

THE KNEE BONE IS CONNECTED TO THE THIGH BONE: EXPLORING OUR CANADIAN UNITARIAN CONNECTIONS

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Vyda Ng | Executive Director | Canadian Unitarian Council

Long ago when I was a student, two friends and I were moving into an apartment. One of my roommates asked a couple of her church friends to help us lug furniture. A few weeks later, I was walking through the residence cafeteria when I heard, “Hey, Vyda.” It was one of the guys who had helped us move. We had a coffee and chatted. Over coffee, we discovered his wife and I were both from Ipoh, Malaysia. After comparing schools and names, it turned out we knew each other through our youth choir connections and mutual friends. Her cousin and younger brother were good friends of mine.

Let me add that her husband and I were chatting in Peterborough ON, far away from Ipoh, Malaysia. What are the chances that she and I would have met up in Peterborough when a random request by my roommate to a Baptist church friend would cause our paths to cross? She and her husband had moved to Peterborough on church-related work, and I was attending Trent University.

What are your unexpected connections? Have you ever met someone or had an experience that unexpectedly reappeared in your life later on? How did this connection strengthen or nurture you? (this is your breakout room and social hour question, by the way) My unexpected re-connection with my Ipoh friend reminded me that I was not alone, that I had a network, at a time when I was far from home, lonely, scared, and missing my family, friends and food.

When Rev. Linda Thomson invited me to speak today, we decided on the theme of connections because I want to share with you how you, here at the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, are connected regionally, nationally, continentally and globally to a wide Unitarian network, and that **we are better together**.

This congregation is one of 42 Unitarian and Universalist congregations across Canada and one of 16 congregations in Ontario. Within the GTA, there are 5 other UU congregations.

Some of your members here have been, and are, engaged and connected at a national level with the work of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

I’ll digress here to talk about the CUC – what is the Canadian Unitarian Council? The formal definition is that the CUC is the national association of Canadian Unitarian and Universalist congregations. What does that actually mean? Think of us as your family’s home. Or the

motherhood. This home is maintained by the CUC staff team and the CUC Board of Trustees. We are the co-parents and caretakers of the space. Each congregation is a member of this family. You have the older siblings, like the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax and the Unitarian Church of Montreal. The younger siblings are coming into their middle-school and adolescent stages, like the Lakehead Fellowship in Thunder Bay and the Fredericton Fellowship in New Brunswick. Sadly, there are siblings who are no more – like the Avalon Unitarian Fellowship in Newfoundland, Kamloops in British Columbia and Windsor in Ontario. Some siblings have also transitioned to more relevant names – Don Heights Unitarian Congregation in Toronto used to be the Willowdale Unitarian Fellowship, the Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga was South Peel, the Unitarian Universalist Community of Victoria was the First Unitarian Congregation of Victoria. New siblings are joining us – UUs of the Salish Sea in BC are new, and groups are forming in Stratford, Ontario and in Manitoba.

As co-parents and caretakers, the CUC staff and board aim to have open, transparent and accountable relationships with you. We provide nurture in the form of programs and resources and consult with you before making big decisions. We aim to help congregations do that which is challenging to do on their own, like providing education and sessions on topics of importance to us, like resisting the anti-trans movement, healthy conflict management, how to write policies and charitable purposes, and work on truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. In turn, congregations do their part by sharing their own resources, their leadership, and by sending in Annual Program Contributions to help with the maintenance and upkeep of the CUC.

As families do, we have gatherings, sometimes in-person and more frequently now online. Once a year, we make decisions that affect us all at the Annual General Meeting, sometimes with and sometimes without the arguing and disagreements that may erupt at family gatherings.

As adult children, you may not always need the family home – you are independent and live your lives. But isn't it good to know that you CAN come home, maybe just to check in and have a chat, or to ask for information and help when you need it.

We are stronger together.

Coming back to this congregation and your national connections - Ellen Campbell was a previous Executive Director of the CUC as well as having served on the CUC Board of Trustees. Rev. Mark Morrison Reed had also been on the CUC Board and served as its President. Art Brewer championed the Welcoming Congregations program which resulted in 100% of our congregations becoming Welcoming Congregations. When the CUC

celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2011 here in Toronto, this congregation pulled together co-
led by Nancy and Terry Lee and co-hosted the celebration conference. Tanya Cothran was a
previous CUC board member and treasurer. Margaret Kohr is a current co-president of the
Board and has been involved in other national initiatives like the Polyamory Task Force and
Bylaw Committee. Maya Ferguson Klinowski has hosted Gathered Here, an online national
gathering for young adults. Brigit McFadden and Maya Saltarski are part of the national
young adult community. Calvin Drake was a CUC board member and president, has been
and continues to be part of national initiatives, provides a lot of tech support to the CUC,
and is currently your faithful link to the Canadian Unitarian Council and keeps you informed
of news and events happening nationally. Dallas Bergen and Daniel Fong have participated
in national music initiatives. Robbie Brydon led the young adult Decision Making
Exploration Team whose work contributed to how decisions are made nationally. Your
refugee team, led by Beth van der Weerd and Wendy Peebles, have worked with the CUC to
help resettle dozens of refugee newcomers from different countries over the years. Your
previous minister, Rev. Shawn Gauthier, served the faith continentally when he was on the
Ministerial Fellowship Committee that credentials ministers, and is currently the Minister
Observer to the CUC Board. Rev. Linda Thomson who serves as your interim minister, was
CUC staff – Congregational Life Lead for the Central and Eastern Region for 22 years. And
when Rev. Jonipher Kwong was here, he and I bonded as foodies and over Marvel movies.

That's a lot, and that's just a few of your folks – I know I haven't named everyone.

We are connected not just regionally and nationally, but also continentally.

Our sibling organization in the US, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), helped
birth the CUC. When we grew up and came into our adolescent years, we moved out. In
2002, the CUC became independent and responsible for our own programming, staffing
and finances. We paid our own bills and managed all the grocery shopping. That was scary.
64 years later, we might have gotten the hang of it. But we continue to be connected.
Today, the CUC has a congenial collegial relationship with the UUA. Our congregations find
UUA resources helpful, and CUC and UUA staff work together on ministerial and other
matters.

We are stronger, and better, together.

Our UU family isn't just continental. There are Unitarians and Universalists in India,
Transylvania, the Philippines and Indonesia, Hungary, Germany, England, Africa, South
America.

At the UUA's General Assembly (their national conference) in June, we internationalists
held a global worship. The room was overflowing – capacity was 280 people but there were

people sitting on the floor and overflowing into the hallway. A minister from Transylvania coordinated the worship, with speakers from India, the UK, and the US. When it was my turn to speak, Canadians got thundering applause from the mostly American participants. Our mutual connections are valued and appreciated.

I've been fortunate enough to attend UU conferences all over the US, in the Netherlands, in Nepal, and have met many UUs from different countries. Some of those UUs faced persecution and threats in their home countries because of their beliefs. Through these connections and the hard work of willing UUs and Canada's refugee sponsorship program, we have brought at least three UU families to their new homes in Canada.

Mark Morrison Reed reflects that the central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that connect us to each other.

"That there is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community.

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

During your ministerial search in 2024, your Search Committee through Chris Lee and Tanya Cothran worked with CUC staff to get accurate and up-to-date immigration information for US ministers coming to Canada. Together, we developed resources - 4 other congregations have now used this information to smooth the immigration complexities.

We are more effective together.

Spirit of Life, the music video we saw together, was created during the pandemic. During those years when we were longing for connection, CUC staff and musical UUs came together online to make this magical video that connected us across the land.

We make good music together.

For decades, Unitarian Universalists in Canada have taken action for peace and equity. CUC resolutions dating back to 1963 demonstrate the passion that Unitarian Universalists dedicate to justice and environmental issues.

Rev. Fred Cappuccino wrote, *“We are called upon to engage in the struggle for human betterment. We don’t know ahead of time if we’ll succeed. In fact, we will often fail. But when success does come, it is oh so sweet!”*

One of these successes was the legalization of same sex marriage in Canada. Canadian Unitarians started advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in the early 1970s. We were one of the first religious communities to have gay and lesbian ministers. Five Unitarian youth from Calgary built a 500-foot rainbow banner and took it to Parliament Hill in support of equal marriage. In 2005, when the same-sex marriage bill was enacted, Gilles Marchildon and Gord Klassen used a piece of the banner during their wedding celebrations. A 150-foot piece of that rainbow banner now resides in the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa.

We are stronger together.

Canadian Unitarians also advocated for the right to choice in dying. The CUC worked with Dying with Dignity, were involved in federal government meetings during the consultation phases and were intervenors in the Taylor and Carter Supreme Court cases in support of the right of terminally ill individuals to decide the time and manner of their death. Medical Assistance in Dying legislation became law in June 2016 – and we, Canadian Unitarians and Universalists, were part of making that happen.

We make justice happen together.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established in 2008 under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The TRC’s mandate was to document the history and impacts of the residential school system on Indigenous children and to guide the process of reconciliation between governments, churches, Indigenous peoples, and Canadians. The TRC travelled across Canada, hearing from thousands of survivors. In 2014, the CUC delivered a statement to the TRC in Edmonton, AB, committing to promote educational materials on the history and impact of the residential schools system, to create and promote a new program for congregations about racial equity and intercultural competency, and to continue to encourage our congregations and their members to learn more about the richness of Indigenous spirituality and cultures, working together to advance the struggle for justice for Indigenous people. To this end, we develop and shared the Truth, Healing and Reconciliation Guides for all ages, and trained facilitators in congregations to share this work.

In 2015, the Commission released its final report – this included 94 Calls to Action, urging governments to address the ongoing harms of residential schools and work towards reconciliation. The CUC committed to supporting this, and to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. To live this out, the CUC creates and shares

programming and resources – like the upcoming September Reconciliation Month events including “*Reclaiming Education: A Conversation with Watsenniiostha Nelson, Director of Education, Kanehsatà:ke*” on Sep 17, 2025 (check the CUC eNews for more information).

We do more together.

What connections are valuable to you? Which connections hold deep meaning and nurture you? In this congregation, you held together over the almost 20 years of finding and coming home to this place. Are there yet-to-be-discovered connections, something that is unknown that could delight you or excite you to embark on a new or different journey?

As UUs, sometimes when we go places, we might visit another UU congregation or meet up with other UUs. Visiting other congregations allows us to share experiences, learn from different perspectives, and strengthen our sense of belonging within the wider UU community.

One of the most meaningful relationships in my life came about because of the UU connection. My late partner Paul was a member of the Neighbourhood UU Congregation here in Toronto. He was a comedian and did shows for Yuk Yuks. I was living in St. John’s NL at the time and part of the now-dissolved Avalon Unitarian Fellowship. He was scheduled to go to the St. John’s Yuk Yuks for a show, and as one does, emailed ahead to ask if anyone from the Fellowship would like to attend the shows or meet up for coffee. The email somehow got routed to me, and I thought the least I could do was pick the guy up from the airport and deliver him to the hotel. That short errand turned into a 3-hour lunch, and I almost forgot to pick up my daughter from school.

Paul was terminally ill and shared this with me the weekend that we met. He was a generous, kind, funny, compassionate, loyal human being and we had 5 years together before he died in January 2014.

Nurture your connections. Pay attention to those that bring you joy and meaning. Explore the possibilities, even if they’re scary, because you never know. Some may lead nowhere, and sometimes the best things happen. Synchronicity is real.

The knee bone is indeed connected to the thigh bone. Remember - Our religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

Lean into your connections as we struggle for human betterment. Because success might come.