

**In the Year 2525**  
Rev. Diane Rollert  
CUC Annual Conference and Meeting  
Sheraton Airport Hotel, Montreal  
**Sunday Worship Service, May 18, 2014**

I'm one of those people who has a sound track constantly playing in my mind. You know, name a topic and I start to hear the words and music to a song. So, as I began thinking about this conference, about building beloved community and sacred space beyond walls, I found myself thinking about the future, and things like cyberchurches, virtual communities, and that big question we've all been asking -- will we still need our church buildings? If it takes 15 people from Generations X and Y to replace one baby boomer to support a church financially and to fill all the volunteer roles that need to be filled today, what will happen by the time their grandchildren's grandchildren take over?

Suddenly, instead of thinking about the year 2025, I was thinking about the year 2525. After all, it's been five hundred years since Michael Servetus' heresy. Where will we be in another five hundred years? And then this song started playing in my head ... "*In the Year 2525*", this slightly goofy, dramatic one-hit wonder from two American guys named Zager and Evans. I remember hearing it when it first came out --in 1969-- and I guess it somehow got stuck forever in my subconscious. So here it is, "*In the Year 2525*", slightly adapted for a Unitarian audience.

*[“In the Year 2525” sung by Tara Bissett, Denis Barsalo, and Duncan Stewart on vocals and guitar, with trumpet by Michael Cartile. Here’s a link to the original song:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izQB2-Kmiic&feature=kp> ]*

A few words from the song:

*Ain't gonna need to tell the truth, tell no lie  
Everything you think, do and say  
Is in the pill you took today...*

*...You ain't gonna need your teeth, won't need your eyes  
You won't find a thing to chew  
Nobody's gonna look at you*

*...Your arms hangin' limp at your sides  
Your legs got nothin' to do  
Some machine's doin' that for you...*

*...Now it's been ten thousand years, we have cried a billion tears  
For what, we never knew, now our reign is through  
But through eternal night, the twinkling of starlight  
So very far away, maybe it's only yesterday  
Whoa-oh yeah... (Zager and Evans, 1969)*

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Are you stressed by the future? Or are you excited? Check your pulse. Notice your breathing. Let's breathe. Let's sigh. Shake out your hands. Do some yoga laughing ... gather up that energy... because we can, because we are physically together in the same room.

I confess, I *am* stressed, because I feel as though a lot is at stake. Not because we're together at this conference and today should be a really special service. (We have these wonderful musicians. That's all we really needed to have an amazing morning.) What's at stake is the future of us, as Unitarians, as a movement in Canada. What's at stake is the future of liberal religion.

Can we even begin to imagine ourselves into the year 2025, let alone 2525? Could we dare to dream about passing on a transformative legacy to generations that far into the future? Will that legacy be in the physical space we hold, will it be the community we build, or in the ideas we share?

In this past year, I have learned some powerful lessons about the value of our liberal religious presence when it finds its strength in physical location and community, but also harnesses the power of virtual networks in order to reach beyond our walls. This is the story I want to share with you today.

I'm sure most of you have heard a lot about Quebec in the past ten months, ever since our last government announced its Charter of Quebec Values. Until the elections on April 7<sup>th</sup>, when that party was voted out of power, many of us didn't know what the future would hold for us here.

To explain -- for anyone who wasn't following this story as closely as those of us who have been living and breathing it for months: The recently defeated government had proposed legislation that would have forced anyone working in government positions to remove their religious identity during the day, or leave their jobs. A Jewish doctor wearing a kippa, a Muslim daycare worker wearing a headscarf, or a Sikh teacher wearing a turban, for example, would have had to choose between their religion and their livelihood. In the months that led up to the recent elections, the debate was vigorous here. Every day, the newspapers and all the French and English media were overflowing with conflicting opinions on the matter.

But when the debate came down to thinking about real people, people we live and work with side-by-side, people who are trying to provide for their families, Quebecers ultimately said "no" to the charter. In particular, opposition to the charter was strong among minority groups, and it was especially strong among Quebecers under the age of 45, no matter what their linguistic or cultural identity. There are those who would say that younger people have forgotten about the hard-won battles against religious oppression during the Quiet

Revolution, while others would say that younger people have come to appreciate living in a multicultural world.

The charter had just been proposed when the leadership of the Unitarian Church of Montreal met for its annual retreat in September. Many, but not all of us, wanted to speak out. Eventually a team came up with the idea of a banner that would have the words "*Nous, tous ensemble*" floating above our chalice alongside a collection of different religious symbols. The message being, in French, "*All of us together.*"

The team brought the idea to a congregational meeting and there too, the debate was vigorous. Some were uncomfortable with the idea of using symbols that belonged to other religious groups. Others wanted to make sure there was both English and French on the banner. Still others spoke with concern about a pluralist message. Were we confusing religious pluralism with our Unitarian identity? And there were some who actually did want to see a secular charter in place, a charter that would remove all religious symbols from the public square, including personal dress.

We listened to each other. We voted. We were not unanimous, but the majority agreed to a banner with modifications. The final banner ended up with the words "*Vivre ensemble/Live in harmony*" and we hung it outside the church across our front entryway (where it hangs today). Despite the fact that the banner went up just in time for our entire street to be closed and ripped up for new sewage pipes, it was still noticed.

Television reporters and their crews came by to film the banner. Visitors who stopped by the church would tell me how impressed they were to see us so welcoming of other religious groups.

That is, to me, right there, the power of physical space. To have a building where you can hang a banner and express your values in trying times – just as our congregation and others did during the equal marriage act – is a privileged place in the public square, one we should not take for granted.

As the debate heated up around the charter, the world swirling around us became obsessed with religious identity. So it isn't that surprising that as a community we became obsessed with our own Unitarian identity. This was an intense topic of discussion throughout the fall and winter – and there were strong feelings, a real worry that Unitarianism might be getting lost in the process.

We spent a lot of time as a community talking about our own values as Unitarians. How else could we respond to a charter that claimed that it was the expression of Quebec's values? For some it became a question of asking: What are we presenting to the world? What's our message? A few even put it into marketing terms: What's our brand?

Is speaking abstractly about tolerance and inclusion a clear enough message? Shouldn't we settle our identity crisis once and for all, the identity crisis we've been struggling with since the turn of the last century? Are we spiritual, religious people whose roots are Christian,

or are we people who have left behind our Christian past and reject all belief in anything that might appear to be supernatural? Do we live on the religious or the secular side of the divide?

How grateful I am to be so challenged by my people. In eight years of ministry in Montreal, I don't think I've ever been as stretched or grown as much as I have in this year. Witnessing the people around me questioning, growing and stretching as well had a transforming effect. We pushed and pulled. We coaxed and caught each other, as we wrestled with these questions.

The more we reflected on our identity as a community, the more clarity I found in my own Unitarian values. These are my Unitarian values, I found myself telling every group I met with during those months: We value love, tolerance, equality, the freedom to question, a commitment to peace and to the earth, and the inherent worth and dignity of every person. You can be an atheist or a believer in God and still value many of the same things. This is the common ground, the core we continually seek.

I value diversity and the essential need to uphold the freedom of individuals to express themselves religiously as long as that freedom does not infringe upon the freedom of others. I believe in a secular state because it enables us to live in a religiously pluralistic society. I don't want to live in a state that privileges one religion above all others. And I believe that liberal religion itself needs to survive because it dares to ask the questions, it does not take truth as handed down from on high, and it has the power to bring people together into loving community.

For me, beloved community serves as a base of support, as well as a place to challenge assumptions, and to push us to speak with authenticity and clarity. We are so much stronger when we are held within the embrace of a community that loves us enough to confront us honestly.

The conversations my congregation had around questions of identity gave me courage. I went out into the world, to the press, and to testify with my conviction strengthened by my community and my faith. Each time I introduced myself, I explained that, as minister of the Unitarian Church of Montreal, I represent a community that knows what it is to live with religious diversity. Even Bernard Drainville, the minister responsible for the charter, stopped in his tracks when I said during my testimony at the National Assembly that we are a community of theists, agnostics, atheists and others. There was look of total surprise on his face. "*What? A community of what?*" ... as if the cognitive dissonance was more than he could handle.

Our theological diversity opens doors for us and gives us credibility, often in ways hard to imagine. We are a people who can bridge the religious and the secular divide. We understand both stories. We understand the pain, trials and shortcomings on both sides of the fence. We also understand the goodness and the humanity to be found across the divide.

And, what I've discovered is that social media can be an amazing tool for building a bridge across that divide. In the midst of the debate over the charter, thanks to members within my community and interfaith connections built over the years, we were able to mobilize a new group called Women Who Believe in Women/*Femmes qui croient en la femme*. We wrote an open letter to the Premier (Quebec's Prime Minister), speaking in defence of women's rights to manage their own bodies and dress; overnight, we became a cybercommunity of nearly 250 female clergy, lay leaders and others from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Then there were the YouTube videos that were created by a media team I belong to for the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal. Our goal was to share a simple, positive message that reflected the sentiment of the words of René Lévesque: < *Est québécois qui veut l'être.* > We are all Quebecers, no matter what our backgrounds may be.

The Unitarian Church of Montreal provided the space to film the videos, and we brought agnostics and atheists to the table with Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs for this multi-faith project. Had we not been there, those agnostic and atheist voices would not have been included. It was a perfect coming together of our physical space, with the support of community, and the strength of our Unitarian values, making it possible to meaningfully reach out beyond our walls.

So, in the past 10 months, since the charter was introduced (and came to its end), this is what I have learned, and this is why I believe Unitarianism can and will survive: We cannot be all things to all people, but we can continue to create fertile ground for growth. There is strength in being a voice for diversity. We choose not to live by dogma, but we can continue to seek a place of common understanding that allows for reasoned inquiry planted in fertile soil, surrounded by light and air that enables us to see, to wonder, to breathe and to touch the ground of our being.

If you tend toward the spiritual side of the spectrum, do not give up on us. Stay and remind us that there is beauty in the cosmos that we may never fully understand. If you tend toward the humanist side of the spectrum, do not leave us. Stay and keep us honest in our human endeavours. If you find yourself still seeking your place, wondering how you will live your life according to your Unitarian values, hold onto those ribbons that are tethered to something you cannot fully see. As we dance together, we are weaving a beautiful cloth that we could never weave alone.

When I step out into the world, beyond our walls, I carry my Unitarian faith with me, ostentatiously, conspicuously, without any doubt that we have the capacity to build bridges between the secular and the religious, between the old world order and the new world order. I believe in reclaiming the word "religious", because we are a people who are bound together. Our faith may not dictate one belief, our stories may not be part of one larger narrative, and we can even stop trying so hard to define the centre. Still, I believe we do have this common core that sustains us.

Our future is sure to see technological tools evolve faster than we can possibly imagine. But that is all they are: tools to use to spread our message. As we have been reminded so beautifully, virtual communities will always need physical communities, as launching pads, as places of refuge, as places to touch and be touched, to nurture, to laugh and to cry together in times of joy and sorrow.

Whatever we do, however we do it, in pubs or coffee shops, in traditional forms of worship or in new forms, our message needs to be clear. But it does not need to be a single, branded, dogmatic message in order to survive. Ours can continue to be a living, evolving tradition. And it will need each and every one of us here to carry it on. No one of us can do this alone. We must do it together. Humanity has survived not because of the strength of isolated individuals, but because of the strength of tribes and communities which found ways to weave meaning together out of the darkness.

So, here's the song "In the Year 2525" again, with words rewritten by me [*the group performs again*]:

*In the year 2525,  
We swear we will survive,  
With our dreams still alive, we may find...*

*In the year 3533  
Free and responsible search for truth's the key.  
Our children's children live to see  
Peaceful loving humanity.*

*In the year 4545  
The interdependent web keeps us alive.  
We finally learn what to do  
To keep the skies and oceans blue.*

*In the year 7510  
If there's a God, she says amen.  
You opened your doors to them all  
That's how you truly heard my call.*

*Now is still the time for us to choose the path that is just  
To open hearts and open minds with love  
and through eternal night, the twinkling of starlight  
reach out to those alone and build the bridge that takes us home.  
Whoa-oh yeah...*