MANY WORDS FOR SNOW:
CANADIAN UNITARIANISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Introduction

We are living through a shift in eras, a time of enormous changes. Old certainties are passing away, and maps of the world are being redrawn. As the tectonic plates move beneath our feet, we witness the quaking and crumbling of what was once firm footing. The Cold War world and the colonial era with its geopolitical alliances and conventional contests between nation-states have given way to a rising tide of terrorism and genocide as ethnic and religious factions enter undeclared wars outside of traditionally drawn borders. The planet is morphing toward a global economy, and socially, the rise of the Internet and other global media make distant parts of the world seem closer. The wealth of information now at our fingertips thanks to new technologies doesn't seem to make us much wiser. Indeed, life feels more disjointed and anxious as the relationship to text, speech and visual data falls increasingly outside the norms of the age of Gutenberg.

This is an era of religious and spiritual changes as well, as traditional religions engage with modernity and its demise, coping with a general loss of trust in authority and an increased awareness of pluralism. The hope that secularity and modernity would vanquish superstition and orthodoxy is collapsing as traditional religions stage a dramatic comeback. The long-established Christian West has dissolved as Western Europe and North America have become less homogenous religiously and as the centre of gravity for Christianity shifts from the global north to the global south. In Canada, historically dominant religious traditions are now negotiating their newfound place on the margins, no longer the nation's sustaining moral authority and no longer the only religious game in town.

The Unitarian movement in Canada is also experiencing some shifts in this, the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Canadian Unitarian Council has come of age at the turn of this new century, becoming the primary provider of services to Unitarian and Universalist congregations in Canada. Years of living in the shadow of the larger US-based Unitarian Universalist Association have given way to this organization standing on its own two feet, providing the collective voice, identity, and vision for our liberal religious movement in this country. I also note the enormous turnover in our professional ministry since the CUC became the sole provider of services to Canadian congregations. Eighteen of our congregations have experienced ministerial transitions since 2002, of the thirty that have ministers. The establishment of regions and RNGs, regional gatherings, and networkers is providing our movement in Canada with an interesting new imaginary, a more lateral and east-west and covenantal relationship than ever before. The geographic distances between our congregations and fellowships is closing as more and better communications technologies become available to our movement.

As a national movement, we have the opportunity now to reflect on our present circumstances, pay attention to the changes taking place around us and among us, and decide how we are to respond to our current and emerging context. If we are moving into a postmodern era, and Unitarianism is the quintessential modern religion, the essence of liberal modernity, what might our fate be in the coming century through the cultural shifts into postmodernity? What might emerge as Canadian Unitarians respond to our shifting contexts? What changes might take place? Is there an emerging paradigm of what it might mean to be liberal after the demise of modernity? How might emerging styles and worldviews inform our theology and most notably our ecclesiology and worship? These are the questions I seek to explore here.

From Garrison to Beloved Community

In this vast, immense land mass known as Canada, there are less than six thousand Unitarians in forty five congregations and fellowships, the majority of which have a membership of less than one hundred and fifty adults. Forty percent of our congregations have fewer than fifty members. In a nation of more than thirty five million people, we Unitarians count for less than one percent of the population. In other words, we are small. And we are getting smaller. While absolute numbers are now what they were when the CUC was founded, the country's population has increased.

In the Canadian Unitarian imaginary, we are a remnant, a strand of free faith stranded in the Great White North, the select few surviving in an inhospitable environment, small independent settlements of liberal religion set against a vast, imposing geography, far flung holdouts of humanism, lifeboats of liberalism, in a world rife with fundamentalisms and chaos. The result is, as Margaret Atwood describes as typically Canadian, a "garrison mentality."[1] In her seminal essay on Canadian literature, Atwood describes the Canadian mythos, the Canadian imaginary, as one of survival in a hostile environment.

"The Canadian particularity is tied to constructing a nation in a place where there can be no serious pretension of human domination," writes John Ralston Saul. "The best—or rather the worst—we can do is pretend that most of the country doesn't exist and that we are somehow here by accident."[2] European forays into the Canadian landscape were tentative, exploratory, and fraught with danger. Unlike our neighbours to the south, who, as Saul describes, operate on a typically European notion of the nation-state, we never thought we could dominate Canada's geography. English Puritans arrived on the shores of America to create a new society, a New England. They came to stay. The British and French came to what is now Canada to hunt, trap, and trade, not to settle. The settlements they did build here were garrisons, trading posts, landing docks.

[1] Atwood, Margaret, *Survival,* Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972.
[2] Saul, John Ralston, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin,* (Toronto: Penguin, 1997), p. 104.

Because this is so, there is a sense of impermanence, of temporariness imbued in the Canadian ethos. Clinging to a geography that overwhelms us, we're not sure we really belong here or will last here. A haunting sense of elsewhereness tends to describe us; we have a lingering feeling that true life is elsewhere. Canada has existed as a colony either of the French, or the British, or as an economic and cultural colony of the United States. The point of reference for Canadians is elsewhere. It's as if Canadians only become visible, become authentic and real, once we have made it in the United States. Asserting a Canadian identity becomes an assertion of negatives: we are not American, we are not British, and we are not French. This is a tendency we reproduce within our Unitarian enclaves, describing ourselves by what we are not (that we are not Christian, or ways in which we are not like the United Church or the Quakers).

The colonial mentality is that "head office is somewhere else," as Northrup Frye has said. Our local institutions are merely branch plants. The first Unitarian congregation established in Canada was the Unitarian Church of Montreal, gathered officially in 1842, and like the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, established two years later, Northern Irish Unitarians (or "Non-Subscribing Presbyterians") were influential in their establishment. The Montreal congregation, in fact, was considered under the jurisdiction of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster, because its minister was himself in ministerial fellowship (we might say) with that body. The situation only changed when the minister himself decidedly broke with Northern Ireland in favour of the American Unitarian Association. But "head office" was merely shifted to Boston, where it has remained for Canadian Unitarians until only recently. The discussion of funding missionary work in Canada was a conversation between the AUA and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association.

What is life like inside a garrison, inside the walls of a fortress? "The place where they reside during their stay is narrowly defined and tightly circumscribed by walls," says my colleague in Edmonton, Alberta, the Rev. Brian Kiely. "It is carved out of that wilderness instead of joined to it. Connections with those outside the walls are made slowly and tentatively if at all. There is a reluctance to change or adapt beyond such changes as are needed for immediate survival."[3]

In the garrison, there is deference toward authority for the sake of social order and there is cooperation. Both of these can be seen as virtues, though each has its shadow. The group will enforce conformity and there is fear of anybody stepping out of line. Unlike our neighbours to the south, whose nation was formed in rebellion against the British government, our nation was formed by an act of parliament by that same government. Bold experimentation and radical decisions are not the order of the day.

Theological conformity, supposedly anathema to Unitarians, is informally enforced within these garrisons. Newcomers arrive with deep questions about God and their relationship to

[3] Kiely, Brian, in a sermon given at the Unitarian Church of Edmonton, April 30, 2000, "What's a Canadian Unitarian Anyway?"

the sacred, and are told, "Unitarians don't talk about God." We say we are welcoming of many viewpoints, we say we draw from many sources of wisdom; we say we don't impose a creed on our members, and I ask, "Is that true?"

Further reinforcement of the garrison mentality is the myth of Unitarian uniqueness. We often use the terms "liberal religion" or "religious liberalism" and "Unitarian" interchangeably, without recognizing that there are religious liberals in other traditions. We tend to think we stand alone in our outposts within the religious landscape, and as Brian says, don't make connections outside our own walls or do so only tentatively. We often fail to recognize that other faith communities struggle with the same things we do—including issues of identity.

And yet we are part of something larger. With head office now in Canada (Toronto, but still) the sense that we are now responsible for the destiny of our religious movement in this country is replacing an earlier passivity and powerlessness. As a movement, and as a nation, we are still negotiating our place next to the global superpower to the south. As a post-colonial nation, we are still negotiating our relationship to empire. However, our stewardship of our national movement is not a matter of defensiveness or negation, but rather empowerment and pride. At the local level there is a greater sense of being part of something larger than the local congregation or fellowship.

The garrison opens out onto an entire landscape. We are used to experiencing our place here as over and above the local context, the natural landscape, the native inhabitants. The garrison mentality is a colonial one, defended against the wild, native country. The garrison mentality is a modern one, lauding human ingenuity and dominance over the interrelated web of existence within which we are embedded. If we could learn to see our Canadian context with new eyes, with the eyes of those who were here before the French and the English built their trading posts and garrisons, we would be better able to see and appreciate all that surrounds us. If we could learn the names of what we find outside the fortress walls, learn to speak, as it were, the landscape's native tongue, we could participate with and in all that surrounds us. We would have, like the Inuit, many words for snow. We would have many words for snow because we would understand ourselves to be embedded within our natural and social contexts and we would be paying attention to the shifts and subtle differences of our environment because we would be living within it and not against it. We would have a language to name and describe our place, our home and native land.

A revisioning of the local congregation or fellowship can take place within Canadian Unitarianism, in which the garrison mentality gives way to a renewed and enlargened sense of community. We need to hold up the notion of "covenanted community" and our larger movement as a "covenanted community of communities." Within this beloved community, sustained and nurtured by loving, mutual relationship, theological differences are a sign of engaged participation, not division.

Much is made in our movement of congregational polity, our governance structure in which the local congregation is the locus of ultimate authority. Our understanding of our polity shapes the view that our congregations are independent, autonomous and self-governing in a way that has often left little room for interdependence, relationship, and mutual support. It is often said that our congregationalism is an expression of basic Unitarian principles, though it is worth noting that Unitarians in Transylvania are episcopal in polity; they have bishops.

Our North American strand of Unitarianism is rooted in a different place than our Continental co-religionists. Unitarianism's North American origins began with the migration of English Puritans to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 1600s and it is from them that we have inherited our form of governance. The Puritans' theology and practice of congregational polity is outlined in the 1648 "Platform of Church Discipline," commonly known as the "Cambridge Platform." This document holds that there is no greater church than the local congregation. One needed to believe in order to join, to be a believer to belong to a congregation.

It should be noted that while each local congregation ran its own affairs, with no one having dominion over them, they recognized that they were united in Christ, that all of their congregations together constituted one body—the Body of Christ—with Jesus Christ as its head. Relief and help for struggling congregations, along with formal mutual consultation, were ways this was affirmed by the Cambridge Platform. A "synod" or "council" could be called in which elders and other officers of the various churches came together to consider problems that concerned the church in general or a local congregation in particular.

The organizational basis of the congregation was the church covenant, a moral agreement of mutual aid, support and edification that was entered into at the act of joining. Giving assent to the congregation's covenant was not taken lightly. A breach of the covenant was grounds for discipline, and if members moved away they had to ask to be released from the obligations of the covenant.

These early New England covenants were not creedal in nature, not because theological diversity was considered a virtue, but rather because it was unheard of. (This would change in the later eighteenth century, with the rise of liberal and anti-Trinitarian views, when orthodox congregations affirmed their beliefs through creedal covenants). At the centre, then, of congregational polity is a moral agreement—a promise—to be together and to be together in a certain way. Not a doctrinal test or creed or allegiance to any theological principles, but a covenant of mutual relation.

Our Unitarian Universalist movement today is not creedal. We do not say that you need to believe certain things in order to belong. We say that as seekers of truth, we walk together in mutual respect, helping one another make meaning of this journey through life. Our religious movement is not creedal; it is relational. It is our relationships, then, that are

primary. How much attention are we paying, in our congregations, to how we relate to each other? How much attention do we pay to good and moral and balanced relationships in our congregations?

"We pledge to walk together in the spirit of mutual love," says the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, in her 2000-2001 Minns Lectures, to which I am indebted for much of what I say here. She continues:

> The spirit of love is alone worthy of our ultimate, our religious loyalty. So, we shall meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we will yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what those ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn or remember them, together… Ours is a covenantal church. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community… We have found there's always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world.[4]

Within the relational matrix of our gathered communities, individuals are sustained by and contribute to the congregation's common life. Personal transformation, spiritual formation, and social change are generated by and from those of us who congregate around the transforming power of love. We do this for ourselves, for each other, and for the world.

The bond that unites a free people is love. Love implies a movement outward, a reaching out in care and concern for the other. Love implies connection, the transformed inverse of isolation. The word "religion" itself reminds us that this is religion's great task: to reconnect, to form and reform the connections, the ligatures between and among, to mend the torn ligaments in the interrelated web of existence, to reweave the web of life. Rabbinic Judaism speaks of *tikkun olam*, the mending, reconstituting, healing, transforming of the world. This work is interpersonal and congregational, social and planetary. It is the work of healthy congregations, a whole and holy religious movement, salvific actions on behalf of social justice.

Congregational polity, then, might better be described as "covenantal association." Our movement nationally and regionally is "a covenanted community of congregations." Rather than far flung outposts, we can imagine our congregations and fellowships embedded in their local environments as nodes in an interrelated network.

The revolution in communications technology has made it possible for our congregations to be better connected as never before. CUC leadership and staff would not be able to do much of what they currently do were it not for such technologies. We are connected to each other nationally as never before, with information sharing and networking taking place electronically. The institution of regions and regional networking groups within this council is indicative of a move toward more covenantal/conciliatory understanding of our governance.

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[4] Wesley, Alice Blair, *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures: The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant,* (Chicago, Meadville Lombard Theological School Press, 2002), 84, 98.

An emerging Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology would grow from this and include:

1. Renewal of local congregations' covenant. A year-long process of queries such as: what do we promise to each other? How shall we be together? What gifts do I offer this community? What kind of community am I longing for?
2. Multiplication of small group ministries. New member orientation lead by leaders, long time members, ministers, with membership being understood as an ongoing process of faith formation and signing the membership book the initiation into an intentional process
3. Local "circles" of neighbouring congregations meeting together to problem-solve, brainstorm and advise. These might be modelled on the Quaker "meeting for clearness," in which a congregation can present a problem or challenge in a meeting with members and leaders of one or two neighbouring congregations and then receive their counsel.
4. A similar council for congregational presidents, or perhaps a regular council of congregational presidents (either face-to-face or virtually). This would work also for finance committees and other lay leaders carrying out the local congregation's ministry and mission. This would be in addition to list-servs that facilitate information-sharing.

Modernity and After

It is said of the enormous cultural shifts that are taking place that we are moving from the modern era to a postmodern one, from a world of progress and optimism, absolutes and certainty, into a time of searching, anxiety, and ambiguity.

The modern period extends from the eighteenth century to today, beginning with the rationalist movements of eighteenth century Europe. An increasingly urban mercantile class developed alongside scientific and technological innovations. Liberalism was itself the ideology of the emerging bourgeois class, the merchants and traders of the city-dwelling burghers. As the feudal system fell apart, the locus of authority shifted from being God-given and monarchical to chosen and democratic. Individual agency, will, and creativity became hallmarks of the modern worldview and individual rights became the concomitant political touchstone in the Age of Reason. Democracy, the civic apparatus of free and self-governing individuals, is the defining political philosophy of the modern era.

Modernism privileged scientific ways of knowing. Divorced from historical contingencies, to be true, something had to be verifiable and repeatable; it was proven scientifically through experimentation and verification. What was real was what could be measured, what could be broken down to its component parts. It is not surprising then that it is in the modern era that we see the rise of secularism, for moderns were necessarily sceptical of spiritual reality. Verifiable, repeatable, quantifiable experiments did not bring knowledge of God or any spiritual phenomenon. A materialist worldview was thus born of modern epistemology. Furthermore, truth was seen as absolute and universal. It could be applied

anywhere. What one deduced as true or good or moral was so for everyone and for all time.

The knowing, modern subject was thus at the centre of a universe of knowable objects. This relationship objectifies nature (knowledge must be "objective") and treats the human subject as fixed, expanding his or her knowledge by actively experimenting on a passive world. Furthermore, modernists optimistically sought to explain everything and to progressively do away with poverty, disease, and superstition. In the modern mind there was a rational answer to every question, a reasoned way to order the world, a faith in "the progress of mankind onward and upward forever," in the memorable words of James Freeman Clarke. Modernism is characterised by the rise of increasingly efficient technologies, making it easier to dominate and control the natural world. Individualism, the pursuit of one's personal happiness, was also spawned by modernism. Modern art valorized the innovative and the novel, the agency of the individual's creating and creative will.

Liberal theology, both within and outside our own liberal religious movement, developed parallel themes, becoming the singular religious voice of the modern West. The individual subject and his or her will, conscience and reasoning powers were at the centre of modern religious liberalism. Progress, both in the individual's increasing knowledge and self-cultivation and in society's overcoming social ills, was the outcome of an optimistic view of human nature. Just as science revealed universal truths about the world, so too were there universally true religious affirmations; the world itself revealed truths about the nature of God. Deism or natural theology was the pinnacle of modern liberal thought.

Unitarianism is the firstborn religious child of the modern era. In the English-speaking countries it developed directly out of the liberal movements of the Enlightenment. And Unitarians have steadily followed the logical march of modernism, beginning as a liberal Protestant sect, with the aim of a reasonable approach to Christian faith, and moving progressively outside Christian parameters in the twentieth century. Our religious movement strove for the use of reason in religious matters, maintained an optimistic view of humanity and of social progress. We are characterized by moral critique and scepticism, continuous and progressive growth and exploration, and individual autonomy.

Our ecclesiology also typifies the Enlightenment values of individualism and democracy. Modern political theory sees free individuals voluntarily entering a social contract from which, as autonomous selves, they receive certain benefits and privileges. "Voluntarist contractualism," writes Stanley Grenz, "finds its ecclesiological counterpart in the theory that sees the church as a voluntary association of individuals whose existence as believers precedes their presence in the congregation, in that the identity of each is supposedly constituted prior to their joining together to form the church."[5] In other words, one becomes convinced through one's own deductive reasoning capacities, outside the

[5] Grenz, Stanley, "Ecclesiology," in Kevin J. Vanhoozen, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Postmodern Theology,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 257.

relational formation of a local congregation, and then chooses to associate with the congregation. Furthermore, one chooses to sign the membership book as a sign of one's preexisting conviction, in order to receive the benefits and privileges of membership.

Our contemporary understanding of congregational polity emphasizes the self-rule of local congregations ("Nobody can tell us what to do") which parallels the autonomy of individuals within them ("Nobody can tell me what to believe"). Member societies in the Canadian Unitarian Council mirror the membership of individuals within our congregations and fellowships, a larger contractual arrangement by which individual societies affiliate or disaffiliate with the CUC at will.

I hesitate to describe the movement away from these tendencies in modernity as "post-modern," though it is clear that an emerging Unitarian Universalist theology, worship practice and ecclesiology will be leaving behind many of the hallmarks of the modern. "Postmodern" has become a moniker so burdened by contradictory meanings that it may not be useful to a coherent discussion of liberal religious renewal in the twenty-first century. There are ways of being church emerging in the early part of this century that might be cultivated as we reposition ourselves for a new era of religious liberalism, many of which intersect with what is beginning to be understood as postmodern.

The emerging understanding of the human person is a more social and dynamic one. The self is coming to be seen more and more as socially constituted, a construction of the social forces that shape it. A person is not merely a reasoning, autonomous subject moving through a world of objects, but rather is embedded in a network of relationality within which identity is created.[6]

Awareness of context becomes important not only for self-understanding, but for the appreciation of cultural texts, including literary and theological texts. The universalizing and totalizing discursive practices of philosophy, theology, critical theory and so on has been interrupted as voices previously silent demand to be heard. Within the anti-colonial, feminist, queer and other liberationist struggles of the late twentieth century, a new critique has been emerging, one that recognizes the relationship between knowledge and power. Oppressed, marginalized, and powerless people have knowledge created about them, knowledge that usually reinscribes and reinforces the power of ruling elites. Subalterns—Blacks, Muslims, women, sexual minorities, immigrants, aboriginals, to name a few—were kept in our place by a hegemonic system of information and control; biological, medical, anthropological, economic, psychological, religious and other discourses explained the naturalness—the inevitability—of our inferior position.

[6] See Paul Rasor's discussion in *Faith Without Certainty,* (Boston: Skinner House, 2005), pp. 85-108; see also Keller, Catherine, *From a Broken Web,* Boston, Beacon Press, 1986; Macy, Joanna, "The Greening of the Self," in *World as Lover, World as Self,* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991). pp. 183-192.

Feminist, anti-colonial and other liberationist movements have begun not only to displace the political, social, economic and military systems of domination, they challenge the discursive practices that enforce them. We have begun to engage in what Michel Foucault calls the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges,"[7] the recovery of local memory and resistance, and the surfacing of submerged, forgotten forms of knowledge, alternatives to the dominant and dominating discourse. (Our reflection together here on the Canadian context is an example of such a practice).

The timeless truths of theologians, theorists, and others come under scrutiny as socially constructed artifacts, productions with vested interests in terms of power relations. Are these indeed truths about God, truth, morality, humanity that are true for all people, in all places, for all time? Could it be that these are the reflections and insights of European, well-educated, male clergy and academics? The power structures behind "universal" knowledge are unmasked.

The grand narratives of history are called into question, as it must be asked who is doing the narration and why? The authority of a singular voice narrating the authorized version of the story is increasingly problematic. Historiography and fiction alike are taking a turn toward the multivocal and the self-reflexive.

Alternate and subaltern versions exist alongside and in opposition to hegemonic ones. A plurality of voices and versions is recognized. Pluralism is an increasing feature and norm of our condition. With a faltering homogeneity, the relative nature of religious and other truths is foregrounded. Religion, though no less meaningful for its participants, is increasingly understood as conditioned by time and place, historically and socially constructed and not imparted by God. We understand that modernism or liberalism itself, with its methods of scientific inquiry and its rationalism and optimism, is socially conditioned. Modernity is the product of a particular class of people in a particular location at a particular time and therefore, postmodernists understand that there are other ways of knowing.

Experience is given increasing weight within the religious enterprise. Gone is the era of making religion credible to rational minds, of reasoned arguments for the existence of God. Ours is an era of direct experience of transcendence, of awe, of wonder. This turn toward experience does not negate the place that the powers of the mind occupies, but rather seeks to balance it with other ways of knowing and testing and refining its truths in the crucible of lived experience.

Thus, Unitarianism in the emerging milieu is challenged to refigure its notions of the individual as self-in-relation, individual agency as mutuality and power-in-relationship and to examine the (ecclesiological) implications of this for our being together in community. Our emerging situation is taking a turn toward the contextual, the experiential, the

[7] Foucault, Michel, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 146.

collaborative and a dynamic pluralism. Such values might be expressed through our modes of worship, an area to which I now turn.

Emerging Worship

Unitarians entered the twentieth century as a liberal Christian denomination increasingly influenced by Transcendentalism, an American form of romanticism. The Unitarians, based largely in New England, were historically Puritan congregations formed in the seventeenth century. In Canada, Unitarian congregations were gathered in the nineteenth century by Unitarian immigrants to Upper and Lower Canada. Expansion westward began in the late nineteenth century as Icelandic liberals on the Prairies broke with the Lutheran church and became Unitarian. The liturgies of Unitarians as the twentieth century opened were Christian, reflecting the various Protestant styles which shaped them. The more or less stable Christian consensus with which Unitarians entered the twentieth century was challenged by the modernism that developed in the early decades of the century. From the Midwestern United States, religious humanism began to emerge as a renewing force in the 1920s. Provoking discussion and debate among Unitarians, this early movement culminated in the 1933 document *The Humanist Manifesto*, initiated by three Unitarian ministers and signed by many more. Dispensing entirely with belief in God, religious humanism emphasized ethical living for its own sake and humanitarian values devoid of supernaturalism. Reason and the scientific method were to be the standard bearers of humanist religion.

Thus commenced the slow, steady secularization of Unitarian worship over the next several decades. Recognizably religious (which is to say Christian) symbols, literature, rituals, and vocabulary were removed. Worship came to be understood as the "celebration of life." Various aspects of human experience were reflected upon, held up for ethical scrutiny, or celebrated. Unitarian and Universalist theorists of worship, most notably Von Ogden Vogt and Kenneth Patton, developed human-centered materials that focused on worship as an aesthetic experience. Principles that inform drama, music, and other performing arts were brought to bear on Unitarian and Universalist liturgy and architecture.

The post-Second World War era saw a boom in the growth of Unitarianism in Canada, following a general trend in church attendance and growth. Doubters and skeptics, full of certainty about the things they did not believe in, were drawn to the Unitarian gospel of reasonable, liberal religion. Rejecting the doctrines and practices of mainstream Christian communions, at a time when most Canadians regularly attended weekly worship services, they built communities centered around intellectual stimulation, moral critique, and a passion for social justice. Religion was scrubbed clean of any mystical or superstitious influences.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, in what is referred to as the Fellowship Movement, Unitarians created a fair number of small to mid-sized lay led groups. Suspicious of religious authority, if not downright anti-clerical, these fellowships rarely called settled ministers to serve them. The growth of Unitarianism outpaced the training of new

ministers in any case, a factor in the evolution of the Fellowship Movement. A number of these fellowships grew into mid-sized congregations, many more faded out by the 1970s.

The majority of Unitarian congregations in this country today were formed as fellowships during this post-war boom. The Unitarian movement in Canada today is by and large shaped by the ethos of the Fellowship Movement. We tend to value informality and the dynamics of the family-sized congregation. There is discomfort with liturgical gestures and language and a tendency to follow a speaker and debate model. In addition to intellectual stimulation, with an address that focuses on ideas, concepts, and issues, the style of such a presentation is often detached, objective, and emotionally neutral. The address or sermon is the focal point of the Sunday service. There is great emphasis on cognitive ways of knowing; the sermon is an exposition of truth. The spoken and written word is primary. Indeed, there is a fetish for the printed word—a printed order of service, a hymnbook, printed copies of the sermon. Decorative aesthetics are treated as distractions to the word, and many of our assembly halls for worship lack even the most basic aesthetic elements.

What we have in our congregations today, then, is a fellowship-based model of church and a secularized Protestant liturgy. We have the form of mainstream liberal Protestantism drained of Christian content. I would argue that this is an inadequate vehicle for our use, and will be increasingly inadequate in this new century. Many Protestants themselves no longer have this kind of worship, having themselves undergone a liturgical renewal movement—a liturgical renewal movement that passed Unitarians by as we had already made our theological exodus from that tradition. We need a liturgical renewal movement of our own. We need, I would argue, to break decisively out of that mold.

Robert Bellah, the American sociologist of religion and himself a great proponent of the social ontology described here, addressed the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in June, 1998. Speaking to this annual gathering taking place that year in Rochester, New York, Bellah decried the individualism of Unitarian Universalists and of US culture in general. Pointing to the findings of a recent comprehensive survey of North American UUs in which the majority answered the question "What is the glue that binds UUs and congregations together?" by choosing "shared values and principles," Bellah commented: "That is certainly encouraging for the people who feared that UUs held such different positions that they shared very little," touching on the fact that as a creedless religious movement, the question of what binds us together is paramount. Yet Bellah then went on to point out that this is still the answer of individualists, people who have their privately held values, which they share with others. He expressed distress that only a minority answered this question (in fact, the majority chose it as "least important") was "common worship and language." "For it is my understanding as a sociologist of religion that it is common worship that creates the beloved community for which many UUs yearn," Bellah said. "Furthermore, shared values and principles don't necessarily motivate people to do anything, whereas a vital experience of common worship can send a congregation out into the world with a determination to see that those values and principles are put into practice." Exhorting North America's Unitarian Universalists to

come to a more social understanding of human nature, Bellah challenged us to think about worship in a new way because "without powerful rituals and sacraments—practices that make our beliefs tangible, physical—and without the powerful symbols and narratives that resonate with those rituals and sacraments, the fundamental truth of social ontology can be covered over."[8]

Not only does worship build community, expressing the social nature of human be-ing and help us shape the covenant by which individual Unitarians are bound together, but worship is the context in which our deepest longings for both intimacy and ultimacy are addressed. Worship touches the deep places within us that yearn for transcendence, meaning, and fulfillment. Sunday morning "meetings" and "programs" devoid of religious language, symbolism, and ritual are increasingly giving way to Sunday morning worship that speaks the language not only of the head—reason, rationalism, intellect—but that also speaks the language of the heart. Worship, in order to be satisfying for a new generation of seekers, uses the vocabulary of the soul, the unconscious, best found in poetry, story, symbols, and ritual gestures.

While challenging the individualism of a religious tradition rooted in an ecclesiology of the covenant of believers, which in modern language is seen as the voluntary association of like-minded individuals, liturgical renewal can breathe new life into the best of the religious humanism that is the hallmark of contemporary Canadian Unitarianism. The practice of many of our Canadian congregations and fellowships can evolve into something more worshipful without necessarily reinventing themselves as theistic. The same continent-wide survey of Unitarian Universalists that Robert Bellah referred to, interestingly, found that the majority of UUs felt that "what was missing" in their UU experience was "greater intensity of celebration, joy and spirituality."

Worship is vital to forming the beloved community, for sustaining religious sensibility, for profoundly informing our ethical and devotional lives. The women and men seeking and joining our congregations in these early years of the twenty-first century, along with those who have come of age within them, have needs and expectations that differ in significant ways from previous generations of Unitarian Universalists. These include a sense of celebration and spiritual renewal. This includes sermons that focus on experience, life passages, and spiritual growth conveyed in a personable and warm fashion by a professional religious leader. There is an openness to using recognizably religious language. Children and youth are present and welcome. There is a preference toward music which is contemporary, upbeat and live and which is easily sung by all participants. Worship satisfies the need for both intimacy and ultimacy. In other words, people who attend our worship services ought to feel connected to others and/or connected to something larger than themselves. This is conveyed in the inclusiveness of worship, in accessibility to what is going on. On a literal level, the building and service are accessible to people no matter what their physical ability, and exclusionary language is avoided. But inclusion and access is

[8] Bellah, Robert, "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective," *Fulfilling the Promise*, Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1998.

also created when nobody uses acronyms unfamiliar to the first time visitor and songs without printed lyrics or music are easily and quickly learned. A sense of intimacy is created when time is taken in a service to greet those around you. A sense of transcendence and transformation are created in worship, of mystery and awe. Whether or not it is expressed in God-language, a sense that participants are connecting to something larger than themselves is essential.

Rites of passage mark life's transitions and ritual, similarly, seeks transformation. A change in a person's status is achieved and observed in a coming of age ritual, a wedding, or a funeral rite. The purpose of worship, similarly, is to have participants come out different from when they went in. Ritual also marks changes in time. Seasons are observed in rituals throughout the year, marking temporal transitions. Solstices and equinoxes, full moon rituals, Sabbath-keeping are some of the ways in which this is expressed. Questions of renewal and change, then, are ultimate when designing worship. "How will participants be transformed?" is the question for the liturgist.

An emerging Unitarian Universalist practice of worship will include the following features:

1. Increased use of story and narrative. Folktales, scriptures, fiction, cinema and autobiography are all rich sources of stories for reflection and such stories can shape a service. The sermon is but one aspect of the overall worship experience. Explanation and analysis are not always or not entirely the focus of the preacher's message.
2. An emphasis is made on living one's Unitarian ideals throughout the week.
3. Increased use of symbols and gestures. A common practice among us now is "water communion," usually in September after the absence of many or the summertime closure of a congregation. The symbolic pouring of water into a common font represents the inflowing and merging of returning individuals in community, individual rivers pouring into a common ocean. Another common ceremony is the "flower communion," usually in June. Recalling the story of Norbert Capek, participants bring a flower to the service which is ritually added to a common vase, after which the flowers are redistributed. Other similar ceremonies, though less common, involve bread, rocks, seeds, fire; the use of such elements and other suggestive elements are ways of speaking the language of the heart. However one characterizes the soul, the psyche, the unconscious, one thing is certain: its language is symbol. This is most clearly expressed in dreams. Archetypes myths, stories, and symbolic gestures are other ways the soul is addressed and expressed. Even a cursory glance at the works of scholars like Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade can offer Unitarian Universalists a host of ways to think of psychological states and spiritual truth in symbolic terms. These can be symbolized in ritual form without necessarily referring to anything outside of human experience.

4. Seasons are celebrated. The homecoming "water communion" is one way in which the seasons of the year are marked. Looking for metaphoric meaning in solstices and equinoxes, in the changing of the seasons, is not difficult. The darkness of winter, the rebirth of spring.
5. The dependence on the spoken and printed word is broken. The spoken word is balanced with silences, visuals, ritual gestures, art, and song, creating experiential, multisensory, and participatory services.
6. More opportunities for congregational singing. Group singing, while becoming more and more of an anomaly in the culture at large, is a significant way to build community. There is a sense, when one sings in a group, that one is part of something larger than the self, that one's voice is part of a larger voice. "It is not you who sings," Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "it is the church that is singing, and you, as a member… may share in its song."[9] Transcendence and connection to others is offered in congregational singing.

Conclusion

We are constructing a religious movement, to paraphrase John Ralston Saul, in a place where there can be no pretension of human domination. Humanity, in all of our ingenuity and intelligence, is dwarfed by the overpowering Canadian geography and climate. Many of our habits and practices feed a garrison mentality that refuses to see the complex systems outside the fortress walls. Canadian Unitarianism needs to develop a theology not so much of the land, but of place, belonging, that re-orients human be-ing to what we have already named "the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are part." That web is larger than us, awe-inspiring, breath-taking. We are not outside the web of life, imposing our will upon it, but embedded within it, one of a myriad of nodes in a complex net. Our species is dependent upon, and agents in, an interrelated network of biological diversity. Mutual relatedness must emerge as a central norm for Unitarian theology and practice.

Interdependence and mutual relatedness are finding their way into our models and practices of governance. An ecclesiology of independent, autonomous congregations is inadequate for our context. Our theological or philosophical view of humanity can imagine the inter-subjectivity of selves, of selves-in-relation. The subject-object, Self-Other oppositions of Enlightenment modernism are evolving into a recognition of the socially, relationally constituted self. Respect for local autonomy is simultaneously affirmed with the larger body whose authority helps constitute it. Similarly, a sense of belonging to, if not the "Church Universal," then at least "liberal religion" in a more broadly understood definition, needs to be nurtured. Dialogue and cooperation with other faith communities needs to be encouraged, in order to explore the common ground we share and to cooperate in mutually valuable mission and social action projects. The Unitarian myth of

[9] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 61.

uniqueness, of self-selected and elitist separation, is part and parcel of the garrison mentality.

If we are to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century, we need to get out of the garrison. We need to break out of the fortress that keeps us locked into a colonialist and modernist mindset.

Our congregations and fellowships will be known as places of profound transformation, communities of care, personal formation, and engagement. Our congregations and fellowships will be known as places where individuals are transformed by their service to others. Our movement in Canada will be characterized not simply by our love of intellectual stimulation, moral critique, but also our emotional intelligence. Love and not doctrine will be the acknowledged basis of our gathered communities.

Unitarian Universalist theological reflection in twenty-first century Canada will concern itself with mutual relatedness. This will have implications for our traditional emphasis on individualism and on the meaning of authentic religious pluralism. The beloved community emerges as a central norm for Unitarian Universalist theology and practice. The theological and ecclesiastical principle of covenant, of what it means to join a covenanted community will expand and deepen and as it does, it will become clearer what binds Unitarians together, what values, symbols, experiences and rituals we share that unite us and sustain us as a community of interrelated autonomous individuals and congregations. Pride in our Canadian identity will not come as a negative sense that we are not American, just as our identity as Unitarians will not come as negatively defined. The image of the interdependent web of all existence will characterize Unitarian Universalist theology. Our natural environment will be as beloved a community as our human environment. Our historical insistence on social action will be deepened by its grounding in deeper spiritual and philosophical commitments. Care for society, our historical urge toward social justice activism, will be envisioned as an enlargement of right-relation, the web of interconnectedness that defines our theological commitments. Social action will be seen as a reweaving the web of life, a spiritual practice of creating just relationships.

We will no longer be locked into garrisons, peeking out at a cold, hostile environment. We will be mutually sustaining nodes in a vast web, connected with our surroundings. Our language will have words for the varied textures of our context, words for the diversity within, among, and around us; we will have many words for snow.

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