“The Journey Was the Destination”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
11 June 2023

With some back-of-the-napkin math,
I figure I’ve shared some 1.3 million words from the pulpit of this congregation.

And that’s just the sermons.

I’ve said quite a few other things along the way.

One naturally wonders—
after writing and speaking so many words—
what difference, if any, they have made.

Across these last sixteen years,
I have had the blessing of many of you routinely telling me
what those words have meant to you.

What I heard back wasn’t always what I expected.
Sometimes what was heard wasn’t in any way connected
to what I thought I was saying.

And that’s okay. Actually, it’s more than okay.

The work of the pulpit is to open again and again a conversation—
a conversation that each of us has with the preacher,
and with the content of the sermon.

But, more importantly, to open a conversation we have with ourselves
and with the sacred, or the holy,
with life, or the Spirit of Life,
with the divine known to us by many names, yet beyond all naming.

For the record, once and for all,
I don’t actually read your minds or your journals
before writing my sermons.

But I am a student of human nature, and of the human condition,
and I have endeavoured across these last sixteen years,
to listen deeply to your hopes and your heartaches
and to reflect back to you,

in what so often feels to me a meagre offering,
something that will help, something that will serve life,
something that will encourage or inspire you
to live more deeply into alignment
with your values and your sense of where life is calling you.

I have never taken the privilege of this part of my role for granted.

But as I deliver this last sermon to you as Senior Minister,
I 've been reflecting on just what it is that I've been trying to get across to you,
what I've been trying to say to you in various and varied ways for so long.

As you've surely heard me and others say,
every minister really has only one or two sermons in them.
We just keep rewriting the sermons, putting a different slant on the theme,
coming at it once again, but, this time, from a somewhat different angle.

And so, what I have for you this morning are the highlights,
the key points I hope have come through and that I hope will remain with you.

My first sermon with you as your new minister took place on September 9th, 2007.
It was Water Communion.
And I preached a sermon titled "The Journey Is the Destination."

It was a sermon about wanderlust,
about the call to travel, to see the world.

It was a sermon about how seeing another corner of the world
helps us to better appreciate home, once we return.

And it was a sermon about appreciating the beauty already abundant at our feet—
an invitation to connect to the place where we already are.

The point was that life isn't so much about getting to some other place,
as much as it is about making the most of the trip itself.

That our journey through life is actually our destination.

Sixteen years later,
after all the time and distance we've travelled together,
I stand here today to say that I still believe
the truth of what I said all those years ago.

Only that I believe it even more deeply.

Looking back now, it is clearer than ever
that the journey was the destination.

And the journey is all there actually is.

This is something, of course, to remember,
especially for a congregation quite literally on the move.

A congregation not exactly here or there,
in terms of physical space, in terms of a building.
And in a liminal time of transition with its ministers.

But, amid the ebb and flow of all that change,
it is the journey through the day to day
that eventually adds up to something we later look back on,
something that we can see only with some distance or perspective,
that causes us to finally appreciate that the journey is and was all there is.

I feel that so deeply as our paths now diverge.

It was the life lived in the day to day and week to week
that mattered as much or more than where we've gotten to as this point.

Which is to say that one of my key messages is that the company we keep,
and the way we keep company with others, matters.

In that first sermon I preached, some of you may recall
the strange but true tale of Lawn Chair Larry.[1]

Larry always wanted to fly.

He had always hoped to become a pilot someday,
but with poor eyesight,
he was left only to watch airplanes flying over his backyard.

Then, one day, he had something of a brainstorm. . .

He purchased 45 weather balloons,
and in his backyard, with a rope,
he anchored his lawn chair to his truck,
attached the balloons, and filled them up with helium.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawnchair_Larry_flight

He packed himself a lunch,
grabbed a six-pack of beer and a pellet gun, and strapped himself in,
planning to glide lazily above his neighbourhood for the afternoon.

But when Larry cut the cord,
he didn't float up to the height of 10 meters, as he had expected.

Instead, he shot straight up to 5,000 meters!

When he finally levelled-off,
he feared that using his pellet gun to pop the balloons at that height
would be far too dangerous,
so he drifted cold and frightened for fourteen hours.

And then things really began to get out of control.

Larry sailed into the flight path of Los Angeles International Airport.

An airline pilot spotted him and radioed the control tower
to report that there was, up there,
a guy with a gun up there, floating along in a lawn chair.

The airport swung into high alert.
A helicopter was scrambled to investigate.

Once they decided that Larry wasn't actually a threat,
his rescuers had to deal with the fact
that he was being carried steadily out to sea on an offshore breeze.

Now, apparently, rescuing a make-shift hot-air balloon
with a helicopter over the ocean is no easy feat.

Every time the helicopter approached,
the draft of the blades would push Larry farther away.

Eventually, the helicopter hovered above the balloon
and dropped down a rescue line
that allowed Larry to be towed back to safety.

As he touched down, Larry was arrested
and led away in handcuffs for violating federal airspace.

When asked by a reporter why he had done it,

Larry stopped, and turned, and said,
"Because you can't just sit around."

There may be many meanings to take from this story.

But the one that speaks to me most strongly now
is that we ultimately and always journey with others.

Larry certainly didn't think that when he bought those weather balloons.

He didn't think it when he strapped himself in with his beer and then cut the cord.

And he certainly didn't feel it,
when he found himself so very alone, drifting amongst the clouds.

But help came. Help he so desperately needed.

Larry was rescued by good people, just doing their jobs.

And through their help, he must have recognized the truth
of those poetic words of Maya Angelou:

> Now if you listen closely
> I'll tell you what I know
> Storm clouds are gathering
> The wind is gonna blow
> The [human race] is suffering
> And I can hear the moan,
> 'Cause nobody,
> But nobody
> Can make it out here alone.[2]

She was right.

In this beautiful, bewildering world,
we do, indeed, need one another,
though we often struggle to realize it, to accept it, and to act on it.

Which points to another of my key themes across the years:
we live in a radically interdependent world—
and we better, if we are to survive, start acting like it.

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[2] "Alone," from *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, 1975.

I can think of no more relevant example of this hard fact
than to invite you to reflect on the air we have been breathing in recent days,
air scented with the thick smoke of fires burning up old forests
hundreds of kilometers away.

Though there are billionaires building private bunkers in New Zealand
and one in particular obsessed with colonizing Mars,
there is no real or meaningful escape from the challenges of life on this planet.

There is no going it alone.

What touches the life of one of us affects us all.

Which means that we must tend to the needs of our neighbours.
That we must strengthen the fabric of community,
building bridges of understanding across human differences,
and doing all we can to foster trust and understanding
through acts of kindness and lives lived with compassion.

This involves the work of healing and restoration,
of truth-telling and reconciliation,
of widening our hearts to hold the whole human family,
in all of its splendour and complexity.

This is a tall order.

And not all of the work belongs to everyone all of the time.

In those haunting, prophetic words from *The Talmud*,
words Lynn has so beautifully set to music:

> Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.
> Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now.
> You are not obligated to complete the work,
> but neither are you free to abandon it.[3]

Which brings me to this place,
this little loving laboratory of the human spirit,
of which I have so often spoken.

This place where you come to journey together.
To do the work of justice and mercy.

[3] From the "Pirkei Avot".

To practice the arts of humility and discernment.
To grapple with the ways you are called to serve
and what that means for your life.

We are living through times of enormous upheaval in the wider world.
And times of significant change
within this beloved community of memory and hope.

There are many beyond this congregation
that would, by argument or by indifference,
claim that a community such as this
has little to no value in our modern world.

I could not disagree more.

You might think that of course I'd say that,
given that I've poured a significant chunk of my life into this place—
this place I so deeply love.

But I believe in the power of community.

My life, for one, has been saved by that power,
when I have found encouragement and inspiration to carry on,
when I have found compassion and understanding when I have felt alone,
when I did not know how to make sense of a world
that often makes so little sense.

And I know I'm not the only one.
Many of you have said the same to me.
And all of the voices we just heard on the video said it, each in their own way.

Which is to say that this community,
this place—and all that it is, all that it aspires to be—matters.

It matters to those gathered online and in person,
and it matters beyond the literal and virtual walls of this sanctuary
to people of every walk of life in this glorious but hurting world of ours.

So, as my time as your Senior Minister comes to a close,
I charge you, as you go forward, to:

Honour the beauty of the earth,
and protect the delicate, sacred web that holds us all.

Love and serve life.
Savour the very gift of your being, of being alive,
and give thanks
by dedicating yourself in service to something beyond yourself.

Seek to understand more than you now know.
Bow before the mysteries and wonders of this life.
Move through this world with compassion, with humility, and with grace.

And in all things, learn to love better with each day.

For that is what it means to be alive.
It is to me the very purpose of our lives.
It is the deepest meaning of life.

To know that we are part of a story billions of years in the making.

And that we, for a shining, magnificent moment,
get to play our part in eternity
to help the universe, the cosmos,
all that is known and unknown in the vastness of all time and space,
to be fully alive and to be wholly awake,
to understand what it means to be here, to be human,
to live and love boldly,
as we revel and bask in the wonder and glory of it all.

So, to this boundless bounty of life
that is within us and between us and beyond us,
may we always and emphatically sing!

Amen.