

**CUC SHARING OUR FAITH SERVICE 2005**

**“GETTING TO KNOW U AND U”**

Suggestions for music:

Ethnic music from your own geographical region.

Music from a local composer, or someone in your congregation.

Instrumental recorded music: “Hymns from the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel,” an album by kd lang that includes Canadian singer-songwriters Bruce Cockburn, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Jane Siberry, Leonard Cohen, and others.

Improvise a medley or new lyrics for Gilbert and Sullivan’s “Getting to Know You”

Welcome, Opening Words

Option 1:

A Living Truth

I have not come to give you Truth,

nor have you come to give truth to me.

We have come together to recreate the truth.

For only a created truth can be a living truth,

and only a living truth can blossom,

and thus become large enough to embrace the wholeness of our lives.

- Rev. John W. Baros-Johnson, 1982

*(Rev. Baros-Johnson is currently minister of the congregation in Halifax, Nova Scotia)*

Option 2:

With the worries and woes of our world weighing upon us,  
we enter in.

With the wonders and joys of our friends and families elating our spirits,  
we enter in.

With the awe and enchantment of this creation dancing upon our senses,  
we enter in.

Enter into this beloved community of connection.

Draw strength from its past. Find nourishment in its hope for the future.

Build a new creation with the person sitting beside you, behind you, in front of you.

By your presence enter in and make this space a holy space;

this time, a holy time; and the world we all inhabit, a holy habitat.

Enter in. - Reverend Jeffrey Brown

*(Reverend Jeffrey E. Brown is a Canadian minister in Mississauga, Ontario.)*

Chalice Lighting

*(Lighting a chalice with a brief reading is a universal feature of Canadian U\*U services)*

**Option 1:**

**Root Fire**

Our roots go deep  
Feeding on the substance of history  
Drawing our strength from the great human past.

From hand to hand the torch was passed.

Let it burn now, brightly, here  
The flame, the light: this moment.

*(Adapted from a poem by John Hanly Morgan published in Hands of Friends, Toronto, 1977 John Morgan is Minister Emeritus of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto..)*

Option 2:      Rooted in This Fertile Soil

As we light this chalice, we join with  
Unitarian (and Universalist)  
communities across this land.

“We gather, perhaps as northern lights rather than beacon lights,  
as mere specks against the vast wilderness...” – Rev. Joan Montagnes

We gather as Unitarians (and Universalists)  
rooted in this fertile soil,  
this high ground of liberty,  
this community devoted to embracing diversity  
and the growth of the human spirit.  
- adapted from a reading by Rev. Ray Drennan

*(Rev. Ray Drennan is minister of the Unitarian Congregation of Montreal; the original version of this reading appears in Vers Un Reve, a collection of bilingual worship readings. Rev. Joan Montagnes served in Canada at the time this reading was published in Northern Lights, Moosemilk Press, Unitarian Church of Edmonton.)*

Responsive Reading #440 Singing the Living Tradition – “From the Fragmented World” – Rev. Phillip Hewett

*(Rev. Hewett is Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, British Columbia.)*

Gathering Hymn – Spirit of Life – In English and French

(A translation of the hymn in Singing the Living Tradition #123, this version is from “Vers Un Reve a Batir” a collection of readings for worship in French and English published by the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian Congregation of Montreal in 2001.)

Joys and Sorrows, Affirmation

*(This ritual is common to many CUC congregations*

*A bilingual affirmation may be used, such as this one from the Unitarian Universalist Church of North Hatley.)*

Affirmation:

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its gift.

This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace,  
to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

(L'amour constitue le fondement de cette eglise et le service en est son present.

Notre engagement profond: Cheminer ensemble dans la paix,  
rechercher la connaissance dans la liberte', et s'entraider.

Story for All Ages

Option 1:

“Emily Would Not Take No For An Answer” by Rev. Anne Orfald, 96/02/11

*(From the collection, Great Canadian Stories: The Unitarian Universalist Version, Vol. One. This is the story of Emily Stowe, who was the first Canadian woman physician and a member of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto. It is one of a number of stories told by Canadian ministers about members of their congregations.*

Option 2:

You might choose to tell something from your congregation's history or celebrate our Canadian diversity with a story from a congregation and region not your own.

Option 3:

The Story of Robert Munsch, author of the bestselling children's classic, I Will Love You Forever.

*(This biographical sketch of Munsch written by Reverend Brian Kiely, CUC President and minister in Edmonton, Alberta, is included in this packet.)*

Offering:

From you I receive, to you I give,

Together we share, and by this we live.

De toi je recois, a toi je donne.

Ensemble nous partageons, et ensemble nous vivons.

*(Bilingual words from \*Vers Un Reve)*

Reading 1: Reverend Mark Mosher de Wolfe

“When I go to different Unitarian Universalist churches, I find something that feels familiar, something that makes me feel a little bit at home even though I don't know a soul there. Somehow, at a deep level, there is something I know which unites us. It's not a prayer book or a hymnal; it's not a creedal statement. If it's anything, it's a spirit, a feeling between people, embodied in a style of operating, which unites us. I believe it's very real, if only because I feel it when I go there. I know when I am among Unitarian Universalists.”

*(Minister in South Peel until his death in 1988, Rev. Mark de Wolfe wrote extensively on the need for developing a Canadian contextual theology for our movement. This reading is taken from an address to the Unitarian Congregation of South Peel in Mississauga, Ontario in 1987 printed in a posthumous collection entitled Time To Live)*

Reading II: Reverend Ray Drennan in Side By Side/Vers Un Reve

“It has been said of this land of ours that its greatness lies not particularly in its mountains or forests, nor in its prairie or shield. Its true measure is found in the imaginations it fires, the dreams it nurtures and the hopes to which it gives birth.”

*(Reverend Ray Drennan, Minister of the Unitarian Congregation of Montreal, citing the film Over Canada by Garry McCartie)*

Reading III: Phillip Hewett in “Listening to the Language of the Land”

“An old story, with endless variations, tells of a traveler who has lost his way. He asks a bystander for directions to his destination, only to be told that this isn’t a very good place to be starting from. The point of that story...is that we can’t start from anywhere except where we are. Our religion must be relevant to the circumstances of our lives if it is to be of my practical use to us...If we are to be authentic in our total response to life (that is to say, our religion) it requires of us that we open ourselves fully to an awareness of what is happening to us. Thus is generated the spirituality that is expressed in the shared observances of a religious community. Our spiritual being, like our respiration, requires a continuous interaction between ourselves and the environment that sustains us, and this is as true of the community as it is of the individual.”

Hymn suggestions:

Choose a song from Phyllis Robbins new book “Now Let Us Sing”

or

“Viens Chanter Avec Moi”

(p. 111 in Vers Un Reve)

(Also #346, English words in SLT – “Come, Sing A Song With Me”)

or

#142 in Singing the Living Tradition: “Let There Be Light”

*(words by Canadian Unitarian Frances W. Davis, 1936-1976)*

Sermon/Reflection – “Getting to Know U and U: Celebrating Our Canadian Spirit”

Closing Hymn: #295 in Singing The Living Tradition

“Sing Out Praises for the Journey”

*(Words to this hymn are by Mark Mosher de Wolfe)*

Closing Words/Extinguishing the Chalice

Option 1: The World

May the world that is one in its life, a rich blue top spinning in the endless night of space, a world that is one in its interdependence and its fragility, be one in our hearts and minds and deeds also.

- Rev. Charles Eddis

*(Reverend Charles Eddis is Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Congregation of Montreal, and one of the founders in 1961 of the Canadian Unitarian Council.)*

Option 2:                   The Task of the Religious Community

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.

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

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

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

Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed. – Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

*(Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed is a past president of the CUC and currently co-minister with his wife Rev. Donna Morrison-Reed of a congregation in the greater Toronto area.)*

By sharing our faith, may we as individuals and congregations  
seek to unveil what makes us diverse and what binds us together.  
May the ability to celebrate both in balance be a sign of our strength.

Congregational Response/Discussion

*(If it is the custom in your congregation, you might wish to include some time for congregational response or a brief discussion following the service. Questions to ask: What is distinct about our area, community, city, geographical region? How does our setting influence how we express our liberal faith in terms of worship, congregational functions, and social justice?)*

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Sermon/Reflection – “Getting to Know U and U: Celebrating Our Canadian Spirit”

Rev. Carole Martignacco, is minister at North Hatley (Quebec) Unitarian Universalist Church and is on contract with the CUC to prepare a Canadian Contextual Theology curriculum.

Our theme this morning is: Getting to know U and U. Today we celebrate our annual Sharing Our Faith Sunday. Congregations throughout Canada choose a Sunday in the year, usually sometime between November and March to celebrate our connectedness as a Canadian movement. Taking time to recognize our uniqueness and the solidarity of our commitment as Unitarians and Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists in Canada and offering monetary support for the work we do in common. This year, we focus on our expressions of that faith. In congregations all across this wide land, we find there are many similarities and differences among us. We share both great diversity and universality in our forms of worship and ways of expressing our regional identity. Today we invite you in your congregation to explore who you are, what we have in common, and the differences we all bring to our larger sense of identity as Canadians in our Unitarian \* Universalist movement.

Getting to know U and U involves knowing our own story and telling it, as well as listening to the stories of other congregations who are members with us in the Canadian Unitarian Council. We can do that in several ways. We can visit each other whenever we are traveling. Another way to get a feel for the richness in our congregations is to collect monthly newsletters from other congregations across Canada. Our newsletters are distinct missives that advertise our identity and bear clues to our religious and regional expression of our faith. Another way to learn about our sibling congregations in Canada is to tour the various websites that creatively display all that we are doing to celebrate our faith, how we do social justice, how we as congregations choose to “bloom where we are planted.” And if we were a family, our reunions would be the annual regional and national gatherings that draw us together each year to meet and celebrate with our relatives in faith from all over Canada.

A catalogue from a fairly recent Winnipeg Art Gallery exhibition quotes from the Group of Seven: “An art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people.” The Group of Seven, which included Unitarian Arthur Lismer, painted with a unique energy of line and colour the particular beauty of this land, from the wilderness of the northern shores of the Great Lakes, to the farms and villages of Ontario and Quebec, and westward to the Rocky Mountains of Alberta and British Columbia. What is true of art, as an aspect of culture, is true also of religion. It matters how our faith has taken root in Canada. What are your roots? Who are you, who are we, because of our history, our heritage, and our placement in the vast Canadian adventure? What is the story of our faith’s beginnings, here, in this place where you now stand? That story is one that combines geography and immigration, tells of ethnic cultural identities, and includes demographics and customs that mix and blend into a continually unfolding richness that informs who we are and how we celebrate today. Getting to know U and U starts with knowing ourselves, and sharing who we are with each other.

A word about the use of French and English in this service: Rev. Ray Drennan, minister of the Unitarian Congregation of Montreal, writes in his Foreword to *Vers Un Reve*, a bilingual congregational resource: “Unitarians and Universalists have lived for almost 170 years in Quebec. Alongside these Anglophones, there have been Francophones who also advocated tolerance and the use of reason in religion. Sadly, language has often been a barrier to connecting in meaningful dialogue.” Therefore, the development of this resource of worship readings was an important

project in Quebec. Our use of readings and a hymn from this collection, gathered and translated into French by bilingual members of Quebec congregations, *Vers Un Reve*, expresses not only a regional provincial culture, but reflects the larger Canadian spirit where both French and English are official languages.

Canada has been called a cultural mosaic. And since religion and culture are inseparable, we might also say that ours is a spiritual mosaic, arising from and in response to the various ethnicities and changing immigration patterns throughout this vast country, not just immigrants of the past but of the present.

Two contemporary voices that illustrate the influence of the land on our spiritual development:

1. Reverend Fran Dearman in “Putting Body, Mind and Spirit Together” in *The Canadian Unitarian*, Winter 2002

“I was born and raised on Vancouver Island. Look into the green depths of an Emily Carr painting and there you will see the earthly paradise that shaped my spiritual awareness. I spent my early years ‘up island,’ near Cowichan Lake. We later moved down to the city of Victoria. My family joined the Unitarian congregation there when I was eight. And on April 7, 2002, this beloved community that has been my spiritual home for over 40 years will ordain me into the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It’s been a long road: sailor, scholar, seminarian.” (*UUMOC member Rev. Fran Dearman is serving a congregation in Alaska.*)

2. Grace Flesher in *The Canadian Unitarian*, Spring 2004, is quoted:

“One of the principles I was taught as a child is that we should always be good stewards of all our gifts. My family were loggers in a remote area of the B.C. coast, accessible only by seaplane or boat. A government program allowed us to harvest timber, but we did not own the land we logged, or even the land on which my father built our house. Ours was a small, family business – we cut trees, tended the forest and planted seedlings for the future. My father and grandfather protected the streams and riverbanks, cut prudently and pioneered reforestation in the province. They considered it a privilege, indeed a gift, to live and work on that land.

Unitarian \* Universalism is like the land upon which I was raised; it is a privilege and magnificent gift which I must tend by planting for the future. I must be a good steward of this free faith, nurturing my congregation and my denomination, sharing my resources and abilities.” (*Grace Flesher attends the London Unitarian Fellowship in Ontario and is a volunteer service consultant for the CUC Central Region.*)

(Note: full text can be found at: <http://cuc.ca/newsletter/canu.htm>)

Those two voices represent so many more stories out there, waiting to be told by each one of us. However we arrived here, from wherever in the world, no matter how recently or long ago, each of us has an answer to a common question: what makes Canada home to us now, and how does being here affect us spiritually? I am reminded of something said in reassurance at an interfaith vigil we held during our refugee sanctuary at the North Hatley church: “Most Canadians are refugees with seniority.” The only ones who are not are indigenous peoples. For that reason, Canada is often called a “cultural mosaic.” One resource for exploring our diverse origins is Caroline Balderston Parry’s book, *Let’s Celebrate*. Caroline says (p. 9 of Foreword) that her book “is about remembering and renewing our roots – about the customs people keep or change or create in Canada.” Armchair travelers can encounter in her book a vast cultural, social and religious

diversity ranging from the Western provinces to the Maritimes and everything in between. Here are just three examples to highlight how local customs informs our regional sense of identity:

Blessing the fleet in British Columbia: (p. 73)

“In the village of Alert Bay, B.C., almost everyone depends on fishing for a living. The Nimpkish Band Council...organizes two ceremonies every year to bless the fishing fleet – one in June, when the salmon boats go out, and one in February, when the herring start to spawn. February can be awfully cold in Alert Bay – so cold that a fisherman’s nets can freeze and prevent him from hauling in his catch...Blessing the fleet is a religious ceremony in which the whole community gathers to pray for the safety of the boats and a good harvest from the sea.” Are there similar ceremonies in your communities?

On March 1<sup>st</sup> in Alberta, where there is a concentration of Welsh immigrants, Caroline tells us that “St. David’s Day is celebrated with storytelling, singing, and banquets. Church services include lots of Welsh hymns as well.” Welsh people can be seen wearing daffodils in their lapels or leeks in their hatbands to honour their country of origin. (p. 84)

Also in March people all over Canada hold “International Women’s Day rallies, demonstrations and concerts on the Saturday nearest to March 8...Women in Canada no longer struggle to gain the right to vote, but they do use March 8 as a time to celebrate women’s history...and to express their concern for inequality everywhere in the world.” Does your congregation celebrate this event? Remembrance Day celebrations also occur all over Canada, and vary according to local history.

Did you know: Parts of Quebec have an Iroquois Midwinter Festival in January, and there are the Bon Homme days, and spring Sugaring-Off Festivals. In Sudbury, Ontario a house visiting tradition is still observed by Ukrainians and their neighbors on Christmas Eve. Wherever Scots abound, especially in Maxwell Ontario there are the Maxwell games in summer and the birthday of Bobbie Burns is celebrated. Iroquois Strawberry Festivals celebrate the first fruits of summer. And all along the South Shore area around Liverpool, Nova Scotia, Canada Day weekend is marked by a celebration called Privateer Days dating back to smuggling during the late 1700s to the war of 1812. Just a few of the many festivals – there are hundreds!

A quick page through the seasons in this collection of Canadian celebrations, both secular and religious, illustrates the “spiritual mosaic” in which we, as U\*Us, find ourselves immersed, where many cultures and faith traditions are represented across this land. What local or regional customs do you and your congregations choose to keep, observe, change or create? Let’s tell each other our stories.

Discovering our Identity - A story about the 2004 CU\*UL School logo:– Somewhere in the midst of planning this past spring for the first ever Canadian U\*U Leadership School, perhaps arising out of a recent CUC workshop on “organizational branding”, someone realized it was time to design our own special logo, a symbol for this and successive years. In a flurry of messages passing through e-space, members of the planning team first considered flying Canadian geese (instead of Eagles – a symbol used by the UUA). The geese were flying, of course, in formation (after a popular metaphor for leadership dynamics); someone then suggested they wear goggles (looking cool). Penguins and polar bears were mentioned, as well as icebergs (as in, the school just deals with the tip of it). These metaphors worked, but were difficult to simplify artistically as logos. Suddenly it just emerged: the thought that somewhere in this vast northernmost land of Canada, at any moment

in time, in any season, it is always snowing. A snowflake could symbolize our individual uniqueness - no two alike, yet all have a common identity. Implied also was something about our collective power in doing social justice: it's always the last snowflake to fall on the branch that causes it to snap. How far can you go with that imagery? The resulting logo shows four quadrants, one for each season, a balance of words and snowflakes, united by color and the CUC maple-leaf logo. The process - the appreciative honouring of each voice on the team, the willingness to play with all possible ideas, the exploration of who and where we are and articulating what we stand for - was creative and exciting. Beyond finding a symbol for CUUL School, this story is one of discovering and shaping identity. It is also an experiential example of what contextual theology is all about. We do this every time we meet to define ourselves, in our individual congregations and at every level within the CUC.

In summary:

What we are talking about this morning, as we share our faith, is part of a larger discussion about what a Canadian contextual theology would look like for Unitarians and Universalists. I hope that we have all come in this time together to the obvious conclusion: Is there any other kind of theology except contextual? How can we separate who we are from where we are? Kim Hunter, former President of the CUC, in a sermon of the same title as Phillip Hewett's paper, "Listening to the Language of the Land," said this in addressing the CUC Annual Meeting of 1988: "If such things as northern-ness, coldness, and isolation matter in literature, it is quite likely they matter in religion...If religion is conveyed to us partly through poetry and symbolism, then those poems and symbols have to be part of our experience...The interplay of religion with its context is subtle."

Who we are religiously, as Canadian Unitarians and Universalists, will be answered differently depending upon where we find ourselves, and when the question is asked. Through all the differences, what holds us together? Perhaps it is our commitment to being together, not despite our diversity, but because of it!

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Discussion: Some topics/questions to consider (adapted in part from Hewett's Listening to the Language of the Land):

Are there common elements in the spirituality of northern countries such as Canada, Iceland, Scandinavia, Russia, the Ukraine, from which inhabitants have immigrated to our shores, who have in some way spiritually acclimated to the seasonal extremes of cold and darkness here?

In Margaret Atwood's writing, a prevalent theme is "survival." How is this a theme of Canadian life, and of our congregations?

How will present immigration patterns change the cultural landscape of Canada? How enrich it? How will we as U\*Us be affected?

Other questions:

What is the shape of your spiritual landscape? How is it influenced by mountains, prairies, harbors and coastline, rivers and inland lakes. What is the "spirit" of your land?

How do customs in your specific region influence your church calendar and cycle of celebrations?

What justice issues arise from your immersion in your local community, and how are these impacted by social, environment, immigration trends, politics, demographics, and religious diversity?

Resources:

Vers Un Reve/Side by Side and A Time to Live are both available from [www.cuc.ca/store](http://www.cuc.ca/store) or by contacting the CUC office.

## The Theology of Robert Munsch

**Reverend Brian J. Kiely, Unitarian Church of Edmonton, May 9, 2004**

Robert Munsch never intended for any of this to happen. He never wanted or expected to become a storyteller. And while he always loved to write, he never planned to become an author, much less Canada's best selling author with over 30 million copies sold worldwide.

In fact, an appreciation of Robert Munsch is a study of unanticipated success. His life also reminds us of how our UU Principles sometimes call us to pay respectful attention to those who fall outside of society's standards and norms. Munsch's success is a testament to our affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person. This is a far cry from society's focused celebration on the best and brightest, people driven to exceptional effort by their will to succeed. And his story is a cautionary tale for those who would marginalize and ostracize some children simply because they don't fit into societal norms.

To hear him tell his life story is to learn about someone who was never expected to make much of a mark on the world.

Munsch was born into a middle class lawyer's family in Pittsburgh in 1945. He was the fourth of nine children. He writes, "I was in the middle; a very bad position as it meant I was attacked by both the younger coalition and the older coalition. I did badly in elementary school – daydreamed all the time, never learned how to spell, graduated from eighth grade counting on my fingers to do simple addition." Elsewhere he concludes, "I wasn't just unhappy. I was globally unhappy. I remember when I was about 10 standing in front of the mirror and telling myself, 'I want to remember I'm not happy. Grown-ups all want to tell me I'm happy because I'm a kid. But I want to remember I'M NOT HAPPY.'"

He would learn much later that he was what was then called manic-depressive. "I'd be manic for one day a year...It started very early; I just didn't have the ability to enjoy things."

Meanwhile his siblings were following the more acceptable paths of achievement. Two older sibs were national merit scholars. His younger brother Tommy was "doing quadratic equations at three." But Munsch was "dumb Bobby" around his house, often being promoted to the next grade simply because the school didn't want him to be in the same class as his younger and 'smarter' brother.

By his teens he says he was, "pathologically isolated...Not one friend. I didn't date, didn't go out. I stayed at home and listened to classical music and read science fiction."

Were he a teen today, security services would probably be keeping an eye on him wondering if he was a candidate for domestic terrorism.

But through it all, Munsch wrote poetry. "Funny poems, silly poems, all sorts of poems. Nobody thought that was important."

He now thinks that at 18 he should have dropped out and done the hippie thing, "But instead I did the good Catholic thing. The Catholic way to run away is to become a priest."

He joined the Jesuits studying with them for seven years in Boston. In researching this sermon called “The Theology of Munsch”, I googled words like, ‘philosophy’. Well, Robert doesn’t like to analyze his stories much, but I did get a hit on the word ‘philosophy’ – several in fact, all pointing to the same quote noted on websites around the world: “While I was studying with the Jesuits, I worked part-time at an orphanage to escape from deadly classes in philosophy.” (I can sympathize!)

Jesuit training did help Munsch. “They like their members to be functional.” So he learned to play squash, give speeches and submit to group therapy that he found hard, but beneficial. In short they taught Robert to become a more social creature.

Munsch left the Jesuits in 1970 having discovered that he no longer could believe all the things he was expected to espouse. What next? “I knew I liked working with kids...I decided to work in daycare until I figured out what I wanted to do. What I figured out was that I wanted to work in daycare.” He worked in a center in a Boston slum.

While changing a soiled diaper he met Ann, the woman who would become his wife. Reporter Jean Sonmor sums up the meeting this way, “Both were committed to saving the world. Both had dropped out of the middle class and both loved children.”

It was while at daycare that Munsch began telling stories – making them up on the spot. “I discovered that I could get the kids to shut up during naptime by telling them stories. For 10 years I did this without thinking I had any special skill. After all, while I made the best stories in the daycare center, most of the other teachers made better Play-Doh... I had no sense of self-worth about what I was doing.”

The daycare eventually lost its funding. Bob and Ann traveled looking for work. They ended up at the University of Guelph working in a lab preschool. Now, professors began to hear Munsch tell his now considerable list of tales. The wife of Munsch’s boss happened to be a Children’s Librarian. Together the Boss and his Wife urged Munsch to publish. He listened. The Boss gave him two months off.

Robert enjoyed 59 days of holidays and then on the last day wrote down 10 of his tales. He sent them off to 10 publishers. Only tiny Annick Press in Vancouver responded saying ‘yes’ to Mud Puddle published in 1979. Fame came slowly to Munsch through appearances at children’s festivals and annual publications of new books. Then came Love You Forever in 1986. Overnight it became Canada’s best selling children’s book and held the title through 1987 and 88. Although the publisher Firefly (Annick had turned that one title down thinking it would not sell) had no sales force in the U.S. the word somehow spread. In 1996 the NY Times updated a long overdue list of the best selling children’s books in America. Much to their embarrassment they learned it was Love You Forever, a title they had never heard of from a publisher that had no U.S. distributor. It had sold 8 million copies. Interestingly the book was never intended for publication – but I’ll come back to that in a moment.

All of Munsch’s stories appear in his performances first. He tells them into being. “Practice makes perfect” he says, often working a story for ten years or more before publishing it. “I play off audience reaction... Audiences of little kids are very transparent. They’re not dumb and they won’t sit there and be bored like an adult audience will.” Perhaps when he sees little kids growing bored he remembers his own childhood. He knows that little people can learn from stories, but only when the stories are interesting enough, so he works to make them entertaining using verbal pratfalls, big noises, repetitive words that are easily learned and, of course, words like ‘underwear’.

What comes through here is not only Munsch’s love for children, but his respect for them and their intelligence. The very act of speaking his stories into being demonstrates an intuitive understanding of interdependence. He can give the children entertainment and perhaps the occasional easy lesson in living, but he needs them in return as co-creators and editors of his stories. Munsch happily claims, “I never learned to write.” He gives full credit to the children he meets for their creativity and their critiques.

Often a particular child comes to him with the beginnings of a story. When Munsch uses one of these ideas, he always uses the child’s name for the starring character.

These days Munsch still loves to perform for children and can afford to do it for free more often than not. He likes to call up Children's Librarians when he travels and ask if he can come tell stories.

As some will no doubt know, Robert Munsch has attended the Unitarian Fellowship of Guelph "until the routine petered out when the kids got restless". Like many Unitarians today, he began elsewhere, as a Catholic in his case. But he found himself questioning the teachings of that church and, in time, its structure as well.

He rejected a faith that, for all of its many good points, is founded partly on the sinfulness of human beings. Having been told for most of his life that he was "dumb Bobby" he set out to find a niche where he could be affirmed for who he was. He found it in childcare and the love of children.

Bob and Ann tried to have a family of their own, but had two tragic stillbirths. "The doctor took me aside and said, 'There's a very good chance your wife is going to die if you keep trying to have babies. Why don't you do something else?...I was having books come out when I was having babies die. I would have liked to switch, if God wouldn't mind moving the cards.'"

In time Bob and Ann would adopt three children, but first there was the grief to pass through. They sought therapy together. The therapist suggested they try writing thorough the painful experience, imagining a whole lifetime of parenting. The result was *Love You Forever*. "It's my monument to my kids," he says, "People like it because it integrates death into life."

Though it has been criticized by some Freudian psychoanalysts and a few feminists, the book struck an instant chord with parents. It still sells over 1 million copies per year. I know why, too. When Lily was born she was given three copies...to add to the two I already owned.

Because it comes from the core of his own experience, *Love You Forever* says a fair amount about Munsch. Yes, it's sentimental, sappy even. I have trouble telling it without crying, but what's wrong with genuine sentiment? It is a story that speaks of undying love, of complete affirmation of one human by another no matter what has gone on between them. It is a book about unconditional acceptance given from parent to child. And then in the end, it shows that the child has learned that lesson and is passing it on to the next generation... and then back to his own mother.

It's the kind of lesson that truly learned can save the world. And in the end, we have to save ourselves in Munsch's view. In interview with Tom Harpur he noted that he had come a long way from Catholic theology, "My brief answer is that I am an atheist." He stopped believing in God after his children died. He then adds with a dart of anger, "I'm not saying there isn't a God, but there isn't a God who cares about people. And who wants a God who doesn't give a shit?"

For Munsch, the way is through appreciative human interaction. He looks for an open interchange of respectful affirmation from whomever he meets, no matter what their age or background. He believes intensely in the power of love and humour combined. These were the things that broke down the isolation of his childhood and brought him into full relation with the world. If it worked for him, chances are they will work for others as well.

### **Other resources:**

The CUC website has sermons from Unitarian Universalist ministers in Canada, original writings and music from U\*Us in Canada and links to congregational pages with sermons by our ministers and others. The material on the CUC website is offered for use within congregations free of charge but copyright remains with the authors. If you use material, please do think of sending a note to the author thanking them for their contribution. You are also encouraged to share original material from your members for this ongoing resource. For more information (including the French translation of Mark Morrison-Reed's reading: *The Task of the Religious Community*), See: [http://cuc.ca/worship\\_celebrations/worship.htm](http://cuc.ca/worship_celebrations/worship.htm)