

The Future of Unitarianism in Canada?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

I think that I have told you that walking across Oak Street just out there where it intersects 49th Avenue can be a hazardous, shocking, sometimes humbling experience. I'm not talking about the traffic; though that can be perilous enough. It's that big sign of ours that announces the title of our worship services. I crossed Oak Street a number of times this week, looked up at our sign, and thought: good grief Steven!—what have you gotten yourself into this time? How on earth are you going to talk about *that*? Well it's no joke; I am going to explore “the future of Unitarianism in Canada” in these remarks; and I hope that what I'm going to say may make some sense, and some difference, by the time I'm finished.

But to even begin, I had to ask myself: “is Unitarianism in *my* future?” And to answer that, I want to tell you what Unitarianism means to me, and why I value it as much as I do. Personally, this is the last, best place for me to do religion publicly, in community with others, *with you*. I don't think or feel that I can evade or extinguish the religious, or spiritual, impulse within me—that intense, personal hunger and passion for a world endowed with sacred meaning. At different times in our lives, we have direct experiences with the mystery, tragedy and grandeur of Nature and of the human condition. And religion functions to respond to them—to that overwhelming surplus of feeling and meaning, and to validate these experiences through public exploration and celebration in socially established acts of worship, fellowship, education, compassion, arts, and social justice. For me, the best, most satisfying place I know of for this to occur, has been in: a) Unitarian congregations and, b) by connecting my story and evolving beliefs and needs with those of Unitarian Universalism—and with women and men who have passionately claimed this historical, religious tradition as their own.

Many of us know the sense of liberation, affirmation and the deepening of heart and mind we experienced in discovering this religion and its expression in congregational life. *From the outside*, I knew something about the UU story as a student of religion and history. I respected the vanguard role it has played in the religious, social and cultural landscape in North America: the commitment of Unitarian Universalist women and men to religious freedom and tolerance, to the crucial role of reason and self-criticism in religious exploration, and for their pace-setting, cutting-edge advocacy for human rights, workers rights, mental health, social services, peace and the environment, as well as the rights of women, gays and lesbians to full inclusion and leadership in their congregations and society.

Each of these subjects could be a sermon, or series of sermons—the martyrdom of Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo for the cause of civil rights in 1965; or how this congregation’s own Leonard Marsh authored the government report in 1943 that laid the foundation for the post-war social welfare state in Canada. I hope that we are cognizant and appreciative of this heritage of ours; I wish that we were.

As an outsider, I had great respect for this religious tradition and for the authors of its heritage—religious, social and cultural. But it took crossing the threshold—from object of arms length study and appreciation to experiencing Unitarianism as a living religious and ethical community that was absolutely crucial for me. Consider what I discovered once I crossed the threshold into a Unitarian church: that Unitarian adults expressed respect for the intellect and spirit of children and young people in their RE programs; that I found myself—finally!—in agreement, for the most part, for the first time in my life, with a living, questing theology—free from slavish deference to tradition, authority, and dogma—articulated in one sermon after another; that here was a religious community of adults governing and defining themselves,

paying their own way, and sharing values and action that I too could affirm and promote without apology and hedging about—across that threshold I stepped: it was a religious and ethical community which, hitherto, I could only dream about! And there it was *live*, in living colour—splendidly diverse in age, love and family, life experience, and belief; *AND* a community united in values, worship, exploration, fellowship and action.

Is there a future for Unitarianism in Canada? Well...I hope that you can see by what I've said above that *there is a future for Unitarianism for me*. And I have every reason to believe that I am not alone. Think about where you've come from; think about your own story; think about the Unitarian congregations you grew up in, or the Unitarian church whose threshold you once crossed—and what you then experienced, week after week, in all its human, ragged glory—far from perfect, heaven knows, *you know*, how far we fall short....

But a moment's reflection on the options available out there—for me, they just dry up: on the religious side of the equation—too alien, too many compromises of intellect and soul, too much dogma and deference to a “faith once given”; —or, on the other side, too much of the same thing: work that never ends, the glittering distraction of celebrity entertainment, a fixation on self, on media, sports, health, consumption—with no rest, no pause, no in-gathering for the soul and its hunger for compassionate fellowship and a world endowed with sacred meaning.

Is there a future for Unitarianism in Canada? As long as we continue to respond in our distinctive way to that overwhelming surplus of feeling and meaning; to that “direct experience” which arises from our encounter with the mystery, tragedy and grandeur of Nature and of the human condition; as long as we validate these experiences as a progressive, non-dogmatic, and welcoming faith community, through public exploration and celebration in acts of worship, fellowship, education, compassionate service, arts, social justice, and by paying loving,

respectful attention to our children and youth—then yes, I believe that a century from now and beyond, what Holly Near calls a “gentle, angry...loving people”—“justice seeking,” “young and old,” “gay and straight”—will continue to gather as Unitarians, and they, too, will be “singing, singing for our lives.”

But then to put it another way, and here I’m quoting Woody Allen, “90% of life is just showing up.” And here we are, and may our joy, our hope, our compassionate and strength ever abide!

And yet, I think that we are also standing at something of a crossroads; at another pivotal moment in the life of our Unitarian story, and the integrity, vision, and strength of our religious movement is at stake; this realization has slowly, but surely, become ever more salient, and clear to me since the beginning of this church year last September. It was prompted by the accumulation of several events. First, were the results from the survey distributed by the Executive Director of the Canadian Unitarian Council—over four hundred Canadian Unitarians took the time to thoughtfully respond to the survey questions. I was asked to compile and analyze the answers to a number of those questions. The outcome was starkly revealing about some widespread and deeply felt hopes and needs.

The second was the unanticipated resignation in November of the Director of our RE program—that, and the fact that the CUC’s national religious education director had resigned over a year ago, and her position had not been filled; and still isn’t to this day. Third, was the surprising conclusion to the meeting on poverty in Canada with Ken Dryen, the liberal MP, that I attended last November. The frank discussion about the CUC that Unitarians ministers held at a BC and Western regional meeting in February, and its outcome was the fourth event that points to our pivotal moment.

Let's look at each of these events and try to make some sense of them. First, the survey questions I analyzed; I spoke with you about them in a January 24th sermon. What came through loud and clear from that survey is that we ardently want our denomination to speak with a "national voice"; we want to serve and identify with a national Unitarian movement possessed of a "clear vision," and that it must assert and express a "stronger public presence" in the Canadian landscape as a progressive religious and ethical community. Five years ago in *The Toronto Star*, Tom Harpur wrote that Unitarians may well possess unique attributes and strengths that could fill a gaping spiritual and moral vacuum in this country. Five years have gone by and we're still arranging deck chairs. No one, or no one body to this day and in this denomination, has a clear mandate, the vision and authority to express, lead, and work with us to fill that gaping spiritual and ethical absence, and hence, the potential service Unitarians could render to many people in this country has yet to be realized. Solving *that* need, providing that spiritual and moral leadership, has very much to do with the future of Unitarianism in Canada.

Second, our Director of RE resigned in November; and the equivalent position nationally, for the CUC has yet to be filled. We're fortunate that Jennifer Fell is so ably filling in as our interim DRE. She's good, and so are the committee members serving with her. Our program is in capable hands. But I can't get out of my mind something that Caroline Farley told me a number of times; and that is, the average tenure of a DRE in our denomination, on both sides of the border, is about two years. Underpaid, under-resourced, strapped for volunteers, working to meet the high expectations of parents, and all-too-often, playing second fiddle in congregations focused primarily on the needs of adult members—our DREs quickly burn-out, and Religious Education programs suffer the consequences.

Religious Education cannot be an adjunct, subsidiary undertaking in our congregations. And what is a cliché if not a well-known truth? “Children are the future,” we say; and if we’re exercised about the future of Unitarianism in Canada—and well we should be—then their religious and ethical formation in our congregations should be a paramount duty and passion.

The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that “there are two things that fill me with awe: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.” And that, I believe, is the task of Unitarian religious education—the formation of children, youth and adults awed by a deep knowledge and appreciation for their place within the grandeur and complexity of nature, and possessed with a keen and clear moral compass that will enable them to grow into principled, compassionate, and justice seeking adults. And are the cards ever stacked against our kids! They are confronted daily, incessantly with greed, corruption, and social illiteracy of dimwitted political and market elites that spew out a “raunch culture driven by celebrity” that encourages young people to believe that it’s right to ‘want it all and want it now.’ We are being “transformed from citizens with mutual needs into consumers with competing appetites.” This is a crisis that’s staring us all in the face. (see Stewart Dakers, “Don’t blame the young for society’s ills,” *Guardian*, April 9, 2010.)

Will our DRE go cap-in-hand trying to round up reluctant adults to volunteer as teachers, committee members, advisors, and chaperones for youth conferences? How about lining up at her door, being willing to teach, to organize activities and to schlep in whatever capacity our RE program needs and deserves?

Back to my November meeting with Ken Dryden and poverty in Canada. I was the token representative of “faith communities” in a focus group convened by Mr. Dryden that included municipal employees and directors of anti-poverty and housing NGOs. This was the last of

twelve such gatherings Dryden had brought together across the country. Our task was to imagine we were a newly elected government, and reporters were waiting outside to hear what concrete steps we were going to take to address the scourge of poverty in Canada. After a lot of back and forth, we reached a consensus: the single most important thing this nation's government could do was forge, fund and restore a credible, affordable national housing program. Only then did Ken Dryden tell us that this was *exactly the same conclusion* identified by every group he met with across the country.

That was a transformative moment for me. And I know that somehow, in some way, the future of this denomination and its well-being as an advocate for justice, equity and compassion must be allied with efforts, with the long, hard, steady movement away from one of this country's most shocking, disgraceful facts—300,000 homeless, 3 million suffering from core housing need in a land of embarrassing riches. Dedicating ourselves to housing our fellow Canadians, may yet prove to be one of the best ways to re-discover ourselves, secure the future of Unitarianism as a vital public force, and reclaim the transformative power of politics as a spiritual practice.

Fourth, the initial trigger for this sermon topic sprang from a ministers' discussion about the CUC last February; it was another signal event pointing to the crossroads where I believe we find ourselves. Grave anxieties for the future of the CUC were frankly expressed. Finances, staffing woes, lack of direction, confusion about leadership and vision—these and other challenges facing our movement were freely raised and talked over. What could have just been a gripe session, suddenly took a surprising turn, when a colleague proposed that we needed a Constitutional conference to re-think the CUC and its governance model, in order to bring about a change in our denominational culture, and a re-engagement with our movement nationally. A

straw poll was taken and passed unanimously. We may be in for some very interesting times in the next couple of years.

Since my arrival here in 2002, almost all of my work has focused on this congregation and to building up the quality and effectiveness of professional ministry in our denomination. You have to remember, this was a new city, province, and country for me. As well, I knew next-to-nothing about the Canadian Unitarian story, its congregations and the CUC. It was all I could do just to try to get my bearings and not lose my way entirely in unfamiliar territory. I've tried to hide my anxiety and disorientation as well as I could.

Well, it's been eight years now, and it's time for me and us to get real about the CUC and our role as the second largest Unitarian congregation in Canada. Let me tell you what I mean by reference to an essay written by the late, great Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams just after Second World War. Adams identified three tenets of a "faith for the free." That essay has been looming behind this entire sermon. The first principle is to recognize what I called that "passion and need we feel for a world endowed with sacred meaning." Without it, there would really be no need for religion at all.

The second tenet, is that we find the richest focus for that transformative passion for meaning in voluntary, "cooperative effort for the common good." Thus we strive to create here a welcoming faith community, dedicated to public acts of fellowship, compassionate service and social justice. "Faith," Adams wrote, "is the sister of justice." The third tenet of a "free person's faith is that the achievement of freedom in community requires the power of organization and the organization of power." It "requires a body as well as a spirit. We live not by spirit alone. A purely spiritual religion," he wrote, "is a purely spurious [or superficial] religion."

“The power of organization and the organization of power.” This is the crossroads we’re approaching; and in a very real sense “the future of Unitarianism in Canada” is in our hands. Whose would they be anyway? The sum of liberal religion is not exhausted by merely thinking as we please; it has far more to do with accepting what needs to be done and acting together.

That’s why I have been talking about CUC surveys, the call for leadership and vision, and the spiritual and moral vacuum Tom Harpur thinks Unitarians can fill. That’s why I’ve been talking about the paramount role of religious education and our call to support it all the way. That’s why I have told you I am going to push for the rest of my ministry in Canada for a national affordable housing program as a policy priority for the federal government.

“The power of organization and the organization of power.” That’s what I mean when I say it’s time for me and us to get real about the CUC and our role as the second largest Unitarian congregation in Canada. It would be a beautiful sight to see this congregation exercising leadership in our denomination that reflects our numbers, our experience, intelligence, and passion. We may be approaching a CUC Constitutional conference and a change in the culture of this denomination; and I hope we will be a part of that transformative work. I am going to be standing out there after the service with a clipboard to ask to you join me in signing up for our Denominational Affairs Committee, which henceforth I would love to see become a congregational think-tank and engine room for the transformation of our denomination.

We’re standing at the crossroads, but I’m not singing the blues today; we’re not gonna sink down, we’re gonna rise up, get organized and claim our power.