

“The Well-Laid Plan of Eternal Flexibility”

Dallas Bergen

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

July 11, 2021

Reading: *Our Moment-to-Moment* - Patricia Ryan Madsen

*Our moment-to-moment experience is improvisational,
even though it exists within a structure or plan.*

*That is, life brings us opportunities, questions, and problems to solve,
and we respond in real time, trying to make sense out of each challenge or offer.*

How we live our lives within the structure of our day is an eternal improvisation...

You are always the one steering the canoe, however.

*Sometimes on the white-water-rapids course it is both relaxing and exhilarating to be swept along
by the swells, oars at rest, watching the scenery and marveling at the ease of it all.*

And sometimes we must paddle against the current in order to take a fork in the river.

Sermon: Anecdote I

The pandemic--the Toronto reality of it--had passed a year in duration, and the long winter--with me having barely left the house, let alone the continent--had taken its toll. I had been itching for any kind of experience to help me feel alive--to connect with the outdoors, to have a feeling of adventure and discovery... Finally, it was May! The days were getting warmer and longer, my new kayak had just arrived, and I had meticulously combed over googlemaps, the Ontario crown land policy atlas, and my favourite fishing apps, honing in on *the* spot that would have the 5:53am Sunrise in the optimal place on the horizon relative to my launch point. There would be decent fishing of my favoured species--and having chosen a lake with only fire route access, I was assured a pristine lake with not a single cottage on it. No cottages and no boat launch meant no motor boats or jet skis to ruin the sacred beauty of my carefully planned first solo kayak outing of the year. Everything was in place; carefully planned--it was bound to be perfect. Or I had expected as much.

It was awful. A total disaster. It turned out that 10 minutes before sunrise the temperature was 3, feels-like 1 degree Celsius... there would be no sun to be seen

behind a blanket of cloud, and as soon as I got my new boat onto the water, it started to rain. The isolated lake without a dock, meant that launching my kayak required getting my feet wet, and with a temperature of 1, I would find it impossible to get warm, despite having prepared for less than optimal weather. It was really ugly out. Winds were gusting to 40kms... I was blowing around in my boat shivering uncontrollably, with no fish being caught... there was no sun... there was no bliss. nothing had gone according to plan.

You can plan all you want--but some things are beyond our control. With our well-laid plans needs to come the willingness to be flexible in the moment... an openness to come what may....

Unitarian Universalism: Woyaya

Ours is a tradition of openness, of flexibility... Unitarianism has been adaptive and open to change for nearly 500 years... if affirming every person and drawing the circle wider are at the core of your beliefs, you need to be prepared to change with the spirit of the times--and at times to drive change, with a commitment to human progress. Ours is a Living Tradition.

Our UU origins are as Christian heretics--Unitarians, denying the divinity of Jesus--holding a belief of the god divine as one entity; and Universalists, rejecting the notions of original sin--the belief that we are all born sinners--and rejecting the ideas of a vengeful god, of eternal damnation, of salvation. Our Universalist forebearers believed that all are worthy of God's love. And by the 19th century, when the idea of a capital-G God wasn't palpable to everyone, the principle became simply that we affirm the worth and dignity of all... men. But that didn't last long! When our principles and sources were adopted in 1960 following the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the feminist movement within UUism immediately challenged our misogynistic language in our first principle--and it was changed. And to this day, we make change for the cause of inclusion. We change phrases such as *the teachings of prophetic women and men*--language recently deemed to be inclusive--to *the teachings of prophetic people*--language that is affirming of non-binary and queer identities and is even more inclusive. Radical inclusion... it's what we do.

Now, it's hard to maintain harmony and unity while being committed to inclusion, committed to listening to and amplifying the voices of the marginalized; and committed to each individual's free search for truth and meaning. Within Unitarian-Universalism we are facing a reckoning parallel to that within our societies--of acknowledging our culture of privilege, and the historical iniquities inherent in a legacy of colonialism, white supremacy, and systemic racism. We've been challenged in our activism, learning that diversity, equity and inclusion--that's our language--the language of liberal progressivism--is no longer good enough. That performative activism and symbolic gestures are insufficient to give those on the margins an equal seat at the table. The call is now that we must be anti-racist... if we are not, then we are complicit in our silence. The call is to fully acknowledge the inherited systems of oppression that have led to the inequity of today--and to bear the responsibility to not only hold them accountable--but to dismantle them.

When we have these paradigm shifts in society, we need to sometimes figure it out as we go along... not to say we totally bumble along, but, as Patricia Ryan Madsen said in the first half of today's reading shared by Maya:

*Our moment-to-moment experience is improvisational,
even though it exists within a structure or plan.*

*That is, life brings us opportunities, questions, and problems to solve,
and we respond in real time, trying to make sense out of each challenge or offer.*

How we live our lives within the structure of our day is an eternal improvisation...

Eternal Improvisation; but with intention. An intention to not sit on our hands and remain silent but to be agents for change. Like our acceptance of the First ordained minister to come out in Rev. James Stoll; or UUs conducting same-sex marriage as early as 1972 in Canada, driving the welcoming congregations movement in the 90s, being the first to ordain trans-gender clergy. We have proud moments of our support of the US Civil Rights Movement with UU ministers and congregants marching at Selma. UUs have protested the deportation of undocumented immigrants in Arizona in 2013; the incarceration of undocumented immigrants at ICE detention centres across the United States in 2020. And in 2017 had a number of UU clergy--including our own

ministers--travel to Standing Rock, SD to bear witness and stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Now, having lifted up the many things in our recent history of which we can be proud, we do have an unfortunate incident in our collective UU history that needs to be named and known--the Black Empowerment Controversy within the Unitarian Universalist Association during the late 60s at the height of the Civil Rights movement. The Unitarian Universalist Association had pledged one million dollars over four years to a Black Affairs Council, created by the Black UU Caucus. In the turmoil of the late 60s and the aftermath of the assassination of Dr King, the relationship between the UUA and the BUUC became frayed and fell apart. The BUUC was dissatisfied with the overreach of the UUA, who had created committees to oversee, manage and approve the spending of the funds by the BUUC, while the Black Affairs Council wanted sole control over use of the funds. This became irreconcilable and was the final blow to the relationship--the BUUC left the UUA. The funding allocated was never given as promised. There were efforts to reconcile, in the years that followed, but irreparable harm was done--and the reputation of UUs as allies to African Americans was tarnished. It is estimated that over 1000 Black members left Unitarian Universalism in the aftermath. That's a heavy dose of Americentric UU History to take in, but it is incredibly relevant as Unitarian-Universalists in both the United States and Canada enter a period of discernment and discussion around adopting an 8th principle that would call Unitarian Universalism to make explicit its commitment to anti-racism and to dismantling systems of racial oppression within ourselves and within our institutions. This is asking us to listen--and to be open to change. To humble ourselves and de-centre our ideas about racism, and to listen to those who have lived experience. It's tremendously challenging work--but it's what we do within our living tradition. We added a seventh principle not long ago in 1985 honouring the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part. Doesn't sound radical at all, does it--at least not to me, a UU of only 15 years--but at the time, the added language that gave respect and acknowledgement to earth-centred traditions, to neopaganism, indigenous beliefs and pantheist spiritualities, was a significant action--and did not come about without challenge. Going back to the Marsden reading, we are presented with *problems to solve, and we respond in real time.*

Radical Inclusion. It's what we do! To go against progress would be to go against our

principles... adapt, and change, be open to ideas and challenges that would better have us live into our values, and allow us to affect greater change in the world. And while we need to be flexible and open, at the same time, we need to have a plan--to ensure we move the 8th Principle cause forward most effectively as we can--achieving as close to consensus as possible, with as many people on board as we can gather. This will reduce discontent and will allow our work in the area of racial justice to have a greater impact. The report containing the findings and recommendations of the CUC's Dismantling Racism Study Group has been shared with congregations. There will be discussions at the congregational level, and facilitated roundtable discussions from the CUC. Feedback will be received in October, and a special session will take place in November. That's a well-laid plan... even in the face of uncertainty.

Reconciliation

With anti-racism and justice for Indigenous, Black, and POC moving to the forefront of Canadian consciousness as the harrowing truths of the Canadian Residential Schools System becomes unavoidably clear to all, what is being asked of us in the area of Racial Justice is shifting. These words came shortly after the story of the 215 unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Hear the words of Thohahente Kim Weaver, Six Nations artist and activist:

I'm already starting to hear the ally movement and Canadians looking to the Indians to take the lead on hashtag 215children. Time for a PSA.

This is your government, your system, and your laws that enabled this whole thing and allows it to continue today.

We are dealing with just getting by under Canada's heavy oppression, with the added burden of processing the reality of what we have always known--of #215children and countless more yet to be found.

If you are saddened by this revelation. If you are mad as hell. Good!!!!

Remember this was done on your behalf as part of the final solution to the Indian Problem--just as injunctions are to keep us from our lands so multinationals can build pipelines and so developers can build subdivisions on land that is ours and needed for our next generations.

Ownership of this tragedy is YOURS. You all benefited as Canada stole our

wealth and our languages. As it disassembled our cultures. You benefit today by having whole provinces built on a lie and shady deals; and from slick investment portfolios built on dispossession.

Everyone of you!

It is your mess. You either condone it because you like it, or condone it through your personal inaction. You must go beyond letter writing and banging on a hand drum you made at a local Native Friendship Centre workshop. (ouch)

This is the moment when you decide "a fair and just society" is more than the empty words of a racist prime minister, and have a broader inclusiveness that extends to those on whose land the nation-state of Canada sits.

This is when you step up to force Canada to go beyond empty rhetoric.

You have the numbers, the leverage of your skin colour.

Don't wait for us. We're a little busy processing our collective grief and steeling ourselves for the next revelation that we know is to come. Kamloops is not the only Indian Residential School site holding whispers of the unmarked graves and the discarded bodies of our children.

Confront your government in real, substantive ways. Force change. #

It is your responsibility to a just and fair society,

It is our responsibility to a just and fair society.

Good allyship is not performative. It does not say look-at-me and how committed to this cause; I am! It de-centres ourselves. It amplifies the voices of those oppressed. Performative advocacy and activism *is* a start--increased awareness is good! All the reposts of the calls for a reflective and respectful Canada Day made a dramatic impact--I think a lot of people gave time to educating themselves on the dark history of our country, acknowledging the atrocities committed by church and state, and grieving the deaths of Indigenous children. But no number of orange shirts or flags at half-mast is going to bring clean water, better healthcare, more infrastructure, to the reservations, or a better quality of life to Indigenous people, long-time victims of systemic oppression, in general. Renaming Dundas St or other gestures of reconciliation are bound to have some effect on moving forward Reconciliation--but if we are going to spend millions of dollars on these gestures, there better be much more action being taken--and dollars spent--that *directly* improves the lives of indigenous peoples. Will our allyship, our partnerships, our endeavours for indigenous justice be bold enough to

bring lasting change? Will they bring clean drinking water, bring reparations, bring the release of records relevant to the history and legacy of genocide within the residential school system. Will it bring the return of unceded lands and a system that recognizes indigenous law and title? We don't have to ponder what is the best course of action. We have been given 94 Calls to Action through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It's all there--it just needs execution. Pressure on our Federal Government has yielded results. We are slowly advancing the 94 Calls. You can follow the progress of the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at [Beyond94](http://Beyond94.ca) at cbc.ca. If you are wondering what you can do, maybe have a read of the recommendations and focus on a couple that *really* speak to you. See how you can be an advocate and take action to move them forward.

Gord Downie, who, in his final years, made telling the Indigenous story and educating his fans about the truths of the Canadian Residential Schools his *magnum opus*, said that:

The next hundred years are going to be painful as we come to know Chanie Wenjack and the thousands like him. It will take seven generations to heal the wound of the residential school. To become a country, and truly call ourselves Canada, we must become one. We must walk down a path of reconciliation from now on. Together, and forever. Only when we do, can we truly call ourselves 'Canada'

This isn't going to be easy... but if we do the work to prepare--as individuals and institutions--to discuss with one another as to how we can make it easier for each individual to be an activist in the areas that they are drawn to, to plan concerted action as a community, and to allow ourselves to be stretched and challenged just enough to push our growing edges--we can do it.

You are always the one steering the canoe, however.

Sometimes on the white-water-rapids course it is both relaxing and exhilarating to be swept along by the swells, oars at rest, watching the scenery and marveling at the ease of it all.

And sometimes we must paddle against the current in order to take a fork in the river.

First Unitarian Toronto: Woyaya

We plan for the future with flexibility and openness... but with preparedness. We plan for what we can, and take control when we need to, but accept the forces that are beyond our control. There's maybe no better example of this than the work of our First Unitarian Real Estate Team and its iterations over the last decade. We have encountered an endless array of opportunities, hurdles, disappointments--constantly recalibrating, re-evaluating, re-planning. Our leadership is active and adaptive--open to opportunity and not stubbornly fixed on a single outcome. As this congregation has weathered the rollercoaster of change throughout this pandemic and will come out the other side renewed and strengthened in new ways, we will also come through this longer period of uncertainty around our physical future and our evolving identity of who we are and what our purpose is. Skilled leadership, stewardship, communication, and the strength of community will get us there... wherever that is. Let's enjoy all that comes with the unpredictability of it all--open to wherever the journey takes us--like an adventure paddling a new body of water, where each new turn is a new surprise.

Anecdote II

Unlike the disappointment of my first kayak trip of the year this year, last year I had an incredible experience... once I accepted that those carefully laid plans had been dashed too. I had planned a trip during the Summer Solstice. Everything was carefully and meticulously planned--but my path became literally blocked, and my plans were thwarted. Just minutes from my scheduled launch time, I found myself needing to turn my rental around and find another launch site... I was crushed that I'd miss the rising Solstice Sun centred on the river on the horizon before me. It took me an hour to get over the disappointment. I had to talk myself into calm, telling myself to accept change--and then to not just accept it, but to make it great. I headed down an unknown road, on a new path into the future... one for which I had no knowledge and no plan. I had missed the solstice sunrise entirely... but the days that followed ended up being a

couple of the most spiritually nourishing days in the splendour of nature that I had ever had. I just needed to be open to changing course, and to find gratitude for what the universe had to offer.

*You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometime you find
You get what you need*