

## "Full Circle"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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The date was October 2nd, and the year, 2015.

I was in Boston, for my appointment with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. It's the body that oversees the credentialing of ministers so that we can enter what's called "ministry fellowship" and become ordained.

I remember standing nervously before the panel of eight people, and starting with a reading that had been meaningful to me since childhood.

By this point, I'd already worked for First Unitarian for a year, from fall 2013 through to the end of that next summer.

I completed my first summer ministry back then--as your intern not yet ordained--and now I've completed my second summer ministry, as I complete my time as a parish minister.

It seems I've come full circle.

After that internship, I finished my Master of Divinity degree and was ordained at Neighbourhood congregation.

Then I joined your staff team in the fall of 2016.

Having started in 2013 and ending this year, I've been in deep relationship with you for almost exactly a decade.

It has been a momentous time, not only in my life, but in the life of this congregation and indeed the world.

My time here has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Trump Era (he was elected just weeks after I arrived), the rapid escalation of climate change,

the Black Lives Matter movement, the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission...not to mention the move out of 175 St. Clair West, and of course, the departure of your beloved Settled Minister, Shawn Newton-Gauthier.

Fun fact! When I began working with you, I didn't own a smart phone.

When I began my ministry with you, I couldn't have imagined the magnitude of changes we'd go through together.

Nor would I have predicted that as I complete my time as a parish minister, I am in some ways coming back to the beginning.

In preparing this message for you today, I found myself returning to a familiar text--the source text for the sermon I delivered for the MFC panel.

It's the prayer that begins "Make me an instrument of Thy peace."

The prayer is often associated with St. Francis of Assisi--who with his wife Clare chose to live in radical simplicity.

It turns out the prayer doesn't appear in any of his writings, so we must attribute it to the ever-prolific and brilliant writer, "Anonymous."

But here is an adapted version of the St. Francis Prayer:

Make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
and where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love,

for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned...

And it is *in the dying of the small self*  
that we are born into new life.

In this room, of course, there will be a range of responses to this reading from the Christian tradition.

While some may find it challenging, I know that others here find it deeply meaningful...and some even hope that I will sing the musical version today. I won't be doing that, but I highly recommend Sinéad O'Connor's beautiful rendition which she dedicated to Princess Diana.

The main thing I want to emphasize, as I reflect on this prayer today, is that it calls me--it calls us--toward something beyond ourselves.

It calls us to look beyond our own personal frames to serve the world in deeper purpose.

And it suggests that being an "instrument" of Peace, or God, or the Spirit of Life is more important than any position of leadership that any individual might hold.

As it's been said: "the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon."

The idea of being an "instrument" or channel of something larger--of being in partnership with the Spirit of Life--this has helped me through this ten-year period of radical change and challenge.

I hope it can be helpful to you, too.

A few weeks ago, I reflected with you on the challenge of human choice-making.

How do we know the "next right thing" to do, when we are free to choose between so many worthy options?

I suggested that we do that in relationship with a source of deep wisdom, whether we call it True Self, God or Goddess...the Source of Love Beyond All Naming...or the Holy Whatever-You-Call-It! (I especially like that one.)

I suggested that prayer and meditation in various forms can be helpful...as we ask ourselves, how do I become "an instrument of a greater peace"?

How do I sow love instead of hate, faith instead of doubt?

What choices must I make in order that Life's deep call to me may be heard in the first place and then be brought to some form of fruition?

This deeper reflection is often called "discernment"...the struggle to make out the difference between Life's deeper or perhaps "truer" calls and the many other urgings that come to us from so many directions...not the least which is our own ego.

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Just after I announced my intention to become a parish minister, a very kind man in my home congregation pulled me aside at coffee time and said gently: "But you already have a calling."

I knew he was right.

My life as a performing songwriter was a ministry in itself; even though it didn't pay a living wage and wasn't nearly as "successful" by external standards as I wanted it to be.

Meanwhile, the call to serve others through listening presence, writing and speaking, supporting my then recently-found faith of Unitarian Universalism by helping lead a congregation--

Well, the call to parish ministry was clear, too, and it's one I'm so grateful to have followed.

Over time, I've come to a deeper understanding of how my calls as minister and musician are indeed interdependent and how they might continue to take shape.

And in these years we've spent together, alongside you I've been aware of the changing calls of life.

Our personal landscapes, our capacities, needs and responsibilities...  
Well, they change as we get older.

I'm turning 60 this week...on October 4th (St. Francis's Day).

And of course, organizations change too, calling for new leaders who bring different skills and energies better suited to the tasks at hand.

And so I made the difficult decision to leave this ministry...despite the fact that I value my deep and meaningful connection with you, and even though my presence and skills might be valuable to First Unitarian at this time.

I was not your "called" settled minister. I was your part-time, second minister.

And yet, I often did sense that there was a natural "fit" in this ministry, between me, and you the congregation, and the staff team.

A natural fit that allowed so much good work to be done in our circles of care.

To leave was not (and is not) an easy decision.

It seems to include equal parts sorrow and joy--which perhaps signals how meaningful a decision it truly is.

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During the pandemic years, we started running online groups centered on readings found in our UU publications.

One of my favourites, which Donald shared earlier, seems to fit my experience of coming "full circle" today. The words of T.S. Eliot...

*We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to find ourselves at the beginning  
and know the place for the first time.*

Through all my exploring in parish ministry, I've been humbled and grateful to be brought back to where I started:

To perennial wisdom from so many sources.

To calls in ministry and music that remain true and alive for me today.

In the larger sense, too, I believe that as a human species, it is time for us to come "full circle."

We must "return again" to the understanding that we are part of one sacred and interdependent Whole, and that we must learn to live in simpler ways, in harmony with the Earth, as we are taught by Indigenous peoples, and all those who have grown into deeper spiritual awareness.

As we deepen and grow, we may let go of the "ladders," and the hierarchical, dualistic ways of thinking that the dominant culture has taught us. (I was

grateful to learn the term "the colonized mind" from one of our online participants.)

We may learn to follow instead, with faith and patience, the path of the spiral, that takes us around again to where we started: at one with the wholeness of life.

As "instruments" or "channels" of a Wisdom far greater than our own individual agendas...perhaps, together, we can co-create a new world where hatred, sadness and despair are met with love, joy and hope.

Where we will not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief... but rather be dancing, in humility and mercy, to the rhythm of justice.



But here's an interesting question.

Is it possible for a large organization to be an instrument of peace in this way?

The Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr recently wrote that we need to "let go of churchiness" because the nature of institutions can overshadow the simple and humble service to others that is the heart of ministry.

Indeed, the small circles of listening presence and small group ministry are often where we feel the Spirit of Life move most powerfully.

I have certainly felt that here at First.

Despite concerns to the contrary, I do believe that organizations can become instruments of God's peace...

That they can do so, when the people within them understand themselves as deeply connected to something much larger.

At its best, religious experience moves us patiently into the deeper waters...

To the humble and curious places from which we can share more readily and cooperate more fully for the well-being of the Whole.

One of the silver linings of First not finding an Interim Minister this year may be the opportunity for creative cooperation between leaders and between ministers and lay-people: a renewed appreciation of interdependence as it is expressed in congregational life.

Any experience, however difficult, that brings us back to the ground of love and relationship is one that serves the Wholeness of Life...

And it is in the eternal circle of love and loss that we are continually re-created and made new.

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For me, the process of creative work, with its cycles of finding and losing, of returning again and again to the blank page...

It provides a way of getting to know the world...of coming to terms with it...in a meaning-filled way.

I like to think that the Creator, in the many forms They take, is doing the same:

Bringing the living thing of a song or a conversation or an act of service into being...whenever life makes that possible.

And so I come to offer you a new song, written in relationship with a poet long ago whose words continue to inspire me...

knowing that in the Circle of Life we will return to closer relationship again in ways we cannot fully understand nor foresee...

And with gratitude for all the many ways you have held me in your circle of love for all this time we have been together.