

Bolder Ways of Being
Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson
For the 2016 CUC Annual Worship Service
Chan Centre
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The theme of our gathering this weekend is: “Bolder ways of Being.” I like the translation into French —“Etre et vivre avec plus d’audace.” To be and to live more audaciously, with more daring. That word—audace—daring—brings a rallying cry of the French Revolution to mind: "*il nous faut de l'audace, et encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace*"—"We have to dare, and to dare again, and always be daring." The audacity, the boldness of which Georges Danton was speaking was to imagine a world without aristocracy and priestcraft; to imagine a world where the people governed themselves in a republic. He paid for that vision with his life.

Historically, our Unitarian ancestors daringly took on the hegemony, the dominant narrative and system of Christendom by audaciously asserting the Unity of God, the humanity of Jesus and the signal importance of reason, religious tolerance, and individual human moral responsibility. It was a bold stance for which our ancestors paid the high price of martyrdom, exile and marginalization for nearly three hundred years. Unitarians and Universalists daringly took on the hegemony of Calvinist Christianity in North America by audaciously asserting the essential goodness of human beings and our capacity to achieve the good because, they believed we are created in the image of a good and loving God. In so doing, they changed the emotional and religious landscape of North America.

Many Unitarians and Universalists daringly took on the hegemony of slave power in Great Britain and the States. Unitarians audaciously worked to save thousands of lives of refugees—Jews and Gentiles alike—during the Second World War. We’ve boldly stood up for

civil and human rights and reproductive and environmental justice. Daringly, we took on discriminatory, moth-eaten conventions and ordained women and LGBTQ people to our professional ministry; and here in Canada, we were in the vanguard in our affirmation of same sex marriage—a stand that was instrumental in helping to change the law across this nation. It's important to remember these people and the daring things they achieved.

All of this, and more, is expressive of a people willing to stake their lives and means to uphold a vision of the worth and dignity of every person. It's expressive of a people whose members believe that Nature and everything in it—from the heavens to the earth—is essentially one vast form of mutual connection and mutual dependence. What is it that ultimately sustains the interdependence and unity of all things?—we've called it God, Mystery, Wonder, the arc of the moral universe, and we've called it Nature itself--that great and fiery force, that still small voice which moves us, calls us to renewing our spirits and opening ourselves up to that which creates and upholds all life in its fullness, complexity and grandeur.

Bolder ways of being? We've heard how Eric struck off bamboo and spiritual shackles to embrace with us the quickened life of a free soul. Lyndsay spoke of how the lack of focus in our own religious culture and media turns off and bars the door to generations stepping toward us. And she challenges us to give youth and young adults clear and compelling reasons to carry our faith forward and equipped with the media to make it happen. Dani calls us to be active healers who acknowledge our own complicity in structures of injustice and exhorts us to true reconciliation with each other, with First Nations people and with the land upon which we all depend for life and flourishing.

After a three year process of consultation with UUs across Canada, our Canadian Unitarian Council's Vision Taskforce presented a Vision Statement and a set of aspirations for

approval by the representatives of our congregations at this year's Annual Meeting. That process of consultation with us revealed what **we said** needed to be lifted up and said about us: "*As Canadian Unitarian Universalists, we envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice.*" This is what we told our Vision Taskforce resonates most powerfully and compellingly to us--this is what matters most to us at this moment in time; this is what we long for; this is how we want to journey together into the future. And, I would underline, our Unitarian Youth have expressed both huge support for this process and for its outcome: "*As Canadian Unitarian Universalists, we envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice.*"

With that Vision Statement, our Taskforce was inspired by us and our words to add five statements of aspiration--that is, how we desire and seek to take this statement of vision and embody it in word and deed: Five Aspirations--*deeply connected, radically inclusive, actively engaged, theologically alive and spiritually grounded.* How, and if, we go forth and embody these aspirations as individuals, families, partners, parents, co-workers, citizens, Unitarian Universalists in congregations, ministers--I can't say; though in the next two years all of our congregations will have an opportunity to explore it; but I can see it my mind's eye and soul and wish to god it would come to pass.

Now you may think: there's nothing new here; this is who we are, this is what we already want--where's the vision? Two responses. First, let's say it's the early 1800s; if I was an abolitionist, surrounded by my abolitionist crew--it would be self-evident that every slave should be immediately freed. This is what we all believed and the end to which we were working already. But here's the thing--up until the early 1830s in the British Empire and 1860 in the

States, hardly anyone else shared our view. It was a daring, bold minority who envisioned the end of slavery, aspired to bring about a new state of being, and, at great cost, made it so.

Second, before I begin a serious journey, I want to know who I am, where I'm starting from, what I believe and value, and who my companions are; I want a compass and a map of the landscape through which I will be travelling . Thus equipped, I would hope that instead of wandering about without direction and purpose, I would reach my destination *and* be transformed by the strangers I meet, the wonders I have seen and the road I have travelled.

I began with stories of our daring UU ancestors, remote and near, the road they travelled and the good they achieved. In each case, they were arrayed against oppressive life and soul crushing systems of polity, thought and belief. In the past forty years, something truly damaging has happened to us: it's the rise to hegemony, the dominant narrative and thinking of economics and the monetization of nearly everything. And here I think our Vision Taskforce is right; this is what we're up against. The economic metaphor has come to be applied to be nearly every aspect of modern life, especially in areas in which it simply doesn't belong: education, healthcare, housing, information, employees' rights, the environment, the social contract and culture itself. This model has spread from the world of finance to government and from there through our whole culture in which the ideas of value, meaning and belief are being supplanted by efficiency, naked competition and cash value.

In such a situation, and if you don't believe me and think I'm out of my mind, ask any young person who has grown up in our post 9/11, post 2008 recessionary culture: envisioning a world in which our interdependence calls us to active love and justice is not old hat, it's not business as usual--it may be the only thing that will save us. And it's time we say it, and embody it in word and deed; not just as one more damn thing we have to do in addition to everything

else; not what we have to do, but what we should and could *be*--growing bolder, and more daring every day.

I just want to leave you with these images to take away:

In the occasionally Good Book, it says that when Abraham saw strangers approaching down the road, he ran from his tent door to meet them and bowed himself down to the earth. Turns out, he later daringly argued with them not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Gen. 18) Later in the same occasionally Good Book, a father sees his no-good son approaching the house while he was still a long way off; this parent is filled with compassion, runs down the road, throws his arms around his adult child, embraces him and later lays out a feast in celebration. (Luke 15) Much later, and in a culture to the South, Muhammad runs in distress toward his home: he believes he's going mad because he's hearing voices. His wife Khadijah runs out into the streets to meet her distraught spouse, who she knows is in the midst of an existential, spiritual crisis, and she wraps Muhammad in her cloak and assures him that all will be well.

Active love and justice rises from a vision of interdependence and mutual connection like the day follows the night and one season follows another.

May we be an aspirational people, inspired by a vision; may we run from our tents, our houses, and go out into the streets to meet and embrace the stranger, the future, and with faith and compassion wrap the cloak of Khadijah around those we love, and from there embrace our one and precious world.