

“Putting Down Roots”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Reading

Before beginning my sermon, I offer you now this reading of excerpts by Toronto author Dionne Brand, from her novel *What We All Long For*.

Mornings are like that on the subway trains — everyone having left their sovereign houses and apartments and rooms to enter the crossroads of the city, they first try at not letting the city touch them, holding on to the meagre privacy of a city with three million people. But eventually they’re disrupted... Anonymity is the big lie of a city. You aren’t anonymous at all. You’re common, really, common like so many pebbles, so many specks of dirt, so many atoms of materiality.

What floats in the air on a subway train... is chance. People stand or sit with the thin magnetic film of their life wrapped around them. They think they’re safe, but they know they’re not. Any minute you can crash into someone else’s life, and if you’re lucky, it’s good, it’s like walking on light.

There are Italian neighbourhoods and Vietnamese neighbourhoods in this city; there are Chinese ones and Ukrainian ones and Pakistani ones and Korean ones and [Ethiopian] ones. Name a region on the planet and there’s someone from there, here. All of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care because that genealogy is willfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself.

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, ..., Colombian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with Jamaican accents, ... Filipina-Saudi beauticians; Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bakers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers.

Lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated — [people] all trying to handle their own chain of events, trying to keep the story straight in their own heads. In this city, like everywhere, people work, they eat, they drink, they have sex, but it’s hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension.

Sermon: “Putting Down Roots”

I love this passage.

And I’m especially grateful to Catherine Lake,
who introduced me to it many years ago.

Though written in the late 90’s,
it still captures something of the unique nature of this great city—
this grand experiment in the mixing and mingling of peoples
from most every corner of this good green earth.

This place where cultures collide, in ways large and small.

Collisions that, when, at our best,
make us richer for the encounter—
and leave us changed, expanding our sense
of being connected to something larger,
to something beyond ourselves.

Helping us to understand that the world we know
is much more complex and beautiful
than we ever dared to imagine.

There is a certain humility required
to take in such lessons when they are offered.

To appreciate that there are wonderfully different ways of doing almost everything.

There is a certain humility required for living in a city like this,
at this moment in time.

And that is no less true for us as a congregation,
than it is for each of us as individuals.

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Those of you who have served in leadership in the congregation
probably recognized the reading.

I have shared it with some frequency across the years
on retreats of the board and convenors and staff.

More than once, I’ve done so as several of us gathered on a Saturday,

up on the 32nd floor of the Manulife Centre,
with its breathtaking view of downtown.

At those retreats,
often focused on our quest for a new building,
I asked the leaders to all gather at the windows and to look out,
a visual meditation on the teeming life of Toronto,
as I shared Dionne Brand's words,
her haunting tribute to this beautiful, complicated city
that is, as always, coming into its own.

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And, yet, as much as I treasure this reading,
I'm always caught off guard by that unsettling last line—
the one about waking up in Toronto with a certain misapprehension.

I looked up the word misapprehension,
just to make sure that I fully apprehended it!

It means a mistaken belief or mistaken interpretation of something.

But, what on earth does Brand mean
by saying it's hard not to wake up in Toronto
without the certainty of misunderstanding?

Are we, one of the most diverse cities the world has ever known,
a metropolis of misapprehension?

Hold that thought.

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A few years ago, I came across a challenging article,
that drew on the research of Robert Putnam,
a much-loved Harvard professor known for his progressive political views,
who, a few years earlier, had written an influential book called *Bowling Alone*.

In that book he decried the breakdown of social capital,
noting how people in recent decades
are living in ever-smaller social circles,
with less connectivity and commitment to the community around them.

As his title suggests, people these days are bowling alone.

More often than not, the time we once spent with others,
we now spend by ourselves or with a shrinking circle of people.

And this was long before the pandemic sent us all to our rooms.

His book called for people to come out of their bunkers
and to reweave the fabric of community.

But, more recently, what Putnam has found,
to his own great discomfort,
is that the more diversity there is in a place,
the lower the social capital.

He said in more diverse communities, people tend to:
“distrust their neighbors,
regardless of the colour of their skin,
to withdraw even from close friends,
to expect the worst from their community and its leaders,
to volunteer less, give less to charity
and work on community projects less often,
to...vote less,
to agitate for social reform more
but have less faith that they can actually make a difference...”¹

To put a finer point on it, he said:
“People living in ethnically diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’ –
that is, to pull in like a turtle.”²

Putnam spent years between announcing his findings and publishing his paper.
How, he wondered, could this be?

He tested the data over and over again, playing with every variable.
But the results stayed the same.

He looked at “contact” theory and “conflict” theory,
the two leading schools of thought on ethnic and racial diversity,
and concluded that more contact amongst people of differing backgrounds
didn’t necessarily lead to stronger bonds,
but it, fortunately, didn’t result in heightened tensions either.

¹ Michael Jonas, “The downside of diversity: A Harvard political scientist finds that diversity hurts civic life. What happens when a liberal scholar unearths an inconvenient truth?,” *The Boston Globe*, 5 August 2007.

² Ibid.

What he found, though,
was that it just caused “a general civic malaise.”

One of his most surprising findings was that, in more diverse settings,
“levels of trust were not only lower between groups...
but even among members of the same group.”

“Diversity,” he says, “seems to bring out the turtle in all of us.”

Now, hold that thought, too.

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Another study suggests that the reason behind all of this might be oxytocin,
as in the hormone that plays a central role
in our brain’s experience of intimacy.³

It’s the magic ingredient that helps couples to bond,
and what prompts mother mammals to nurse their young after giving birth.

It’s also what helps humans to trust each other.

A Dutch researcher has found, it’s also what causes us
to trust those most like us
and hold a bias against those who are different.

It’s “the hormone of the clan” and a key “agent of ethnocentrism.”

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A few moments ago, I asked you
to hold the thought about “the certainty of misapprehension.”

I invite you to now link up that thought
with this finding about oxytocin
and the human tendency to distrust those different from us—
and then, when you’ve put those ideas together,
to bring in Putnam’s research about how diversity
brings about less social capital, less social connection, less social cohesion.

With all of this top of mind,

³ Nicholas Wade, Depth of the Kindness Hormone Appears to Know Some Bounds,” *The New York Times*, 10 January 2011.

I find myself wondering about what seems to be
the pressing question before us:
of whether we, who live in this great city,
are really just a bunch of hormonal turtles
incapable of understanding one another...!

The social science would seem to suggest that it is so.

It makes the case that difference should drive us
into lonely caves of distrust.

But, I for one, believe with all of my being
that such data need not be our destiny.

While we humans may have evolved with hormones
to help us sort between family and friend and foe,
we are more than capable of overcoming the fears that would keep us apart.

We can choose a more courageous and generous path.
Even if it is, at times, more difficult.

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I do believe, as our motto states,
that diversity is the strength of this city,
but it will also be our undoing,
if we fail to keep at the hard work of building
a truly just and equitable society.

The misapprehension any of us may feel is not helped
by romanticizing our diversity,
by not truly confronting and contending with the challenges
that come with living in a multicultural society,
in which injustices of so many kinds continue to persist.

To state it more frankly,
we cannot celebrate our diversity without seeking to overcome
the hard realities of racism,
the scourge of inequality,
and the bitter legacies of colonialism
that in such insidious ways have also had a hand
in shaping our city into being what it is today.

We all know this, of course, on some level.

And there are many of us who see this
as the core of our work in the world, especially as Unitarians.

It's central, I believe, to the work of our congregation,
which I think of as little loving laboratory of the human spirit.

A place where we are called to do the deep soul work required
to help us build genuine community
by working through that which would separate us,
by building bridges of trust and understanding.

But, again, we should be under no illusion that this is easy.

As the explorer Freya Stark put it, "Few are the giants of the soul
who actually feel that the human race is their family circle."

Mindful of the research I shared earlier,
we may now better understand why.

It takes a determined commitment
to draw wide the circle of human kinship,
and to see across the barriers of difference,
the very same sacred human essence
looking back at us from another's eyes.

It takes a leap of faith to move beyond what oxytocin alone would tell us,
to know in the deepest parts of our being that we are, indeed, one with all.

And it takes a sustained determination to face all of this,
knowing there are deep systemic issues that must be addressed,
once and for all, if we are to make the most
of the grand experiment that is our city—
and if we are to make the most of this great experiment that is our congregation.

I believe all of this is about growing our hearts and our souls.

Learning to behold one another with a sacred curiosity.

To resist the temptation to assume we know someone else,
and, instead, endeavour to understand the variety of human experience,
and to ask how and why someone might hold a different perspective—
on matters of justice, or theology, or politics,
or any of the deep moral questions of our time.

Such growth is about emerging from our lovely, lonely turtle shells
to bask in the wonder of the world around us.

A world made ever more whole,
when we dare, against the odds—and even our hormones—
to place our trust and our faith, in others.

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In just over an hour, we will gather in a Congregational Meeting to make a critically
important decision that will shape the future of First Unitarian in untold ways.

While I emphatically believe this to be the congregation's decision,
I also feel you deserve to know where I stand.

I believe the move to Oakwood Village will open up
incredibly exciting possibilities for our congregation
to more deeply engage with the city,
in ways that have been difficult
in our present context at Avenue and St. Clair.

And I believe this move will ask us to grow in ways we can scarcely imagine.
And I can only see that as a good thing.

What we can be certain of is that it will ask us to grow in integrity—
to be true to the principles we profess,
even when it means we must stretch and change
to make real our commitments to love and justice.

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Though I am by no stretch of the imagination a gardener,
I have learned a few things across the years.

One of these is that replanting something as simple as a shrub
can bring about a full-on crisis of faith.

If you've ever done some replating yourself,
you'll know that what you often find
when you pull a plant from its container
is that the roots have become coiled in tight knots.

For the plant to survive being the transition

requires cutting away at the roots for them to be freed
to extend out and into the life-giving soil of their new setting.

Even knowing that, it is a huge act of faith
to trust that growth can and will come from such seeming pain—
even though that seems to be how life so often works.

To practise that kind of trust is one of the hardest things that life asks of us—
whether the question comes to us in our individual lives,
or whether it comes to us at a point of decision as a congregation.

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We have sold our current building,
and we're in need of a new place to call home.

We are in the process of pulling up our roots.

And we're in the stage of loosening, out of necessity,
the knotted parts of congregational life that no longer serve us.

It's not fun.
It's not painless.
It involves a tonne of work.

And it is nothing less than a leap of faith,
an act of trust, on all of our parts.

But, whenever a gardener replants a living thing,
it is with the sacred hope that the plant will not merely survive,
but thrive in its new setting.

As we prepare to make this move,
may we, gardeners that we all now are,
undertake this work with care and humility,
with love and commitment,
with hope and with joy.

May we give ourselves fully to this act of faith,
trusting that First Unitarian can still learn new things,
and come to serve our city in relevant and life-giving ways,
now and for generations still to come.

May it be so.