

“Spilling Hope”
A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada
Sunday, April 19, 2026

*My life flows on in endless song above
earth’s lamentation.*

I hear the real though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
while to that rock I’m clinging.*

*Since love prevails in heav’n and earth,
how can I keep from singing?¹*

When I think about a soundtrack for my ministry, I imagine a folksy rendition of this hymn playing as the backdrop of a coffee shop. I hear this real though far-off hymn in between the clinks of ceramic cups. The excited murmurs and chatter. The bitter warm aromas of steamed milk and coffee filling the room.

You see, the first minister I ever had was a coffee shop minister. Rev. Jeremy, the minister I had in my teen years, was someone who was willing to meet me right where I was; taking me seriously and making space for me to bring my whole self. Through the hardest chapters of my teenage years, we met at that coffee shop: My parents’ divorce. My growing identity as a Unitarian Universalist, and as a minister, even though I didn’t know it yet. Coming to accept myself and my eventual coming out as gay.

Many of us don’t make it out of our teenage years unscathed by the challenges and trials of coming of age. For me, I was in a place of searching for hope, making meaning of life in the midst of challenging life transitions. In between the warm sips of coffee, I found hope there in sharing my joys and my sorrows. My prouds and my pains. I couldn’t tell you the number of times I cried at that table, dabbing away the tears on my red face. *You know those thin, brown coffee shop napkins? Hardly soft enough, but somehow they do the job...*

Following these meetings with Jeremy, not only did I think that this was the coolest job ever—that *I could literally have coffee with people for a living!* (Being a minister is only a little more complicated than that...) I felt the power of ministry from this simple, hopeful act: grabbing coffee with a companion on the journey. Feeling deeply held, seen, and loved.

For me, this ministry was relational. A vision of radical hospitality. Something kind and unassuming. It was as simple as being welcomed to bring all of myself to the table for a gentle cup of coffee. To share in what I was carrying, knowing I wasn’t carrying it alone.

¹ *Singing the Living Tradition*, Hymn #108 “My Life Flows On in Endless Song”.

Funny enough, one of my spiritual practices is sitting there each morning with my daily cup of coffee, holding five things that I'm grateful for that day close to my heart. My "spiritual coffee," as I call it. This daily drinking-in of life and spirit, awakening me to the hope that we can find in each day, even in this troubled world. This daily cup reaches into the far echoes of my soul, invoking that same refrain: *How can I keep from singing?*

Now, if you're sick and tired of all this coffee talk, don't worry... This won't be just a sermon on coffee. *I know you tea people are out there!* Isn't this basic, daily act of presence what we do in Unitarian Universalist communities? Isn't this what we do with one another, when we take seriously life's invitation to slow down, to savour the present moment? To open ourselves in radical hospitality to our neighbours, joining one another in spiritual community and companionship through all that life brings?

Now, Unitarian Universalist congregations aren't coffee shops, no matter how much we might privilege our sacred coffee hour. Though we aren't coffee shops, we do create something special: We bring each other hope, akin to that holy moment of slowing down to savour a visit with someone over a warm cup. We make space for one another, offering at times a love and acceptance that we often feel we don't deserve.

Like that line from the hymn, we envision a new creation. A different way of being with one another than what our world and predominant cultures tell us. This is the rock we cling to, weaving a new way together. A way that insists on our common humanity and refuses to accept the harm of the status quo. The Beloved Community in its fullest sense.

We have a real gift in what we offer one another; a gift that you as a congregation are well familiar with as you weave these new patterns and rhythms here in your new building. You are at a juncture of honouring your past and all that you've been over your 180-year history, while simultaneously turning toward your future. Looking to be good neighbours in Oakwood-Vaughan and Little Jamaica, creating connections that go beyond the surface but are authentic, accountable, and real.

As an American, I want to apologize in part for this world we're in... Regrettably, in part thanks to my country's administration. *I hope you won't hold that against me, eh?* I've got a lot to learn about Canadian ways and customs, but I hope I'm on the right track with that. I'm curious and eager to learn! In all seriousness, we are in unprecedented times that ask and demand much from us. Escalating wars and conflicts in our world. The erosion of democratic principles and rights around the world at an alarming pace. The ever-shifting sands of our sociopolitical and economic climates, knowing that anything could change or turn at a moment's notice, on the whims of a problematic personality.

These are challenging times in our world, but they are challenges that are far greater than any single one of us can carry alone. It is crucial, now more than ever, that we remember our connections to what sustains us. The hope that can't help but spill out and shine. The hope that is contagious.

I'm touched by those words from the Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage, naming us as "stewards of hope" that I shared with you in our Call to Worship. In this passage, she names how nurturing this hope is an act of shared ministry in our wider world. She writes:

So often, we can slip easily into conversations and endless news cycles that focus on dire calamity and we feel overwhelmed, crushed, and dispirited. Yes, there is much wrong with our world... though: we do have time to make changes, today... by remembering and reminding others with a wink and smile... that today can be for the good one breath at a time, one act of love... at a time, one act of defiance and change at a time...²

Each of us is a steward of hope and brings with us a faith that is larger than ourselves. A faith we sometimes need help carrying, when times are rough. Now, I know I'm the new guy here... Even though we're still getting to know each other, I feel like I already know this special part of you: You are all experts in being stewards of hope. When I first came to visit, I saw that graphic in your fellowship hall of your recent rollercoaster years:

Bidding farewell to Rev. Shawn, your last settled minister. Saying goodbye to your building on St. Clair Avenue. Traversing the challenges of moving into this building here at 473 during a global pandemic. Could we just pause for a moment to give yourselves a hand, for all the hard work that's been done to bring you to this place, to this very moment?

It's not a weak congregation that can survive such a rollercoaster ride, let alone thrive in this transition, as you also discern your leadership for this next chapter. If I've come to know anything about you, even at this early stage, it's that you each are already stewards of hope. There's no other way you'd be here without the many ways you have loved one another into being. Treasure it. Savour it, as one savours a warm cup of connection.

Being stewards of this hope together, in the sacred partnership between minister and congregation is what shared ministry is all about. This shared ministry of hope is what we might call the great sacrament of Unitarian Universalist community. This ministry of hope to our world is so necessary right now, and not just for our world but for Toronto itself.

We are the faith of a new way. A different way. The faith of creating longer tables rather than building up higher walls. We have a long way to go on our journey. The work is hard and it will ask much of us. Yet, congregations like this remain places where we still might glimpse a new world that's possible. A truly radical, inclusive, multicultural Beloved Community. To get there, we must be willing to make it so.

Our Unitarian Universalism tells us to take heart. Through simple moments of joy. Through the sharing of our lives over something as small as a cup of coffee... We might just glimpse the hope that's on the horizon. *No one's getting left behind.* We need one another if we're truly going to get there.

² ["Stewards of Hope."](#) by Rev. Dr. Rebekah Savage, *Braver/Wiser*, UUA.

The words of our reading, by the Rev. Julián Soto, remind us that hope is more than just a feeling:

To what have we promised ourselves? We promise that there is something moving between us that we cannot tame and cannot measure. The chalice is a reminder that what flame we keep inside us cannot light the way. The light must spill to shine.³

Our single flickering flames cannot hope to guide us alone. Instead, our cups overflow in abundance when we bring our fullest selves and meet one another right where we are. Our collective light must spill to shine.

As we enter this Candidating Week together and reflect on all that this community has done to transform and grow, noticing our connections to one another is vital ministry. Going back to my earliest image of ministry, of meeting with Jeremy over a cup of coffee, it's been my gift and honour to minister on the other side of that coffee table. It's allowed me to witness firsthand that sacred and relational part of ministry that I've come to know and love. My husband, Connor, and I are so overjoyed to be taking these next steps together as you consider calling me as your next settled minister.

As we continue through the week, I invite you to be present to that gentle place of awe and wonder deep within yourself. Take time this week to truly ponder your connectedness. To one another. To this Beloved Community. And as you're so moved, over the next few days, see if you might spill out some of this hope, even in the smallest of ways. Calling up a friend. Cooking a meal for someone. Writing a note of care. Scattering some wildflower seeds. Doing some other random act of kindness. We could all use a little more hope in these times. It's through these touchstones with hope that we remember why it is we come here, to this place.

And so here we are. A minister from across the border, sitting down at a new coffee table. A congregation that has carried itself through more than most. Through grief and goodbyes. Through a worldwide pandemic to a new building. We are at the start of something extraordinary. And I find myself thinking of Jeremy. Of what it meant to have someone simply show up, week after week, and say: I see you. You are not carrying this alone.

That is what I hope to be for you. That is what I believe you already are for one another. *The light must spill to shine.* Not from any one of us. Not from me, not from the brightest among you... But from all of us together, pouring out what we've been given. Refusing to hoard our hope. There is so much that needs that light right now, in this city and in our world. The people who will find their way through these doors for the first time, maybe without knowing it, looking for the same thing a teenager once found in a coffee shop...

How can we keep from singing? Amen.

³ ["Spilling the Light,"](#) by Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto, *Spilling the Light*.