

“The Great Good Place”

Reverend Shawn Newton
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.

Reading: from “On Going to Church”

The reading comes from the Rev. A. Powell Davies, who was the minister of All Souls Unitarian in Washington, D.C. in the 1950s. He uses the word church quite frequently, but if it's not your word, feel free to hear congregation or community in its place.

Let me tell you why I come to church.

I come to church—
and would whether I was a preacher or not—
because I fall below my own standards
and need to be constantly brought back to them.

It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems
at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion.
It could too soon become too low a level.

I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me
to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable.

I must feel again the love I owe my fellow [humans].
I must not only hear about it but feel it. [And,] in church, I do.

I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world—
unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism.

Workaday enthusiasms are not enough.
They wear out too soon.

I want to experience human nature at its best—
and be reminded of its highest possibilities,
and this happens to me in church.

It may seem as though the same things could be found in solitude,
but it does not easily happen so.

In a congregation we share each other's spiritual needs
and reinforce each other....

We meet each other as friends and neighbours anywhere and everywhere, but we
seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls' deepest yearnings.

But in church we do—in a way that protects us from all that is intrusive, yet leaves us
knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual loneliness, the same
need of assurance and faith and hope.

We are brought together at the highest level possible.
We are not merely an audience, we are a congregation.

I doubt whether I could stand the thought
of the cruelty and misery of the present world unless I could know, through an
experience that renewed itself over and over again,
that at the heart of life there is assurance,
that I can hold an ultimate belief that all is well.
And this happens in church.

Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places.
The soul will always seek its nurture.

For religious experience—which is life at its most intense,
life at its best—is something we cannot do without.

Sermon: “The Great Good Place”

It begins the same way most every Sunday morning.

The sun comes up.
The alarm clock buzzes to life with little discernible effect.

Eventually, a stern but patient voice
calls out from the kitchen, announcing that it is time to get up.

But the man grumbles and groans,
and only pulls his blanket tighter over his head.

When his wife comes into the room to insist he get out of bed,
he explains that he just doesn't want to go to church.

When pressed, he complains that the sermons are boring,
the coffee is too strong, and the people aren't friendly to him.

And, his wife then says, "while all that may be so,
you're going to church this morning, so get out of bed.
You're the minister!"

* * * * *

I am happy to report that this isn't a problem I have.

Yet, I suspect some of us wrestle –
with our partners, or parents, or children,
and, sometimes, even, with ourselves –
every tug back and forth, a way of asking the question why –
why we come to this building, to be with this congregation,
engaged in the weekly work of worship.

It may be a question that you're asking yourself even now,
as you're wondering why I'm bringing it up.

So, go ahead, take a moment to ask yourself
why it is that you come? What is it that you come for?
Especially on a morning like this.

* * * * *

A recent survey in another congregation revealed
that people report, overwhelmingly, that they come seeking community.¹

In fact, the search for community surpassed all the other reasons combined.

That doesn't surprise me.

¹ Reported by the Rev. Peter Morales, Jefferson Unitarian Church, Golden, Colorado in UUA video, "Listening to Experience."

The urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg has written of our deep need for a “third place” in our lives - a place that, he says, “host[s] regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of [people] beyond [our regular] realms of home and work.”²

He says, we need those “‘third places’ which lend a public balance to the increase[ing] privatization of [our] home life.”

His term, the third place, derives from considering our homes to be the “first places” in our lives, and our work places, if we’re still working, to be “the second.”

Like pubs in England, cafes in France, coffee bars in Italy, and beer gardens in Germany, “third places are nothing more than informal public gathering places.”

Oldenburg says that, “The character of third places is determined most of all by its regular clientele.”

“Though a radically different kind of setting [from] a home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it [offers]...

[While third places] are the heart of a community’s social vitality, . . . , sadly, they constitute a diminishing aspect of [our]. . . social landscape.”

“Life without community has produced, for many [people], a lifestyle consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. [But, our] social well-being and psychological health,” he says, “depend upon community.”

Which is why we’re so fortunate to live in this amazing city. Community is seemingly available to us on every corner.

As Jane Jacobs once put it:

² <http://www.pps.org/info/placemakingtools/placemakers/roldenburg>

“Reformers have long observed city people loitering on busy corners, hanging around in candy stores and bars and drinking soda pop on stoops, and [they] have passed a judgment, the gist of which is: “This is deplorable!

If these people had decent homes and a more private or bosky outdoor place, they wouldn’t be on the street!”

“That judgment [she says] represents a profound misunderstanding of cities.”

“It makes no more sense than to drop in at a testimonial banquet in a hotel and conclude that if these people had wives who could cook, they would give their parties at home.”³

Indeed, to live in a city such as this offers the privilege of endless opportunities for creating meaningful human connection.

Yet, it can also offer the ironic despair of deep isolation.

When we surveyed the congregation recently about what topics you’d like for us to preach on, the subject of loneliness cropped up over and over again.

And, so, I suspect if we were to poll the congregation to find out why most of us come here, that the search for community – the quest for meaningful connection – would be at or very near the top of the list.

I’m happy to say that I know many of you do, indeed, find it here each week.

I know that many of you make it here each Sunday, come hell or high water, or ice storm, just to renew and savour the deep bonds of affection you’ve forged with one another through the years.

³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, chapter 3, 1961.

But, I also know that for others it's still something of a struggle to find that comforting sense of connection here.

So, to you, I would encourage you to try digging a bit deeper.

Reach out – with an open mind, an open heart, and an open hand, knowing, as the poet Marge Piercy tells us, that “connections are made slowly.”⁴

As it turns out, creating a third place requires a great deal more than mere physical space.

Building authentic human community takes intention and effort, and it takes time.

A case in point.

Thirty-five years ago, a man named Howard Schultz was on a business trip in Italy.

He had recently become the marketing director for a small chain of coffee shops in the Pacific Northwest.

While visiting Milan, he was struck by the Italian zest for living – their enviable balance of work, and rest, and play.

He saw people enjoying life – and it saw it on clear display in the infectious conviviality found in Italy's 200,000 coffee bars.

Schultz's mind started to spin, as he dreamed of creating similar places back home, where people could find casual community. A place where all would be welcome.

As you might have guessed, he came back to Seattle and founded what, today, is known the world over as Starbucks.⁵

Over the past thirty years, of course,

⁴ Margy Piercy, “The Seven of Pentacles.”

⁵ Story found in the Reverend Ginger Luke's sermon, “The Third Place,” River Road Unitarian Church, March 12, 2006.

Starbucks has spread to most every corner of the planet.

Where some see the great potential for new third places for everyone, others see these coffee shops as a fussy, over-priced scourge on the land.

Now, this isn't an advertisement for Starbucks, so I'll leave it to you to sort out the question of where to get your coffee.

But, I do want to make an observation.

Though I've enjoyed, through the years, some wonderful, lively chats with friends in Starbucks stores all over North America, rarely have I been in one of these shops and gotten a strong sense that I had just wandered into a genuine community.

What I've seen more often, is a lot of people, tucked safely behind newspapers and laptops, probably wanting some meaningful connection with each other, but seemingly unsure of just how to make it happen.

Now, maybe I've gotten it all wrong. Perhaps the parties break out when I'm not around.

But, it seems that some important ingredient is missing, some vital element that keeps every Starbucks from truly being a third place.

* * * * *

Several years ago, when I was in Boston, working at Arlington Street Church, arguably the mother church of American Unitarianism, the staff and the ushers noticed a curious trend on Sunday mornings.

Fifteen to twenty minutes into the service, a small crowd of people would arrive, coffee in hand (and, I'm not making this up, it was from the Starbucks just around the corner), and they would place their cups somewhere at the back of the church, slip into a pew, listen to the sermon, and then... leave!

Long before coffee hour,
and, certainly, well before the offering, they were gone.

Now, on one hand, I wanted to be gracious.

I wanted to be grateful that they seemed to have recognised in themselves some spiritual hunger which could be fed by, quite literally, dropping in for the sermon.

But, I also wanted to tell them that they were missing the best part.

That they were missing the point: that a congregation is a set of relationships – a set of complicated, at times confusing, and at its best, life-changing set of relationships.

And, *that*, I believe, is what we ultimately come looking for in a congregation, whether we realise it or not.

It's what we mean when we say we want community or connection.

And, it's what Starbucks is trying so hard to manufacture with mixed results.

But, real community takes an investment of our time, and of ourselves.

My hope is given enough time,
every coffee shop in North America might truly take up the challenge of becoming a genuine, third place,
of becoming what Oldenburg also called a “great good place.”

A “great good place.”

I can think of no better expression
to describe what every congregation, at its best, aspires to be –
a place of connection and commitment,
an enduring community of memory and hope,
that calls each and every one us to the highest purpose of our lives.

So, what surprises me, then, about Oldenburg's work
is that for all of his talk of our need for public places to make meaningful connections, he never mentions congregations as a possibility.

To me, biased as I am, that is the great flaw I see in his work –
that he misses entirely that all around are communities like this one,
doing precisely what makes for a great, good place:
a regular, voluntary, and happily-anticipated gathering
of a regular group of people in a playful mood
who come together for comfort and support.

That definition sounds a lot like a congregation I happen to know. . .

Let us then unabashedly be about the business
of building up this congregation to be a truly great, good place,
that can reach out and welcome in
all who seek what we have to offer.

One of my favourite stories of the transformative power
of reaching out comes from my remarkable colleague, Rebecca Parker.⁶

Years ago, living in Seattle (there's that coffee thing again. . .),
Rebecca was at the end of her rope.

One night, she had come to the end of her will to live.
She just wanted the anguish to stop.

It was spring. A cold, clear night.

Living at the top of the hill far above Lake Union,
sometime after midnight she left her house
and started walking down the hill.

She knew the water would be cold enough.
She would walk into it, then swim, and then let go,
sinking down into the darkness and, as she put it, “go home to God.”

Comforted by that notion, she had no second thoughts.
She was set on her course.

At the bottom of the hill, she had only the small grassy rise

⁶ Paraphrased from Rebecca Ann Parker's own telling, in her book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, written with Rita Nakashima Brock.

at the edge of Kite Hill to cross before coming to the water's edge.

She crested the familiar rise and began the descent
to the welcoming water when she was caught short
by a barrier that hadn't been there before.

It looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses,
laid out to the left and to the right, the width of the grassy field.

In the dark she couldn't see a way to get around either end,
but it looked like she could climb over the middle.

So, she quickened her pace, impelled by a grief that would not let her go.

As she got closer, the dark forms before her eyes seemed to be moving.
She squinted to understand what she was seeing.

The odd bunched shapes were a line of human beings
bundled up in parkas and hats.

The stick shapes weren't sawhorses.
They were telescopes.
It was the Seattle Amateur Astronomy Club.

Before she could make her way through the line,
one of them looked up from his eyeglass
and, presuming her to be a fellow astronomer,
said with great enthusiasm,
"I've got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look."

She didn't want to be rude or give away her reason for being there,
so she bent down and looked through the telescope.

And, there it was: Jupiter – banded red and glowing!
"Isn't it great?" he asked.
And, it was great.
Jupiter was astonishingly beautiful through the telescope.

That amateur astronomer didn't know Rebecca,
or know why she was there.
He just assumed that she was there

because the night sky is a wonder to behold.

Across the sheen of dark water, the lights of the city shimmered.
And, overhead, the sky was wild with pinpoints of fire.

Rebecca knew she couldn't kill herself in the presence of these good people
who had gotten up in the middle of a cold spring night,
with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes,
to take in the marvel of the planets and the stars.

Looking back on that moment,
she recalled the stunning words of James Agee's poetry.

Sure on this shining night
Of starmade shadows round,
kindness must watch for me
This side the ground. . .

“Kindness must watch for me this side the ground. . . “

That night, the poets, the amateur scientists,
and the splendid night sky kept Rebecca in this world.

She is quick to say that it was not overwhelming beauty that did it.
It was more that she simply came to feel more.

Her capacity to feel broadened. Her senses expanded.
And while life's hurts remained,
she embraced pain, and sadness, and despair, within a larger heart.

As she puts it,
“The ordinary inclination of human beings to share what pleases them,
the delight of being awake to the beauty of the night sky,
the cool air, the grass beneath my feet—these returned life to my senses.
[That night,] the commonplace translated itself into a deeper knowing.
[That] there is a web of connection we live in
that is greater than [our] senses can tell.”⁷

Friends, people walk down a great hill of despair every week

⁷ *Proverbs of Ashes*, 114-115.

and enter the doors of this building in the hope
that they will find here some reassurance
that life is precious and good,
that our days have meaning and purpose,
and that we are connected through and through
by a wondrous spirit of life.

May the doors of this great good place, stand ever-open,
ever-ready to receive them – and each other –
we who come in search of the enduring hope
at the heart of this community.

So may it be.

Amen.