

“The Road Ahead”

Rev. Eric Meter, Guest Speaker
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading

An excerpt from Galway Kinnell’s poem *Flying Home*:

... can I try to express:

*that love is hard,
that while many good things are easy,
true love is not,
because love is first of all a power,
its own power,
which continually must make its way forward,
from transcending union always forward into difficult day.*

*And as the plane descends, it comes to me in the space
where tears stream down across the stars,
tears fallen on the actual earth
where their shining is what we call spirit,
that once the lover
recognizes the other, knows for the first time
what is most to be valued in another,
from then on, love is very much like courage,
perhaps it is courage, and even
perhaps
only courage.*

Sermon: “The Road Ahead”

Let me begin by thanking Rev. Shawn for the invitation to join all of you today.

I am thrilled to be with you this morning, and offer greetings to you from the Olympia Brown UU Church in Racine WI. Rev. Brown was the first woman ordained to parish ministry in the US with the support of her denomination.

An image of the church organ is behind me, and the very pulpit she spoke from will be the one used when we are able to once again worship in person.

This morning I want to talk with you about how we move forward with our core values intact in light of the long year we've all endured.

This last year has challenged all of us, and that's an understatement. While compliance (and subsequent infection rates) may differ in how Canadians and those of other nations have responded to Covid-19, the truth is that political borders are meaningless to this, or any, disease.

If we have learned, or been reminded, of anything in this last 12+ months, it is that everything that makes up our common humanity – ambition, love, hope – for all our strengths, we are also inherently vulnerable.

As a life-long Unitarian Universalist, I sometimes say that somewhere along the way I picked up the phrase *our congregations are where we learn what it means to love*.

But I can be more specific than that. I first heard that phrase from Bev Smrha, a district staff member from Oakland, California. Retired now, Bev is one of the most skilled religious leaders I've ever had the privilege of working with.

Our congregations are where we learn what it means to love.

That's been our chief task these last 12+ months, hasn't it? We've needed to adapt and change how we come together and interact, but all of this has been in service to keeping ourselves and others as safe as possible so that we can continue to, harkening back to the lyrics from a 19th Century hymn, make channels for the streams of love.

Today a key issue before us is equitable access to vaccines.

I am relieved that my nation finally agreed this to provide vaccines to Canada, and that your pharmaceutical company Medicigo (I hope I'm pronouncing that right) has now begun Phase 3 in its vaccine development.

I'm worried about places like Brazil, where it seems Covid is now out of control or close to it.

If ever there were an example of how important good governance is, Covid has provided it.

But I digress. No one here, to my knowledge, is running for office. We're here to gather as a faith community.

Our congregations are where we learn what it means to love.

And while that may sound a bit overblown, there is some real truth to it. At the very least, it's worth aspiring to.

Sometimes I forget how important that is. The proverbial fish can't describe what water is because water is all it knows.

I was an undergraduate when a fellow student showed me that not everyone was brought up with a liberal religious understanding of love.

I was living in a co-ed dorm, and, for the first time in my life, I had sisters.

In the middle of her first year one of the young women on the floor fell for an attractive sophomore. But after a couple months came a painful break-up.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I realized that love wasn't enough," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I learned that you need respect, too."

"But I thought respect was part of love?"

In response, her face took on the classic features of befuddlement.

I want to be careful, even now, not to judge the woman, but it was as if love for her was only the romantic movie kind. I can't help but think that our *Our Whole Lives* human sexuality classes would have been valuable to her as its predecessor, *About Your Sexuality*, had been for me.

I tell that story because as we begin to move into more of us being vaccinated, we're going to need to hold close to our values to help us navigate our way forward in a way that is just and right for more than just ourselves.

Congregants I serve are asking when we can worship once again in the space they so dearly love. But the building is old, with long-outdated ventilation. The size of the space and the closeness of the pews make social distancing a challenge. We could only let so many people in at once. Who's going to decide who gets to come inside? What about our younger ones? The restrooms are on the lower level next to the Sunday School classrooms, and the stairs are narrow.

Each of our congregations will have to come up with a plan based upon public health guidelines and the particulars of each physical space.

I hope that work is proving easier for you than it is for us where I serve. Let me also add that I'm impressed by both the guidance provided by the denominational leadership in the States as well as that of the Canadian Unitarian Council. Both are doing good work on our behalf.

One thing we do know is that small groups will be able to resume in-person first.

Sadly, the most dangerous thing we can do is to sing in close proximity to one another. For many of our choir members singing as part of a larger group is a spiritual practice. They've been hit harder than many during this last year.

Yes, this is a shameless plug, please be especially kind to members your choirs.

Moving on, as older adults are vaccinated before younger people, we need to guard against favoring one group over another, thereby segregating our communities more than they may already be.

As religious educator Leann Pomaville says, "My concern isn't with small groups meeting with masks, but rather that there's a huge gap between those who are likely to feel safer gathering now (mostly older folks who have been vaccinated) and families [with younger children]. I'm ... wary of opening things up for [those] who feel safe because it will be so long until it's truly safe for younger people and kids, especially."

We have to make these decisions as communities of faith. No one is going to get everything they want. The sacrifices we have had to make are not over.

That said, when we can once again meet together in person, to the extent that these decision will be proven to have been in the service of the welfare of all, we'll be able to take justifiable pride in the sacrifices we have made.

We also have to expect that our sanctuaries may be less full in the months and years ahead as people opt for virtual worship instead of in-person celebrations for any number of reasons.

More than ever, we will need to practice the art assuming good intentions.

A result of our ethic of respect and safety will likely mean that our congregations may be among the last public institutions to re-open fully.

We will need to be prepared for that, and remain committed to our values in order to stay the course, in order to keep the whole of our communities as safe as we can.

While we follow the science, we also need to acknowledge that the science is still developing. Like in so much of life, we're still learning as we go.

There is one other facet I need to highlight amid all this.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with church members about when and how we might re-open.

When we came to the end of what we knew and could imagine about protocols, indicators and intensive care capacity, we began talking about how we might celebrate being back together once more.

Because we will need that celebration.

“We should let all the children wear pajamas that first Sunday back!” “Heck, why only the kids?” “Would the adults go for it?” “Would the minister?”

I loved the energy in the room, but ... that last one is not going to happen. But not for the reasons they might suspect. At least, not for all the reasons they might suspect.

During that conversation, it hit me. We need to laugh and celebrate, yes.

And we also have to cry.

I remember a passage in a novel I read years ago that moved me then, and still stops me in my tracks today.

The novel is Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, a reflection on war torn Poland from the eyes of Oskar, a soul who grows old in the body of his young childhood self.

The scene is post-World War II Gdansk (then called Danzig), a large industrial city on the Baltic coast. Oskar is working at a jazz club named The Onion Cellar.

In the post-war city, and following Nazi occupation, the secret of the club was this: the proprietor placed at every seat a cutting board, a knife and an onion, all covered with a cloth napkin.

When everyone was seated, the proprietor theatrically called out “Ready. Set. Go!” inviting folks to uncover their onions and start peeling and slicing them.

Some did so awkwardly, being unaccustomed to kitchen rituals. Others lit into their onions with the grace born of long experience. But, before long, all had tears streaming down their faces.

What's the word? Catharsis.

The bodily reaction to the aerosolized onion juice, or whatever the specific scientific cause that prompts our tears, triggered the tears long held within.

The losses, injustice and hardship of war. Survivor's guilt. Hopes and lives crushed, and for what?

For all this and more, those fictional characters cried, and cried together.

In the words of not-so-young-anymore Oskar, "A true community formed when, to your left and right, [others] from all fields, were weeping with you."

While I know that we all grieve in different ways, and in different ways at different times, I also know that we have much to grieve from what we've gone through in this last year or more.

What would it be if we cried together for all we've struggled through and lost during this time?

The first person I knew to die from Covid-19 likely contracted it attending a memorial service. My grief for Tony is wrapped up with outrage still. I know I could use the cleansing of body and spirit some onion juice might prompt.

There will be no clear armistice with the virus. No date in which victory can be declared.

Instead, there will be booster vaccinations and an aching slow journey in which humans adapt and Covid-19 becomes, finally, like a flu or the common cold.

Just over a month ago now, denominational leadership in the States re-issued guidance on returning to in-person gatherings. The conclusion puts it this way, "As the pandemic continues to play out, we ... will continue to face uncertainty. The best we can do at any given time is to lean in to our values as well as draw on the gifts and wisdom of our own people."

The wisdom of our people, like these words on what love really is from my colleague Jan Carlsson-Bull:

Love is knotted and gnarled,
like an old tree fighting with the wind,
like branches too brittle for their own good,
like roots that relentlessly inform how deeply
we can trust
and how freely we can forgive.

That's the kind of tenacious love that will best serve us in the weeks and months to come. A generous love, with deep-seated roots, able to trust and forgive ourselves and one another.

Returning to the Galway Kinnell poem from earlier,

while many good things are easy,
... love is not,
because love is first of all a power,
its own power,
which continually must make its way forward,
from transcending union always forward into difficult day.

That's where we find ourselves, isn't it? *Difficult Day*.

We have lost much during these last twelve or so months, and we're not out of the proverbial woods yet. But, together, we can get there, with one another at our sides, and our faith communities vibrant and welcoming to all.

May it be so.

Amen.

Benediction

As we move into the conclusion of this time of worship and reflection, and with St. Patrick's Day just past, I leave you with this traditional Celtic benediction:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

May Spring come to warm your heart and your soul. May the depths of your faith and love be restored, and may what you say and do help restore the hope of those whose journeys intersect with your own.

Go in peace my friends. With a dance for greater justice in your steps, go in peace.