

Authentically UU
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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The Nouwen reading I shared ended with these words:

We can not bring good news on our own. ...I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful ...when I am alone. I need my brothers and sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart and body.

Now, you and I might not use some of the language and images that Nouwen uses. But I am prepared to suggest that we too need one another, just as much as the disciples did and just as much as Nouwen did, so that we are able to stay true to our best selves, to help one another so that no one needs to carry that backpack all alone. For some years now, we have been using the language of Shared Ministry. Even when congregations work with a full-time minister there is a growing appreciation for the reality that our congregations are all lay-led – some happen to work with a professional minister to help them in that work. And we are beginning to wrestle with the real tension between individuals and community. This can be tricky work in a UU congregation when many of us are eager to define ourselves by differentiating ourselves from other religious paths. But we are here in a community. It is my belief that enlightenment or insight are not solitary sports. We need one another. And if we didn't believe in our heart of hearts that this was true, we wouldn't be gathering here today, and those of you at home, on your devices, - well you'd be using them to watch cat videos instead of this service.

A congregational website I came across says this about motivations for attendance at our congregations.

People come to our churches to be lifted out of the ordinary, to be drawn up from the mundane, and to seek relief from the omnipresent materialism of our culture. People come into religious community to wrestle with life's ultimate questions, looking for a place to seek meaning about living and dying and the spaces in between. People are looking for a way to make a difference in the world, to live a life that matters. In our society of frequent re-locations and diminished family support, people also come to our churches to find friends and community; they come for a sense of intimacy and a safe place in which they can be accepted; they come looking for a place to belong. Well, that may be why some people come to congregations – but personally, I showed up, and I'm guessing a lot of you did, because you *wanted and needed* to sit on a committee and because you just love rummage sales Truthfully though, if we do it

'right' and if we get it 'right' our congregations can help us do the important work, about supporting one another in our work of intimacy and ultimacy. We can do it for ourselves and for one another. And congregations remind us that we need to do it together. But there is a problem. Too often our congregations fall short and don't deliver what people are looking for. They try, we try, but sometimes we don't deliver the goods and we find that a lot of people, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, slowly drift away.

Some time ago, I took a course that helped me make the connection between theology and the way congregations and denominations organize. I considered that in our congregations there is no single theological outlook – leading me to conclude, briefly, that perhaps we are destined to be disorganized... but then I thought about our values – our belief in equity, and justice and our focus on the interdependence of all existence and that most of us, could with translation perhaps, see each of us as having if not, as Channing believed, the 'seed of divine' in us, then at least the potential to be expressions of the divine. Theologically speaking, we aren't a very 'top down' group. And if our congregations are to serve as expressions of those beliefs then the way we organize and the programs we support will reflect our values. For us, if we are to have institutional integrity, if our values and principles matter to us, we'll need to ensure there is a space for all members – long-time and more recently arrived –to come together, where they can make meaning of their lives and find deep and abiding connections with others. It means we won't presume what answers others will need and it means each of us will need to be open to the possibility of change – based on the wisdom and contributions of others.

I've heard people say, "I've been a Unitarian my whole life, but I didn't know it until five years ago." I'd say that while I understand the point of that statement and others like it, I disagree. To be a Unitarian Universalist is to belong to and to associate with a congregation. It's possible to hold Unitarian ideas or to be a Unitarian thinker without association with a congregation – but I believe it is in coming together in communities that reflect our collective values, in communities that help us explore our own humanity, and in communities that hold us responsible for doing good deep work that we actually become Unitarian Universalist. It is here, in community, that each of us does the work of exploring meaning and of becoming Unitarian. James Luther Adams, a great Unitarian theologian, said people come to church for intimacy and ultimacy. They come to have lives of meaning and to find others who can know them and who they can know – so that together they can explore fully what it means to be alive. We live in an age where no one is legally required to attend any particular church or any church at all – and the choices we make about where we belong, are – or can be – expressions of our theology.

But to do the sort of work and to make the sort of connections I'm talking about is to risk something. It is to risk being open with others, to risk sharing our deepest selves with one another, and it is to risk having someone say, I think we can do better. Being in deep community means we must be open to change. This kind of openness, is not easy. It will lead us into lands where we are strange to others and they are strange to us. Congregations as gatherings of friendly people are not enough – they ought to be places where we encounter strangers, where we are, at least some of the time, uncomfortable. If we are personally open to change and challenge, so too must our congregations be, because unless our structures and institutions reflect our values, things will be askew.”

So, there it is, a challenge. In my previous work with the Canadian Unitarian Council, this was a challenge I made to all the congregations I engaged with – all of our congregations need to figure ways to better live our theology and values into being – to minister effectively to one another and in the world. It takes ongoing effort to do this work well. We need to enter into the kind of shared ministry that Nouwen was talking about. To be authentically Unitarian Universalist, congregations need to develop and re-develop programs, practices and outlooks that help long-time and brand-new members find a community of meaning. There is a pesky human tendency to resist change. Consciously, or unconsciously we tend to try to keep things the way they are, after all, it works for the people that are already here. But who doesn't it work for? Who would find our liberal approach to theology life-affirming, but are left feeling less than welcome because of the reception they receive or our patterns and practices? I don't think any one person here or in any of our congregations wants to be inhospitable, but the reality is we all are at times. The way we've always done things may not be the way we need to be doing things anymore. This is our legacy and our challenge. Ours is a tradition that has changed a great deal over the years. 100 year ago Unitarian and Universalist congregations were explicitly Christian. Shifts and changes are part of our story, and they are one of the ways we have responded to the needs of those we'd not yet met. Perhaps because the news from the world is so often hard, all of us, at least some of the time would prefer to retreat to the familiar, to resist change. But the reality is everything changes, some changes we see and welcome and others we deny and resist. Change isn't easy, it sometimes represents loss and that is tough – but as we learned in Star Trek, and as the Borg asserted, “Resistance is Futile.” We need to make sure our congregations can be open to new people, that members are willing to risk meaningful engagement and that each of us, and all of our congregations are open to the possibility of change. And I know that it isn't easy. I think with amusement of the ways in which I, in my home congregation of Hamilton, have resisted new ways of doing things. When I first joined the congregation was completely lay-led and when the leadership started talking about professional ministry I thought, “what on earth would we

ever need a minister for?” It’s not easy for us to always do this work. We feel comfortable dealing with the familiar. It feels safe to have great conversations with people who think the same way we do. But if we don’t change, if we let the comfort of the familiar lull us into assuming all is well, we may well fail to be the communities our values and our theology challenge us to be.

Happily, I have some thoughts about how we can meet this challenge. My thoughts aren’t the only useful ones, of course, but I think they might serve as a starting point for conversations about congregational authenticity.

What do you personally do, when you find your choices out of alignment with your values or your hopes for yourself? I imagine most of us start this difficult work by taking an inventory. What is it we want from our lives and our relationships? Where do we fall short of those aspirations? And then, if you are anything like me, you think of one or two things we can do – find some starting points for moving into a greater alignment. I won’t ever get to the point where I can say ‘absolutely everything I do is perfect. Sometimes, for me, that’s a problem, because sometimes for me, ‘perfection is the enemy of the good’. It is too easy for me to get stuck, and struggle to appreciate the small steps... I see congregations struggling with this too. But if authenticity and integrity are worthy goals, we’ll accept our imperfections and find a place to start.

If our values, reflected in our principles, include concepts such as , inclusion, compassion, community, encouragement, spiritual growth, and the inherent worth of each person, we’ve got a pretty good starting point for our considerations. How well are we, collectively embodying these values? Something I’ve observed in myself and in many of the congregations I have worked with is the real tension between individual needs and preferences and that of the congregation. Your ideas for great worship might differ from mine. I might have ideas on what social justice priorities make sense that you think are ill-advised. The ways in which we, with our varied understandings and preferences, can bump into one another are almost limitless. But at our best, we rise above those personal preferences and think about how the community can be its best self. When we do this we remember to think about the collective welfare, rather than our own. It doesn’t mean our personal preferences – for music, for styles of worship, for theological language, for community projects go away, but it does mean we ask ourselves what the group needs. I’m not talking about any one person being a pushover. That wouldn’t put us in greater alignment with our values. But I am thinking about how beautiful it is when congregational life is a beautiful dance of give and take, how lovely it is when someone can say, “in this moment I’m very happy to defer to someone else’s preference. It is my gift to them, I’m happy that their immediate needs and preferences are being met. My being stretched is good for me and it is something I can do to honour another person’s spiritual path.

I know you've asked yourself some questions about how you gather and organize, the last few years have been nothing but. Soon, you will be considering the recommendation of your Search committee for your next settled minister. In all of this there are questions. Are we as welcoming to others as you'd like to believe we are? It seems like an obvious and useful arena for reflection, but it isn't always done. I had a classmate in seminary who came from one of the many UU congregations in the Washington, DC area. He told us, unperturbed of meetings at his congregation – meetings characterized by yelling and fist pounding and name calling. We, his horrified classmates, asked him how this was OK and what they were doing about it. Oh, he said, nothing – that's just the way things are in Washington. Well, it may be true, sadly, that what he described was typical in Washington – maybe even more now than 15 years ago. Those meetings might have reflected the Washington culture, but it was not a reflection of the values Unitarian Universalists aspire to. He described a congregation that wasn't functioning with authenticity. Far from it... Most cases of congregational disconnect I encounter are not as extreme as this one. But if we do the work and we take an honest inventory of our practices we'll understand that we have work to do.

And that's ok. It isn't always easy, it's downright difficult at times. But then again, I think we've all figured out that good work is often challenging.

I love our congregations. I love this congregation! I love our liberal communities of faith that help people find companions for the journey. I love groups of people that witness to one another's lives and who do it with compassion and who are brave enough to call one another, when help is needed, to their higher selves. I love that our congregations and their members are not afraid to look at the world and to do the important work of justice-making. I love that we can show the world, through the choices we make about how we organize and assemble, what we believe. I love that we do this even though we find it difficult. For me too, it feels significant that we, collectively, the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto do this work together. Also, and I think this is very important, we are just one group of people doing this work. This morning in other places, there are other Unitarian Universalist congregations meeting. Other groups of people are asking similar questions. What does it mean to live our values into being? How do our beliefs inform our ways of being in relationship with others, both within and without this community.

Last week a number of UU and other clergy gathered in Minneapolis, witnessing to the violence and harm being caused to people there. The lessons that they have shared from their time there are of the importance of building connections, of holding one another in care, and asking the hard question, 'how shall my relationships and my

actions reflect my most deeply held values?' These are the questions we ask here, and our answers will shape our future. They are the questions the world needs people to ask.

I feel fortunate to have found this faith, and I'm pretty passionate about passing it on, in better shape than I found it, for the next generation. I hope all of you know just how much this congregation can offer to the larger community and to people you haven't met yet. Thankfully, no one here has to carry the backpack of gear required for a vital ministry alone. You can each carry a small pack; you can help one another and you can invite others to join you in the journey. I'm glad to know you are doing this work together and I'm glad to be a companion to you, at least for a time, as you do the work.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection.