

" Love and Justice"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (Online)

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I grew up Unitarian – and was dedicated to this faith community at the Unitarian Fellowship of Regina. My family moved to Calgary when I was 9 years old, so Calgary Unitarians is my home congregation, and the community of which I heard my call to ministry.

During the last 6 or 7 years that I was living in Calgary, the Calgary Unitarians hosting a Service auction, as one of their primary fundraisers. Every year the Minister, Rev. Debra Faulk auctions off a sermon title. This means that the person who bids the highest is allowed to pick the focus of a sermon that she will deliver during the next church year. Sometimes the person would choose a topic that they wanted to share the service with, a topic that they wanted to help create a service about. But others would offer ideas that they wanted to hear Debra's opinion on, asking her to do the research and share her learnings. The last auction that I was present for, the person who won Debra's sermon was Gorham H. I knew Gorham since I was 10 or 12 years old, he has been a patriarch of the Calgary Church for several decades, and when I decided to do an internship in the Calgary church I asked Gorham if he would be willing to sit on my intern committee. He was an incredibly endearing, generous man who really cared about his community, and was often in the church garden and the community garden tending dehydrated plants. He would deliver extra produce to the food bank, and teach the children and youth about the composting red wiggler worms. I also remember, when I was quiet young, he had the children's program help bring the red worms into the church basement in the fall, so that they don't die in the cold compost buckets, and then takes them back out in the spring.

I knew Gorham to be a Universalist, Unitarian – holding onto pieces of the Christian Science theology that he grew up with (such as the ideas that sin was an illusion – but refusing to believe that pray and faith would heal all things), so when he won the Sermon Title at the auction I assumed that he would ask Debra to preach along these lines. But oh how I was mistaken. Later on, during one of our Intern committee meetings Gorham told us the title he had chosen was “Unitarian Universalism- Out with the Old and In with the New.”

Gorham explained that when he joined the UU faith 50-plus years ago he and his wife were looking for a community that was “paying attention to world events” and doing something about them. That they wanted to be in a community who was engaged in Social Action and Justice Work, and that they wanted to raise their four kids to live into the values that would make them better, more socially aware people. But that now, Unitarian Universalists are no longer the only church that is engaging in these initiatives. He believes that we have lost our edge, that we are just one in multiple faith communities and innumerable other organizations that offer people a space to engage this work. He also argued that it no longer mattered whether we were a church that was free, much like the way that James Luther Adam described in the opening words that I shared this morning. Gorham argued that the prophethood of all believers was no longer a thing that UUs could claim as their own. With trainings for every single type of community leadership available, and communities of belonging coming in multiple different forms, Gorham believed that it no longer mattered if we were a free church.

Although Gorham believed that we, Unitarian Universalists, had lost our “edge” he also full heartedly believed that Unitarian Universalism still had things to offer the world, that our theology is lifesaving, and that the work we do is necessary in the world. And he wanted to hear a sermon about how we were going to deal with this, how were we going to enact into the world our ‘understanding of faith’ and “our visions of truth’?

Unfortunately, I never got to listen to Debra's sermon about the future of our faith, although I would have loved to have heard Debra's ponderings, as I was getting ready to move to Toronto for my internship.

In 2016, the same year I moved to Toronto, at the CUC's Annual Conference and Meeting, Canadian UUs were introduced to the proposed vision statement of Canadian Unitarian Universalists which I shared before the sermon. I believe that this vision offers us a great opportunity to live into the future exactly what Gorham was asking for, it offers the love and the justice that he sought from our faith. An opportunity to breathe life into our faith, in a new and yes, an already existing way, and it definitely offers us a shared language to express our communities' and our ideals to those who don't know Unitarian Universalism.

And not only is the vision statement of "we envision a world where our interdependence calls us to love and justice" a strong statement to share with the world, but the Aspirations offer us an understanding of how to live into this vision. We aspire to be Deeply Connected, to be Radically Inclusive, to be Actively Engaged, to be Theologically Alive and to be Spiritually Grounded.

But what does it mean to be Actively Engaged or Theologically Alive? And how can this vision statement, of radical inclusion and spiritual grounding, move us to a place of more visibility in the wider world? What is it about this statement that moves us into a deeper sense of our faith?

Let's take a step back for a minute. The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto has its vision and mission statement posted on the website –

First is a beacon of hope and inspiration in Toronto.

We move hearts, hands and minds

To make our commitments

To love and justice come alive.

We welcome all to come together to seek to understand the meaning of our lives, connect with others as we are, and serve life to build a better worlds. Or the shortened version:

Seek Freely

Connect Authentically

Serve Passionately

The mission statement identifies the What of this community: What do we gather for and what we intend our community and our relationships to do.

Toronto First is a beacon of hope and inspiration:

We move hearts, hands and minds

To make our commitments

To love and justice come alive.

A vision statement is the “How” in this equation. How do we move hearts, and hands and minds? By coming together to seek to understand the meaning of our lives,

By coming together to connect with others as we are,

and by coming together to serve life to build a better worlds.

There are very tangible ways in which this community is acting its vision into the world. Journey Groups and circles of care help people seek meaning. Worship services, choir practices, Religious Exploration programs help us to connect. The justice work, the work that is being done to serve the world is happening too, from the Reconciliation working Group, the Refugee family sponsorship team, the Green sanctuary team, and many more active groups.

Of course there are different ways in which the congregation could further live up to their Mission – but that is part of the point, we all need things to strive for.

With the Vision statement that was approved by the CUC there is a big difference. It is a Vision Statement for Canadian Unitarian Universalists. It isn't supposed to offer a 'how' for a specific organization, such as the Canadian Unitarian Council (although they have adopted the language as their own vision statement) and it is not supposed to override the work that individual congregations

have done around creating their own mission and vision statements. It was intended to bring all people into a common language, whether we are a part of a community, or live in a city without a congregation. Whether we are a regular attender on Sunday mornings, and sit on Boards and committees or come by when we can find time in our busy schedules. This Vision statement offers space for all communities to identify with it, be they churches, congregations, fellowships, or start up communities, small gatherings, or individual people.

I find comfort in it, because as a Unitarian Universalist who lives in a different province than the congregation that I hold membership with, and having to leave behind many congregations over the years since serving in Toronto. I know that I still belong to this community, it reminds me that I do not need to belong to a Congregation, or attend it regularly in order to be living into my faith. It also gives me the language, and the imagery that I am called to live into. To be Deeply Connected – both to my church community, but also to other Unitarian Universalists, to find connections with individuals I have not yet met, or to find deeper connection to those that I do know. To be Radically Inclusive – to recognize that I have ingrained stereotypes, and to learn how to change my behaviours and my thoughts when someone brings these to the surface. But also to engage with those who are different from me, to make connections with people who I am outside of my normal cohort – to learn the wisdom of those who are different than me.

To be Actively Engaged – to pay attention to world politics, news and current issues. I will stay involved in social justice work, and engage with activists who hold similar values; as well I will listen when someone has a different opinion than mine, in hopes to deepen my understanding of the world and its inequities.

To be Theologically Alive – to continue to grow in my understanding of the world, and how I interact with it. To continuously examine my

own sense of the wholly and to contemplate how that fits with the way that I interact in the world, and how I connect with life. To constantly be engaging my ideas and ideals with others around me, attempting to discern my truth.

And to be Spiritually Grounded – I know that the work of being connected, inclusive, engaged and alive will be exhausting, and at times it will be overwhelming. In order to feel connected to the work that I am called to do I will continue to be grounded through my spiritual practices, living intentionally, and with connection to the sacred, so that I won't forget the reason of my call to ministry and the call of Unitarian Universalism.

Being raised Unitarian Universalist and continuing to call it my faith and striving towards understanding myself and the world through the lens that is Unitarian Universalism- is not an easy task, and not something that I take lightly. But having this Vision statement to help guide me toward that world I dream of has made the path a little clearer.

I hope that this community and that the Canadian Unitarian Council are able to see this vision statement to live into their potential, and to understand how Unitarian Universalism can continue to recognize our interdependence and move toward love and justice.

I am not certain that this is what Gorham would have been looking for, when he asked for a sermon about the future of Unitarian Universalism, but this speaks to me of a future with direction.

Looking at the future of my faith I can envision a sense of belonging that does not revolve around congregational members, or pledging or financial contributions; where belonging means that you are connected to Unitarian Universalism within your heart and your soul; whether that means that you practice it in a church, or on your own in a way that doesn't necessarily look like a church. Looking to the future I see a faith where love and justice are at the center of our interdependence. I see a faith where barriers have been removed,

where we recognize the harm and the exclusion that our words and our actions can have and we change our behaviours. And not only are we actively seeking to improve our relationships with marginalized groups and individuals, but that they are at the center of our faith, leading the way forward. In this future Unitarian Universalists will be involved in policy change at provincial or federal levels, educational work, public action and other ways of engaging with the issues of the world. We will call the leaders of our world to a higher standard, we will seek ways to build communities for those on the outside of society's framework, we will support growth in our faith in ways that we currently don't realize are needed. In this future Unitarian Universalism greater depth of our own very rich theology will be understood more broadly, and we will continue to seek new truths and ways of relating to the world and each other - also recognizing the challenges and effects of misappropriation and misuse of other cultures beliefs. In this future Unitarian Universalism, we will have strong spiritual practices that support our work within and without our communities. We will find strength within our community practices and rituals – allowing ourselves to be filled up by the music, words, and practices of worship, and not forgetting that we can have the same practices while outside of our communities.

The future of our faith has never been in danger, but now – with clearer understandings of a collective vision and language to connect our communities together in new and not so new ways – our future seems much clearer. May it be so, and may we make it so.