

Travelling Together
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
Sunday, August 17, 2025

Good morning, my fellow travellers. Thank you for being here today.

For those of you who may not know, until last June my work and my ministry was as the Canadian Unitarian Council's Congregational Life Lead for the congregations in Eastern Canada – work I did for 23 years. I've visited many congregations... It may not surprise you to hear that each Unitarian and Universalist congregation I have visited is a bit different from the others. We have no standard liturgy or prayer book, though most do, "Singing the Living Tradition", the text where our responsive reading is found. Our worship has evolved with some peculiarities in each community. The organizational structure is somewhat different in each congregation. Some congregations are vital and growing and others are very tired and weak. Some of our congregations are tiny – fewer than 10 members, some are quite new, others are large, some are old. Most were founded as Unitarian congregations, and some, like Halifax, North Hatley Quebec, and Olinda – not far from here, - as Universalist. This, congregation, was founded in 1845, quite a few others in the late 1950's, and some are very new. We are theologically, geographically and organizationally, a diverse group of people. But in other ways we are not really so different. In the important things, we are quite similar. We love our congregations, we want them to thrive, because we know that what we do here, and in our other congregations, matters. We gather so that the atheist, and agnostic, and mystic and pagan and the unsure can come together to learn from one another. We come together in communities, in this community, not united by dogma, but rather by a hope for what human community might look like. We come with open hearts and open minds, daring to meet together, daring to sit and talk together, and daring to be changed by one another. We come with hearts brimming and hearts broken, so that we can be assured that we are not alone. Time and time again, in my work I was privileged to see people committed to potential, to hope, to being good companions in congregations, and now, with you, I am seeing the same things. And after all this time, I am still amazed and find my breath, literally, taken away.

We like to describe ours as a Living Tradition. Edmund Burke, the 18th Century, British Parliamentarian, said a tradition could only be described as a living tradition if it is, "a partnership between those who are dead, those who are living and those who are yet to be born." That means that it adjusts to new circumstances and environments and times. It does not stay the same, 'because that's who we are', nor does it follow the fancy of the popular whim. A living tradition is my mind, both considered and changeable. Antoine de

St. Exupery, (Anne-Twahn-de-Sant-Ex-oo-pair-ee) in the reading we just read, wrote, “one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds. Love, like a carefully loaded ship crosses the gulf between the generations” Being part of a living tradition makes us travellers... from what was, through what is, and towards what is to come.

This travelling is a complicated business. We must ask, “Where are we travelling from, where are we now? What is our purpose in travelling? What do we know about our destination?” Finally, we must ask, how shall we equip our ship so that we are best able to make the journey?

And where are we travelling from anyway? Unitarianism formally came to Canada in 1832, in Montreal. In those early days the Montreal congregation was made up of Americans and British members, and in a workable compromise settled an Irishman, William Corder as their first Minister. Universalism came earlier, and of our existing congregations, Halifax was founded first, in 1837. Amid much protest about the dangerous notions of a loving God and of universal salvation, they formed a congregation that exists to this day.

Here, in Toronto, in July 1845 – 180 years ago, a Unitarian congregation was founded. In January 1946, their constitution was adopted, and it asserted that a key principle was, to maintain, ‘the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief, and the rejection of all test, creeds or formal declarations of belief’, and it also made explicit that ‘females should have the ‘same privileges as members of this Society, as exercised by males’....their neighbours were suspicious though, from other traditions, most notably the Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists.

Between 1945 and 1961, during the age of socially mandatory church attendance, there were 16 new congregations in Canada. I’ve spoken to some of the people involved in starting those congregations and they tell me, given the extreme pressures to attend church, they felt the need to belong to one that gave them freedom of belief. Many of the congregations founded during that period could best be described as Unitarian – Humanist. During the late 50’s and the heady 60’s many of our church schools were brimming. Toronto’s was one of them. This congregation was instrumental in supporting the organization of other congregations in the region. Unitarians were at the forefront of Canadian discussion, debate and action on issues such as, the death penalty, health care, women’s issues, religion in schools, and the civil rights movement in the US.

In the years since the mid-60s we have seen new UU congregations. We’ve seen some disband. Our congregations and members have been and are in the struggle for Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender rights. They’ve considered how they can better respect

the earth, how to promote a culture of peace, how to address pervasive poverty, how to drink from the well of world religions in a respectful way. Currently in Canada there are approximately 4,000 members in 44 congregations. This congregation has, like so many, seen peaks and drops in membership.

What I've just relayed to you is a 'Condensed version of Canadian UU history': factual to be sure, but we must, if we are to honour the stories, stop and ask, "What does it all mean?" As we read earlier, "We live not by things, but by the meaning of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation." How does this little slice of history help us to understand our journey and what glimpses of our destination does it offer – does it whisper passwords to us?

We know that throughout human history religion has developed in relationship to the life of the people. In India, the Ganges River is important to religious observation. Seasonal changes are observed in many traditions. We are aware of a dim resonance with ancient traditions, but they, for the most part, do not serve us in the way they did earlier generations. Peter C. Emberley, professor at Carleton University, remarked in his book, *Diving Hunger: Canadians on Spiritual Walkabout*, "To be modern is to accept that self-determination, the liberty of private conscience, and personal experience will nearly always trump older ways of knowing and being. It is to believe that humans are essentially rational and autonomous. It is to understand that reason and science will trump ancient traditions." And, in large part, this was the thinking that led to the founding of many of our congregations- particularly those that started in the 1950's and 60's. But increasingly, I have a sense that some of the members in many of our congregations are asking, "is it enough?" Indeed there is sense in our culture and in our congregations that the understandings recognized by science, and permitted in everyday life, can be, on their own, too narrow and restrictive.

So here we are, people who are not evolutionarily different than those who painted the insides of caves, *and* who have a vast body of scientific information: people who have made the choice to participate in religious community and in this religious community. The questions we are faced with now are similar to those faced by earlier generations, but now, given the current secular nature of Canadian society, they may have a new urgency to them. "What is our purpose in traveling and where are we going?"

Emberly, in his study of Canadians and their spiritual journeys notes that integral to most religious understandings is a critique of the current society. He says, their "spiritual searches... speak to an idea of humanity and community as yet unrealized." Essentially what we do when we gather here, is what people have always done when they explore religion and philosophy; they ask the BIG questions. What is the meaning of my life? How

can I live a life of integrity? How can my life matter? We are, in our spiritual, religious, theological, philosophical travels (whichever word you are most comfortable with) trying to make our values and the world fit together, to make our lives matter. I know these things are important to me, and I know from the choices you have made, the work you are doing and the conversations I've had that they are important to you. I believe that science, partnered with a sense of mystery and majesty can help show us the way. I see people who believe that community can heal, that change is possible, that there is a power bigger than individuals.

The founding goals of this Universalist Congregation, over 180 years ago, included , 'the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief, and the rejection of all tests, creeds or formal declarations of belief'. Maybe we'd rephrase that today, maybe we'd say that our purpose in gathering this community together was to provide a spiritual community for people, free of creedal requirements, so that they could explore their relationship with their purpose and the meaning of life freely... On second thought, maybe I should leave the original, those ancestors of ours were more concise than I am! But really at the heart of it, they were trying to do, what we're trying to do, weren't they – just trying to make sense of it all, trying to be good people, trying to foster a culture of openness, so that we can live, with dignity and generosity in the world. I know, because of the opportunities my work has afforded me, that we, in our congregations, help one another with this – this work of being human. Sometimes it happens in our Sunday Worship services, sometimes it takes place in adult and children's programs, sometimes it happens when someone challenges the assumptions of another, sometime it takes place with a hug, or a casserole or a protest march...sometimes it take place in groups - in the conversation and in the silence between people. But I know, from personal experience, and from my observations, that this important life-affirming work happens in our congregations - in this congregation. When I stop and think about my experiences, through my work with the Canadian Unitarian Council, and as a member of the Hamilton congregation, and most recently with you, I know, to the core of my being, that I have been helped and supported on my human journey. I am less sure of the clever answers I thought I had figured out. I'm more willing to listen to the religious perspective of another. I've let go of things. I've learned that the church isn't about me, and my preferences and peculiarities, but rather it is about us holding space for one another. People have given me the gift of encouragement and of honesty, have encouraged me to see hope when I didn't know where to look for it, and in the process I have been changed, and in the process I have developed a profound commitment to building our congregations. I know that our particular religious approach is not universal, but I am not convinced that every Canadian who would, in time, share my gratitude, has even heard of us. I believe that is part of my call, to help our congregations

understand how they can show those we don't yet know, deep hospitality. Our job, like that of those hardy souls who gathered here in 1845, is to encourage others to find their path-co-operatively, so that we can support one another and live our values of love and justice... Things change, and things don't change.

I do not know what congregational life will look like in the future. I don't know what religious and spiritual communities are going to look like. There is a lot of theorizing and writing and head scratching and hand wringing going on about this, and you might think that with all my fancy theological education I might have some answers. But I don't. I have questions, I have hunches, and I have a few ideas about how we can use the signposts of the past and the present to help us read the map to our future.

There is a lot of talk lately about how our congregations need to appeal to both the head and heart, so that we can appeal to the older, typically humanist members of our communities and so we can also appeal to those who might be interested in engaging with us, and who are, seemingly more willing to explore the unknowable. But I can't help but think head vs. heart is a false distinction. No one of us gets to leave either of those at home on Sunday morning or whenever else we gather. We bring both, and we bring more. We bring our whole selves, or at least that is my sincere hope. So no, I don't know what our communities will look like, but I do have some thoughts about what we'll do there, and how we'll feel. Brain scientists tell us that they have been surprised to learn that feelings and impulses like love, generosity, trust and hope seem to come quite naturally to humans. We have learned, it seems, over the slow journey of evolution, to cooperate, to gather in mutually supportive communities. They tell us that our brains become habituated. We learn by doing – we already knew that about piano, and riding bicycles, but now we know it is also true about feelings. We, they tell us, act our way into feelings. So when we gather in congregations and when we carefully craft the communities we dream of, we are also becoming the people we aspire to be. The particulars of this music or that music, of pews or chairs, of responsive readings or any other specific practice is less important, it seems, than our working together, to promote openness and cooperation, so that we can, in the long run, make those dreams a reality. Our job is to listen for the passwords, to turn our heads, just so, so that we can if we sit, in that in-between place, gain some insight, into the future we can't quite see.

Earlier we sang a song. I wish we could be together in a room (soon we hope) to sing it together and to hear one another sing.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Where do we come from?

Mystery. Mystery. Life is a riddle and a mystery.

Where do we come from? Where are we going?

So, how shall we equip our ship so we can make this strange journey? What have we packed? What is still needed? Sailing along in this gulf between Unitarianism and Universalism as it was, and as we dream it might be – vital, alive, sustaining and relevant for those who are not yet born, we find ourselves in strange waters. We are afloat in a diverse, modern, secular society; one that provides little support for those who long for mystery, majesty and meaning. Our congregations respond to those needs, serving some as lifeboat and others as a spring board. Congregations wonder how best to navigate the waters they find themselves in. How can we support growth? What would it mean to broaden our demographic profile? How can we offer sustaining and supporting ministry to more people? Many of you find ways to act for good in the world. Yet there is more we can do. There is more justice to be made, more love to be learned, there are still people who would respond to our affirming theology.

We don't yet know how easy our journey will be, and we don't yet know what will be needed from us in this work of the world. In a Jewish text, Ethics of the Fathers, the commentator, Rabbi Tarfon writes, "It was not granted to you to complete the task, and yet you are not free to desist from it either." We, on this Canadian Unitarian Universalist journey of faith do not yet know how our Living Tradition will evolve, nor do we know who it will serve. We know we are on an amazing journey of interdependence and that we travel together ...you, me, the trees, the winds, our ancestors, every person who ever was and everyone that will ever be.

Love is like a carefully loaded ship. It crosses between the generations. Our seas may be calm, they may be rough. We don't really know where our journey will end. We do know though, that we are stewards of a faith tradition that was given to us, in partnership and trust by those who have gone before, that we have a responsibility to sail our ship, mindfully and carefully into the future, so that we deliver it into the keeping of unborn partners in our Living Tradition. I do know something else too. I know I am blessed to have you here with me, on board our ship, as we set out together on the next leg of our journey. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for letting me travel with you.