

Keeping the Faith

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
18 August 2019

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.

They were said to be “consistent Unitarians.”

Downstairs, in the corridor near my office,
hangs a brass plaque honouring Margaret Mason and George Rose,
a couple who were longstanding members of this congregation
who died before we moved here in the 1950’s,
from our previous location on Jarvis Street.

The concise words of tribute read that
they were “in life consistent Unitarians.”

What a rare and remarkable thing!

Consistency, after all, isn’t exactly our hallmark.

Decades ago, when Universalist minister L. B. Fisher was asked
where his religion stood on some big theological question
he defiantly said: “We do not stand at all; we move!”

And so we have. And so we do.

Arguably more than any other branch
of the radical wing of the Reformation,
we have embraced the rallying cry
of “*semper reformanda*,” always reforming.

Our inheritance as Unitarian Universalists
has been an ever-evolving spirit
that proclaims that revelation is not sealed,
that new truths await our understanding,
that, in the words of Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell:

New occasions teach new duties,
time makes ancient good uncouth,
They must upward still and onward,
who would keep abreast of truth.¹

These stirring and highly optimistic words,
penned a century and a half ago,
grace our hymnal still today—
words that have echoed down the generations of this congregation.

And words that were surely sung by Margaret and George,
those two consistent Unitarian souls
whose names are inscribed downstairs,
during the decades they devoted to this congregation
the labour of their hands and their hearts.

But, it seems fair, I think,
to ask just how one can manage to “keep abreast of truth,”
upward and onward,
while at the same time remaining a “consistent Unitarian.”

How do we keep a faith that is constantly changing?

How do we put down our roots in a faith that is forever in motion?

How do we hold together two such seemingly incompatible goals?

I think that, at least, part of the answer is to be found in recognizing
that ours is not an “either/or” faith, but a “both/and” faith.

As with life itself, the strength of this faith
is in its being large enough
to embrace the contradictions of both constancy and change,
of tradition and evolution.

Barry Lopez, the author of *Arctic Dreams*,
his book about the Canadian North, says that:

“If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult,

¹ James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation.”

it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding,
and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of. . . paradox.

“One must live in the middle of contradiction,
because if all contradiction were eliminated at once, life would collapse.

“There are simply no answers,” he reminds us,
“to some of the great pressing questions.

“You [just] continue to live them out,
making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.”²

“Of leaning into the light.”

I love that image.

It’s one of the best definitions for faith that I know.

Now, faith, typically, of course,
refers to both a system of religious beliefs,
as well as to the deep trust and confidence
we place in someone or some thing.

Though the word itself may not sit well with everyone—
conjuring notions of unquestioned allegiance or wishful thinking—
I invite your help this morning
in giving new life to this “wounded word”
and appreciating its usefulness
simply as an expression
of that to which we set our hearts,
as that belief or ideal in which we place our life’s deepest trust,
as that source of strength that gives us the courage *to lean into the light*.

* * *

When I was in seminary, I was a bit surprised,
in one of my first courses,
to have the professor arrive for class one day
with crayons and markers and craft paper of various colours.

² Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 1986, p. 413.

Our assignment, we were told, was—
without too much thinking—
to use these art supplies to depict our faith.

Admittedly, it took some of us more time than others
to get into the swing of things.

Eventually, some of my classmates drew a cross or a church;
others created an image of a lotus flower
or sketched the scrolls of the Torah.

One overachiever, in a fit of inspiration,
fashioned an elaborate origami crane thing
that put the rest of us to shame.

Harvard can be a pretty competitive place...

After a split-second of intense meditation about the meaning of my faith,
I took a piece of white paper and with two long strokes,
sketched out a simple snow drift and a clear winter sky.

Adding an almost invisible speck of green—
the only hint of colour in a field of overwhelming white—
I planted the little flag of my faith
in this tiny sign of the persistent force of life.

To the professor, it apparently seemed
I hadn't taken the assignment all that seriously.

When pressed for an explanation, though,
I said that, faith, for me, is a deep belief
that the universe can ultimately be trusted.

That the great force of life that brought us all into being,
that fashioned us from nothing less than stardust,
will, in the end, enfold each of us again
into that great ongoing cycle of life itself,
“upward still and onward”
until the sun, at last, burns out.

Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes.

In this, the ancient words from *The Book of Genesis* ring in my ear with an enduring note of truth:

“Remember, O [mortal], that you are dust,
and unto dust you shall return.”³

While that may sound sobering or solemn to some,
I take deep comfort in these words,
because they hold up the great and hardest paradox of this life:
that we live and that we die—and that it all is of a piece.

It is, for me, the most enduring truth
upon which one can build a consistent faith
amid the turning tides of this life—this most fundamental fact of our lives.

Between the moments that bookend our beginning and our end,
between the stardust of our origin and the dust of our destiny,
is the wondrous stuff of this life,
alive and animated and unleashed in us
for a miraculous, though mere glint of time.

It’s something I can’t explain;
often, I can’t really even comprehend it.

But, somehow I have come to trust it and put my faith in its power.

I have come to honour that relentless, sacred pulse of life
that flows in us all through every day that is gifted to us.

That little green shoot in the snow is, for me,
a symbol for this amazing cycle of life,
of which we are so privileged to play a part.

Now, this was not, the faith that I started out with.

I, like many of you, have found the journey of faith
to be an endless experience of *semper reformanda*,

³ *Book of Genesis* 3:19.

an ever-unfolding quest to know and understand
what in this life abides, what can be trusted,
what can and will serve as an enduring foundation
for a life of purpose, and integrity, and joy.

This journey has carried me from a fundamentalist, Southern Baptist upbringing
through moderating stints in different Christian traditions,
through explorations in Buddhism and a time of ardent atheism.

Today, for now, for this unfolding moment,
I'm a religious humanist in my theology
who strives to not only understand,
but "reverence the reverences" of others.

It's worth mentioning that this journey
that has winded its way through various traditions
and the different stages of my own spiritual development,
has also passed through intense periods of doubt and despair,
gone through patches of obnoxious self-righteousness,
but more lately settled into a comfortable, humble awareness
that there is so much in this vast and astonishing universe
that is beyond our capacity to comprehend.

I am grateful to now be in a faith tradition
where I can continue to struggle and stretch and grow,
without needing to find a new religious home, when I do.

But, more than anything, I am grateful for the journey itself,
and glad that it continues on.

In Marilynne Robinson's powerful novel, *Gilead*,
the narrator, an elderly Congregationalist minister,
and himself the son and the grandson of ministers,
reflects on his own lifetime of wrestling with faith and doubt.

In a letter to his son, he writes:

People want me to defend religion
and they want me to give them "proofs."
I just won't do it.

It only confirms them in their skepticism.
Because nothing true can be said about God
from a posture of defence.

I blame the radio for sowing a good deal of confusion
where theology is concerned. And television is worse.

You can spend forty years teaching people to be awake
to the fact of mystery, and then some fellow
with no more theological sense than a jackrabbit
gets himself a radio ministry and all your work is forgotten.

I do wonder where it will end.

I have wandered to the limits of my understanding
any number of times, out into that desolation...
and I've scared myself, too, a good many times,
leaving all landmarks behind me, or so it seemed.

And it has been among the true pleasures of my life.

Night and light, silence and difficulty,
it seemed to me always rigorous and good.

Theologians talk about a prevenient grace
that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it.

I think there must also be a prevenient courage
that allows us to be brave – that is, to acknowledge
that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear,
that precious things have been put into our hands
and [that] to do nothing to honour them is to do great harm.⁴

Friends, in the unfolding of your lives,
where has the journey of your faith taken you?

Part of the obvious answer, by your presence, is here:
to this community and to the conversation

⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, pp. 245-6.

that is at the heart of this faith.

But, I'm asking a somewhat different question.

Have you known something of this struggle—
for courage, for commitment, for a faith that endures?

Have you wrestled with life and its many changes?

Have you wandered to the limits of your own understanding,
out into that desolation beyond the security and solace
of everything that you thought you knew of this world?

I hope to heaven that you have.

And I hope, like the minister in the letter,
that you count it among the greatest pleasures of your life.

If you have known this struggle,
or if you know it even now,
what has that wrestling taught you?

What is it teaching you still?

What have you managed to learn about faith,
and where have you come to place your life's deepest trust?

Take a minute.

Take a minute to really think about the substance of your faith.

What more than anything in this life
have you come to trust with all of your being?

(Silence)

I ask because the answer you give, or even struggle to articulate,
bears directly on your ability to keep the faith—
and for that faith to keep you in life's most difficult days.

* * *

In his poem, “Self-Portrait,” the poet David Whyte says:

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods.

I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned.

If you know despair or can see it in others.

I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need to change you.

If you can look back with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand.

I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward the centre of your longing.

I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day,
with the consequence of love...⁵

These are worthy questions to guide us
on the journey to knowing what we can truly put our faith in,
to knowing what we are made of
and to knowing that it will withstand the tests of time, come what may.

So, may you keep an ever-evolving, always growing faith.

Not by preserving it, but by practising it,
by putting it to the test,
by reforming and reshaping it,
that it might always “keep abreast of truth.”

Kept in this way, your faith will also keep you,
and may even lead to you being a “consistent Unitarian”, too.

Amen.

⁵ David Whyte, “Self-Portrait.”