

# Celebrating Our Dodransbicentennial!

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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It's a photo that has captivated me  
from the instant I first saw it many years ago.

A photo taken in Toronto in the summer of 1909.

The members of First Unitarian are  
gathered outside a grand old house wearing their Sunday finest.

Men in dark suits and top hats.  
Women in the long white dresses,  
with very big and highly-decorated hats to boot.  
Children in knickers and dresses, sitting at their feet—  
and atop the roof of the vast porch.

There is patriotic bunting strung up along the lines of the house.  
Red Ensign flags seem to be fluttering  
in the breeze of this summer day.  
It might have been a picnic for Dominion Day.

These people are so clearly of another place and time.  
And, yet, they and we are counted as part of this same congregation  
that has endured now for nearly 175 years.

While we have photos of almost all of the ministers  
who've served this congregation dating to its founding in 1845,  
and we have images of the many different buildings  
we've called home over our long history,  
it is rare to find an old photo of the congregation itself.

This image is one of the earliest in our archives.

And so I cherish it, as I stare into their faces,  
knowing that each of them is now long gone.

Knowing that they are our spiritual ancestors.

Knowing that we share a Living Tradition with them  
that stretches across time.

Knowing that we are called in some way  
to keep continuity with them,  
to somehow keep faith with them.

I look into their faces and wonder at what that means.

We are decidedly different in so many ways.

They professed a liberal version of Christianity,  
and followed a form of worship  
that was a slimmed down version of Anglican Morning Prayer,  
minus references to the Trinity.

Looking into the faces,  
I wonder if they had any inkling of the war that would soon come.  
Or the flu pandemic that would upend their lives a decade later.

I wonder who among them knew  
the founders of this congregation, likely in the later years.

Who remembered worshipping in the clapboard meeting house  
on Lower George Street, before they moved  
into their Gothic building on Jarvis Street in 1854.

Who could recall the fire that was intentionally set  
in the basement of that church on Christmas Eve in 1865,  
a seeming indication of anti-Unitarian sentiment  
in a city dominated at the time by Anglicans and Methodists.

And I look into the faces in this photograph,  
and I wonder who would live on to see  
the first woman president of the congregation in the 1940s.

Who would stay on through the hard years  
when the former Gothic glory of the Jarvis Street church  
had faded quite a bit, when the roof was leaking (yet again),

when the church was reeling  
from one financial crisis after another,  
and when the neighbourhood around the building  
had become the red-light district—to the point  
that during World War II,  
soldiers had to get special permission to attend services,  
as it was otherwise unseemly to be caught in that part of the city.

I wonder who would adapt to and even enthusiastically embrace  
the sweeping theological changes in Unitarianism  
in the early and middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
as the church, like many Unitarian churches,  
expanded beyond its liberal Christian identity  
to adopt the views of mid-century “Big-H” Humanism,  
with its open agnosticism and atheism,  
and its deep-seated optimism in human progress.

I wonder if any of them were serving on the board in the 1960s,  
when they sent Rev. John Morgan, the minister at the time,  
to join the march for racial justice in Selma,  
or when the board refused John’s request  
to allow a group of homosexual men to gather in our building.

I wonder what they thought when John just decided instead  
to host the gay men’s group in the parlour of the manse.

And were they still around  
to see Rev. Duke Gray marry two women in 1974?  
I wonder what they thought of that!

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And I wonder who among us  
might remember some of these people?

There are long-time members of our present-day congregation,  
Elisabeth Michnick and Shirley Grant, who were part of the congregation  
when we were still on Jarvis Street, and who,  
along with so many who joined in the 50s and 60s,  
surely crossed paths with the people in this photo.

Clarence Cruikshank, who died in 1995,  
had been a member for 93 years.

Some of you, I know, remember him.  
And others of us recall his name,  
because we lift it up each Easter in gratitude  
for the fresh flowers his bequest provides for our sanctuary.

I'm not sure if he's a little boy in the photo,  
but he easily could have been.

In the words Angela read during the meditation<sup>1</sup>:

We share a history with [these] lives.  
We belong to the same motion.

They too were strengthened by what had gone before.

They too were drawn on  
by the vision of what might come to be.

Those who lived before us,  
who struggled for justice  
and suffered injustice before us,  
have not melted into the dust,  
and have not disappeared.

They are with us still.

The lives they lived hold us steady.

Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves.

Their courage and love evoke our own.

We, the living, carry them with us:  
we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

We are a community of memory and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Words of Kathleen McTigue.

And we exist in this present moment  
as an ever-changing, ever-evolving part  
of what has been, is, and will be First Unitarian.

At any given point, we are a bridge between  
what we have been and what we will become.

Which means, of course, time working as it does,  
that someday, we will be counted among the ancestors.

How, I wonder, will the future regard  
the decisions we've made in this era?

In the same way that we stare into the faces in the photo  
and wonder about the attitudes and prejudices they held—  
how they understood the status of women,  
the meaning of gender,  
or the consequences of colonization—  
a hundred years hence  
faces from the future will look back to this time, too,  
and wonder why we, knowing all that we already know,  
were still so slow to confront climate change,  
to make racial justice a reality,  
to reach genuine reconciliation with Indigenous peoples,  
and to lift up and celebrate the stunning and wondrous diversity  
of the human family as the marvellous gift that it is.

In the way that those faces from 1909  
would likely find much about us today bewildering,  
we can hardly imagine what a hundred years or more  
will mean for this religious community, let alone the world.

We do, I believe, though, have a sacred obligation  
to become, in the here and now, good ancestors.

That means many things.

It means trying to live our lives with integrity.

Trying to live out our values

in a way that makes a difference.

It means grappling with what justice demands of us in our time.  
And taking action to make justice real.

It means beholding the sacredness at the heart of life,  
in ourselves and in our neighbours,  
in people half the world away, and in every living thing.

It means moving through the world  
with compassion and with kindness,  
in search of understanding, and invitations to grow.

This requires what some artfully call “epistemological humility”—  
the ability to appreciate that we don’t—and can’t—know everything!

To begin from a place of curiosity and openness  
to the fact that the world still has things to teach to us.  
That the truth and meaning of life are still unfolding.

To be good ancestors will also mean  
that we take ourselves and our faith seriously.

We are living in incredibly tumultuous times.

We need one another,  
and the grounding we find together,  
arguably now, more than ever.

This may mean digging deeper than we’ve been accustomed to.  
Calling ourselves to lead examined lives.  
Relying on spiritual practices that help us to be mindful.  
Crafting a religion for ourselves that strengthens and sustains us.

In a rather irksome passage in her novel *Fly Away Home*,  
the writer Marge Piercy  
has the mother in the story say of her daughters:

The girls had been raised Unitarian,  
which seemed a nice, sensible compromise  
between having no religion at all

and having to lie about what we believed.  
Enough religion to be respectable  
but not enough to get in the way.

Friends, our religion is meant to get in our way.  
To challenge and change us.  
To hold before us our highest ideals,  
and help us move with faith  
towards life more abundant.

This is not the easy path.

Contrary to what Piercy says,  
Unitarianism is arguably the hardest religion you will ever love.

The principles we have set before ourselves,  
while simply expressed in words,  
are tremendously difficult to live out in practice.

From respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person  
to honouring the great web of life,  
there's plenty there to keep us busy  
for all of our days on this good green earth.

As lofty and demanding as our principles may be, though,  
why would we ever settle for anything less?

We need a faith that calls us to the best of our humanity—  
while also recognizing that we won't and can't  
always live up to these principles.

But it is the effort that matters.  
The faith in action.  
The principles put into practice.  
Day in and day out.

In other words, it is letting our religion get  
regularly and solidly in our way.

As Susan Frederick Gray,  
my colleague, friend, and president of the UUA has put it,

this is “no time for a casual faith.”

How right she is.

As we move into our 175<sup>th</sup> year,  
as we celebrate our bicentennial, as it is called,  
may we take up the call anew  
to live fully into our faith,  
and to build up together  
an enduring community of memory and hope,  
that serves life and sustains us all.

May we take up the call to the  
sacred work that ours to do in this time.

That in generations to come,  
the great family of all souls that is this congregation,  
may look back  
and find that we were faithful.

So be it.