"Saints Amongst Us"
A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada
Sunday, November 1, 2026

What makes a UU a saint? As someone who wasn't raised with religion, I've never quite known how to access the idea of sainthood or saints. It always seemed to me like a divine corporation, this "chain of command" structure, with certain branches or divisions for your varying requests and needs. In this structure, I think we UUs are well-covered with our generalized plea of "To Whom It May Concern". *Thankfully, this covers a lot of traditions and bases!*

While our tradition doesn't have a formal system of saints, or mechanisms for evaluating miracles or supernatural feats, what is applicable is this sense of ancestral lineage with those who have gone before. We can translate or reframe sainthood from the extraordinary and the supernatural to the common and everyday life around us.

I've known a few saints in my time as a Unitarian Universalist, many of whom wouldn't ever call themselves saints. I know of a great many living saints, who are shining examples of the best parts of our tradition. Not perfect people by any means; none of us are. But people who truly lean into our shared values. Who make a habit of setting wide tables and sharing from generous hearts. Those are the kinds of "saints" I'm talking about today. Our people. The everyday saints of you and me.

As a newcomer to Unitarian Universalism in Canada, I must first say I've gotten quite good at telling the story of our tradition from a States-side perspective. While there are poignant and rich moments in that lineage that do inform our tradition, Canadian Unitarian Universalism had a separate development. So, if you're like me in being new from the States and already know a fair amount of UU history, this'll have some new stories for you! Or, if you're a newcomer and really could use the broad overview, this will give you a sense of how Unitarianism and Universalism started in Canada. And likewise, if you've been coming here for years and wonder about the deeper legacies and roots of our faith, allow me to "learn out loud" with you as I tell these stories anew.

Again, I'm new here; some of you may even have some stories or tidbits of the history that you know. *I say, bring it!* In my last congregation, they knew me as the UU history nerd in residence. *I'm hope I'm not alone here!* My hope is that you'll see echoes and reflections of yourself in these stories and histories. That you'll find your place in the overall development and lineage of our faith, emboldened to answer love's call in today's world. We hold a kinship with these saints who have gone before. Who continue to inspire and remind us of the power of our faithful lineage. I hope you'll sense that power here today.

However, in speaking about our history, and with this being the start of Treaties Recognition Week here in Ontario, I want to name that these lineages are only some of the histories and stories of our past. Some underrepresented stories aren't told because of omission, erasure, and systemic and structural oppressions. While I uplift these known stories, the absence of other stories doesn't mean those stories don't exist.

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We are in a time of growing bodies of work around recovering these lost stories, like your former minister the Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed's book *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*.[1] You may not know that one of our early heretical forebears, Arius of Alexandria, was actually born in Libya, in North Africa. In Rev. Mark's own words, "We were always here".[2]

As we engage as treaty partners in the work of reconciliation, we hold the truth that knowing our history is also being able to face its challenging chapters. May we also remember that the people of First Nations, as well as our Black and other racialized Universalists and Unitarians in our history, have stories bound to ours as well. All that being said, let's uncover our Unitarian origins: a history connected to our own congregation's birth as a community.

In the States, New England's standing-order churches gradually shifted from their Puritan beliefs toward a more liberal theology. In New England today, many of the oldest meetinghouses are now UU congregations.[3] Unlike in the States, here in Canada we had no such shift.

In Canada, Unitarianism arrived instead from the British Isles. Immigrants from Britain and Ireland came to Canada and brought with them their radical politics and their dissent from rote creeds. The first Unitarian church in Canada was founded at Montréal, with ours being a close second.[4] A group of 15 Irish and British immigrants were the first to gather as our community in 1845.[5] FirstU's original constitution at the time was radical: it emphasized the equality of women and men in the life of the congregation. It also stated "the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief", showing that our commitments to equality, inclusion, and the freedom of belief were here from the very start.[6]

Many of FirstU's early ministers came from the States. *As settled minister number 23, I'm in a long and proud lineage of expats!*[7] Our congregation blended these influences and forged a distinct Unitarianism of its own, eventually growing beyond the bounds of Christianity into embracing Humanism and many other traditions.

In this lineage, I have a few Unitarian "saints" to highlight: First, from our founding, Dr. Joseph Workman, who was an immigrant from Ireland known as the "Father of Canadian Psychiatry".[8] As one of our principal founders, Workman largely wrote FirstU's constitution in 1846 and became our first lay preacher.[9] For over twenty years, Workman

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[1] *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, by Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed.
[2] Quoted by Rev. Connie Simon in her piece "We Were Always Here".
[3] "Governance: A Historical Perspective", *LeaderLab, UUA*.
[4] First Unitarian Church of Montreal.
[5] *Unitarians in Canada*, by Phillip Hewett, *Canadian Unitarian Council*, p. 63.
[6] "Workman, Joseph", *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*.
[7] "FirstU At A Glance", *First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto*.
[8] "The Father of Canadian Psychiatry: Joseph Workman", by Mary V. Seeman, *PsychiatryOnline*.
[9] "Workman, Joseph", *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*.

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compassionately led Toronto's asylum on Queen Street, where the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health stands today.[10] Workman helped to turn it from a place of neglect into a place of humanity and care. He held a definingly distinct outlook on mental illness for his time.

Moving forward in time to the Victorian Era, Dr. Emily Stowe was a member of FirstU on Jarvis Street, signing the membership book thirty-four years after our founding.[11] Stowe was born in Upper Canada to a Quaker family, yet her true claims to fame are of her being Ontario's first woman to serve as a public-school principal, as well as the first woman to openly practise medicine here in Canada.[vii]

I'd note that Stowe was a bit of a rebel: denied admission by the University of Toronto on account of her being a woman, Stowe practised medicine without a formal licence for thirteen years. Later on, she was granted a medical licence because of her dedication and earlier training. But before this recognition, she was remarkable in making her way in medicine, before many women could.

In the early 20th century, Arthur Lismer was another interesting saint from our years at Jarvis, one you've heard about from Angela's Time for All Ages. Born in England, he moved to Canada in 1911.[12] An artist and a founding member of the "Group of Seven", the landmark Canadian national art movement in the 1920s and 30s, Lismer was passionate about children making art.[13] He started Saturday art classes for children at what is now The Art Gallery of Ontario, not to mention teaching Sunday school classes here at FirstU as well.[14]

In sum, these three Unitarian saints helped us to form our community, to more fully live into our values, and to bring the Unitarian spirit and ethos into Canadian culture.

Let me leave an interesting aside here to say that the Unitarian church in Canada also has a fascinating Icelandic component, with immigrants from Iceland coming to Canada and settling in Manitoba, and in Winnipeg.[15] I don't have time to speak more on that, but the fact that our movement had sermons and services preached in both English and Icelandic was something new to me!

So much more could be said about each of these saints, but for the sake of time, I'll need to move to our Universalist side of the story. Universalism's roots in Canada are quite different. In the States, Universalism was at its height during the Civil War, with families and members caught across the divide. The grief following the war also shifted how many

[10] "History of the Queen Street Site", *Centre for Addiction and Mental Health*.
[11] "Stowe, Emily", *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*.
[12] "Lismer, Arthur (1885-1969)", *Harvard Square Library*.
[13] "The Group of Seven".
[14] "Arthur Lismer: We Are Always Learning for Ourselves", by Helen Sidowecki.
[15] "Björn, Jennie, and the First Icelandic Unitarian Society: A Love Story", *First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg*.

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people imagined heaven, as it became a place of reunion with those we've lost rather than a place of judgment.[16]

In Canada, Universalism had its own peak during those years, but it was always a smaller movement. While the Unitarians in Canada were more affluent merchants and professionals, the Universalists came from modest backgrounds, coming from the rural backcountry, with a strong lay-led flavour. The early Universalists here largely came from New England and upstate New York in the 1800s. Its theological roots, though, go back well into the 1700s in the colonies.

The three Universalist centres in Canada were in Upper Canada, now present-day Ontario, Quebec's Eastern Townships, and Nova Scotia. To this day, there are only three congregations founded as Universalist that are still meeting: congregations in Halifax, North Hatley, and Olinda.[17] As the wider culture softened on the preaching of hellfire and damnation, Universalists were largely left "without a job" so to speak. Many would-be Universalists found a home in other mainstream churches and denominations.[18]

While they are lesser-represented here in Canada, I'd argue that the beating heart of our UU theology comes from Universalism and its emphasis on Love at the centre of all we do.[19]

Our three Universalist "saints" represent this notion of everyday saints quite well. First, I'd like to turn to Mary Ann Hayden Church. Born in England in 1807, she was first a leader in Methodism.[20] Just a note that no image exists of her that I could find, though her tombstone is visible on the screen. Over time, Hayden Church became convinced of the gospel of universal salvation. She became one of the first preachers of the newly-formed Universalist Society of Upper Canada in 1838. She was the first woman to preach amongst 400 men in North America, and a lay preacher at that. As a forebear, Hayden Church became the voice of Universalism in the Rideau region, causing it to flower.

In Olinda, the local farmer Michael Fox began organizing Universalist services around 1860, even twenty years before the church at Olinda was built.[21] Known as "Big Mike", Fox was an "evangelist" of sorts whose work led twenty-some-odd men and women to form the congregation at Olinda. It was one of six Universalist churches in Ontario at the time. No photo survives of Fox, though I've included a picture of the church he donated the land for, pictured around 1896. Fox shows us a saint who did what needed to be done. Who saw a need for his community and hamlet and made it happen, with humble, everyday magic.

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[16] *The Gates Ajar* by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.
[17] "Our Church", *The Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda*.
[18] "Guide to the Church", by Adele Ernstrom, *UU Estrie*.
[19] "Love, A Reflection on UU Shared Values", *UUA*.
[20] "Mary Ann Hayden Church, Merrickville's Universalist Preacher", *North Grenville Times*.
[21] *Universalists in Ontario*, Louise Folds, p. 71.

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Lastly, the Rev. Lucia Fidelia Woolley Gillette is a Universalist saint who was likely the first ordained woman in Canada.[22] Born in New York and ordained a minister in Michigan, Gillette came to Canada around 1887, serving as pastor to the Bloomfield church in Prince Edward County. Gillette was an early proponent of the women's suffrage movement, just as Emily Stowe was on our Unitarian side. She was a minister's daughter, a soldier's wife, a pastor, a caregiver, and a poet; her leadership blazed trails for generations of Universalist women long after her.

From our Universalist heritage, these saints show us the power of women preachers in early Universalism, both lay and ordained, the faith in a larger Love that transcended barriers and borders, and how everyday ordinary people literally birthed and built up the Universalist church here in Canada.

Phew… That was a lot of history. Trust me, it was a lot to research as well… So, what do these histories and stories mean for us today?

To close, I want to leave you inspired to do the good you can in your corner of the world. To speak love and life into a world that is hurting for more peace and justice. The Unitarian theologian and minister the Rev. James Luther Adams coined the phrase "prophethood of all believers".[23] This idea that the prophetic work of justice and love are ours and belong to each of us, not just to ministers.

The best way we can honour these saints is by caring for our fellow human beings beside us. May we not be so concerned with our own prestige and legacy so much as actually doing the ministry we've been called to do. May we offer a ministry of love and service that reaches far back to our roots; that is nourished by the waters of history and story.

Before we go, I invite you to look around the room… The "saints" are not just in history books or on plaques. They're in the chair beside you. May we not forget the power we hold. One small circle of friends. One kitchen-table meeting. One tiny yet mighty congregation. All of these have the power to save and to change the world.

May we ever live into these words that demand much of us, the words of our Covenant:

> *Love is our doctrine,*
> *The quest for truth is our sacrament*
> *And service is our prayer*
> *To dwell together in peace,*
> *To seek knowledge in freedom*
> *To serve life,*
> *To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine.*
> *Thus do we covenant with each other and with all.*[24]
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> Amen.

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[22] "Gillette, Lucia Fidelia Woolley", *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*.
[23] *The Prophethood of All Believers*, by Rev. James Luther Adams.
[24] A variation of the covenant originally written by Rev. James Vila Blake, 1894, adopted by FirstU.

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