
I am confident, given all I have come to know of human nature,
that there will be an ongoing need for a place like this.

That said, what the future needs from First Unitarian
won't be and can't be exactly like this.

We are being called to change, to stretch, and to grow.
We are being called to take the road that leads into the future.

We have the exceptionally rare chance
to respond to that call in creative and courageous ways
because those who came before left this legacy to us.

Of course, what First will become in the future is impossible to predict.

What I see, though,
in order to remain viable and relevant for more people,
is that First will need to exist in more times and places.

While there will always be a need for a central hub,
First could serve this city better
by having a few branches in other parts of the city.

This isn't a radical idea, of course.
It's how our congregation grew in the 1960's
and gave birth to the other UU congregations in the GTA.

Toronto is obviously so much larger than it was then.

And I think we can all attest to what a challenge it can be
to move across the city, given the state of transit and traffic.

This means we need to grapple with the implications
of having only one service at one location once a week.

If our goal is to truly be a beacon for our city,
and to increase the number of people
living a life grounded in UU values,
we will need to expand our thinking
in order to increase our capacity.

That doesn't necessarily mean a bigger building,
or even multiple buildings.

But it could involve a mix of activities
across the city and across the week
that flow from First and serve the needs of people
far beyond our walls.

In the coming months and years,
as we look down the different roads before us,
as we seek to answer the question of where we are going,
my deepest hope is that we will hold a wider vision,
that we will look beyond our own present needs
to consider the needs of future generations and the needs
of people who have yet to even hear of Unitarian Universalism.

For the crossroads where we find ourselves
is not merely one of geography, it is one of time.

The congregation that sits here this morning,
is balanced between the inheritance of our past
and the promise of our future.

With all of that held in our hearts,
may we choose the road that honours the legacy left to us,
as we create the legacy that we, in our time, will leave behind.

Amen.

Closing Words

[Someone] shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and we—
we took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

May it be so.