

Unitarians in Canada: Transformative Dynamic, Joyful?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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I think it's kind of confusing being a Canadian these days, of is it just me? In the past two years, Canada's Junior hockey teams have come home from Russia and Sweden without winning any medals at the World Junior Ice Hockey Championships; Hudson's Bay Company is owned by a New York State based equity firm; and 32 Liberal Senators woke up recently to learn that they had been ejected from their party's caucus. A bit dazed and confused to read last November, in an assessment of the twenty-seven wealthiest nations, that ranked Canada dead last for environmental protection, and that Canada is the only democratic country in the world "in a which a political party garnering less than 40% of the ballots cast can form a majority government." (*G&M*, November 18, 2013; Ed Finn, "Lack of democracy...", *CCPA Monitor*, Dec 2013/Jan 2014)

I still find it disorienting that our nation still has no national housing program while 300,000 Canadians are homeless, 3 million suffer from core housing needs, and its mayors—fifteen years ago—announced that we have a national housing crisis. And try to figure this one out: 75% of the world's mining companies are based in Canada, and Canadian mining companies, according to a global study commissioned by an industry association but never made public, Canadian companies are far and away the worst offenders in the industry when it comes to environmental, human rights and other abuses around the world.

(www.vice.com/en_ca/read/75-of-the-worlds-mining-companies-are-based-in-canada; Les Whittington, "Canadian mining firms...", *Toronto Star*, Oct 19 2010) (* see end notes) And I haven't even mentioned the Rob Ford and Justin Bieber shows, or that my daughter recently recorded a Stompin John Connors cover for the CBC. It's kind of confusing being a Canadian these days; but when it comes to identity—to Canadian identity and self-definition—hasn't it ever been thus? (**see end notes)

It's tough arriving at and holding on to a story which "contains our ideals, which gives our experience continuity and purpose. [That says] this is who we are," (Daniel Francis) when, as James Porter put it in his classic *The Vertical Mosaic* from 1965, "Canada has no resounding charter myth proclaiming a utopia against which, periodically, progress [toward or away from it] can be measured." "Our identity," wrote Northrup Frye in our centennial year, "is the one we have failed to achieve." Maybe that's OK. Look at the charter myths of the United States: Manifest Destiny, Exceptionalism, Rags to Riches; or what about this one?: "When Britain first

at heavens command/Arose from out the azure main....And guardian angels sang this strain/Rule Britannia! Britannia rules the waves!”—perhaps it’s just as well that the Canadian identity search remains a never ending, elusive thing; especially if the price for a nation’s self-worth is paid in the coin of imperial and aggressive myths.

“Perhaps, after all, this is a wild goose chase,” Rev. Phillip Hewett said four years ago. “With regard to a national identity,” he continued, “many...have concluded that our destiny is not to have one, to become what Barbara Ward years ago challenged us to be –the first international nation in history.” But Phillip also quoted Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby, who wrote the following twenty-five years ago:

On the surface, for a country like ours to opt for a pluralistic model and declared itself to be a nation of nations...the idea of being able to choose freely from many options sounds inviting....But if what we have in common is our diversity, do we really have anything in common? (Hewett, “How Canadian? How Canadian!” 2010 Mark DeWolfe Lecture; Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*, quoted in Hewett)

Now I’ve spent this time being confused and musing on Canadian identity because adding the term “Unitarian” as the subject, with Canadian as an adjective, makes the conundrum even more complicated and interesting; if the Canadian identity piece is elusive, what of the Unitarian? How’s your “This is What Unitarianism Is” elevator speech doing; got one at hand and well-practiced when asked? It would help, or maybe complexify things, if we had a ready-made and widely held myth of origins, a site like Mecca to which we could turn, a ritual day of celebration unique to us, and a fairly distinct, commonplace story we could tell about ourselves.

Do we have a mythic beginning and destiny, a place of pilgrimage, a festive holiday, a distinct story? The myths we choose, the sites and times we gather to in pilgrimage, the stories we tell matter. They have a power to move and affect us into new ways of seeing the world. Unlike purely rational arguments, myths, sacred sites and times, the story we share unite reason and emotion so as to move both mind and heart. When they are successful, their power can bring about a conversion in our understanding of our selves. They reach down into the unconscious and transform our ways of seeing and our willingness to act on new insights.

It’s hard enough in a multicultural country of immigrants to come up with a satisfying national identity; but things are even more difficult in a religious community like ours where, if Rev. Hewett’s right, statistics show “that ninety percent of our current membership has come from some other religious background, and that ninety percent of one-time Unitarians are no longer with us.” Sounds like a herd of acts or a band of wayfaring strangers.

A few years ago, Rev. Jeffrey Brown, the former Unitarian minister in Mississauga, surveyed over twenty-five years of Canadian Unitarian historical studies. What he gleaned from those papers were four themes built around, or rising from a common phenomenon—and that’s *marginality*, of living out a religious life on the margins.

The first theme is *invisibility*: Canada's so huge and Canadian Unitarians have been so thin in numbers on the ground that we're *invisible*—we're *marginalized by the land*. It's confounded our efforts to establish sustainable congregations and a national religious identity. How do we make a credible mark in a landscape so vast?

The second theme is *opposition*—for a very long time, we were *marginalized by other religions*. That may have been good for *Us vs Them* boundary maintenance, but it contributed to self-definition by negation: “we're not them”; “we don't believe that”—which can lead, in turn, to a parochial and self-righteous mindset built around a hollow core of insufficient ideas and beliefs we can claim as our own. And now, when the fires have cooled down and we're faced with indifference to religion in general, not vitriol against *us*—what do we have constructively to offer a society that's both spiritualizing *and* secularizing? If we don't have something credible and compelling to offer, that still leaves us marginalized.

The third theme is our own *indifference*—first, indifference to continuity and commitment to building up congregational organizations—by lay members and professional clergy alike (many professional Unitarian ministries have been incredibly short-lived in this country); and, second, indifference to building wider and deeper connections between congregations have led to *marginalization by the lack of denominational structures*.

Local autonomy is great; I'm all for it, but how do we develop educational resources with Canadian content, train Canadians for the ministry, collectively speak out and work on national issues—all that and more? We've been trying to connect between congregations and across regions since the 19th century, and for the past thirty years, and certainly ever since I've been here, we've been calling out for our religious community to express a Canadian identity, for us to be more visible, for more growth and closer connections, better communication, etc. The call for us to do these things is keenly felt and expressed. But to achieve these goods requires real, sustained commitment and resources to building a denomination, not just our local congregation; and how do we do that if local congregational autonomy always trumps denomination building?

The fourth and final theme Jeff Brown found in his survey of lectures and papers on Canadian Unitarian history is *individualism*—and he observed that we've been *marginalized by personality*. It's true that Unitarianism across Canada (and elsewhere) has always attracted creative and even brilliant people to our congregations. Thanks goodness; we've celebrated a

growing number of these individuals in our “Encountering our Ancestors” Samhain/All Souls worship services. As well, we too, are a congregation full of creative, extraordinary personalities. And we’ve valued as a positive good our pluralistic faith and welcome our myriad diversity—and see them as strengths, as we should. But to repeat Reginald Bibby’s question about Canadians and Canadian identity, “if what we have in common is our diversity, do we really have anything in common?”

Consider three colourful examples from the early 20th century: A visitor to this congregation in its early days noted the presence of what he called “cranks,” theosophists, single-taxers, long-haired men and short-haired women.” Over in Victoria in 1919, E. W. Bowden—that congregation’s fifth minister in ten years—described them as a “delightful lot of liberal sentiment of a vagrant sort.... It is Unitarian today, New Thought tomorrow, socialist next week and heaven knows what afterwards.” And in Calgary, W. H. Alexander wrote: “they were simply radicals of every conceivable sort, so that the church was just [a kind of bedlam] without coherency or homogeneity.”

Now while I do not think, or wish Canadian Unitarianism to be a square hole into which we hammer into conformity all of our geometrically kinky selves—the question remains: “if what we have in common is our diversity, do we really have anything in common?” Is there a common bowl we share; a common table around which we can gather to eat together; a framework large enough, but with clearly defined borders, sufficient to hold the canvas of our lives on which we can paint a compelling and coherent group portrait and a shared landscape? Or are we ever fated to wander off into the margins—invisible on the land, stuck in a defensive, oppositional crouch, indifferent to building and sustaining congregational and denominational structures and a shared sense of mission, and driven to incoherence by privileging our own unique individual visions and will?.....

In 2002, Canadian Unitarians achieved institutional autonomy—this, after long decades of tutelage under British and American personalities and denominational structures. Our congregations were members of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Denominational dues were levied and sent to Boston, and there was dissatisfaction on both sides of the border with how those resources were distributed. We attended annual general meetings of the UUA which were held almost always in the US, and found ourselves lost in the crowd, subject to

largely States-side political and religious agendas, and treated as very junior partners in the bigger scheme of things. All that changed twelve years ago.

Once an amicable separation was agreed upon, in a burst of pent-up, creative energy, we devised our own national, denominational map, hired professional staff, carried out numerous surveys in order to build our own agendas, elected Boards of Trustees with national priorities and goals to envision and achieve, assembled volunteer and professional service providers for our four regions and 49 congregations and fellowships, set up a website, published a national newsletter, worked out formal, collegial relations between professional ministers, staff, religious educators and the CUC Board, etc. etc. A lot of work, dedication, visioning and thought. Along with quite a number of you, I've been involved in the thick of some this—this still very young, work-in-progress we call the Canadian Unitarian Council.

The growth and development of all young things, including children and organizations, proceeds in fits and starts and is accompanied by growing pains. That's true of the Canadian Unitarian Council as well. We've had and experienced our fair share over the past twelve years—fits, starts, and pains. And how many of us even know about the CUC and feel connected to its mission and destiny—that is, have we, can we see beyond the horizon of this congregation and the Lower Mainland, and find ourselves knowingly, passionately committed to growing and sustaining a vibrant national denomination? With all that goes on in our own lives, with all that takes place and deserves our attention and nurturing care in our own congregation, raising our sights and making real commitments to a national organization can be daunting, just one more task beyond our ken and means—I know, because I experience it myself.

Having said that, it is with some fear, a good dose of idiot hope, as well as real longing for something good and concrete to happen that I want to invite us, our congregation to engage in the coming months in a discussion of the future of Unitarianism in Canada and the role of the CUC in that future. Last November, CUC Board members, staff and ministers took a good look at our history, our achievements, failures, and resources and tried to envision a relevant, transformative Unitarian religion for the times we live in and into the future. Discussions took place on “what should the Canadian UU community look like five to ten years down the road,” as well, in our Fall Regional gatherings. Under the heading: “Canadian Unitarian Universalism: Transformative, Dynamic and Joyful,” the outcomes of the initial visioning process were distilled down into seven propositions: (you can find this on page 7 of the January UCV Bulletin, and CUC website)

1. **Theologically alive:** Canadian Unitarian Universalism is theologically alive. We gather regularly to worship, rooted in and inspired by our living tradition.
2. **Spiritually grounded:** Canadian UU is spiritually grounded. The CUC partners with the UU Ministers of Canada to inspire spiritual growth characterized by depth and maturity.
3. **Embodying our principles:** Canadian UU challenges us to live our seven principles. The CUC inspires action for justice.
4. **Boldly inclusive:** Canadian UU is boldly inclusive. The CUC fosters hospitable, diverse, multi-generational communities.
5. **Beyond Congregations:** Canadian UU reaches beyond congregations. The CUC builds bridges with UU individuals and groups who express their faith through diverse avenues (e.g. urban ministry, faith-based social enterprise and on-line communities.)
6. **Deeply connected:** Canadian UU is deeply connected. The CUC keeps UUs engaged regionally and nationally.
7. **Technologically current:** Canadian UU is technologically current. The CUC uses technology to connect and engage UUs and encourage democracy.

Reflecting on those propositions, the visioning team then came up with Draft Mission Statement that they would bring to the Annual Meeting in Montreal in May for the approval:

“The Canadian Unitarian Council increases love and justice by nurturing spiritual growth, encouraging social responsibility, and honouring our interdependence; it supports Unitarian Universalist communities in Canada.”

Propositions and draft mission statements alone will not bring to an end the *marginality* of Unitarians and our religion in Canada. We’ve been sidelined to the margins for a long time: *invisible* in a vast country, cast in the role of a toothless *opposition*, so focused on local autonomy that we’ve been *indifferent* to building a national movement, and so focused on our selves individually, on *individualism*, that we’ve struggled to sustain coherent congregations, beliefs and practices. It’s hard to overcome engrained habits, practices and ways in which we see ourselves and the way others see us, if they see us at all. I know this well enough personally.

Be that as it may, think of these proposals as materials to build with, a starting place for a vibrant national denomination that could house our aspirations, deepen our faith and extend and achieve our longing for a more fair, inclusive and effective, that is to say, a more just nation with Unitarians playing the role *we may be meant for*—not on the margins, but working outward from our distinctive social ecological niche as a vanguard religious and ethical people.

Or try this: think of the “Valley of Dry Bones” from the first fourteen verses in the book of *Ezekiel, chapter 37*—with the propositions and draft mission statement above as the bones.

The prophet Ezekiel was given in a vision to see a valley full of dry, disarticulated bones. And a voice came to him asking: “Can these bones live?” To which Ezekiel replied: “Sovereign Lord, only You know.” And then the voice told him: “Prophesy over these bones and say unto them...you will live again.” And what follows is one of those great, vivid, crazy passages in the Hebrew Bible: with a rattling sound the bones came together, tendons and muscle appeared, skin covered the bodies, and breath from the four winds breathed into that vast human multitude and they came to life and stood up on their feet.

We’ve been handed a list of propositions and a draft statement about our future. They are the bones. We are the largest Unitarian congregation in Canada possessing a lot of wisdom, experience, insight and noble desire to sufficient to help those bones live, come to life and stand up on their feet..

Let’s come in from the margins; I don’t want other people and congregations doing their part without us doing ours. We have strength in numbers and more than enough good minds and hearts—what will be confirmed in Montreal in May and beyond needs our voice and vision. I urge you to attend the Forum on February 9th where we will discuss a proposed and problematic CUC resolution and attend the Board Forum on the 16th to help formulate a renewed vision for Unitarianism in Canada. I expect this congregation to send a full slate of well-informed active delegates to Montreal in May. And if you are unable to attend the forums and the Annual Meeting, you can write your comments and feedback directly to the CUC Board and staff by emailing to board@cuc.ca

Canadian Unitarianism: transformative, dynamic, joyful?—or on the margins; that story and the telling and achieving of it is up to us.

*If you felt your hackles rise when I mentioned Canada and the environment, Canada and mining, Canada and democracy, Canada and affordable housing or the lack thereof, five years ago, John Ralston Saul, in one of a plethora of books on Canadian identity, asserted that when we’re actually asked and listened to, Canadians intuitively know—it’s written in our historical and cultural DNA—that this nation is about *fairness, inclusivity, and effectiveness*—but, because we don’t know our history, we don’t know *why* we feel the way we do. We don’t know/appreciate, according to Saul, that our “civilization” is based on three pillars—British French *and* Aboriginal, with the latter perhaps being the most foundational of all. see JR Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*)

**I wonder what French Canadians and First Nations people thought of the following words from the kind of unofficial national anthem, “The Maple Leaf Forever” written in 1867: “In days of yore, from Britain’s shore,/Wolfe, the dauntless hero, came/And planted firm Britannia’s flag/On Canada’s fair domain”?