

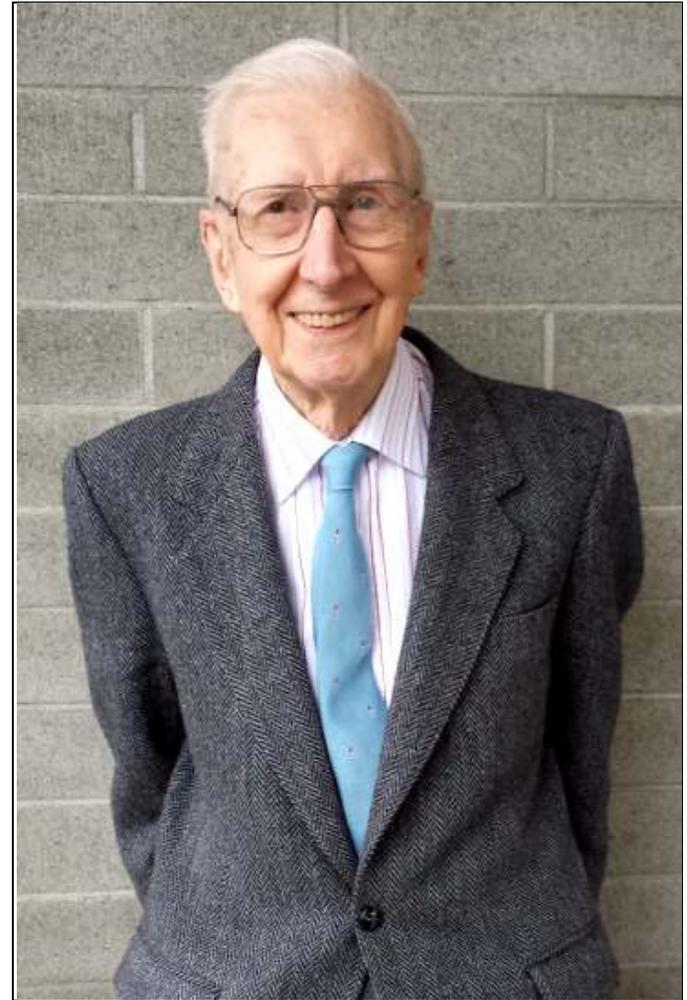
*Phillip Hewett -
A Spiritual Odyssey*

Reflections of the Reverend Phillip Hewett,
Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian
Church of Vancouver

Collected by Stanley L. Tromp

Vancouver, B.C., Canada

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Phillip Hewett

A Biographical Note

Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett, age 93, is minister emeritus of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. Born and raised in villages near Dorchester, England, he served in the R.A.F. during World War II. He studied at Exeter College and Manchester College, Oxford University (B.A., 1949, M.A., 1951) and the Harvard Divinity School (S.T.M., 1953). He received the S.T.D. from the Starr King School for Ministry in 1969.

In 1951 he married Margaret Smith of London, England. He served churches in Montreal, Quebec (1953-54); Ipswich, England (1954-56); Vancouver, British Columbia (1956-91); and Victoria, British Columbia (1991-92). He has also served for short terms congregations in St. Catharines, Ontario, Adelaide, South Australia, and Auckland, New Zealand.

He has been president of both the British and Canadian Unitarian Historical Societies and vice president of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. He has also served three terms on the board of the Canadian Unitarian Council, and has contributed to the *Canadian Encyclopedia* and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. A list of his publications can be found at the end of this booklet.

Since 1952 Rev. Hewett has been active in the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF). In 1983 the American chapter of IARF presented Phillip and Margaret Hewett a joint award for Outstanding Service to International Liberal Religion. In 1992 he was given the Unitarian Universalist Association annual award for distinguished service.

Rev. Hewett has made six trips to the Unitarian movements in Poland and ten to Romania, both beginning in 1969. He

has been a strong advocate for the environment, family planning, disarmament, and peace. In 1972 he first spoke about acceptance of gays, and subsequently officiated at several same-sex unions (the issue of same-sex marriages emerging after his retirement).

He has prepared about 1,200 sermons, and officiated at about the same number of weddings, and close to the same number of memorial services. His hobbies have been hiking, climbing and gardening, and he also enjoys music. Rev. Hewett is father to Barton and Daphne and has four grandchildren.

For a fuller version of Rev. Hewett's life story, see *An Odyssey*, posted at the Hewett page on the UCV website at: <http://vancouverunitarians.ca/speaker/rev-dr-phillip-hewett/>



Preface by Reverend Steven Epperson

When I seriously contemplated applying for the position as Parish Minister of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver back in 2001/02, I read through Phillip Hewett's book *Unitarians in Canada* with keen interest and appreciation. In that work of fine historical scholarship, I came to appreciate its author, the country my family and I would be moving to, and the unique set of experiences which have shaped Canadian Unitarians and their particular ethos.

One of the salient features of this work, intended or not by its author, was a realization of how often Canadian lay-folk have upheld the essentials of their progressive faith, and built and sustained their congregations, *in spite of* professional ministry. Far too frequently, over the years, it was the case that congregations were served by ministers, often from the States, whose ministry was ephemeral and quixotic. I came away from reading Hewett's *Unitarians in Canada* with a healthy and profound respect for Canadian Unitarian lay members.

I thought that if I was to ever to move to Canada and take up professional ministry, I would make a commitment to be Canadian, to put down roots in a new country, and to serve a Canadian Unitarian congregation for as long as we - lay people and minister - deemed that it was a benefit to our congregation and the Unitarian religion in Canada as exemplified in the thirty-five years long ministry of Rev. Hewett with the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. If for nothing else, I have this to thank the Rev. Phillip Hewett

for: this book helped to set me up for what has become a long-lasting and fruitful ministry in Vancouver.

Rev. Hewett served Vancouver Unitarians during what, looking back, appears to be something of a golden age of religion in Canada, which included Unitarians. Unlike our own era of declining membership and participation in organized religion, Rev. Hewett's tenure in Vancouver from the mid-1950s through the 1980s was a time where active membership in religion was expected and respected, where family size was double that of today, where voluntarism in religious communities was the norm, and where religion had a prominence and impact in public, civil life almost unimaginable today. To his credit, Rev. Hewett and Vancouver Unitarians saw this and made the most of it.

My head nearly spins when I read and hear about the range and effectiveness of his ministry and that of the Vancouver congregation: hundreds of children enrolled in religious education taught by scores of volunteers; vanguard advocacy in challenging the practice of the Lord's Prayer in public schools; founding the BC Memorial Society in order to provide an alternative to the expensive stranglehold of the funeral industry; his leadership in establishing and leading the BC Civil Liberties Association; promoting inter-faith dialogue; success in securing the property and building a new church campus at 49th Avenue & Oak Street admired by architects and the city at large for its beauty and utility; hosting the founding meetings of the Greenpeace organization ... and far, far more. Rev. Hewett and Vancouver Unitarians placed the Vancouver congregation - its people, its programs and its campus - squarely on the

map of the civic, cultural, and religious life of this city. The Vancouver congregation was, and has been, a beacon for all Vancouver as a site for a progressive, humane, and socially and spiritually committed religion.

As well, Rev. Hewett is esteemed by his ministerial colleagues, the Vancouver congregation and the wider Unitarian Universalist world for his thoughtful, effective leadership in our religious movement. He has been instrumental in effecting meaningful ties and cooperation between Unitarian Universalists through his advocacy of creating an autonomous Canadian Unitarian Council (of which he served three terms on its Board of Trustees), his work on behalf of the Partner Church Program, and that of both the International Association of Religious Freedom and the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. In recognition of his service - to his congregation, the UU world at-large, and as a thoughtful author of works both historical and theological - Rev. Hewett was the recipient of the Award for Distinguished Service granted by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1992

Closer to home, he mentored a large number of ministerial interns, many of whom went on to successful ministries in North America, helped to promote the founding of three additional independent congregations in the Metro Vancouver area, and was instrumental in creating the Lay Chaplaincy Program - unique to Canadian Unitarianism. While doing all of this, he carried the responsibilities of parish ministry, and authored articles for the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and the *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography* and the

Journal of Unitarian Universalist History, as well as numerous books including *Unitarians in Canada*, *The Unitarian Way* and *Racovia: An Early Liberal Religious Community*. This is a significant, remarkable achievement, as is his ministry. It is more than fitting that we honour Rev. Hewett with the publication of this booklet in February 2018 and in celebration of his 93rd birthday.

For my part, I would add that during my sixteen years as Parish Minister of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, Rev. Hewett has respected the autonomy, work and nature of my ministry, as he should. That said, I have turned to him, with confidence, to perform numerous memorial services for members of the Unitarian Church he served as their minister decades ago, knowing how much it meant to those families to be served, one last time, by *their* minister. With confidence, as well, I have been pleased that our Worship Services Committee has called on Rev. Hewett to preach and lead at least one worship service annually. I am most impressed, on hearing reports about his participation in those services, by how he can still hold and captivate the attention of children while sharing a story with them during the service. This is a gift.

Phillip and I are very different people. That said, a reminiscence: it was May 2003, and I was nearing the end of my first year as Parish Minister in Vancouver. I was attending the annual meeting of UU Ministers of Canada outside Winnipeg, Manitoba at a retreat centre. It was late afternoon, and I was in my room when I heard Phillip's sonorous voice from the room next door reading/reciting out loud lines of poetry. I walked next door and discovered he

was reading passages from the Orkney Islands poet Edwin Muir, and I was astonished. Unbeknownst to him, Muir was a favourite poet of mine whose remarkable personal story and poetry I had long cherished. What a coincidence; and what a fitting way for me to bring my first year of ministry in Canada to its end and to connect in some mysterious way to this man. I'll never forget it.

Testimonials

I have known Phillip Hewett in many different ways, including as his intern at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, and as an experienced minister with whom to consult about ministerial concerns.

Phillip is a kind, gentle, thoughtful, intelligent man. His sermons have depth and bring challenge. But he also knew how to have fun and was able to laugh at himself as well as with others. Watching Phillip be part a skit at a collegial gathering often produced humour for all! I don't think I ever saw him lose his temper although he had some extremely difficult situations to deal with through the years.

What are his contributions to the Unitarian movement? Obviously his detailed research and written observations through his books, and his willingness to be of service to both individuals and organizations that have asked for his help. He always looked so relaxed but he could also be counted on to follow through on any request often requiring long bouts of travel.

He followed the historical trail of Unitarians right back to its beginnings in Transylvania and other European

sites and on into Great Britain. He enjoyed hiking and I was able to usually choose not to accompany him because his legs were so much longer than mine!

- *Jane Bramadat, Minister Emerita, First Unitarian Church of Victoria*

When Bonnie and I moved from Maryland to Canada in 1967, Phillip Hewett was already established as "Mr Unitarian" of Canada. Several congregations were already presenting one of his books to new members, as the best explanation of what Unitarianism was all about.

I got to know Phillip well at the annual four-day retreats of the Unitarian ministers of Canada. That body of some 50 ministers includes three nonagenarians: Phillip, 92, myself, 91, and Charles Eddis, 90, sometimes referred to as the three stUUges .

Phillip and I roomed together several times. I am continually in awe of his intellectual capacity. He knows all the philosophers, as well as all the religious groupings and movements around the world.

- *Rev. Fred Cappuccino is Minister Emeritus of Lakeshore Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Montreal and of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ottawa.*

I first met Phillip in late June, 1953, at a summer cottage on Pelican Lake, a two-hour drive southwest of Winnipeg, where he had been visiting old friends from the

time he spent there during the war when he was training as an air navigator under the Commonwealth Air Training Plan. We were at the cottage of Grant Butler, Director of Extension for the American Unitarian Association. A beginning minister just out of school in Chicago, I was spending two days with him to learn how to work with the Unitarian Fellowship of Edmonton to help it grow into the strong church it was to become. I was heading west to Edmonton. Phillip and his wife Margaret were on a cross-Canada tour which was to take them back to Montreal, where he spent the following year helping establish the new suburban fellowship at Pointe Claire, helping it develop into a full-fledged church.

Two years later Phillip became the minister of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. I passed through Vancouver once a year, preached once there, and attended the annual ministers study group in Portland, Oregon, which Phillip also attended. I saw him also at meetings of the American Unitarian Association and other gatherings. When the proposal to establish a national Unitarian organization Canada caught fire across the country, Phillip served with me on the first board of the Canadian Unitarian Council. In the years since, I have until recently seen Phillip at annual meetings of the CUC. We have had contacts with each other at meetings of the AUA and then the Unitarian Universalist Association and the IARF. We have written about each other, and read each other's writings.

- *Charles Eddis is the leading founder of the Canadian Unitarian Council and its first president. From 1953 to 1993 he served at Unitarian churches in Edmonton, Montreal and Illinois.*

I first met Phillip and his late wife Margaret as they came off the liner, Queen Elizabeth in New York City in 1952. I was then student minister in the Unitarian Church in Hubbardston, MA. My roommate Charles Forman afterward professor at Wheaton College in Norton, MA and I took Phillip and Margaret from the boat to Hubbardston to stay with parishioners there.

Later when I was minister in Portland OR , I worked often with Phillip and Peter Raible who was minister in Seattle at the University Unitarian Church on projects in the Northwest District of the UUA in which Vancouver was then included.

I remember him especially for his officiating at the memorial service for my late wife, The Rev Marguerite Hessler Deale. His history of Canadian Unitarians is the greatest work he did for our denomination in Canada. He pulled together, with difficulty, a great deal of scattered history into one volume.

- *Alan G. Deale, Minister Emeritus, First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon*

I know Phillip as a colleague although he is about fourteen years older than me. Most years Phillip comes over to Oxford for the Ministerial Old Students Association meetings at Harris Manchester College. He stays at our house, then after the meetings we see him off to stay with his younger sisters in Salisbury and Dorchester respectively. He treasures his roots in the county of Dorset, in a village close to where the Tolpuddle Martyrs set up "The Friendly

Society of Agricultural Labourers," forerunner of the Trade Unions' movement.

I have many lasting memories of him including the devoted way he cared for his wife over many years; his morning walks of around two miles that he insists on taking every morning when he stays here and the day he gave his Odyssey at our Ministers' Conference a few years ago in Derbyshire when we gave him a standing ovation.

His contribution to Canada includes his encouragement of humanitarian and liberal thought and action, often against many odds. For the Unitarian movement he was instrumental in setting up the Canadian Unitarian Council and thus creating an organization no longer dependent on the American Unitarian Universalist Association.

On a lighthearted note he is the only Honorary Member of the *Little Blenheim Real Ale Appreciation Society* (LBRAAS) that consists of just three members, a retired Sports Editor, a retired bank manager and a retired Unitarian Minister; we meet once a week in a local pub for an hour and although Phillip imbibes but little he always joins us and is great company.

- *Peter Hewis, Emeritus Fellow & Chaplain, Harris Manchester College, Oxford University*

(For many years, the Vancouver Unitarian Church partnered with the congregation in Brassó – a city so named by Hungarians, and Brasov by Romanians - in the region of Transylvania, Romania, one of the birthplaces of the

Unitarian movement in the 16th century. Rev. Hewett has visited the region ten times since 1969.)

I met Phillip Hewett, the minister of the Vancouver Unitarian Church in the summer of 1990, at an IARF [International Association for Religious Freedom] congress in Hamburg. Perhaps it would be better to say, that he came to meet me and told me that our churches were partnered and had been “destined for each other.” That was the moment of the rebirth for our partnership.

All this was not random. I found out later that Phillip and his wife Margaret had been to visit our congregation and they had developed a good relationship – within the framework of that time – with our former minister Endre Majay and his family. As well as learning about this partnership, I found out that Phillip had a thorough knowledge of Eastern Europe, of the history of Unitarianism in Transylvania and Poland, with a knowledge surpassing mine and those of my contemporaries. The study of Polish Unitarianism continues to be close to his heart.

After this first encounter there came many memorable visits with well known friends or just acquaintances to get to know each other and to keep our common heritage and with a substantial financial support for our congregations.

Keeping up the flow of the conversation and the partnership was not easy, as the lack of English language skills on my part did not allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude and sentiments. But even so, we understood each other. We used Latin or even sign language to discuss

theology, history and opinions about the state of the world and the challenges it faced. We felt many times that perhaps Unitarian Universalism may have the answers to some of our common questions and challenges.

What brought Phillip and I closer was the love of nature, and the mountains. He even wrote a poem about them, which together with his sermons were translated by friends into Hungarian and were published by our theological journal, *The Christian Sower*.

But it was not just these works, which made his name known in Transylvania. The high officials of our Church, especially our former bishop János Erdő, appreciated him enormously. We were aware even in Transylvania about his outstanding personality, his academic prowess, his renown in Canada, and his ministry in the Vancouver congregation. We knew that while appreciating the particularity, he still had a universal mentality and outlook, and his sometimes pessimistic intellectual penchant was intertwined with an optimistic worldview. Perhaps this latter trait made him take a very active part in the dialogue of the world religions.

And finally I know that in 1956, he was one of those who, together with his congregation, welcomed the Hungarian refugees after the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution, proving once again that a friend in need is a friend indeed. He never boasted about his academic achievements or successes, and he remained a very private and modest person. He is of my father's generation, and so I always respected and loved him in this light.

I consider him a mentor for my development both as a person and as a minister. I treasure and cherish his books, which I am not able to translate, but I hope one day someone from the younger generation of our ministers will undertake this work.

There is a Hungarian expression, which may be conveyed into English: a great man is called a “noble” man, a gentleman. Phillip is a Man of God in the service of humankind. So let us leave it at that, my dear friends in Vancouver. God bless you, minister emeritus, Reverend Phillip Hewett. *Isten áldjon ! Ad multos annos !*

- Ferenc Szász, Minister, Unitarian Church, Brasso, Romania

(Rev. Hewett's sermon, *Spiritual Enrichment from Romania, May 2014*, is posted at - <https://vancouverunitarians.ca/download/printsermon/2014/4-May-2014-Spiritual-Enrichment-from-Transylvania.pdf>)

The Roped Ascent



To sunlit ranges of life's peaks
upward our hearts aspire,
by rock and snow and fields of ice
ascending higher.

Together in this enterprise,
sharing a common hope,
each to the next securely linked
by one firm rope.

Then strength of all is strength of each,
as in the rope's design
with strand each reinforcing strand,
all intertwine.

So reason, passion, comradeship
in faith and hope and love
unite to bind us as we scale
the heights above.

We follow paths once pioneered
by climbers long ago
to vistas over splendid scenes
spread far below.

*Words: Phillip Hewett
Music: John Goss*

***Reflections on life by Rev. Phillip Hewett,
inspired by the words of some of his
favourite authors***

A life, as such, is something so mysterious that to find its meaning seems all-important. And if there is no meaning, has not meaning to be invented? -- Kathleen Raine.

As I look back over my long life, whatever meaning I find in it seems to lie in the choices I made when, as happens to all of us all the time, I came to a parting of the ways. Some of those choices were momentous, and I could no doubt have been a very different person if I had chosen otherwise. One possibility is sacrificed in the interest of another. To look at the “ifs” of history can be a fascinating process, but the decisions cannot be unravelled, and on the whole I am well content with the way things have worked out for me.

Just as the wave cannot exist for itself, but is ever a part of the heaving surface of the ocean, so must I never live my life for itself, but always in the experience that is going on around me. -- Albert Schweitzer.

As a metaphor for one’s personal identity, the wave on the ocean is remarkably suggestive. It does indeed appear to have a separate individuality of its own, but it is composed of water which has been part of countless other waves before it and will continue to be part of others in the future. The ancient injunction to love your neighbour as yourself

gains new life from the realization that your neighbour is yourself -- both of you part of one indivisible whole.

The buried statue through the marble gleams — Eva Gore-Booth

One of Michelangelo’s greatest masterpieces, the statue of David, stands at the end of a long gallery lined with blocks of stone from which he began to carve a human form but never completed the work. “We are in the making still,” says a line in a Unitarian hymn. The potential that Eva Gore-Booth called “the uncarven image” is there in each life, and we are called upon to be conscious partners in the creative process of bringing it closer to its ultimate form.

Where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding? -- The Book of Job

Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. The most brilliant intellectual is not necessarily the wisest person. Wisdom is the art of applying knowledge to life in such a way that it becomes practically effective in producing the best results. Knowledge has now given us the instruments of mass destruction which can never be used if we are to survive. But there are few signs that among the power structures which dominate the life of the world there will be found the wisdom to avert catastrophe. Even the massive threat posed by human-induced climate change has not yet rallied enough support for diplomacy to be conducted in a way to set us upon the path to wisdom.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. -- Anglican General Confession.

Here is a situation in which it is indeed true that one size fits all. The differences are only one of degree, and in all honesty we need to accept that. But how does one respond? This is, after all, only one side of the picture. It is also true that we have done those things which we ought to have done. To focus on these gives us the positive frame of mind which is the basis for productive effort in the future.

Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will. --- Antonio Gramsci.

Ever since I first ran across Gramsci's motto, I have made it my own. If one adds together all the items one finds in each day's "news," one cannot help feeling pessimistic. That is the intellectual conclusion. But as the proverb runs, while there's life there's hope, and hope is not a passive waiting for change, but an active determination, an act of will. Not being able to change everything does not mean an inability to change some things. Albert Schweitzer, who shared Gramsci's approach and lived it, used a striking metaphor. The greening of the earth in the springtime, he said, is the outcome of the appearance of millions of individual blades of grass.

I cannot rest contentedly upon the past; I cannot take a step towards the future without its support. -- James Martineau.

The common error of those who make a revolution is to suppose that the pages of history can be wiped clean, making an entirely new beginning in the present on the basis of abstract principles. But a study of history shows how impossible it is to pretend that we are the first people who ever lived. It is the path of wisdom to build upon foundations laid in the past, after those foundations have been examined and tested with the utmost care. The outworn can indeed be discarded, but much that is valuable remains to be incorporated into the new.

Canadians who, like myself, are the descendants of various settlers ... must hear native peoples' voices and ultimately become part of them. -- Margaret Laurence.

Gilbert and Sullivan facetiously coined the idea that in taking over someone else's estate one took over their ancestors as well, but Margaret Laurence developed it more seriously. Though we have not yet fully earned the right to adopt First Nations ancestors as our own, we desperately need to do so, for we have "largely forgotten how to live with, protect and pay homage to our earth and the other creatures who share it with us." As one who, in becoming a Unitarian joined a tradition reaching back into the sixteenth century, I have been deeply conscious of its pioneers as my ancestors too, as I have walked in their footsteps in Poland and Transylvania. And like Margaret Laurence, I want to treat the ancestors of First Nations in our own land in the same way.

We cannot make a religion for others, and we ought not to let others make a religion for us. Our own religion is what life has taught us. – W.R. Inge.

Inge was Dean of St. Paul's in London, a leading religious institution, and yet he was able to focus instead upon personal religion, which in more recent times has come to be called spirituality. What life has taught us certainly includes what we have learned from others, but we have to ask whether those others are better qualified than we are to come up with a real understanding of life. Some no doubt are, but they would be the first to admit just how limited their understanding is. The mystery at the heart of things is not something easily captured in our means of communication, certainly not in creeds and dogmas.

Our minds are possessed by three mysteries: where we come from, where we are going, and, since we are not alone but members of a countless family, how we should live with one another. These questions are aspects of one question, and none of them can be separated from the others and dealt with alone. -- Edwin Muir.

In a sense, each individual recapitulates the entire experience of the human race. Each one is a microcosm of humanity as a whole. Consequently, in considering our origins and destiny, we have to rule out as inadequate any approach which ignores either the individual or the community. We need to see ourselves as fellow-pilgrims in a caravan which, as an ancient Indian poet expressed it, has been journeying through the desert since the beginning of time. The journey is important, but so too is the caravan.



THREE SERMONS

The Cross and the Weathervane

*A sermon delivered in the Unitarian Church of Victoria,
B.C., June 1992*

One of the things I most enjoy about being in Victoria is that as you stand and look across the downtown area, the skyline is not entirely dominated, as it is in so many cities, by buildings dedicated to buying and selling and making money. Other buildings stand out strongly: those serving government and law and, particularly, religion. The religious edifices are not totally dwarfed and hidden by the palaces of commerce.

I wouldn't like to speculate to what extent this prominence of religious symbols in the cityscape represents the current values of the citizenry. However, one of the most notable of these religious symbols is the spire. The spire was an invention of the Middle Ages, as a symbol of aspiration. It pointed by day to the blue vault of heaven and by night to the firmament of stars, declaring that human life had some meaning in relation to these immensities of space and time. Those who glanced up from the streets or across the fields saw this constant reminder that this was so.

As a symbol of the aspiration both of speculative thinking and of religious devotion, the spire needed no embellishment. It spoke for itself, and its clean lines needed only to terminate in a point. Sometimes that was the way it was left. But very often it was felt that the top, the high point dominating the surrounding area, was an appropriate place for another symbol.

Sometimes this was simply a tuft of leaves carved into the stonework, a reminder that in one sense at any rate the spire is a tree. Sometimes it was a round globe, representing, whether by intuition or conscious design, the world and the universe. And sometimes the symbol was a cross. In fact, I have a feeling that on many churches built in more recent times, the spire is simply there in order to carry a cross.

But there is still another symbol that you often see at the top of a spire: the weathervane. I suppose we could debate whether this really is a symbol at all, or whether it is a functional device like the clock which you also find on many of the old churches.

After all, it made sense to use a location such as the top of a spire to place a device to show which way the wind is blowing, high above all the confusing currents and eddies down at ground level. Very often the weathervane took the form of a rooster, and was in fact called a weathercock. The cock was traditionally a symbol of watchful vigilance, and the Cock of the North had the topmost place on Yggdrasil, the old Norse World-tree, which may also have influenced the concept of the spire. Or, of course, the old-time church builders may simply have had in mind the well-known fondness of real live roosters for high places from which to announce the dawn.

Coming back to where I began, as I look across the skyline of Victoria, there are two lofty spires which stand out strikingly. One is on St. Andrew's Catholic cathedral, the other is on St. John's Anglican church. The first carries a cross; the second carries a weathervane. The other day I stopped by at St. John's to ask about their weathervane. I had a very pleasant conversation in their office with a gentleman who showed me photographs of it down on the ground a few years ago when their spire was being repaired,

and who told me that it is anchored fifteen feet down into the spire.

I inquired a little hesitantly as to whether he was aware of any wisecracks ever having been made about their having a symbol on the church which swings with every breeze that blows. No, he had never heard anything of the kind. Nor was he aware of any theological significance having been attached to it. I did not feel it was discreet to ask the same questions at the Catholic Church, but went instead to the Public Library. There I found a book called *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, and when I looked up "weathervane" in it, it said, "symbol of instability or wavering in religious faith."

You may be wondering by now why I should be following up so esoteric an interest. Well, I was prompted by some experiences that came my way over the years. You see, spires are a common feature on Unitarian churches in Transylvania and on most of the Unitarian churches in New England. So too do a number in England have spires, though they date mainly from the Victorian Gothic period. In Canada the only example is the church in Ottawa, which soars dramatically to an unorthodox central spire.

But it was an experience in the United States that really triggered my interest. A few years ago, on a visit to the Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago, I stayed right across the street from the First Unitarian Church. Built in 1930, it must be one of the last Unitarian examples of the full Gothic treatment. The whole building is full of symbols of all kinds, and when I looked up to the top of the spire, yes, there was a weathervane.

When I was being shown around that church, I asked the same question as I asked at St. John's. Are there any jokes

about the symbolism - you know, about Unitarians swinging with every breeze that blows? Oh yes, I was told. That's one of the standard wisecracks in the theological schools around the area.

Well, I suppose you're asking for that when you put a weathervane on a Unitarian church. The Catholic spire with a cross on the top is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken - that is, unless it gets struck by lightning, which has been known to happen. The Unitarian weathervane, on the other hand, swings incessantly and never points in any one firm direction.

It's easy to poke fun at our approach to religion by a superficial interpretation of this symbolism. The fixity of the cross does suggest that the people gathered beneath it know what they stand for. The person who doesn't stand for something, they can say, will fall for anything.

Unitarians are accused of never being able to make up their minds. Many years ago Alexander Gordon, the distinguished Irish Unitarian historian, described how a Presbyterian minister once told him: "What I object to about you Unitarians is that you have never said your last word." To the speaker, this was the most telling criticism he could make, and it must have been very upsetting to him when Gordon received it as a compliment.

From a secure vantage point under the cross which always faces in the same direction from the top of its spire, the Unitarian weathervane can look like an appropriate symbol for a religion with no sense of direction. Whichever way the breeze is blowing today, it will spin around and point that way. What's the latest fad from California? What's the "in" thing this month? What has risen to the top of the current best-seller list? Who has propounded the most up-to-the-

minute prescription for effective living, for finding the real you?

Just as the Areopagus in ancient Athens attracted all the vendors of exotic philosophies, so in our time their successors, wise and otherwise, make a beeline for the Unitarian church. Anything goes. It's a wild race to keep up with novelty. Drop out of the race for a few months and you're hopelessly out of date. You won't even understand the jargon.

It's all a caricature, of course. At least, I hope so. What we prefer to call ourselves is a fellowship of seekers. I don't know if the story is apocryphal or not, but Oliver Cromwell is said to have remarked: "It is a good thing to belong to the Sect of the Seekers, but it is better to belong to the Sect of the Finders." I'm sure many of our critics would echo his opinion. As a matter of fact, a few years ago I was told by someone who had been attending my services that she would be coming no longer. She had no further need of a fellowship of seekers because she had *found*. Game over.

This finding, once and for all, is no doubt the experience of some people. It certainly isn't mine. I'm sure I have found a great deal as I've gone through my life thus far, but I'm always acutely conscious of how much more there is to be found, and of the need for continual seeking. Didn't Socrates say: "The more I know, the more I know how little I know"?

The dogmatist who believes that he or she has found everything worth finding is far from my ideal of the religiously mature person. Life is a complex process of seeking and finding, doubting and believing, standing fast and moving forward. The end of all movement is the end of being alive.

The truth of the matter is that we need both fixity and flexibility. As a matter of fact, the weathervane does include a cross, and the vertical arm of the cross is indeed fixed, otherwise the vane wouldn't work. But the horizontal arm, which carries the Chanticleer or the arrow or whatever it might be, has to be free to move in a circle. It doesn't blow away. It doesn't flee before the wind. But it does point to the wind, just as the freely floating compass needle, securely fixed on its central pivot, swings till it points to the pole.

Many people have found a deeply moving symbolism in that strange magnetic attraction of the compass needle for the unseen pole. I find no less moving a symbolism in the weathervane. What does it point to? The wind is one of the most ancient of religious symbols. In these days when so many people are using the word *spirituality*, it is worth remembering that in many languages the word for spirit is precisely the same as the word for the wind. I find that profoundly significant, for deep insights are often carried in the words we use.

We could trace that connection in Sanskrit and other languages of the Orient, but let's confine ourselves to the languages of the scriptures of our own culture: the Bible. Take that passage from the Gospel of John:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.

The modern translations take the trouble to remind you that where you find first 'wind' and then 'spirit' in the English, the word in the original Greek is exactly the same - the word *pneuma*, from which we get our word pneumatic. The associations of that word can run all the way through air, wind, breath, life, disposition, spirit.

The same is true of the keyword in the Hebrew scriptures, the word *ruach*. It is remarkably suggestive. In the first place, it is neither decidedly feminine nor masculine, though someone who tabulated its appearance in the Bible found that the times it was treated as feminine outnumbered the times it was treated as masculine by a ratio of two to one. Listen to the wealth of meanings it encompasses. *Ruach* is:

- the air, the wind, the atmosphere. It is the breath, the power to live that leaves the body when we finally expire (and remember that expiration and inspiration were originally the two aspects of respiration - breathing out and breathing in).

- your temperament, your disposition, your innermost essence, that which moves you to feel and to act. It is a power that lifts you out of yourself, an ecstasy, an inspiration to utter prophecies, to take a stand on principle.

- that which links the human to the divine. It is the holy spirit, the spirit of God.

I can mention more points at which this powerful imagery appears in the ancient scripture. At the beginning of the Book of Genesis, we are told that the wind of God, or the spirit of God (whichever way you want to translate it) moved upon the face of the waters. A little later on, there is God creating the first human being, Adam, from the dust of the earth; God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" - *ruach*, both the breath of God and the essence of life.

Much later along, the prophet Micah declares: "As for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit [of the Ineffable One], and with justice and might" - *ruach* again. And finally let me mention that magnificent vision of the prophet Ezekiel immortalized in a well-known spiritual: the vision of the

valley of dry bones. The prophet is told: "Prophesy to the breath. . . and say to the breath: 'Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live!'"

All this and more lies behind the movements of the wind, the movements of the spirit in which we are caught up and in which we participate as living beings. William Johnston, that remarkable Irish Jesuit, writes in his magnificent book, *Silent Music*:

I was greatly impressed when I heard a master say that after attending to the breathing for some time, one realizes that there are two distinct stages in Zen.

One is: I am breathing.

The next is: The universe is breathing.

The breath of the universe, the wind, moving, inspiring, cleansing, taking us out of our little, stagnant, ego-centered selves: this has always been a poignant and powerful part of what we nowadays so aptly call spirituality. Listen to Shelley in his great "Ode to the West Wind":

*Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear! ...
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! ...
Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is ...
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!*

Now do you see why I respond so strongly to the symbolism of the weathervane? It is not swept hither and thither with every breeze that blows. If you want a symbol of that, you'll find it in the tumbleweed.

No, the weathervane is anchored on a firm base. It has found - it is founded - it has a foundation. And yet it moves. It yields to the movements of the spirit, not as they were at some point in the distant past, but as they come in the here and now. The weathervane has the freedom to move, but its movements are not arbitrary. Like the needle of the compass, it points to something real and compelling.

I no more feel put down by jokes about the fluctuations of the weathervane than Alexander Gordon felt put down by the objection that Unitarians had never said their last word. There always remains more to be said. There are always new movements of the spirit to be indicated. Freedom is not some passive condition that makes us the sport of every passing breeze that blows. It combines the fixity of the pivot solidly founded upon the soaring spire, with the flexibility of the arm which indicates which way we should turn to feel the winds of God blowing upon our faces.

There are times when the air is still and stagnant, and our spirits flag. At such times of depression, listlessness, I for one am thankful that it is still possible to look up to the top of the spire and see that symbol, pointing to the source of energy that is going to revitalize my life as the wind begins once again to gather force.

Others may find their reassurance in symbols that never move at all: I get mine from the one that tells me that the renewing wind is sweeping across the face of the earth.

Savouring the Soil

*A sermon delivered at the annual meetings of the CUC,
Victoria B.C., May 17 1998*

There is a certain little ritual that we celebrate annually at these meetings. It centers around the pot of soil which travels with us from coast to coast and is added to from a local source each year. It adds a depth of meaning to our proceedings; if it didn't, we would soon forget to do it. It symbolizes our unity in diversity, our roots in many soils across this vast land, but as with so many other religious symbols and rituals its origins are, to me, and to others I've consulted, lost in the mists of antiquity. So I can't tell you at this point whether whoever started it had in mind the words that came to me as I began thinking about what I would share with you this morning - words of that great Unitarian pioneer in our country, John Corder.

In a sermon delivered in the Unitarian Church of Montreal on New Year's Day, 1860, Corder said: "Undoubtedly a nation is growing up here in Canada which promises to hold no mean place in the future annals of civilization." And then he went on: "Our nationality as it grows must savour of the soil on which it grows." These, you notice, were political comments, but political comments embedded in a sermon; they were political theology. The whole sermon was concerned with the application of religious and moral principles to the life of the nation.

Ever since I first read that sermon, the phrase "savour of the soil" has kept resonating in my mind. Perhaps as you hear it now it doesn't seem to be saying anything out of the ordinary, but in saying that where he did and when he did Corder was far in advance of his times. For most people in

those days what was said from the pulpit savoured of ages past and distant places.

Worthwhile ideas and practices, whether in politics or religion, did not savour of the local soil; they were *imported* from places far away where the real thinking was going on and practice had borne the test of time. All we had to do was to make a copy of it and use it here with few if any modifications. People of that period were still echoing, even if unconsciously, the medieval Catholic view that what is valid in religion or politics is the same for all people in all times and all places. Even Unitarians for the most part shared that idea and acted on it as they tried to transplant the traditional ideas and practice of England or of New England into our own very different soil.

I said that Corder was ahead of his times in going beyond that idea because what he said has by now been vindicated. Even Catholics - or perhaps I should say, *particularly* Catholics - are now talking that way. Let me quote one recent Jesuit writer, who says of the period following the Second Vatican Council: "It was becoming increasingly evident that theologies once thought to have a universal or . . . perennial character . . . were but regional expressions of certain cultures."

Catholics have had many reminders of this in the liberation theologies that have arisen in various parts of the world, expressing the fact that people living in those places don't feel that thinking and practice worked out in past times in Europe or North America fits their condition at all. In the same way, we Unitarians have had similar reminders. Our partner church program, in which so many of us have become involved in recent years, has brought us into much closer contact with the Unitarians of Transylvania. As we grow to know them, we also come to realize how different

they are from us, not only in their way of life but also in their way of thinking.

Now there have been some people in this part of the world who have interpreted that difference as simply a time-lag: the Transylvanians are where we were a century ago; they need help to catch up to where we are now. In the current issue of the *Partner Church News*, a man who has just returned from two years there writes: "It seems we often want to rebuild the Transylvanian Church in our own image". He points out what is obvious when you stop to think about it: that this is insufferably patronizing, that Transylvanian Unitarianism is not the Unitarianism of the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century, but something very different. It is the present-day authentic product of the religious wrestling of those people with the situation within which they have to live.

One could multiply examples. All religious thinking and all religious practice are saturated with the influences of the time and place where they take shape, and of the sort of people who shape them. They savour of that soil, and they don't transplant very readily to another.

It was reflections of this kind - what has come to be called contextual theology - that came to a focus among us Canadian Unitarians ten years ago, when we devoted our annual meetings in Saskatoon to an exploration of this theme and all it implies for us. The impetus to do that was to a very large extent the last contribution to our movement of the late Mark DeWolfe, who in the closing months of his life dedicated himself passionately to it. Our discussions at the annual meetings built upon dialogues during the preceding months in most of our local congregations, and brought us to a new point in our thinking about who we really are and where and why.

But unfortunately it's also true that we Unitarians are much better at exploring new ideas and launching new projects than at hanging in for the long haul, and although it would certainly be presumptuous of me to say that there were few discernible long-term effects, they were equally certainly not the result of a consciously designed process.

But for me personally the impact was such as to lead me to spend my sabbatical the following year in New Zealand, studying contextual theology there. Some people might find such a choice odd; indeed, one New Zealand theologian wrote in a book on this subject: "Viewed from the outside, New Zealand seems 'the last place on earth' in which to carry out religious studies." But in fact, it was an ideal place for the purpose: a country geographically self-contained and isolated in a way that favours the development of a separate identity.

Sociologically speaking, it is easy to study, because the various cross-currents are relatively uncomplicated. There is the interaction of the Maori and European cultures, with the more recent infusion of a third strand as a result of large-scale immigration from Polynesia. I found these forces reflected in the atmosphere of St John's College in Auckland, where I did a little teaching and a lot of listening. I participated in the Auckland Theological Forum, which had produced a little book called *Toward an Authentic New Zealand Theology*. And I learned a good deal about the traditional religion of the Maori people.

One particularly moving experience stands out in my mind. One of the elders was telling us about the ritual which follows the birth of a baby. She described how the placenta, the afterbirth, is ceremonially interred within the soil on which the baby has been born, symbolically marking the attachment of the person to the place - a child not simply of

earth but of that particular spot on earth, to which eventually, in the fullness of time, the body which had been attached to the placenta will itself return. At a more academic level, I was introduced to what one theologian identified as four basic themes of an "authentic New Zealand theology". They were the long journey, the power of the land, the diversity of the people and the search for a vision, each of which was explored at length and in some depth.

Now my sabbatical plan was to compare what was being done there with what can be done in our very different context here. We, of course, are not isolated by vast stretches of ocean in the way New Zealand is, and the variety of traditions represented in our population is much more diversified. The geographically artificial border that separates us from our powerful and influential neighbour to the south is a much more permeable boundary.

Nonetheless, there are certain features that do define our identity; as the late lamented Robertson Davies put it, they mark our soul. "I am convinced," he wrote, "that Canada has a soul, and should get on better terms with it, because at the moment it is a sadly neglected aspect of our inheritance. . . . Canadians must take heed of what they really are in terms of their past, and their northern land. Only then can they find through their wholeness the true path to their future too."

Is that just a romantic idea? There are very down-to-earth studies to back it up, most of them looking at our distinctiveness by way of comparisons with the United States. A few years ago one sociological study looked at a form of religion that is more than usually resistant to all the influences of the local context - the Mennonites.

“Theoretically,” the author wrote, “neither the Anabaptists nor their Mennonite offspring are interested in national boundaries. National cultures and political structures are set aside in the central purpose of forming a worldwide people of God unfettered by the relativizing wiles of 'worldly' principalities and powers.” But after careful examination he concluded, “since significant differences have obtained it must be argued the even non-nationalist sectarian groups like the Mennonites must take the national context seriously”, pointing to what he called the paradox of “Canadian Mennonites perceiving their American counterparts as assimilated to Americanism, and American Mennonites accusing the Canadian Mennonites of nationalism.”

In practical terms, we need to ask what is the Canadian equivalent to the four basic themes I cited as having been proposed for an authentic New Zealand theology? Let me propose not four but five (after all, ours is a bigger country).

The first would be a product of our being a northern country, which has moulded the life of the entire nation to an extent paralleled only in the Scandinavian countries and Russia. “*Mon pays, c’est l’hiver*”, despite the local exception of this little area on the periphery in which we meet this year. Mark DeWolfe pointed out that the religious expression of this is in what the German theologian Karl Rahner called a “wintry spirituality,” one that understands life best in terms of its struggles, its cold time, its ending in death.

Mark added, very perceptively: "If we are as a people truly to belong to the land and country of Canada, then we must learn spiritually how to be at home in winter. And it might be possible to develop a stance for living creatively in Canadian winter which applies to the winters of the soul,

which arrive in any season, which might be the gift of a Canadian spirituality, a Canadian theology, to the larger world.” I would add only that this gift can be particularly enriching to the liberal traditions of religion, which have sometimes been deficient in this very quality.

The second theme arises out of the pluralism and multiculturalism that have become so evident in recent years. Years ago the distinguished sociologist John Porter wrote: “If there is any Canadian ideology, if Canadians can be said to stand for anything in general. . . it would seem to be the doctrine of unity through diversity.” The word that has customarily been used is *mosaic*. Each piece in the mosaic has a right to its own distinctive identity, but together they add up to an overall design or pattern. Here is something arising out of our experience that we can contribute to the life of the world, by contrast with the alternative view of national identity which sees it as imposing essentially the same outlook and way of life upon all its members. For us, this is where national and religious traditions come together, for a Unitarian outlook requires the same unity through diversity.

Theme number three. Douglas Hall, who is just retiring from a distinguished career at McGill, has pointed out that the Judeo-Christian tradition that has moulded the Western world took its rise not in a great empire but in a land that was on the edge of empire - on the margin, to use an expression that figures prominently in interpretations of Canadian history. The Hebrew religion was the product of the interaction of that ancient race with their own environment – an environment so much a part of their religion that the poignantly nostalgic psalms written during the Babylonian exile are among the most moving passages in literature.

And the prophets were stern in their warning against the perils of relying upon the great empire to the south. Listen to Isaiah: “Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, and . . . trust in chariots, because they are many, and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!” Well, we too live on the edge of empire, on the margin, and we have to ask what we are making of that religiously.

The fourth theme has been suggested by another person who was at one time a part of our own religious community - of my own congregation, in fact - Margaret Laurence. She noted that few of us have roots in this country that go back for many generations, but that there are people who have - the aboriginal people. Just as we can adopt children, so we can, if we work at it, earn the right to adopt ancestors and become part of their tradition.

It's a deep thought. Most of us have similarly short tenure in this Unitarian tradition of ours, but I for one have a deep sense of my adopted spiritual ancestors. I can't begin to describe how moving an experience it was last summer for me to walk the streets of the little town of Rakow in Poland, which was the Unitarian capital of Europe in the sixteenth century, or to stand in the castle at Deva in Transylvania, where the great Unitarian pioneer Francis David was imprisoned for the closing months of his life. In the same way we may, if we work at it, earn the right to call the people of this land our ancestors too, and adopt their reverence for the land as sacred.

Which brings me to the last of the themes I want to set before you: the land itself, incredibly ravaged by our greed and stupidity, but still there to support us if we will let it. I'm not going to say much about this; I want to let a poet do

it for me. These are words of Gwendolyn MacEwen:

*This land like a mirror turns you inward
And you become a forest in a furtive lake;
The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
You dream in the green of your time,
Your memory is a row of sinking pines.
Explorer, you tell yourself this is not what you came for
Although it is good here, and green;
You had meant to move with a kind of largeness,
You had planned a heavy grace/ an anguished dream.*

*But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper
In an elementary world;
There is something down there and you want it told.*

Yes, there are themes here for us as we seek to make our own proper contribution to the coming new millennium. We will do well to tackle them seriously. I am going to close with lines from another poet, an Irish poet this time, Sidney Royse Lysaght:

*Amid the boundless and unknown
We call some guarded spot our own;
A shelter from the vast we win
In homely hearths, and make therein
The glow of light, the sound of mirth
That bind all children of the earth
In comradeship*

That, I think, just about sums it up. The cherishing of one “guarded spot” does not war against the spirit of inclusiveness which embraces “all children of the earth”. It simply gives that spirit somewhere to grow.

Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will

*A sermon delivered in the Unitarian Church of Vancouver,
July 5, 2008*

A minister was once asked how long it took him to prepare a sermon. His answer: “about thirty years.” I don't think he was just trying to be facetious. He was saying that over such a period of time, ideas and experiences had accumulated subconsciously, which he could then set in order for a sermon.

That's not quite the process behind this morning's sermon. It was over 36 years ago that with the normal process of preparation I delivered a sermon with the same title as I am using today. I said at that time that the epigram "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" had been buzzing around in my head for the previous few months. It seemed to show exactly what stance in life might be helpful and productive.

That period was one in which we were just emerging from the postwar euphoria in which it had seemed that we were moving out of darkness into a glorious new day. The sixties saw that feeling culminate among young people with the idea of a “New Age.” But the new age into which we had in fact moved was one that turned out to hold more of threat than of promise. The Cold War looked as though it might become hot at any moment, with a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons in existence. If all those weapons had in fact been detonated our planet would most likely have been rendered uninhabitable not only for our own species but for a vast number of others.

Well, the Cold War came to an end, but many of those weapons of mass destruction are still around. Three years

ago the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Mohammed Elbaradei, reminded his hearers that there are 27,000 of them in existence, adding, "I believe this is 27,000 too many.”

Though that was so widely understood as a threat at the time I first tackled this theme, most people then had no real awareness of the subtler but equally potent threat of the collapse of our life-sustaining environment as a by-product of what we had so recently in industrialized societies come to accept as our way of life. As a matter of fact, that threat had not even so short a time ago, developed to the alarming proportions that that we are so well aware of today. In his best-selling book on climate change, Tim Flannery points out that this is not a simple progression, but one that is marked by sudden leaps. And it's only in recent months that the focus of attention has shifted to shortages of food and of water, and the dilemma over energy sources as we turn away from oil.

But the elephant in the room that is still not often mentioned is that few of the menaces that threaten us today would have grown to their present scale if the earth's human population was still what it was when I was a child - less than one-third of what it is today. We have more than twice as many people in the world as when I began my ministry in Vancouver. Add all these items together, and a strictly logical analysis would almost inevitably lead to pessimism about our future prospects. But to live solely by that is soul destroying and nihilistic.

That's the background against which I came to accept “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” as a personal maxim by which to live, and that sermon back in 1971 was my first attempt to articulate it. But subsequently I did with that sermon something I have never done with any

other. About every seven years I have announced the same title and come back to the same theme in the light of my own unfolding understanding and the developments in the world around us. So today's sermon is my sixth attempt and although it owes something to that sermon of long ago, it is no more the same sermon than I am the same person as I then was.

One thing that has changed is that I felt obliged to say in that first sermon that although I had found the expression so meaningful, I just couldn't remember when I first ran across it or whose words these were. It was some time later that my old friend and colleague Leonard Mason, then minister in Montreal, set me on the right track. He referred me to Antonio Gramsci, of whom I have to confess I had never heard at that time, though in recent years there has been something of a revival of interest in his life and thinking.

Gramsci was a brilliant left-wing Italian intellectual, who in the years immediately following the First World War published a magazine called *Ordine Nuovo*. The masthead of each issue bore the slogan "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," and Gramsci described this as "a compelling way of ordering one's being." He himself soon stood in personal need of such a way, for with the rise to power of Mussolini he was thrown into jail and was only released eleven years later when he was literally at death's door.

So the next time I returned to the theme I was able to give Gramsci due credit. But more recently a new source of information has become available, namely Google. The first time I googled this phrase I was intrigued to find that out of what one is told are about 11,000 entries, number 2 turns out to be the fifth incarnation of my own sermon delivered seven years ago. But more important was the discovery that

although Gramsci popularized the expression and his name is indelibly associated with it, he did not coin it. He was quoting the French writer Romain Rolland, with whom he was probably in correspondence.

But let's move on from the history of the phrase to what is really significant about it – its content. I don't think we need to spend too much time with pessimism of the intellect. The media supply us every day with data which if fed into a computer programmed to make projections for the future could not fail to come up with conclusions that would lead to pessimism. But this accumulation of information is not going to give us what we really need. As Byron put it so many years ago,

they who know the most
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth.
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.

Unitarians have often been tempted to think that the Tree of Knowledge really is the Tree of Life. A century ago many of our congregations were joyfully affirming their faith in what they called "the progress of mankind, onward and upward forever," as though this was some kind of automatic escalator propelled by inexorable historical processes. And those who held to such a belief would have been prepared to defend it against the charge that it was just wishful thinking, "pie in the sky." On the contrary, they would have said, it was a reasoned interpretation of evidence available to everyone.

Progress was demonstrable, at least to middle-class people in the more "developed" countries. You could see it going on all around you, and some widespread interpretations of the recently-accepted theory of evolution seemed to guarantee that it would continue.

That kind of optimism has of course taken a beating in the years that have passed since then. As we look back over the disastrous twentieth century, we may sometimes marvel that we have survived at all. Yet the old nineteenth-century optimism has not totally died. Our current hymn book, for instance, still has one hymn which assures us that

every life a song shall be
when all the earth is paradise.

And how, one might ask, is that improbable state of affairs to be attained? If you go back to the present hymn book's predecessor, you'll find the answer to that in the verse of the same hymn predicting that we will "dare" / All that may plant man's lordship firm / On earth and fire and sea and air." Today we've become a little less arrogant. The current British Unitarian hymnal altered the line about man's lordship to: "All that may make them stewards true / Of earth and fire and sea and air," while the book we now use here drops that verse altogether.

Yet, I am told, when the hymn book commission was at work preparing that book and asking for recommendations, this was one of the most popular requests for retention. But in our times its sentiments seem more like whistling for a wind than any kind of reasoned inference from what we know of our situation. If we can get beyond that kind of facile optimism, what can optimism of the will mean? Let me call to witness a few people who seem to have found the answer.

First, let's hear from one of the most thoughtful analysts of the situation half a century ago, at the height of the Cold War, when it seemed that nuclear devastation might be launched upon the world at any moment. These are words of Erich Fromm: "In matters of life - be it of the individual or

of a society - it does not matter whether the chance for cure is fifty-one percent or five percent. Life is precarious and unpredictable, and the only way to live it is to make every effort to save it as long as there is a possibility of doing so."

That's an optimism that is not an intellectual deduction from observed facts, but a determined decision, an act of will - something much more demanding than the belief in an automatic escalator that was so often the source of nineteenth century optimism. It says that in spite of everything, this is where I stand and this is how I shall act. And this, I venture to say, is a far more deeply religious posture.

Such an act of will was graphically portrayed by a pioneer in Fromm's own discipline of psychology, William James. In one of his essays he invited us to consider the situation of a climber in the Alps who has got himself into a predicament from which he can escape only by a terrible leap across a chasm. Objectively speaking, it is obviously right on the margin of possibility of a successful outcome.

He has never made such a leap before. Pessimism of the intellect tells him that his chances are very poor. If he acts on that alone, the outcome is almost certainly fatal. But optimism of the will leads him to a fierce determination to succeed, and this is also likely to be self-fulfilling, though there are never any guarantees. Nevertheless, if the outcome is successful, it is his optimism of the will that has made it so.

Another outstanding witness from the same period is Albert Schweitzer, for whom I have long had a great admiration, both for his thinking and his living. A bust of him stands in my home. He wrote in his autobiography: "To the question whether I am a pessimist or an optimist. I answer that my

knowledge is pessimistic, but my willing and hoping are optimistic.” Schweitzer was a prophet in the true sense of that word - someone who could perceive the real nature and trend of events long before his contemporaries could see it - and he expressed that insight in ringing tones to a largely unheeding world.

Back in the early part of the twentieth century, when so many people were still clinging to that dream of automatic progress, Schweitzer compared the civilization of his times to a ship that had lost its rudder and was swinging wildly through tempestuous seas towards disaster. In the ensuing years, as catastrophe followed catastrophe, his prophecies were strikingly vindicated. But they were not heeded. Unless, as he urged, we find a way of putting ethical insights into practice in our relationships not only with one another at all levels, but also with the natural world of which we are inescapably a part, we are heading for even greater catastrophes.

And yet, although he was in many ways a prophet of doom, that is not at all the same as being a purveyor of despair. Like the Hebrew prophets of old who were his inspiration, he refused to capitulate to any calculations of inevitability. The future is not inescapably fixed. It is still malleable to human effort. “I believe in the future,” he wrote.

“We are always walking on loose stones above the precipice of pessimism. . . we are liable to lose our foothold and be carried away with the moving boulders into the depth beneath. . . That is why it is so profoundly important that the will-to-live should. . . insist on its freedom from having to comprehend the world, and show itself capable of using its power of self-determination to steer its own course. “Ethical acceptance of the world contains within itself an optimistic willing and hoping that can never be lost. It is,

therefore, never afraid to face the dismal reality and to see it as it really is.”

A very different personality who endorsed the same basic attitude towards life was Simone Weil, who has been called the greatest spiritual thinker the West produced in the twentieth century. One of her biographers summed up the tension in her life by giving his book the paradoxical title, *Utopian Pessimist*. Certainly her experiences during the Depression years and the Second World War made her a pessimist about the way the world was going, but she never ceased to dream of and work for a radical change arising out of her own unique religious convictions.

Let me mention a couple of others from that same troubled era whose words have inspired me. Viktor Frankl, the distinguished psychotherapist, was a survivor of Auschwitz, perhaps the ultimate in unpromising surroundings. He testified that for those in that situation, survival was an act of will, even when one knew that, objectively speaking, the chances for survival were so low that it would have been easy to yield to despair and give up.

And the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, another deeply religious man, built upon that experience of imprisonment with his stark assertion that we are all of us, in effect, prisoners. What he meant was that we are held in captivity by massive forces dominating the world, making us feel almost completely powerless. The Juggernaut rolls on. We today have little difficulty, I think, in understanding what he was talking about. But he went on to ask whether “in the last analysis hope might not always be looked on as an active reaction against a state of captivity. It may be that we are capable of hoping only insofar as we start by realizing that we are captives.”

The testimony of those closer to our own times tells the same story. Eva Hoffman, in her book *Exit into History*, describes her interviews with people who were imprisoned for years in Eastern European countries under Communism, which left her with the feeling that what they had in common was “a simultaneous recognition of power and injustice, and an understanding that one need never give in completely. There is always something that can be done from within.”

Vaclav Havel, whose words you heard earlier, was of course an outstanding example of this refusal to give in, but his sober assessment of the human situation demonstrated an equally strong refusal to be carried away by the euphoria that hailed the end of the oppressive Communist era as the dawning of the new age dreamed of by Utopian visionaries.

Likewise, we have before us today the example of that indomitable Burmese woman, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and still living in literal captivity because she has refused to compromise her basic principles. She is a living example of the twentieth-century prisoners of conscience depicted in the magnificent stained-glass windows of Salisbury Cathedral before which I stood in awe once again earlier this year.

We could go on a long time adding further names of those who are there to inspire us with their pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. But for us the question remains: how do we put this approach to life into practice? How do we practice what we preach? I believe this to be one of the most basic religious issues, and no religion worthy of the name can ignore it. Pessimism of the intellect may seem to present few difficulties. It's practically forced upon us as we assimilate each day's news. And yet, one not uncommon response is to shut it out, to succumb to what the

psychiatrist Robert Lifton called “psychic numbing.” It's too much to face, so people put up what they think is a protective wall around themselves. It never works.

Why? On this let me cite someone who has inspired the development of my own thinking. For the past 25 years Joanna Macy has in her writings followed much the same course as I have with this sermon, taking the same basic theme and re-expressing it in the light of experience and changing circumstances. That basic theme is empowerment. I felt privileged to participate in one of the workshops she devised, presented here at the church by Toni Pieroni a few months ago.

She points out that those who have gained a deep understanding of the workings of the human psyche are unanimous that repression, avoidance, refusal to face what you know to be the real situation, serves only to weaken rather than strengthen your response to the world around you. In her words: “Repression tends to paralyze; it builds a sense of isolation and powerlessness. Furthermore, it fosters resistance to painful but essential information.” She adds that pain, which we tend nowadays to try to anaesthetize, is in fact our built-in warning system when we are running into serious, even life-threatening dangers. We need that warning if we are to survive.

Pushing awareness of the state of the world and the threat to our future below the level of consciousness means that it will surface again in other guises: acts of senseless violence or of self-destruction through drug abuse and even suicide. The evidence for this is all around us. Refusing to accept the darkness and pain, the pessimism of the intellect leaves us worse off than before. As Thomas Hardy put it years ago: “If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst.”

So we face the pain. What then? Where do we find the optimism of the will? It's an unusual person who will find it alone. We find it together. That was the testimony of those who survived the totalitarian prisons and the concentration camps. Albert Schweitzer, who used that striking metaphor I mentioned earlier of the rudderless ship plunging wildly through stormy seas towards disaster, presented another memorable image to express what we're talking about now.

In the springtime (he said), when the world becomes green again, this comes about through the millions of individual blades of grass thrusting irrepressibly out of the dark earth. Each life contributes to the greening of the earth, but it does so only in concert with others. This is the spiritual aspect of our struggle for survival. We are parts of one interconnected whole, and if we suffer with that whole, we also gain strength from it. We are not isolated individuals.

A basic religious insight to be found in every faith points to the overcoming of the illusion of separateness. We are indeed members one of another, and we are rooted in a deeper reality that sustains us all. Call it what you may, in just the same way as the number-less blades of grass we are all rooted in the sustaining earth.

Cultivating a consciousness of this means that we tap into energies we never knew we had, energies that can serve us well in the struggle to which we are called on behalf of everything we cherish. Alone, we would burn out in no time at all, but in knowing ourselves to be part of something far greater, which did not come into being with our birth and will not end with our death, we find what we need to steel the will in commitment and action. Cultivation of a deeper spirituality is one side of this, the sustaining roots; investment in significant action in the world is the other

side, the sturdy branches. Together they maintain optimism of the will. Let me conclude with the memorable words of another remarkable woman, Bonaro Overstreet:

You say the little efforts that I make
will do no good; they never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where justice hangs in the balance.

I don't think I ever thought they would,
but I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favour of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.

MOUNTAIN RETREAT

Black pools and silver stipples on the lake,
grey piles of rock from cliffs that fall away,
green spires of fir cut off in fallow cloud:
the curtain hangs half-raised upon the day.

The unremitting rain drives slanting down;
a sodden crow calls from a topless tree,
accepting rain or sun as they may come
with enviable equanimity.

The wind cut lanes like these across the lake
before the birth of human memories;
the trees reached up, stood tall, decayed and died
in rhythms measured by the centuries.

Along the tumbling stream that links the lakes
Grass of Parnassus lifts its orb and crown:
most exquisite of all the mountain flowers,
swept by the storm and still not beaten down.

Two water-ouzels on the rocky shore
dip, pirouette, salute and gravely bow,
then skim far down the lake and out of view,
needing no audience for their daily show.

The rain streams down. Is the sky dark or bright?
Some sunlight filters through this smothering shroud.
Such contrasts weave the tapestry of life;
the mountain-top may be above the cloud.

- *Phillip Hewett, Taquat Lakes, B.C.*
September 1979

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