

## **“No Time Like the Present”**

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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A few weeks ago, Winnipeg singer-songwriter  
Don Amero got a call.

Would he be able to sing the national anthem  
at the opening game, in a few days, between his home team  
The Jets and the Montreal Canadiens?

Normally this would have been an easy “yes,”  
and indeed he had sung “O Canada” at hockey games before.

But just a few days earlier, the remains of 215 Indigenous  
children had been found at the site of a former  
residential school in Kamloops, B.C.

How could Canada’s national anthem be proudly sung,  
as the entire country came to grips with this horrible truth?

While knowing, too,  
that this was only one burial site of many...

And that today, Indigenous children are still being  
taken from their homes and living in unsafe conditions...

...including right now in Kashechewan,  
the site of the current Covid-19 outbreak.

As he pondered the invitation to sing the anthem,  
Don Amero, who is of mixed Indigenous and European descent, couldn’t  
decide what to do.

By the early morning hours of the day of the big game,

he still didn't have an answer.

But as he sat with the grief, horror, anger and sorrow in the middle of that difficult night, suddenly he knew.

He needed to sing from the middle of the night:

Not a sunny, proud, flag-waving anthem,  
but a dark and mournful elegy—

Which is exactly what he delivered,  
accompanied by two Indigenous elders  
bearing tobacco and a pair of tiny moccasins.<sup>1</sup>

At first it appeared that this would not be “the right time”  
to sing Canada's national anthem.

But Don Amero realized that in fact, he could act—  
and he must act—fully within the present moment,  
as hard as that might be.

There was no time like the present  
for him to engage personally  
with the painful reality  
of Canada's past and present...  
And that in that moment, with the tools he had,  
he could contribute in his own specific way  
to reconciliation, healing and justice.

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Moments like these may seem rare to most of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Video on Sportsnet: <https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/video/don-amero-sings-national-anthem-ahead-jets-vs-canadiens/>

Moments when a timely opportunity opens up,  
allowing us to make a contribution we could never have planned...  
and perhaps might not have even chosen.

Our ability to respond well—  
our “response-ability” if you will—  
has something to do with our relationship with time.

It’s connected to our ability  
to be fully present to **the moment we have:**  
as both expectation and regret can  
cloud our responses.

It’s about using the time we have  
to offer what is ours to give....

And to do that in relationship with others,  
to co-create a more just and loving world.

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So, what opportunity is this time offering us?

There will be many personal answers to that question.

But as a community, today after service,  
we have an opportunity to talk about the proposal of a new 8<sup>th</sup> Principle  
for the Canadian Unitarian Council.

Along with the other 7 Principles,  
we would covenant to affirm and promote:

“Individual and communal action  
that accountably dismantles racism  
and other oppressions

in ourselves and in our institutions.”

The adoption of this new 8<sup>th</sup> Principle—  
which is similar to one also being considered now by the UUA,  
the American body of Unitarian Universalism—

It’s one of several recommendations being made now by the CUC’s  
Dismantling Racism Study Group,  
which is co-chaired by Beverley Horton and Rev. Julie Stoneberg.

The Study Group carried out an illuminating survey  
of Canadian UU congregations last year.

Among its many findings were that systemic racism  
and other forms of oppression  
have continued within Unitarian Universalism,  
despite our stated commitment to  
justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Quoting from the report:

“The Dismantling Racism Survey clearly shows that while some efforts to  
dismantle racism and other oppressions exist,  
a gap between our CUC aspirations and reality persists.

This is evidenced in another gap between White Canadian UUs’  
understanding/awareness of systemic racism in our faith communities, and  
the lived realities and experiences of [Canadian UUs who are Black,  
Indigenous and People of Colour].

These gaps indicate that we are not living into our vision of being an  
inclusive, diverse, and just faith community.”

Continuing to read from the report:

“Sadly, many BIPOC UUs regularly experience microaggressions and other forms of racism within [UU] congregations and our wider faith movement.

At present, neither our seven principles nor our five CUC aspirations demand that UUs actively dismantle the oppression of racism or examine how they contribute to it.”<sup>2</sup>

The report notes, too, that the acronym “BIPOC” for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour arose out of the American context, and it may not fully reflect the Canadian experience of racism.<sup>3</sup>

As the report states: “This is an evolving conversation.” And I believe that word “evolving” is very useful.

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In my limited experience,  
every act of creativity is an act of change.

And all change is necessarily an act of “dismantling”—  
of taking apart and building back up.

Of seeing what fits and what doesn’t.

What contributes to the well-being of the whole—  
and what takes away from it.

Sometimes, as a writer, one realizes that a favourite passage,  
the image you thought was the most valuable has to go...

Because it doesn’t serve the whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Final Report of CUC Dismantling Racism Study Group: <https://cuc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CUC-Dismantling-Racism-Final-Report.2021-05.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> “The term ‘BIPOC’ is a bad fit for the Canadian discourse on race,” Joseph Heath in the Globe and Mail, May 29, 2021. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-term-bipoc-is-a-bad-fit-for-the-canadian-discourse-on-race/>

Sometimes, too, one gets to a point in the creative process  
when it all seems too big, too much,  
a puzzle too difficult to be solved...

And it is at that point that Something More,  
The Creative Source or Divine Wisdom can enter in...  
to reveal the way forward.

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Right now, in many parts of the world,  
significant change is taking place,  
as more and more people come to understand  
the legacies of colonialism and systemic racism  
and our relationships to them.

Recognizing of course that there are important  
differences in how we are situated in the  
evolving conversation...

You may have noticed changes taking place  
within yourself, or in people around you.

A few years ago, when I heard the term “white supremacy culture”  
I felt taken aback and deeply uncomfortable.

I also felt unexpectedly intense shame,  
not only about my ancestry  
that includes slave owners in the American South...

...but also about my ignorance of Indigenous experience in Canada,  
and the trauma and suffering inflicted by white settler  
culture, not to mention the Christian church.

As well, as a cisgender, straight and able-bodied person,  
I'm beginning to understand how these characteristics  
contribute to my privilege.

Breaking down some of the ways I see myself and my history...

Breaking open to admitting my own ignorance  
and recognizing my privilege...

This personal process was—and is—  
a first step toward the “dismantling” of systemic racism  
and the re-forming of institutions that  
continue to cause such harm.

It means learning to use different words and language  
that at first made me uncomfortable.

It means listening with openness to the experiences of others...

Sitting with any discomfort that may arise in me...

Whether it's about my own history,  
my own actions or inaction,  
my own stumbling.

Recognizing what needs to be undone and reformed  
within myself and within the systems  
that I'm embedded in, from which I have benefited.

It means...speaking out and standing up.  
Calling out racist attitudes, speech and practices.

Joining with others to actively change  
oppressive institutions.

Being a faithful steward, not of what was...

but of the change that is necessary....

Open to the evolution that is necessary now.

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There is truly “no time like the present.”

No time when we as a species are so aware  
of all the challenges we face.

No time when we’ve been aware  
that time is literally running out for the planet...

No time when we’ve beheld the inter-relationship  
of all things, and begun to glimpse  
the depth of our responsibility.

We are “gathered here in the mystery of the hour”...  
and we are gathered here in the magnitude of our time.

The proposed 8<sup>th</sup> Principle calls us to dismantle  
“racism and other oppressions”...and indeed there are so many!

In addition to racism and colonialism,  
we can name homophobia, transphobia, ableism,  
eco-cide, cruelty to animals, classism, patriarchy,  
body shaming, ageism...and forgive me for  
I’m sure I’ve left several out.

They are all intersectional and inter-related.

As we delve into the features of what’s called “white supremacy culture”  
at the heart of so much injustice,  
we must also name the oppressions of perfectionism  
and achievement-oriented culture in which

so many of us have been immersed since birth...

Not to mention our obsession with time and speed.

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Dismantling, reforming, recreating a new world  
will take time.

And as Einstein said:

“No problem can be solved  
using the same level of consciousness that created it.”

Therefore our anti-racism and anti-oppression work  
will always be a step-by-step process of change over time...  
as we steadily gain new awareness and practice new skills.

Patience and kindness are essential parts of this process,  
as together we seek right relationship—  
with each other, with the earth and with ourselves.

It’s a lifetime’s work.

It is spiritual work.

And it is work that must take place within each of us,  
even as it requires collective action—

beginning perhaps with the intentional  
framing of principles that we affirm as a faith,  
and hopefully extending far further,  
into the active living of those principles.

This “living into” the principles  
will take a slightly different shape for every person...  
and so it’s important that listening and compassion

be a part of our practice.

All creative activity is, after all, about listening and learning.

About paying attention, and being present in the moment,  
so we can do the next right thing:

So we can make the choice that is ours to make,  
that best contributes to the harmony of the whole.

In his book “The Prophetic Imperative”  
Unitarian Universalist theologian Richard S. Gilbert wrote:

“I think of the divine as the power of cosmic creativity.

This creativity is manifest in nature as creative evolution;  
it is observed in history in those prophets of the human spirit  
who have tried to bend the arc of history toward justice against all odds;

It is manifest here and now as we are co-creators of the  
Beloved Community.

This work I know will not be completed in my lifetime,  
but I wish to work at repairing the world while I may.

It is my mystic identification with this creative process  
that prompts me to continue.”<sup>4</sup>

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This has been called the time of the “great turning”—  
and by turning toward, we must also turn away,  
in the continual dance of creativity that is life.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard S. Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice* (Skinner House: 2000), p. 24.

Today also marks the sacred time of the Summer Solstice:  
linking us with our ancestors,  
all our Fathers and Mothers,  
in the Universe of light and dark,  
illumination and shadow.

While there is, in many ways, “no time like the present,”  
this time, our time,  
is linked to all other times in history.

As we breathe the same air as all others,  
live and die under the same star,  
passing along our gifts and our wisdom  
as best we can to those who will follow.

The song you’re about to hear,  
sung by our resident musician Gabrielle Byrnes  
and composed by First Unitarian member Jewels Krauss  
is an inspiring example of how life  
evolves in creative ways  
to find new and healing form.

The lyrics are adapted from a 16<sup>th</sup> Century text  
by the early Christian mystic, Teresa of Avila.

It’s remarkable to me, yet not surprising,  
that Teresa’s personal devotion,  
her prayer to the God of her understanding,  
could evolve and be offered to us today  
in support of our own spiritual growth  
that’s so necessary for justice making.

When we affirm that all is changing...  
but that Love is present for us in every moment

we become able to respond to life  
in ways that heal and transform.

In this present moment in time  
May we embrace all that Life is offering us...

Bringing our whole selves  
and our open hearts

to the work of justice  
and love.

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