

Saskatoon  
Why We're Here (and not someplace else)  
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Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to the members of this congregation for extending to me the invitation to be with you this weekend, and the opportunity to speak to you today. You have been gracious and generous in your welcome to me; and for this I am very grateful. Gratitude, that's what I'm feeling today, as well, for the turning of the seasons and the return of spring in which we all take delight. We are the fruits of various experience; we've grown, ripened, we've been seasoned on the vine of life. And here we are gathered in this place, this hour; and we return again and again. Why would that be? *Why are we here and not someplace else?*

Consider the following thoughts as a kind of springtime reckoning, a naming and praising of the fruits of our religious life, our cornucopia.

First of all, it seems clear that we gather together in order to share and enjoy the bounty of community, of a distinctive kind of community. We are social creatures, we humans, who band together in innumerable forms of solidarity that cater to our interests and need for enrichment, friendship, and pleasure. And yet, essential though they may be in overcoming our isolation, we know that there is something distinctive and valuable about religious community and our role in creating it, cultivating it, and harvesting its fruit.

This became clear to me almost twenty years ago, when for the first time in my life, I left the rhythms, duty, and community of the religious tradition into which I had been born and raised, and to which I had given heart, thought, and means. The horizon of

a life unencumbered by formal, institutional religious practice beckoned; weekends and evenings would be free from religious duty for the first time in memory. What a relief!

But then, *and this is really hard for me to convey*, I felt...I knew...that *for me*, the kind of freedom that expresses itself *only* within the family, the company of friends, and the confines of daily work, as satisfying as those are, they just weren't enough.

Insufficient due to something I couldn't shake or elude, come what may—sometimes we call it “that transcending mystery and wonder,” what Unitarian philosopher James Luther Adams has called “our ultimate dependence for being and freedom [nourished by] a creative power and upon [transformative] processes not of our own making.” [hereafter, reference to Adams—JLA]

That feeling, that experience, has profound consequences. It calls us to renew our spirit and resolve. It calls us to be open to that which creates and upholds life. And then, crucially, we sense and experience that this transforming reality finds its “richest focus in meaningful human history, in free, cooperative effort for the common good” [JLA]; a cooperative effort for the common good that I find embodied in liberal religious communities. I believe that, here, Unitarian minister Mark Morrison-Reed has it right: “religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.” And so, about twenty years ago, I put down the Sunday paper and walked into the doors of the 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City.

The distinctive nature of religious community announces itself once you step inside: it has its unique choreography of worship and ritual, its distinctive language of music, covenant and high resolve, its affective expression of compassionate solidarity; a dedication to service that strives to be present to each and all across boundaries of class,

race, status of health, party, gender and generation; it has its work groups and committees, its mobilization efforts to sustain its vision and translate its values into concrete action and outcome. “This,” as someone recently remarked to me, “this is how we do church.”

Countless gestures, memories, words, deeds and kindnesses weave the rich fabric of religious community; they are the hallmarks of religious faith and moral life. They can be found and experienced in many faith communities; we have no monopoly on them.

*And so why are here and not someplace else?*

A striking reason for our presence here is manifest each time a Unitarian minister is ordained. A month ago, you voted in favour of pursuing the goal of having a professional minister in place this coming September. Who ordains a Unitarian minister? Who has the right, the authority? There’s no presiding bishop. Senior ministers don’t conduct this rite. To be sure, the minister to be ordained has studied and qualified for ministry; but the sole authority, the power to ordain, is vested exclusively with the congregation. And thus, we rise up together, fellow church members, and true to the vision and the 450 year tradition of our faith, we ordain and charge our ministers to serve with us in the spirit of truth, freedom and love.

*Power is with the people and that’s why we’re here.* That’s the first reason.

A second reason why we’re here and not someplace else is that we claim that *religion publicly begins with a human covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* **That** is the principal criterion of our moral and religious community. In distinction to many religions, Unitarianism does not begin with affirmations about the existence, attributes, sanctity and authority of gods, prophets,

priests and texts. Though the worth and dignity of the person may be imprecise and imperfect as a guide and standard, at least it honours the truths that the human body, mind and heart know intimately.

It's the kind of principle that promotes social action. From a Unitarian king in 1568 making religious toleration the law of land (the first such proclamation in human history), to Dorothy Dix's field research and political work in New England that led to decent housing and treatment of mental patients in the 1840s, to Saskatoon Unitarians who have stood in solidarity against the distribution of hateful, lying literature that assaults the rights and security of vulnerable members of this community. Unitarian women and men have asserted and worked for the inherent worth of every soul, and supported efforts to secure conditions that make for human dignity.

Here's a third reason: We're here and not someplace else in order to provide opportunities for children, youth and adults *to experience a progressive religious and moral education*. We welcome questions and ideas. We encourage thoughtful, respectful learning about other religions, as well as our own. Our philosophy of education rejects the twin pillars of the fundamentalist mind with its absolute allergy to doubt and its binary vision of a world divided into black and white. We support our RE directors and we volunteer to be teachers ourselves because we know by experience that: "A free person does not live by an unexamined faith." (JLA) Belief worth having is worth discussing, testing and exploring; and that's why we're here.

A fourth reason: *We're here because of our advocacy for the right of conscience and the guidance of reason*. No person should be made to submit to one-size-fits all dogmas or centres of power. And thus, Unitarians have been averse to doctrines, creeds

and hierarchy; we impose none of these as conditions for membership in our congregations. Nor, may I add, are we shy about talking back to our ministers.

This stance toward the life of the spirit and mind has enabled Unitarians historically to be open to the methods, insights and results of science. We're unthinking cheerleaders of every scientific theory and technological innovation; still, it is important to acknowledge that the revelations of reason and science, especially when they contribute to fundamentally alter our picture of the cosmos, nature, and the self, these up-endings don't have to throw us into a dithering panic. Rather, this stance, this openness to the life and methods of reason and science, should enable us to be flexible, supple, critical, and, I would hope, *humble* about what we know and what we don't know.

Whenever the communities of science actually look for and reach out to communities of faith, they should know that we are here: critical but welcoming friends and willing partners in dialogue, a bridging community between the sciences, secular humanism, and other religious communities.

Authority vested in the members of each congregation; principled assertion of the worth and dignity of every person; progressive religious education; advocacy of the right of conscience and the guidance of reason as guards against idolatries of the mind and spirit—these are some of the fruits of the free and questing faith that we gratefully acknowledge at this time of spring blooming forth. None of these practices or attitudes, taken in isolation, is unique to us; together, though, their combined presence and vigorous expression provide a compelling portrait of a distinctive religious community; the kind of community which gathers us here, the kind of religion—perhaps the last—to which I can belong without apology, evasion, or a kind of fated gloom.

And yet after having said all of that, perhaps what really counts here is *the experience of fellowship*. Lord Chesterfield said that “congenial society is, in the end, the greatest joy in life.” And when I see us meet, embrace, share a cup of tea, extend sincere and compassionate feelings and service to one another, I feel that if nothing else happened here, making room and time for “congenial society” would be enough to justify all that you do here on 2<sup>nd</sup> East Street.

And yet, as important as congenial society may be for the enjoyment of life, as important as all the characteristics I’ve listed above are for gathering here, still, there remains something *unique* about us that compels *my* presence here, something that warrants our devotion of time, thought and resources to this congregation and to our religious tradition. There are three unique attributes about Unitarianism that, in conclusion, I want to recognize and celebrate: they are the Unitarian story, our radical diversity, and our principled commitment to doubt.

Nothing in life is as important as discovering and participating in a meaningful story. Whether we have a life partner or are single; whether we are old or young, gay, straight, female, male—you name it—no matter what walk or style of life, finding the right story into which we can write our lives and where we can fruitfully live, means all the difference in the world between joy or despair. Most of us are here because we discovered sometime in our lives, that we were characters in the wrong story, with the wrong people, going in the wrong direction, and that we had to bust out of it or our souls would truly perish.

*The nearly 500 year old Unitarian story* is not perfect, no human tale, no cast of characters can be; but of all the options I know of out there, when it comes to religious

community and its story, here I can abide and write out the remaining chapters of my life in good faith. It is the tale of a *vanguard* religious community that possessed the vision, people and tools to smash one religious idol and shibboleth after another; thus making it possible for other religious people more risk averse to follow suit, to change and grow. We have been radical advocates for a unitary view of the divine and nature, revolutionary scholars of religious texts, leaders in the movement to ordain women and GLBT persons to the ministry, post-Christian religious pluralists...it's an extraordinary story. And I encourage all of us to learn it and discover how *we will contribute* meaningfully to its unfolding now and years to come.

*Radical diversity* is another reason why I am here and not someplace else. No matter how patiently I try to explain it to them, people outside this community have a hard time getting their minds around just how diverse a collection of religious views and practices are embodied and present in a Unitarian church on a Sunday morning. Don't take it for granted! Think about it! Under one roof, we are openly pagan, humanist, mystic, and agnostic; we're hard headed atheists and tender-hearted spiritual souls. The whole realm of religious life and humanistic disciplines are open to us as valued sources of our living tradition; and we bring them here and try our best to make them work in community and in solidarity with one another.

There is something so exhilarating, so defiantly saucy and courageous about the endeavour to fashion and practice a radically pluralistic faith. In a world dividing up into grim, panicky, or distressed religious communities variously troubled, palsied, walled off, or reveling in apocalyptic fantasies, we are a crucial experiment in the possibility of peaceful, frank cohabitation of diverse religious, spiritual, and secular beliefs and

practices. Don't forget for a minute how important this living experiment of ours may yet prove to be for a troubled, divided world. There's nothing quite like it; and I celebrate it. May it flourish!

And finally, in Sunday school long ago, I was taught that there was something fundamentally flawed with Thomas, the disciple of Jesus. Yes, that "doubting Thomas," a goat among apostolic sheep, who gets a very bum rap in the Gospel of John. His so-called "defect"? He insisted on tangible proof that the claims by his fellow disciples that Jesus has risen bodily from the grave were not just irrational exuberance. For Thomas, this was too important a matter to be taken merely on hearsay. And for this stance, he has been tarred with the brush of calumny ever since; a negative stereotype, a cliché, as though there's something wrong with being a "doubting Thomas."

Well, today I'm just going to say that Thomas's demand for tangible fruit made him the most faithful of disciples, faithful to the young itinerant rabbi who said: "beware of false prophets...you will know them by their fruits...[For] every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit."

For nearly five centuries, Unitarians have embraced this pragmatic test of truth. We have not and will not rest content with a faith once given. If our pagan members can deepen our ritual life, we embrace them; if our humanists can steer us clear from woolly thinking, we thank them. If our children can remind us of the sweetness of youth, and of our responsibility to be wise stewards of the future, we honour them and follow their lead. If our mystics accompany us to the sweet wells of the great mystery of life, we will drink deep drafts and quench our thirst. If our Christians and Jews remind us of the historical roots of our faith, in sacred literature and culture, we will bless them for this

gift and faithfulness.

By our fruits we will be known; fruits tried and tested, claims frankly weighed on the scales of doubt and verified by experimentation; for grapes are not gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles. Thomas was right, and believed only when he could see and touch the living fruit himself.

The blooming forth of spring that we name, see and honour this day is rich indeed. Sufficient to the season thereof, and to our abiding need for a living, credible religion to which we can belong. May we be mindful and grateful for it, and for each other: for this our “congenial society,” for the story we inhabit and claim as our own, the diversity we enjoy, and for the loyal, crucial doubt which lights our journey like a star in the night.