

# “How, then, shall we live?”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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## Welcome

Good morning!

And welcome to First Unitarian, online,  
where we come together  
in the hope of bringing more love and justice into our world.

We welcome you, wherever you are,  
and whether you've been part of this community for years,  
or are visiting us for the first time today.

Whoever you are,  
wherever you are on life's journey,  
you belong here because you are here.

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My name is Shawn Newton, and I serve  
as the Senior Minister of our congregation.

I am joined in leading today's service by

Matt Rideout, our A/V engineer;

Adam Sakiyama, our pianist;

Gaby Byrnes and Danny Fong, our resident musicians;

Dallas Bergen, our Director of Congregational Music  
and Congregational Engagement,

Angela Klassen, our Director of Lifespan Religious Education;

Leslie Solomonian, our Worship Leader,

And in a short while,

Karen Dunk-Green and Merrilee Brand,  
will be bringing us news  
from two important areas of congregational life.

It's a wonderfully full service we have for you today.  
Thank you, all, for being with us.

### **Chalice Lighting**

And, now, as we begin,  
I invite you to light a candle or chalice at home,  
if you have one readily at hand,  
and join me in our chalice lighting words.

As we light our chalice.

May its flame kindle within us:  
The warmth of compassion.  
The glow of love.  
The fire of commitment.  
And the light of truth.

### **Sermon: "How, then, shall we live?"**

I don't know about you,  
but it's been a long time now since I've heard anyone say  
that they can't wait for things to get back to normal.

For a while there, a couple of years ago—  
back in those halcyon days  
when we thought we'd be through the worst of this pandemic-thing  
in a few weeks, or a couple of months, at most—  
who among us didn't find ourselves longing for a return to normal?

It didn't take long for the talking heads on the nightly news,  
or maybe those around us,  
or maybe, even, a voice deep within  
to name that we wouldn't be going "back to before,"  
and that we would, instead, be living into a "new normal."

It now feels like it's also been a very long time

since I've heard anyone refer to the "new normal."

I think that's because no one really has to be convinced at this point.

Yeah, we all get it.

Things have changed.

Things are changing.

Early on, there were endless articles published on the topic of what this strange, new normal would be like.

I didn't put much stock in any of those articles at the time. It felt far too soon to be making such predictions.

And it didn't feel that a pandemic of only a few weeks—a couple of month, tops—was enough to fundamentally change life as we knew it.

Two years into our long, strange, and dangerous dance with Covid, though, and it is clear enough that this ordeal, for better and for worse, has changed and is changing us.

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Andrew Sullivan writes that:

Plagues have often been catalyzing events,  
entering human history like asteroids hitting a planet.

They kill shocking numbers of people and leave many more rudderless,  
coping with massive loss, incalculable grief, and, often, social collapse.

They reorder the natural world, at least for a time,  
as human cities and towns recede and animal life reemerges  
and microbes evolve and regroup.

They suspend a society in midair and traumatize it,  
taking it out of its regular patterns  
and intimating new possible futures.

In some cases, a society redefines itself.  
In others, trauma seems the only consequence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sullivan, A Plague Is an Apocalypse. But It Can Bring a New World. *NY Magazine*, 21 July 2020.

I recall first reading those words in the summer of 2020.

Sullivan went on in his essay to detail numerous moments when disease has upended the course of human history, from the Black Death to smallpox to the flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919.

These plagues, in their time,  
killed huge numbers of people,  
disrupted economies,  
destabilized political systems,  
sparked or settled wars,  
and caused people to deeply question their religious beliefs.

And they touched most every aspect of human life.

A case can be made that we're now finding all of this to be largely true in our own time.

Two years in, it's become clear that this virus and its many varieties can affect far more than the health of individuals.

In ways that were hard to appreciate at the outset, Covid has sickened many of the key systems we depend on.

And it has revealed the inequality that has long been baked into our way of life. And shown us anew its bitter consequences.

Frank Snowden, a professor of history and medicine, explains that:

Diseases do not afflict societies in random and chaotic ways.

[Pandemics are] ordered events, because microbes selectively expand and diffuse themselves to explore ecological niches that human beings have created.

Those niches very much show who we are—whether, for example, in the industrial revolution, we actually cared what happened to workers and the poor and the condition that the most vulnerable people lived in.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaac Chotiner, "How Pandemics Change History," *The New Yorker*, 3 March 2020.

The question of whether we actually care about those who are subject to the worst whims of this pandemic is one that has, I know, haunted many of us.

In various ways, Covid has simply revealed what we already suspected or knew to be true about the modern world.

And it has had new things to teach us, as it has revealed both the best and the worst of our humanity.

It is easy to conjure the most despicable examples:

- That wealthy B.C. couple that jumped the vaccine queue by flying to the Yukon to get their first doses, which were intended for the White River First Nation.

- Anti-vax protestors who've harassed and intimidated healthcare workers outside of hospitals.

- Stunning examples of misplaced entitlement—be it from tennis stars, thoughtless strangers, or those irritating messages from that distant cousin of ours.

Fortunately, such stories have been offset by great acts of generosity, grace, and good will.

Moments that have made our spirits soar and affirmed the best of who we can be.

But it is worth acknowledging that these two years of ups and downs, amid so much uncertainty, as we've ridden out four waves, and now a fifth, have taken a toll on us our hearts— as we've had to navigate understandable fears for our own health and well-being and for those whom we love.

As we've contended with the disappointment of missing out on so many key life events— from births to deaths, and the many meaningful moments in between.

And as we've most likely had to deal with some level of disillusionment, as our faith in government and various institutions has been shaken by missteps and mistakes that have made clear how very human our leaders are, even though they are often doing

the best they can under evolving circumstances.

These experiences and so many more are, I believe, changing us.

The question, though, is in what way.

It may still be too soon to say, or, even, to fully know.

We are, of course, still in the thick  
of this strange chapter of our lives.

But the world as we knew it in early 2020 is obviously no longer the same.  
There is no real going back to where we once were.

With so many changes coming into focus,  
the way forward is into a future few of us might have imagined two years ago.

In outward ways, much of our lives has shifted online,  
and it's near certain that we will continue to live large parts of our lives virtually—  
be it for school, for work, for doctor's visits, and for religious services—  
even when the pandemic has passed,  
and we are safely able to gather again in person.

In the process, the meaning of home is being redefined.  
As is our sense of work and travel and play.

It must also be said that these past two years  
have challenged and changed us  
in ways beyond the scope of the pandemic—  
as we've grappled with a renewed reckoning over racial injustice  
and been confronted anew with the horrific legacy of the residential schools  
through the discovery of the bodies  
of hundreds and hundreds of Indigenous children.

For almost six months, the Maple Leaf flew at half-mast  
as a symbol of our national shame.

In this same stretch of time, we have watched global leaders  
make only the most meagre progress in mitigating  
the intensifying effects of climate change  
that are now becoming almost routine,  
with forests and the towns within them going up in flames in an afternoon  
or floods wiping out livestock, crops, and vital infrastructure in mere minutes.

And across the border we are witnessing  
tremendous instability in our nearest neighbour,  
with daily reports on the erosion of democracy.

All while other global powers are rattling their sabers  
in ways that threaten to mightily imperil peace on our planet.

This is a lot. This is a lot, I know.

And it's more than our hearts and minds can at times be expected to hold,  
let alone know how to respond to most of the time in any meaningful way.

I really empathized with those who a few days ago  
said that the death of Betty White was just the last straw,  
and that they had had it...!

I am taking the risk of lifting up all of this this morning  
to acknowledge that there are real and understandable reasons  
for this age of anxiety we find ourselves in.

There are real and understandable reasons you may be feeling  
overwhelmed, depressed, or despondent.  
Sad, or angry, or completely discombobulated.

This is a lot to bear and to bear witness to.

And whether we pay it much attention or much heed,  
it is changing us and the world around us.

Which is a big part of why we can't actually go back to before—  
even if we still wanted to.

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The title of my sermon today is: "How, then, shall we live?"

It is, I believe, becoming the question of our time.

In the face of all that is unfolding,  
in light of all that is changing,  
how shall we live our lives?

How shall we live with meaning and purpose,  
when so much may seem uncertain or pointless?

How shall we live with integrity,  
when the path to justice and equity is such an uphill struggle?

How shall we live with courage, when fear and anxiety abound?

How shall we live with joy,  
when the weight of the world feels far heavier than it's ever been for most of us?

I realize this is one of those moments  
when it might be helpful if I trotted out a simple, straight-forward answer.

If only.

We are living through extraordinary times.

And it's best, in my view, to not sugarcoat  
the hard realities that we are living into.

Because if we can name what we are feeling,  
and even what we're fearing,  
we can begin to put things in perspective.

Barry Schwartz, a psychologist who studies how plagues impact our psyches,  
recently offered what I found to be a very helpful distinction  
between fear and anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

He says that while the two "terms are quite different,  
... in popular discourse, people don't make a distinction."

"There is," he said, though, "an object to fear.  
You are afraid of something."

And then he adds that:

"The thing [with] anxiety is [that] you're afraid of *everything*.  
[And] you don't [actually] know what you're afraid of."

Knowing what we are afraid of can help us deal with it,  
which is a useful thing to know how to do  
when trying to figure out how one should live.

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<sup>3</sup> Sophie Brickman, "If Covid's 'new normal' makes you more anxious than before, you are not alone," *The Guardian*, 1 October 2021.

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It may surprise you to hear me say that I consider this a hopeful sermon.

And I say that because I find myself returning again and again these days to the wisdom of James Luther Adams, the most prominent UU theologian of the last century.

Adams, who lived in Germany in the 30s and witnessed the rise of fascism, maintained to the end of his long life that there was cause for hope.

Here's what he said:

... the resources divine and human  
that are available for the achievement of meaningful change  
justify an attitude of ultimate optimism...

History is a struggle in dead earnest  
between justice and injustice,  
looking towards the ultimate victory  
in the promise and fulfillment of grace.

Anyone who does not enter into that struggle  
with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark  
and thwarts creation as well as self-creation.<sup>4</sup>

The wisdom I take from his words for our time  
is the reminder that we, as characters in this ancient story,  
this long struggle of learning what it means to be human,  
have the resources to effect meaningful if incremental change in our world.

That we can, through the cherishing of life's beauty  
and an unyielding commitment to the relentless power of love,  
choose to let ourselves, in this tumultuous time, be changed for good.

And that we can, in fact, play a part in shaping a new normal  
that is better than the one we once knew.

As the poet Adrienne Rich so powerfully put it:

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<sup>4</sup> James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*, Beacon Press: Boston, 1976, p. 18.

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.<sup>5</sup>

May we be such a people,  
today and in all the days we are given.

Blessed Be.

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<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Rich, from "Natural Resources" in *The Dream of a Common Language*, Norton, 1978, p. 67.