

New beginnings towards a hopeful world

Rev. Mwibutsawineza Ndagijimanayiburundi, Toronto January 21st

At any given time and age, life constantly calls us to begin again. To face challenging situations in the hope of emerging more hopeful and more fulfilled. Throughout my life and my work, I have had so many times to start all over again, to experience new beginnings. This morning I will briefly share my experience of experimenting with new beginnings, how new beginnings invite us to investigate who we really are as we get called to live our values in the world.

For more than a year now, I have been going through a process of name changing, essentially deepening my spiritual identity, my connection to my roots and to my ancestors. I can tell you; it has been quite a spiritual journey. I was given a name by parents, Ndagijimana and Fulgence by missionaries who baptized me. I, my parents and my neighbours can relate to Ndagijimana, few can really relate to Fulgence which is a foreign name, that no one knows the meaning of in a culture in which names are powerful in the sense that they carry a message to the person who carries the name, to the community and to the parents who chose the name.

The process got more meaningful by virtue of me being in Canada. While navigating and learning this culture and appreciating its beauty, being in a new country and new culture gave me the opportunity to appreciate fully my

Burundian and African cultures. It dawned on me that cultural alienation is real, and it takes a lot from us. It robs from us the capacity to drink from the familiar and natural source and relate to our fellow human beings from a place of stability and enough. Most traditional religious practices are either illegal or looked down upon by Christianity, which, in its failure to incorporate and embrace valuable cultural elements in its teachings, sees everything from our traditions as a threat to its often very “shallow “message. A message shared with people who are essentially invited to deny themselves culturally in the process of living their faith.

In our tradition, the name is given by parents and always have a meaning of who you are or need to be or carrying a message for the next generations of what was going on at the time of your birth. When you grow up, you may get another name from the community because you are a good hunter, you are very generous and so on, a testimony of your skills or character.

When you are an adult, you can also give yourself a name as a life mission, you decide who you want to be, what you want your life to mean for you and for others and all of that is expressed through a name.

I decided to give myself a new name and to clarify my last name.

My chosen name is now Mwibutsawineza, Mwibutsa for short, the one who reminds people to do good and be kind. Many of Burundi names have MANA (God) in them. But Christianity and Islam being so dominant now, it is often heard that the MANA we are talking about in our names is the Muslim or the Christian God. I clarified that the MANA in my name is the God of our ancestors, at the very least, their understanding of God, whatever it may be.

These seemingly small things have large implications for me. It is a life mission name that I have chosen to live and be inspired by, to live a life that is geared towards others because life can only have a meaning in community.

New beginnings or a renewed focus on what exists already could be needed for more than names or traditions. Maybe there is a conversation we have dreaded to have for so long, a project we have postponed so many times, that relationship we have refused to let go of or to embrace and so many more other beginnings awaiting to be looked at and faced with hope and determination.

It seems to me that new beginnings are both a statement of who we are and who we need to be. When the person we are, who behaves and acts in certain way need to relate differently, we are at point when we need to open to something new and different.

The new beginnings are charted and lived in a community. The community is helpful and nurturing when they support and encourage our various identities and this where Unitarian Universalist communities play an important role in nurturing different identities.

When we think about difficult and complicated issues, maybe issues some of us have spent time our lifetimes working on with no results to show for or, even

worse, reverse of what we had thought was secured for good, it can be difficult to get motivated and stay focussed.

Should we begin again to work for peace when we don't see progress during our lifetime, when wars and rumours of wars are all we hear about? Can we continue working for reconciliation and peaceful cohabitation when it looks like divisions keep increasing?

Can we continue to push for Climate change when the opposing forces seem so powerful, and the environmental catastrophe seems closer and closer?

The work to eradicate poverty is never ending. Although the hunger situation has improved compared to past centuries, many people, far too many still starve to death either for lack of access of healthy or nutritious food or maliciously prevented from accessing the food.

Every time I visit refugees, I get overwhelmed by the need and the misery. If flaming Chalice International helps 50 or 100 among the hundreds of thousands who need help? Is it worth it? I get satisfaction that the work is worth the efforts regardless of how many were served because a life was touched and changed. But I am aware of the limitations.

There are so many causes that need us to wake up every day and literally repeat what we did yesterday and last year and many years before.

I was born in an unstable country and sometimes I catch myself thinking that I will probably join my ancestors before something stable and to be proud of is real and tangible.

In my culture, we believe that you do what needs to be done and when your part is done, the next people continue the work that you started. It takes off our shoulders the expectation that the world will be changed just by one person. We need to believe in the power of humanity, in the collective power of all those who want to do good in the world and in our communities.

Why do you keep trying? Why don't you give up? Why do you still taking risks instead of being safe and cozy but rather go out in the world, get your hands dirty in order to change the situation for the better. That is where a strong case of what keeps us going is posed.

I think the motivation for us people of faith and good will is the values we stand for.

When we do something just for the sake of doing it, because we believe we are doing the right thing, we have found a reason for waking up every day and starting of where we left off, again and again.

The values we stand for as UUs are the core of our identity. As part of who we are, we respect and value people young and old, regardless of skin colour. We, as a faith community, encourage individuals in their search for meaning

without confining them in pre-determined box. These help us bring to life to our identity and other varied identities as well.

Values are like guideposts. They remind us of what is important, and they keep hope alive. Without hope, it would be difficult to keep going and do things even when the result is not forthcoming.

In my work in difficult conditions and with limited resource, I see my work as that of providing hope when hope is hard to find. The person in need who sees some others helped, is reminded that not all is lost, that things could change. The person who gets a word of encouragement may work harder and smarter to get out of the situation thanks to ideas and possibilities that a supportive presence can offer. One person at time, one child at time, one community at time and eventually change happens.

All of us gathered here today, we serve the world in different ways and whichever way we serve, if based on an identity that we can relate to or even better, an identity we have participated in crafting, then we can follow our values as guideposts and create and provide hope.

There are people who need a fresh look from us. Maybe they need understanding, less judgment and maybe there are some boundaries that need to be set. Not all the people need to stay in your lives. This fresh look that relates to your identity is what our lives often long for.

There are also projects, possessions or stuff that need a fresh look. A new identity will need new parameters.

What a joy it is to know that with the necessary support from the community, from friends and partners, we can lead a life that is connected to who we are, a life that gives us the reality of operating from a space of joy, stability, peace and hope.

Your theme for this month speaks of the liberation power of love. It is these acts of love, small and big that eventually bring about the change that we all work for in our different endeavours to transform the world and make it a better place.

That love has been expressed in many ways by you the people of Toronto 1st towards the refugees, the students who have access to internet thanks to your generous support of the computer training for all the financial support that you have been providing to Flaming Chalice International every year. On behalf of all the people whose lives have been and are being touched and transformed, thank you!

It is also important to see the connection between love and hope. Whatever we do, it begins from a place of thoughtful belief that what we are working for is likely to happen in full or in part, sooner or later, in our lifetime or after we are no more. This is the liberating power of love expressed in constant efforts of loving again and again and hoping again and again.

An identity expressed in our values for a life that builds a hopeful world, that is your call and mine.

Amen and blessed be.