

“Here Together”

Rev. Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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“Break not the circle, make it wider still, till it includes, embraces all the living.”

With these words “we sing the circle wider,” at each of our new member Sundays a couple of times each year.

It is indeed something to celebrate: the expanding embrace of personality and background and opinion within these walls—

The rich diversity of perspective and experience that makes First Unitarian of Toronto a place where so many find welcome and a sense of belonging.

Here together, we hold a wide spectrum of theological outlooks and opinion on many subjects...

So, here in community, you’re likely to find others whose viewpoints are compatible with yours.

People with whom you feel in alignment.

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At the same time, here together in community,
you're likely to find people with differing views!

In fact, chances are, if you're here with us awhile,
you'll come face-to-face with the one person in our
congregation who has precisely the opposite view to your
own.

It's an amazing how it happens!

Depending on your point-of-view...

The wisdom of your inner teacher,
the grace of God,
the miracle of synchronicity
or just dumb luck...

Will make sure that, sooner or later, you'll meet the person
who's the very best at pushing your buttons.

(It might even be one of your ministers!)

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Yes, here at First Unitarian, our Sunday morning services
offer enough variety that every person is virtually guaranteed
to find something they dislike.

We have hymns, for people who don't like singing.

And in our hymns, we have words
that people who like singing
don't like to sing.

We have sermons, which occasionally can seem,
well, preachy.

And don't get me started on
candles, stoles and robes.

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Outside of our worship services,
we offer many things to do
that are not everyone's cup of tea.

We encourage people to volunteer in ways
that they enjoy and feel well-suited to...

But even when we volunteer to do something we love...
there will come a day when it seems inconvenient,
boring, or not worth the trouble.

As Shawn said, in a funny story he told a few weeks ago
about a minister who doesn't want to get out of bed on
Sunday...

There are times when even those of us
who love "church"
don't want to come to "this place"....

Whatever it may be called.

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So, what are we doing, here together?

When I think about the purpose of religious community,
I'm reminded of some advice given to me about marriage:

And I think the advice applies to any relationship.

First, to see the differences between you as gifts.

And second, to take responsibility for your own happiness.

This advice might sound simple,
and it may seem easy to do when things are going well,
but when things are difficult—
well, we know it's not easy at all.

When we join any group,
perhaps a religious community especially,
we may seek a place where our differences are not
apparent...
and where some key to happiness might be offered.

We may be—let's face it—
horrified to discover,
after being in a relationship for awhile,

That the people with whom we're together
are both like us and unlike us.

And even the leaders can't offer
any simple answers.

As we continue to be present over time,
both here and in other rooms like these...

We may discover that the most
important and difficult thing we have to do
is to simply accompany each other...

...on the lifelong journey of growth.
which is ultimately a solitary journey,
even as it is, in some way, shared.

We are each responsible for our own growth.

But in relationship...
with companions of many kinds...
be they family, friends, fellow congregants,
or for some, a Higher Power...

we deepen and grow as individuals
who become ever more capable of love.

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I don't believe that all people need to be "joiners"
or extraverted and sociable,
or in formal partnerships with others
in order to have a meaningful and fulfilling life.

But for many of us,
at least at particular points in our journey,
living intentionally in some form of community
can give us exactly what we need for growth.

This growth, needless to say,
may at times involve discomfort and stretching...

Yet through that stretching,
we may move into a new ease...
a more relaxed way with life as it is...

That allows us to become more loving
and present to others.

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The author Wayne Muller paraphrases a well-known
Christian text in a way that I find meaningfully inclusive:

"Whenever two or more are gathered,
something is born in the soil of our having joined
in each other's open-hearted company."

He writes:

“Perhaps the greatest wealth you possess,
the most precious, valuable gift you can ever hope to offer
any human being is this one, simple, true thing:

You.

Your presence.
Showing up.

Being in the company of another,
undistracted, unhurried,
with an open heart,
gentle hands and a patient soul.

Willing and able to listen, do something...
or do nothing.

Willing to be surprised by
whatever emerges in the soil
of sharing your present, loving company
with another human being.”¹

I’d like to thank all our new members today for their
willingness to be present with us...

Through all the days that led to today...and all the days to
come.

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¹ Wayne Muller, *A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough* (New York: Harmony, 2010), 130.