

“The Possibilities Are Endless”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Ever since I first saw it, an "Off the Mark" cartoon¹
by Mark Parisi has been sitting on my desk.

It features a shiny new box of sand,
the colour of blue sky, like all the possibilities ahead.

Looking out the window at children playing outside,
it thinks to itself, "I'm a sandbox! I'll be full of fun and joy."

But, sure enough, coming around the bend is a cat...

About to reveal that the box is, in fact, a **litterbox**.

Not a sandbox after all...or, at least a sandbox of a very
different kind.

I love that cartoon.

Like so much humour, it points out the uncomfortable truth
of real life...and it does so in metaphor.

In this case, it reveals how often we think we know
exactly who we are and how our life is going to go.

We might even think the same of our congregation...
that we can predict the shape and destiny of our work together.

But life will always surprise us...in both delightful

¹ <https://www.offthemark.com/cartoon/animals/cats/2021-09-16> Used with permission in worship service 24/10/2021.

and deeply challenging ways.
Try as we might,
and believe what we will,
the possibilities life holds for us
go far beyond our imaginations,
in both joyful and sorrowful directions.

You might say that the possibilities are endless...
in the sense that the complete Mystery of Life
will always be beyond our grasp...

While at the same time,
it will always hold infinite depths of meaning
and potential for love.



To paraphrase the Transcendentalist writer Walt Whitman,
"We contain multitudes."

Each of us is marvellously complex,
perhaps even more than we realize ourselves.

We are not so simple, we sandboxes.

We contain multitudes of feelings, experiences, influences,
motivations...and also potentials and possibilities...
no matter at what stage of life we happen to find ourselves.

When we combine these personal multitudes with each other,
we come up with an infinite variety of interesting combinations...
and in a community like ours, that is always changing.

Today we welcomed several new members into our congregation.

A congregation is a living and breathing,

ever-changing and evolving creative thing...

As Rev. Shawn likes to say: it's "a little loving laboratory of the human spirit."

In such a place, so much can happen. So much will happen.

Knowing that we contain such multiplicity,
how can we live in such a way
that we can receive and hold all of life,
and use it, in a good and hopeful way,
for the benefit of all?

How can we preserve the hope and optimism
of that sandbox, while knowing that life
will bring us so many things
we would not wish for and cannot control?

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Many years ago, this point was made by the philosopher Aldous Huxley, whose views were distinctly universalist in tone.

"Human beings are immensely complicated creatures, living simultaneously in a half dozen different worlds.

Each individual is unique and, in a number of respects, unlike all the other members of the species.

None of our motives is unmixed, none of our actions can be traced back to a single source and, in any group we care to study, behavior patterns that are observably similar may be the result of many constellations of dissimilar causes."

These constellations within us guide us in so many ways.

They influence the way we see other people and interact with them--often to a greater degree than we realize.

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You may have heard the story about two travelers coming to a town for the first time, and asking a wise elder who they might expect to meet there.

"Hello there," the first traveler asks. "I've never been to the town of Possibility before. What are the people like there?"

"Well," asks the wise elder,
"What were the people like in your home city?"

"Oh, they were terrible! Mean-spirited, judgmental, very difficult to get along with."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the elder responds. "You'll find the people up ahead are exactly the same."

Before long another traveler comes by and asks the same question.

"What kind of people are they, who live in Possibility, the town up ahead?"

"Well, how did you find the people of your home city?"

"Oh they were kind and good people. Loving, ethical and compassionate."

And the elder's response: "Well, you'll find the people up ahead are just the same."²

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² Adapted from Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace* (Bantam, 2002), 91.

As I read this classic story, it occurs to me that the wise elder might have asked, did you happen to belong to a Unitarian congregation in your previous town?

Because this foundational outlook on human beings is woven into not only our First Principle, but at least our first three:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.

In addition, our 7th Principle affirms our interdependence not only with each other but with all living things...

And our proposed 8th Principle aspires to create a framework for effective anti-racism and anti-oppression work.

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Now, there is the distinct possibility,
if not the likelihood,
that, guided by these principles,
we'd always look for the best in others and ourselves.

"We're a sandbox! We'll be full of love and joy and..."

Well, maybe not always.

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Let's take a show of hands.

How many of you have ever made a negative judgment about someone, thinking they had selfish motivations or making an assumption about their character...

Only to find out later that you were completely mistaken?

(I raise hand, too.)

And now the reverse.

How many of you have had other people
assume incorrect and negative things about you?

(Raise hand.)

I think that's pretty much everybody,
whether we raised our hands or not.

The multitudes within us...the complexities of our lives...
are seldom apparent on the surface.

We make judgments about each other all the time.
And we're often wrong.

Another way to imagine this is that everyone is an iceberg,
with only the tip showing.

From our own very separate viewpoints--
that is, particular views from particular points--
we may seem to be very far apart...

But when we take the time to travel down the iceberg,
to learn what is underneath the surface of any of us,
we discover we are deeply and inextricably connected.

We are intertwined in that interdependent web of existence
which we hold with such reverence and awe,
and which we seek to love and protect
through our lives and our actions.

Given the particularities of our lives and our stories...
the specific frames of reference each of us live within...
mirrored in the particular points-of-view on this Zoom screen...

It makes sense that we don't know each other as well
as we think we do.

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And how about ourselves?

Do we hold possibilities and potentials within ourselves
of which we are not yet aware?

The answer is yes.

In addition to the aspects of our lives we know about,
and the persona or self-image we present to the world,
there are depths within us obscured not only from others
but also unconscious to ourselves.

In Jungian terms, some of this is called the shadow.
the parts of ourselves we do not acknowledge and accept.

Each of us has our shadow side...and if we wonder what it's like, we might
look at what irritates us most in others.

That's the "you spot it, you got it" phenomenon.

Organizations may have their shadow sides as well.

For example, the unconscious "flip side" of any community
that aspires to be "radically inclusive" may be its innate
yet unconscious capacity to reject and exclude.

Thinking back to the cartoon we saw earlier,
we can imagine that the cat coming around the corner
is in fact the shadow of that sunny Pollyanna of a sandbox.

While it may not be pretty or nice
the cat will provide earthiness and grounding.

It will bring the sandbox into the realm of the Real,
with all the smelly, messy, difficult bits
that life brings us all.

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It's not easy to come to terms with all the possibilities life holds for
us...whether they arrive in the form of circumstances from the outside...or
the stranger within us who unexpectedly shows up.

Yet the safe container of a caring community can make it easier.

At First Unitarian, our Journey Groups and other small circles
are based on the concept of "Circles of Trust,"
taught by Parker J. Palmer, who is a Quaker.

In his book, "A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Towards an Undivided
Life" he writes that "the soul is shy"...

That all people need to feel safety and belonging before they
(that is, we) can show up in our full humanity,
to open-heartedly meet the parts of ourselves
we might not want to see.

The humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers called this
"unconditional positive regard"--

The ability to offer acceptance and support to anyone,
in order to create the conditions whereby they can grow and heal.

Recently I saw this demonstrated in a film called "The Wisdom of Trauma."

In it, Dr. Gabor Maté cares for people who passed along their own childhood trauma in acts of violence or abuse, until they were able to heal those wounds in an atmosphere of love and respect.

In this very moving film, Maté makes clear that people's harmful behaviour often springs from wounds that go back generations, and that healing those wounds starts first with unconditional loving regard.

It's also clear from the film that each person's story is far more complex than anyone can see from the outside.

That is, "we contain multitudes."

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If we behold the beauty of human life with the reverence of the mystics, we might encounter every conversation with each other as a meeting with the Divine.

A meeting with the Holy Mystery which is always beyond our complete understanding, yet continually invites us into loving relationship.

This attitude of humility, reverence and curiosity prevents us from falling into reflexive "us and them" judgments...of rejecting others because, in our view, they've somehow fallen short.

Our hope, in the continual task of spiritual growth that is the human journey, is that we might nurture and cultivate that attitude--perhaps against all odds.

That we might maintain our connection to
the loving, open and receptive spirit
we see on the face of the sky-blue sandbox...

Even when we discover parts of ourselves we'd rather not find...

Or experience the most painful and challenging aspects of life.

Our hope is that we might come to "love where we're at"
even if that's a place we didn't expect to be
or wouldn't have chosen.

That we might come to love who we are, warts and all,
in the deep acceptance of unconditional love
that can be channeled through healthy religious
or spiritual community.

To paraphrase a text from our Christian heritage:

"Wherever two or more are gathered for mutual support,
the Source of Love is there."

Healthy religious communities strengthen our connection
with Source, God, Spirit and Being Itself,
helping us find meaning
even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Indeed, sometimes that connection with deeper wisdom
can give rise to art, and sometimes even humour,
helping us hold our entire lives in the light of love.

In circles like the one we form today,
we can provide care to one another
that enables healing and transformation.

As we sang earlier in the service:

“Break not the circle of enabling love,
where people grow, forgiven and forgiving;
break not that circle, make it wider still,
till it includes, embraces all the living.”³

Where people grow, forgiven and forgiving.

Where we receive ourselves and each other
in all our multiplicities...

Requiring not perfection...but rather, inviting real presence.

Keeping our doors open...knowing that they will blow shut from time to
time in the winds of circumstance...
but then opening them again. And again.

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As the stories of our lives continue to unfold
in beauty, and in humour, and at times, in deep pain.

May the possibilities before us
whatever they may be
bring us more deeply into relationship
with Life, Spirit and each other.

May we meet all that is eternally unfolding
in faith, hope and love.

Amen.

³ “Break Not the Circle,” Hymn #323 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, sung earlier in the service.