

We'll Build a Land?

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
22 May 2022

Meditation - Tony Kushner

At every moment in every person's life there is work to be done, always work to be done, some of it small, some of it Great. The Great Work, in a sense, always has to do with healing the world, changing the world, and, as a necessary predicate to that, understanding the world. You rise every morning aware that you are called to this work. You won't live to see it finished. But if you can't hear it calling, you aren't listening hard enough. It's always calling, sometimes in a big voice, sometimes in a quiet voice.

Sermon: "We'll Build a Land?"

I must tell you at the outset that I have long loved the hymn we sang earlier.

I heard it soon after I first passed through the doors of a UU congregation some three decades ago.

It resonates deeply for me with what I see as the core of our calling: to help heal the world through the work of love and justice.

For those of us raised to be biblically literate—
whether we wanted to be or not—
it's easy to pick up the many references
to the prophetic tradition found in the Jewish scriptures—
words later echoed by Jesus, or at least by the writers of the gospels
who put many of these same words in his mouth.

And, of course, it's powerful to sing the lines so often shared by Dr. King,
the ones that proclaim that a day will at last come,
when justice and mercy and all that we know of rightness
will stream down like mighty torrents, leaving the world transformed for good.

I, like many of you, and with UUs across the continent,
have sung these words with gusto for decades.

Believing that what we do in this life truly matters

and makes a meaningful difference in the here and now,
many of us have sung these words more emphatically
than most anything else in our hymnal,
because they capture something of the vision, even if a long way off,
of peace at last prevailing upon the earth,
with all her people one.

But in recent years, I and others are finding
the words of this once-beloved hymn
now stick uncomfortably in our throats.

For starters, the tone of arrogance rubs some people the wrong way.

I mean, it is a rather tall order to
bind up the broken,
set free the captives,
and dissolve all mourning with the oil of gladness.

To say nothing of building up ancient cities,
raising up devastations from old,
and restoring the ruins of generations.

That's a lot to try to accomplish on our own.
And there have been times in our history when we were confident we could do it.

To be clear, these are all noble and deeply needed things
in this beautiful but hurting world of ours.

Yet, it's not so much the words, or only the words,
but the way in which they are said, or sung, or proclaimed.

With our growing awareness of what the real work of reconciliation requires of us,
it's hard to bear the words of this hymn
unless they somehow come with a heaping dose of humility.

Held against the light of the history of colonization in this country
and the bitter legacy of cultural genocide—and the literal genocide—
of Indigenous peoples across this land we now call Canada,
there is a need for us to seriously consider whether we can sing these words at all.

The tragedy is that it took UUs with Indigenous backgrounds
speaking up to help us finally begin to understand
that this hymn has some real problems.

I think if this hymn has a future—and I’m not so sure it does—we need to first ask ourselves what we mean when we say “we.”

When we sing “we’ll build a land,” who do we envision being involved, or consulted, about what this new and distant land will be like? And just whose definition of justice are we working with? Whose vision of a peaceful planet are we striving towards?

I’m pretty sure that when this hymn was written back in our Humanist hey-day, more than 40 years ago, we meant “we” in a fairly narrow sense.

And without the fuller awareness we have gained across the decades of how real progress towards racial justice and reconciliation means that our understanding of “we” must be reimagined to include everyone who has a stake in the land we are hoping to build.

So, you may well be wondering why I had us sing “We’ll Build a Land” this morning, given my many misgivings, and my finding it increasingly problematic.

First, it was good, I think, for us all to have a bit of a refresher, since we haven’t, as a congregation, sung this particular hymn in several years now.

So there’s value in having it fresh in our minds, and recently on our lips.

But, even more, I had us sing it, because doing so might help us to better understand in a heart-felt way the need for us to check our attitudes and our assumptions about the Great Work we’re trying to accomplish in the world.

I bring this up now, as we are packing up this building and preparing to move into a new and different neighbourhood, because how we arrive there, how we act and how we engage with the community that already exists there, and has for a very long time, will matter a great deal to what our future in this city will actually be.

If we introduce ourselves in an arrogant, haughty manner, wrongly thinking ourselves somehow superior to our new neighbours, and believing that we alone have a clear view of how things really should be, we will do harm to the Oakwood-Vaughan community and we will do damage to our own congregation.

In moving to the Oakwood Collegiate Institute next fall,
and eventually on to 473 Oakwood in early 2024,
we are placing ourselves in a rich and diverse ecosystem
that has been around for a long time—
and that, frankly, has been doing just fine without us.

All of which is to say that we, as a congregation,
may need a bit of an attitude adjustment as we make this move.

We will need to enter into the neighbourhood with humility and a holy curiosity.
We need to show up to listen, and learn, and then listen some more.

To respect what and who is already there.
To honour the communities that have called that place home for a long time.

And to recognize that we have much to learn
about what it means to be good neighbours in that particular place.

This is where my mantra of
how is more important than what comes in.

For us to flourish in this new neighbourhood,
for us to embrace the future that we might have there,
we will need to draw on everything we have already come to know as UUs
about listening, about seeking understanding,
about drawing on compassion,
and about living into the truth at the heart of our faith:
that we need not think alike to love alike.

When our religious forebears established themselves,
first on George Street, downtown, and later on Jarvis, before moving to St. Clair,
they seemingly did so without much, if any, appreciation
that they were doing so on lands that ultimately were not their own.

There seems to have been little attention paid
to what had been happening before they arrived on the scene.

That, of course, was not uncommon for most white settlers.
They had bought and paid for the land,
and considered themselves the outright owners of it, free and clear.

Through the lenses of reconciliation and decolonization, though,
we now know better—even if we don't quite know what it means,
on a deeper level, to have purchased another plot of land in this city—

land that we often acknowledge here as the traditional lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Ojibway/Chippewa, and the Wendat, lands subject to the Toronto Purchase Treaty 13 of 1805, through which the Crown purchased 250,830 acres for the sum of 10 shillings.

So, as we prepare to move to our new home, aware of all of this hard history, my deepest hope is that we will not arrive as colonizers, proudly planting our flag, and not as thoughtless gentrifiers giving little consideration to our impact on the community, and not as misguided do-gooders, there to somehow save the day.

Instead, I hope we will arrive with a profound openness to learning what we do not already know—about the neighbourhood, and about ourselves.

I hope we will come to see ourselves not as owners of a fortified piece of property, but as stewards of a place that sits in the heart of a dynamic community that already has a history, and that already has a present, and that may be willing to involve us in its future, if we demonstrate over time our capacity to care deeply for the well-being of everyone who calls it home.

This means embracing the promise of this neighbourhood, and helping to contend with its challenges.

It means finding out how we can help support what other people are already doing to build a better world in that corner of the city.

It means being generous with sharing the building and our resources not to “build a land,” but to build collaboratively alongside others on foundations that have already been laid by other people across generations.

Over the past couple of years, I’ve spent time in the presence of Indigenous leaders who often use in their prayers to the Creator the petition that they are helped to do something “in a good and humble way.”

“A good and humble way.”

That is my prayer for us.

That we may come to this new chapter of our common life as a congregation in a good and humble way.

* * *

This move will change us.

It will transform us—
and, I dare say, it is already changing and challenging us
in ways that, if we remain truly committed and fully open,
will lead on to a powerful expression of Unitarian Universalism
that I believe will serve our city in exciting and newly-relevant ways.

My colleague Nancy McDonald Ladd has written words
that speak to me of this role we might play—
this way we might put our faith into action
to serve needs beyond our own.

Talking about the struggles and stresses of congregational life—
the internal conflicts that sometimes divide and destroy congregations—
she points to the fights that are worth fighting—“the real conversation[s]
about our history, our identity, our relevance, [and] our resistance.”

And then she goes on to say:

The world does not need another place
for like-minded liberal leaning people
to hang out together and fight about who’s in charge.

The world does not need a place where you or I or any of us
is going to get [exactly] what we want.

What the world needs is a movement like ours
to step more fully into our higher calling;
to serve as an instrument for encounter with one another,
with the [sacred], and with the world,
so that we might love more fully,
and speak more truly
and serve with greater efficacy.¹

¹ Excerpted from the sermon delivered by Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd at General Assembly 2016.

Over the past fifteen years that I have journeyed with you,
I have been part of hundreds if not thousands of discussions,
in formal meetings and casual conversation,
about the building we hoped to someday build.

As tedious and trying as some of those conversations have been,
it has been a labour of love for me,
because this has never been about a building.

A building is merely a tool to carry out The Great Work
that we feel we, as a congregation, are called to take up.

Tools matter. And there is a big difference
between having the wrong tool or the right tool.
A good tool or a not-so-good tool.

We are building a very good tool, if we accept as our calling
that we are here to “seek, connect, and serve.”

To seek to understand the meaning of our lives.
To connect with others authentically.
And to serve life to build a better world.

Our home on the hill in Oakwood will be a wonderful place
to live into that vision, not for ourselves alone,
but for others who may find strength and courage, and hope and healing,
in what we have to offer.

So let us set our hearts to the great work of building that is before us.

That we may, in a good and humble way,
help to create a place—a land, if you will—
where a community of compassion and care flourishes,
and where justice shall roll down like waters,
and peace like an ever-flowing stream.

So may it be.

Amen.