

Confluence: No. 2

A Lecture Series Sponsored By

The Unitarian*Universalist Ministers of Canada

Canadian Unitarianism: An Idea of a Possibility

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At The Annual Conference and Meeting of

The Canadian Unitarian Council

Edmonton, Alberta, May 22, 2004

Only when the centre is truly empty

can the full possibilities of deep spirituality enter among us.

Ray Drennan

PART ONE

Last year the Rev. John Baros Johnson inaugurated this lecture series on a very high note. He's a hard act to follow. With some fear and trepidation, let me begin this year with a short story from the Hasidic tradition. A man was heard reciting the alphabet in a synagogue. He then said, "Dear God, I don't know how to pray, yet with these poor letters from my alphabet I am sure that you will be able to compose a great prayer."

Today, from these poor letters of my alphabet I trust that you, my learned listeners, will be able to compose a fine lecture. It is an honour to be here today, to give this the second, in what we hope will be an annual, lecture in our series called *Confluence*. The purpose of this lecture series is "to provoke thinking (imagine that) and in so doing inspire action and engender wholeness and integrity" (VIA Journal, Vision-in-action). I am grateful that you have thought it worth your while to be here to listen to my thoughts on the topic of *Canadian Unitarianism: An Idea of a Possibility*. If I don't speak too long I hope we have some time for discussion.

A WORD ON THE TITLE:

Perhaps you were curious about the title. It's not unique to me. Part of my recent sabbatical was spent visiting more than a dozen of our congregations. I did a very un-ministerial thing. I went to listen. I asked a lot of people what makes Canada, Canada, and what makes Unitarianism north of the 45th or the 49th parallel Canadian -much as the CUC's Principles and Sources Task Force is now doing. Some people answered very personally while others, claiming to speak for all, actually spoke only for their particular spiritual/social/political sub-group which they believed defined the centre. Whether humanist, cosmologist, NDPer, environmentalist, Christian or Pagan, each tried,"with

varying degrees of eloquence to define the challenged centre". Neil Bissoondath said something like that about Canada itself (*Selling Illusions*). It was Gilbert Bouchard though, from right here in Edmonton, who won the prize in my books. He answered, "Canadian Unitarianism is an idea of a possibility." Thanks Gilbert. Your answer resonated with me and stimulated more than a little reflection.

PROVOCATEUR

I can't say that my sabbatical research was particularly methodical. It isn't my style. I am neither historian nor sociologist. I am a preacher, and in every preacher there's a bit of *provocateur*. So, this morning I hope to provoke you and to provoke discussion among us. What you will hear will be a combination of my thinking, reading, living and quite frankly, my best guesses, accumulated over 25 years of ordained ministry. My apologies at the outset to those of you who are way ahead of me in thinking through these matters. Be kind. I'll put your name on the sign-up sheet for a future year.

I have been told that the best lectures are those in which the presenter first tells the audience what is going to be said, then says it, only to end by restating what has already been said. So, let me begin by outlining an hypotheses or two that I want us to work with this morning.

Firstly, I will argue that in much of our history and even today, Canadian Unitarian congregations have lived far too convergent with the mainstream of Canadian values and culture, rather than living as a much-needed confluent, challenging or counter-current force. I will try to show that sociologically our congregations have paralleled Canadian society, despite our rhetoric. When it was conservative so were we and now we are both mildly liberal. Since today our theological divergence has all but

disappeared, and since many of our liberal social action positions parallel those of the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops or the United Church of Canada, I want us to ask ourselves whether there is any possible room left for growth and whether perhaps there is any justification for our separate existence. Max Weber reminded us that all institutions are "somewhere on (the) way," from the original storm to a slow death by suffocation."¹ Where are we on that path?

Secondly, I will argue that there is an unresolved dichotomy within our Canadian Unitarian movement. Although we speak of diversity and embracing respectful engagement, our congregations are for the most part value tribes which promote specific value-laden, liberal agendas or ideologies. We are an exclusive tribe. Perhaps we should become **more** exclusive.

Thirdly, good preachers always have three points. I will argue that for us to survive and maybe even thrive, we must break loose from the past and make wide-ranging changes in our being, believing and behaviour. I will trace two paths which lie before us as possibilities. Following one we would become sharply dissonant, more extreme socially and politically. Following the other path we would move beyond religion altogether and become transformative in a spiritual way. I will argue that we should move in the latter direction and away from being mere social change activists, or a lobby group for liberal values. I will argue that we should move toward becoming what Tom Atlee has called "facilitators of cultural transformation."² This shift will unlock possibilities that lie hidden within this great idea called Unitarianism. We are going to cover a bit of ground so hang on. Let's begin.

CONFLUENCE: A SEDUCTIVE IMAGE | MAP

Confluence: isn't that a great name for

a lecture series? It is so evocative. In 1886, then Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier described Canada as confluence.

*"Below the island of Montreal, the waters that come from the north ... unite with the waters that come from the western lakes, but uniting, they do not mix. There they run parallel, separate, distinguishable, and yet as one stream, flowing within the same banks, the mighty Saint Lawrence, ... a perfect image of our nation."*³

What intrigues me about this statement is that Laurier could have been speaking about Canadian Unitarianism: confluent streams flowing "parallel, separate, distinguishable" within one body. We are diverse theological and sociological streams of Irish, English, American Loyalist, Icelander, European refugee and even a few Canadians, though not enough *Canadiens*, flowing separately and harmoniously together between the wide and welcoming banks of this great river called Canadian Unitarianism. The image is appealing. Does it, however, accurately describe us?

CONFLUENCE: A COUNTER-IMAGE MAP

Confluence can also mean "running into each other." Rather than the mighty Saint Lawrence, this word brings to my mind the Tobique River in New Brunswick where I have a cabin. Last summer, after many days of heavy rain, half of the river turned brown. Deforestation had eroded the soil and fish-killing guck flowed downstream. Below the surface I pictured a life and death struggle, as one stream fought desperately to keep separate and distinguishable from the other while the latter fought equally hard to control the whole river. Might this rendition of the image not better describe our experiences within Unitarianism?

MAPS: CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION

Confluence then is a more complex

self-image or conceptual map than it first appears. It is easy to get lost in the splendour of the image without much thought for its accuracy. Canada and Unitarians share this fascination with conceptual mapping and equally share an indifference, if not an antagonism, towards exploring the actual details of the territory. David Thompson, the explorer, is considered, "a mapmaker of the Canadian mind"⁴, though nobody wanted to buy his maps. Sherrill Grace, in her book *Canada and the Idea of North*, states that the myth of nordicity shapes and haunts Canada, even as ironically we huddle in the warm south, close to the US border. The idea of north informs our Canadian psyche, yet learning about the actual north, its peoples and traditions, and travelling to the far north is met with great resistance. "Don't ruin a good self-image or a concept by pointing out where the reality doesn't fit the map." Similarly many of us resist Phillip Hewett's cajoling to dig more deeply into the details of our Canadian Unitarian and Universalist histories. "Leave us with our precious images, Phillip. Don't confuse us with the topographical details." Obviously, this is problematic. Images and conceptual maps constitute and shape "*cultural mythology*".⁵ False and inaccurate maps only lead us astray.

As Canadian historian P.B. Waite (1874-1896) has said the mapping of history "is a false order imposed upon an immensely complicated reality; it is an arbitrary, and doubtless haphazard, selection of what really was."⁶ This morning I want to impose another "arbitrary order" on our past in an attempt to open up new possibilities for our future. I will step out of my usual role, that of cheerleader for things Canadian and Unitarian. Assume that I have already said all of the good stuff and piled on the warm fuzzies about us. My time is short and I want to focus on the critique, not just to be negative, but out of a belief

that this movement of ours is precious and holds within it an idea full of great possibilities, many of which we have not yet explored.

OUR USUAL MAP

When we draw a conceptual map of ourselves how do we usually position Unitarianism on the religious landscape? Do we not usually describe ourselves as intellectuals, liberal and free thinkers who, not bound by tradition, affirm and promote progressive and avant-garde values? We take pride in being ahead of the social and theological trends. We like to think of ourselves as a movement that pushes against the theological and social conservatism of Canadian society, a movement that accepts diversity, that fights against homogenisation, and challenges the establishment. Does the map fit the territory? Not easily.

DISCREPANCIES IN THE MAPS

Even though in the past Canadian Unitarians have been described as foreigners, "trying to undermine the traditional, respectable patterns of Canadian life" (*Unitarians in Canada*), from what I have observed and read it seems that our Canadian Unitarian congregations have been "*très Canadien, si non trop Canadien*". Michel Adams describes Canadians as "a tolerant people, socially liberal; and flexible, who find their path by their own thinking."⁷ *Très unitarien, n'est-ce pas?* I would argue that our self-image is at odds with the reality. This is so because we have focussed too much upon outspoken individuals and have ignored evidence coming from our congregational cultures. Has not much of our cherished self-image of radicalism been borrowed from American Unitarians; those literary, mostly well-heeled and famous American UUs who gave shape not only to Unitarianism but also to American society? How much of our self-image would remain if we subtracted these more outspoken ministers from among us and focussed

upon our congregations and their behaviours?

Certainly in Canada we have had some remarkable individuals, - some characters also -Elizabeth Hedge, Elizabeth Cushing, William Irvine, Margaret Lawrence, Angus Cameron, Dorothy Livesay, John Molson, Emily Stowe, the Workmans, Phillip Hewett and Charles Eddis and others. You know the list. We have even had a few of the rich and influential among them. Yet many of those who had been Unitarians 'back home', or who simply shared Unitarian ideals, seemed to stay at arm's length from our congregations, individuals such as Supreme Court Justice Wilfred Judson, Livesay and Lawrence. American UUs have had much the same problem. Benjamin Franklin, we are told, faithfully stayed away from all of the congregations that he supported financially: Presbyterian, Unitarian and Episcopal alike. Other noteworthy Canadians seemed to have drifted through our congregations and our ministry, such as William Irvine, Francis Potter and Harold Rosen. We must ask ourselves what was it about us that made them stay at a distance or leave altogether. It is too simple, and probably a rationalization at best, to blame their departure or their non-engagement on our radicalism. Were our congregations all that non-mainstream? It seems not.

SURVIVAL ISSUES

Others have said some of this before me but it bears repeating so that we are all on the same map, as it were. In Canada, Unitarians were not the establishment. Most of our members came as either political or economic refugees. Many came from what was called "the evening congregations," comprised of working class people who had little interest in intellectual matters and less ability in leadership. Most of the real theological and political revolutionaries went to the U.S. Canadian Unitarians were mainly pioneers: hence the theme of

this weekend. We must be careful though not to romanticize the pioneer whose daily reality is hardly recognizable in the popular image. Most pioneers were seeking a better life for themselves and were not interested in rocking the boat. Survival issues were omnipresent. Perhaps this is why so many of our congregations' stories seem self-absorbed with survival. To quote *Unitarians in Canada*, our congregations were, for the most part, "less eager for change than were their ministers, and tended to put up considerable resistance (even) to any radical alteration in their accustomed orders of service."⁸ In both English and French Canada people were seeking to preserve their values and culture and reacted against liberal revolutions. Like the larger Canadian society, Unitarian congregations were full of "great caution, reserve and restraint."⁹ Does this not ring true of your experience within your congregation?

FORMAL STANCES

It seems that "until recently Unitarian congregations as a whole did not take formal stands on anything, although they safeguarded the ministers' right to do so."¹⁰ Apart from a few cases of sanctuary, the one exception to this I found was in Toronto First which voted as a congregation to affirm that "Women will have equal rights and responsibilities as men" in 1845, 86 years before Canada got around to changing the law. I couldn't though find a date when the first woman was actually appointed to Toronto's board. Perhaps conservative old Montreal beat them to it. While a few individuals were revolutionary, our congregations and membership were for the most part apolitical, and reflected the views of the dominant culture in Canada.

WAR

On the issue of war, for example, during the First World War the Rev. Frederick Griffin in Montreal spoke out for pacifism; William Irvine, in

Calgary, for conscription of wealth, while most of the members of our congregations, like those in other Protestant churches, rose to patriotic fervour. Here in Edmonton, Unitarian layman, William Hardy Alexander, tried to purge the movement of anyone not wholeheartedly supporting the war. Today, many Canadians and the majority in Quebec are opposed to war. So are most Unitarians.

DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

Where were our congregations on the issue of democratic reforms in the 19th century? Montreal is always credited with being on the conservative end of things and too often we deserve it. In Montreal there was almost a split in the congregation, even before it was founded, over the 1837-38 Rebellion - as it was framed by the winners. You will remember that these conflicts in both Lower and Upper Canada were attempts to bring about much needed democratic reforms. Corder and most of the congregation were against such reforms. John Molson (the son), it seems, left the congregation with his money for the simple reason that one or two Montreal Unitarians fought in favour of the reforms. The situation was much the same back in the Ireland that Corder had just left; namely conservative congregations and outspoken individuals. I want to mention a distant family relative in this regard - not to boast, of course. William Drennan, son of a Belfast, 18th century, non-subscribing, Presbyterian minister Thomas Drennan, was arrested and tried for treason in the 1798 Rebellion. I am happy to report that he wasn't hung. The family has enough skeletons. William Drennan dared to challenge the social inequalities of his day and promoted fundamental democratic reforms; reforms similar to the ones that Corder and the Montreal congregation wanted no part of 40 years later.

IMMIGRATION

Where were our congregations on the

question of immigration? It seems for the most part we were just as ethnocentric as Canada itself. We saw ourselves as part of a British establishment and, although “not sharing much of the wealth, (we) shared its pride, and had much of the conservatism of its outlook and manners.”¹¹ Our congregations were part of the Canada which was, “sung, danced and constantly re-imagined by white Canadians.”¹² Not all that long ago, Canadian immigration policies were written by white, British Christians. These policies denied entrance to those who couldn’t be easily moulded into “good Canadians” and by that was understood into good Christians. Canadian churches, ours included, promoted a melting pot through what Canadian historian W. L. Morton, has called an “internal Canadian Imperialism by the so-called centre”¹³ or what another has called “anglo-conformity expectations”.¹⁴ One reminder of this will suffice.

In the spring of 1914, the *Komagata Maru*, with 376 Sikhs on board, sailed into Vancouver harbour directly from India to challenge the (Canadian) racially motivated Law of Direct Passage. They were not allowed to land. In July the *HMCS Rainbow*, half of Canada’s navy at the time, with soldiers pointing fixed bayonets at the unarmed passengers and Sikhs reciting the Guru Granth Sahib, ejected them from Canadian waters. “Not everyone noticed the irony that the Canadian Navy was being used to stop British subjects from landing on British soil.”¹⁵ It is a shameful moment in our history.

In preparation for this lecture, I read through the microfilm record of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver and in particular the Board of Trustees’ Annual Report of February, 1915. Seven months after this scandal, there was no record of the church’s position on the matter. Maybe I missed it, but there was an interminable silence as the congregation seemed self-absorbed

with its deficit, with congratulating itself on a new schoolroom that it had completed in the basement, and with trying to establish “a more dignified position” for itself in the community.

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

Where did our congregations position themselves on the Social Gospel Movement in Canada? New England Unitarians had influenced Salem Bland the philosopher and later mentor of the movement (1890).¹⁶ The “emerging religion of labour, as Woodsworth expressed it, was more a reflection of the culture of a Canadian intellectual than of a Canadian worker.”¹⁷ This should have made it all the more appealing to us. Why then did we not become the Labour Church? Any reading in depth of J. S. Woodsworth’s speeches will tell us why. The Labour Church promoted fundamental social change. It was socially radical. Unitarians were merely theologically liberal. Liberalism talks about change, all the while guarding social and political privilege.

Of late, through the CUC, Unitarian congregations have made some very important social justice statements. We have spoken out on Choice and Act of Dying, First Nations, peace and disarmament, reproductive rights, the environment and same-sex marriage. Valuable as these declarations are, they seldom affect our mortgages or our RSPs. Most of them are variations of the statements made by the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops or KAIROS.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

On the same-sex marriage issue our official position differs little from that of the United Church of Canada and liberal Anglicans. Here again we reflect Canadian opinion. It has just been reported that 47% of Canadians are now in favour of same-sex marriage, while in the U.S. the figure stands at 36%.¹⁸ Reginald Bibby recently said that the reason Canadians are more accepting of

same-sex marriage than Americans is due in part to the fact that Canadians attend church LESS often. To be honest, if we scratch below the surface in our congregations, will we not discover a wide range of opinions on all of these subjects, perhaps a reflection of the larger Canadian society? In this light Phillip Hewett’s book, *Unitarians in Canada* is perhaps an attempt to explain our bewilderment. If Unitarianism is sooo Canadian, how is it that we haven’t been such a rip-roaring, wild success here?

OUR CONGREGATIONS: A STREAM OF RESPECTABILITY

For the most part our congregations have for some time now been mainstream and respectable. In 1917, eleven years after the Montreal congregation moved into its building on Sherbrooke Street, Rev. Griffin could say, “Much of the bitterness and hostility displayed toward Unitarians in the past (has) by now evaporated. Our church is respected.”¹⁹ Today, even the feisty Winnipeg congregation has moved into a swanky new building in a posh neighbourhood. In some of my more cynical moments, yes even ministers get those, it appears to me that we Unitarians have eight principles. On too many days the first, and sadly the foremost reads, “We affirm and promote a respectable image for ourselves at all cost.” Might we not trace some of our problems around the “G-word” - no, not God but growth, back to this shift towards respectability?

OUR CONGREGATIONS: A STREAM OF INSTITUTIONAL TIMIDITY

Must we also not admit that too often our congregations and our movement have been timid creatures? Rather than bravely and willingly go where no other group has dared to venture before, too often we had to be pushed. Would Unitarianism ever have happened in England had the Independents, the General Baptists

and rigorous academic and independently-minded Presbyterians, who didn't care much for each other, not been pushed out and pushed in together by the Act of Uniformity(1662)? Would the Montreal congregation ever have left that drafty, much-in-need-of-repair building, a building that better reflected Anglicanism than Unitarianism, had we not been pushed out by the fire? Would we be here today, an independent Canadian movement, had John Buehrens and the UUA not pushed us?

Maybe we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. David Bumbaugh once said, "Even the most liberal of religions performs an essentially conservative function, seeking to preserve the best of the past ... functioning as a secure anchor in the ebbing and flowing tides of change and decay."²⁰

PART TWO

ALICE'S RESTAURANT

At this stage of my lecture I feel that I should maybe stop and sing a chorus from Arlo Guthrie's song, *Alice's Restaurant*. You might be in need of an intermission. I wanted to find a Canadian tune but neither *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* nor *North-West Passage* said what I wanted to say, so *Alice's Restaurant* will have to be it. You remember the song: *You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant/ You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant/ Walk right in it's around the back/ Just a half a mile from the railroad track/ You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant.*

About halfway through his 18 minute and 20 second song, after having told us all about Alice, the restaurant, all about the garbage, officer Obie and "the twenty-seven eight-by-ten colour glossy pictures with the circles and arrows with a paragraph on the back of each one ...," Guthrie stopped the song suddenly and said, "But that's not what I came to tell you about.

Came to talk about the draft."

Well, what I have been saying so far about our past is not what I came to talk to you about. I came to talk to you about our future. If what I have been saying describes something important about where we have been, where might we go from here? I want us now to focus on the two remaining hypotheses I mentioned at the beginning. The one talks about our schizophrenia and the other outlines possible paths for our future.

TWO MODELS AND THREE PATHS

As I thought about our future as a movement, and I have thought a great deal about it since hitching my wagon to this caravan, it seems to me that there are two very different, often conflicting concepts, about *how* we organize ourselves. Too often it seems that we preach one while we live the other and it tends to make us all a bit crazy. These two concepts offer the possibility of three paths for our future as congregations and as an association of congregations. I certainly hope we never develop into a denomination. The two concepts and the three paths address, in different ways, the fundamental questions of how we claim our identity, how we manage our differences and how we act in the world.

Let me briefly outline the paths, for I want to dispense with one immediately. On the first path we would become **an alternative religion**; a more distinctive value tribe as it were. On the second path we would become **an alternative to religion**; a centre for personal and cultural transformation. The third path sets up a **creative tension** between the first two paths, much like in polarity mapping. I will leave the exploration of the third path for those more able than I. Let me simply quote J. R. Saul in this regard: "*One of the long-standing lessons of the Canadian experience (ditto Unitarian) has seen the importance of*

living on several levels at once. Somehow we have found enough intelligence and developed enough curiosity to maintain this successful, but uncomfortable position."²¹

AN ALTERNATIVE RELIGION AROUND A CONSTELLATION OF IDEAS

For the time that is remaining I will focus on paths one and two. On the first path then, we would become an alternative religion, gathered around clearly defined constellations of ideas or positions. This may seem like where we are now but as I go along it will become obvious why I do not believe we are there yet.

Most of our congregations declare a belief in complexity, and honour a diversity of opinions. Most of us say we gather around our principles in a general enough way so as to allow multiple interpretations or applications of them. In theory we hope someone justifying military intervention in Iraq and a pacifist could be at home in our congregations and equally claim the centre - in theory. It doesn't seem to be working out that way. This is where the dichotomy comes in. It seems that many of our congregations have gone beyond generalities and gather around specific interpretations of the principles to which everyone ought to agree, if they are **really** Unitarian. In some cases it might not be too strong to call these constellations of ideas, opinions and behaviours, ideologies, whether they are acknowledged or not. Too often our congregations define their centre and their values with a certain "value rigidity".²² Kathleen Hunter once said that we promote "rigid political views alienating the monied people."²³

I am sure that each of us can come up with our own list of views, ideals and behaviours that might form these constellations within our Unitarian value tribe. They might, to name a few, include promoting pacifism and anti-globalization, being "green",

wearing Birkenstocks, not wearing suits, voting NDP, supporting the CBC, not talking to strangers at coffee, promoting gay marriage, and not driving SUVs, at least not into the church parking lot. On that last one I have already requested a special dispensation from my congregation, because my big gas-guzzling Roadmaster station wagon is over 11 years old and they know that they don't pay me enough to afford a hybrid. One brave soul in Calgary, having come from an African experience came right out and said it, "We Unitarians, we are a tribe." If you don't think that we are, take a moment and look around the room today.

UNINTENTIONAL EXCLUSION

Though we speak of diversity and inclusion we unintentionally exclude. Obviously in comparison with the surrounding population, we disproportionately represent the homeless, working class, military, members of the "New Conservative Party", Sovereignists, visible minorities, unilingual Franco-phones or the mentally ill. Our congregations develop certain cultures and ways of operating that newcomers and those outside these norms hear as messages about who will be accepted. We are a value tribe.

For this reason I would respectfully take issue with John Baros Johnson's contention in last year's lecture. John said that we can be distinguished from other religious groups because their "leaders speak in ways which are intended to shut down the conversation of faith."²⁴ I would contend that we equally shut down the conversation in our congregations. If someone believes in applying our principles in a fashion contrary to that of the majority, would that person's views be warmly welcomed **into the centre** of the congregation? More often than not we leave little room for such people and their views at the centre. They

are left to feel at best tolerated or patronized. We often shut down their ideas and force them into the closet. Either fit in, conform, be cantankerous, or leave and form your own Unitarian congregation down the street. No doubt the plan would be to enshrine your constellation of ideas at the centre of this spanking new Unitarian congregation.

TRIBE AND TRIBALISM

Most of us are painfully aware of this. So, what can we do about it? If we wish to remain a religion - later I will argue that we shouldn't - but if we wish to remain a religion, I believe we should stop beating ourselves up over the fact that we are for the most part a politically, socially and economically defined value tribe. Exclusion after all, is a necessary part of being a religion. Religions are by definition particular, tribal, cultural and exclusive. We drive ourselves crazy feeling guilty for the lack of diversity among us. Maybe we should accept the fact that as a religion, even an alternative one, we too are tribal and therefore to some degree exclusive. Of course simply admitting that we are exclusive and tribal does not mean we must foster tribalism. As a tribal faith we can meet other faith tribes and honour the *other* that is present with humility. Sadly, our Unitarian tribe has been a little short on that quality.

There are of course positive benefits to being a tribal religion. Being together with like-minded tribesmen/women is one of the reasons why our members continue to belong and participate regardless of the quality of the sermon or the coffee - not in Montreal of course, where the quality of both is excellent and fair-trade - at least the coffee. I am asking that we come clean about our biases and not flog idealistic diversity. In an age such as ours when the Canadian religious and political right, and especially a group called The Centre for Cultural Renewal, is getting better organized

and seeking to control more of the public square of Canada, it could be argued that Canada is more than ever in need of a tribal religious group like ours which hangs out on the liberal value edge, freely and openly gathering around liberal applications of our principles. Charles Francis Potter, one-time minister here in Edmonton said, "My main occupation during my ministry in liberal churches has been the often unsuccessful attempt to persuade the members to try to be really and broadly liberal." ²⁵

LEVELS OF DISSONANCE

As a value tribe, as an alternative religion, where might the path lead us? We could stay much as we are: liberal, relatively affluent, respectable, continuing to say the "left" things about Bush and the environment. There is of course a downside to staying the way we are. I wonder if staying as we are would give us much of a future. Our future might become as bleak as the one described by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History*.²⁶ "Daring, courage, imagination and idealism will be replaced by economic calculations, the endless solving of technical problems ... and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands." Some days that future seems closer than I wish to acknowledge. Think about what you spend most of your time doing in your congregation.

If we stay much as we are I don't see how we can expect much growth in numbers. I say this for two reasons. Firstly, sociologists are telling us that to the degree that a religious organization lives norms and values different from those of the surrounding culture, it is deviant. ²⁷ For a religious institution to grow there must be a certain level of dissonance (deviancy). Most mainline denominations and Unitarians are not really growing - shifting the chairs around perhaps. The sociologists tell us it is partly because there isn't

sufficient dissonance between us and the mainline culture. We already saw that earlier.

LIBERAL AND RADICAL

The second reason for lack of growth potential as we are has to do with our place on the Canadian religious landscape. In so many ways we do not differ all that much from the United Church of Canada, with its broad interpretation of faith and its liberal social justice agenda. If someone is looking for a place reflecting moderate, liberal, religious values, within a respectable religious organization there is usually a United Church which will satisfy them. What room is there left for us?

WORKING AGAINST YOUR OWN CLASS

Let me take our discussion a little further. This first path holds within it another option. As a tribal religion we need to ask ourselves a few troubling questions. Are the liberal values that our tribe promotes adequate? In which ways do these liberal values promote genuine social justice and in which ways do they simply prop up the status quo that favours our privileges as well-heeled, armchair socialists-capitalists with good intentions?

This path would call us to take a bold step, so let me be bold for a moment. I would suggest that if we wish to remain a cultural, value-specific, tribal religion, then we will need to move to an even less inclusive position. Yes, you heard me correctly, to a less inclusive position. We would need to become a more exclusive and more dissonant value tribe. We would need to sharpen our social and political positions, moving from mildly liberal to counterculture and radical.

Douglas Hall defines such a religion as one that lives out a “radical inability to accept the world as it is because it is meant to be different and can be changed.”²⁸ For over twenty years Gregory Baum has been encouraging the churches to move in this

revolutionary direction. “The mainstream (of Canadian society) nourishes a culture of injustice,” he says. It “is comfortable with the status quo. Since most theologians (and churches) belong to the middleclass (in order to be faithful), they (ministers and the churches) have to opt against the perspective of their own class. Theology (and the church) must be counterculture.”²⁹ Imagine what might happen if we were to choose to embrace this path; namely, to work against the privileges of our own class. Living as a counterculture religion would affect the way we live and spend and invest and holiday. The CUC from 1969-1996 outlined a road map for such a counterculture religion in their statements on economic justice. We, however, along with most of the Canadian churches, simply mouthed the correct platitudes regarding a “preferential option for the poor” ~ it was the “in” language of the time ~ yet we did not significantly change our place of privilege.

TAXES

Let me suggest one example of how such a counterculture religious tribe might act. Our Unitarian congregations could, for example, lobby the federal government to tax all religious institutions, including our own, much like the Mennonites did in the U. S. Once we achieved this right we could withhold our taxes in protest against increased military spending, environmental destruction and systemic injustice. A counterculture religious organization would act even at the risk of losing its buildings and its charitable status. Ironically there was a short time when the Edmonton Church was the only one in North America which paid taxes. They could have been the first to have withheld them.

PART THREE

NOT A RELIGION BUT AN OPEN SPACE OF RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT

I must move on. Perhaps it is time for another chorus of Alice’s Restaurant

since all that I have said thus far is really a preparation for what I have really come to talk to you about. This final path is what I want to leave with you, for I believe within it is the key to unlocking the revolutionary possibilities within the idea that is Unitarianism. Frankly, given our history, I wonder how possible it would be for our congregations and our movement to become that counterculture religion, politically and socially. This second path encourages us to move in another direction: namely, to a truly revolutionary spiritual position. Following this path would move us beyond a mere lobby group for liberal values and beyond social change activists. Ever since the 1920s, liberal Christianity and Unitarian generic Protestantism have had fading appeal among Canadians. Yet there has been little conversation among us whether Unitarianism should take, “an entirely different form ... with different goals, different symbols, and a different constituency to which to appeal.”³⁰ It seems to me that we are still NOT having that conversation today. I believe that it is time to have it. On this path we would move beyond religion altogether and fully claim our identity: that of being “not a real religion”, ironically within a land that has been described as “not a real country.”³¹

This second path holds great possibilities, and elements of it have been among us for many years, though we have merely toyed with it. We have always spoken of holding content at arm’s length and of emphasizing the search and the process. Theodore Parker was ostracized from almost every pulpit in Boston, including Unitarian ones, for daring to suggest such a direction. Our foundational work with WCRP and IARF has included parts of the path. For the last 40 years we have been aware that having so many converts among us keeps us preoccupied “with matters of belief and religion as doctrine - in the very (group) which declares these are

not the essence of religion.”³² When leaving the Montreal Church, Angus Cameron hinted at it when he said, “The question is ... not merely what you do or do not believe; the question is how, in what spirit do you now approach the problems and questions and the issues of life.”³³ Yes, elements of this path have been among us, yet for the most part the path has remained an unexplored territory.

Our congregations have seemed unable or unwilling to break free from their generic Protestant culture, our NDP-at-meditation position. We seem to have been more than a little afraid of the revolutionary implications of this call beyond religion; a little afraid “of becoming tumbleweeds if we detach from (our) ... roots.”³⁴ If some in our congregations are not yet used to the idea that we have gone beyond Christianity, obviously there is more than a little consternation at the thought of moving beyond religion. Charles Taylor says we fear “the very things that define our break (with tradition) ... will somehow be carried beyond feasible limits and will undo us.”³⁵ So we have merely toyed with the path. Each time we have come to the brink and looked over the edge towards future possibilities, we have backed away, somewhat desperate to find, or to force, a consensus of content which would define our centre. We must be careful as we proceed with the work of the Principles and Sources Task Force that such desperation does not drive us. Personally I don’t believe the centre of our movement or congregations formed around consensus on substantive issues is achievable, important or productive. It may even be a betrayal of the revolutionary idea that we are. Let me unpack that sentence.

NOT A CHURCH NOT A RELIGION AND NOT A FAITH

In order to embrace fully the possibilities inherent within this path beyond religion, we would need to leave behind once and for all the idea

that we are a church, even a liberal, avant-garde, post-modern church. We would need to work out our feelings about this and there are many. We would need to honestly admit to ourselves that we are no longer a religion. The good news is that there are few people looking or wanting to hitch their wagons to a religion. We would need to admit that we no longer have a “Faith”. We would need to stop using such language. Boldly we would empty the centre of any hope of consensus or the pet orthodoxies that seem to sneak in. No constellation of opinions, no social programs, no matter how noble, not even being green, or anti-war or anti-globalization; no beliefs, opinions, political positions, ideologies or theologies should sneak into the centre of our movement. Even diversity itself would not be the centre. Simply being diverse and complex is no guarantee of anything. A zoo is diverse and complex and yet I hope there is some difference between a zoo and a Unitarian congregation, although some days ...

WHAT IS LEFT? ... INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

So, you might ask, “What is left? What is left when the centre has been emptied?” I would say that only when the centre is truly empty can the full possibilities of deep spirituality enter among us. Let me repeat that, “only when the centre is truly empty can the full possibilities of deep spirituality enter among us.” The Tao Ti Ching speaks of this. “*It is empty yet infinitely capable... It is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities.*”³⁶ The centre of our movement could become that empty fullness filled with infinite possibilities. This path would move us beyond cultural, political and religious particulars and invite us to embrace fully the notion that beliefs and opinions and social justice positions have no place defining our collective centre or identity. Content is not the issue; process is. How we hold our beliefs and opinions and exchange

them with others is the issue.

Within our congregations, gathering in this empty/full space of respectful engagement, the military and the pacifist, the gay-marriage supporter and non-supporter, the universal and private sector medicare people, the humanist and the Christian would feel that their perspectives were equally heard and equally valid. Each would be honoured as they were. Each would be challenged to become all that they might be. Each would find a place of deep dialogue and exchange and no *should* as to how to interpret or implement the principles collectively or practically would enter. There might not be any principles at all, but simply rules of engagement or covenants of behaviour. Imagine what might happen if we left to one side our collective, tribal, generic protestant, political, social, theological and ideological positions so as to engage with each other in an open space of empty-fullness?

Obviously on this path our structures, both local and national, would need to be transformed. No longer would we spend our time facilitating, sometimes forcing, consensus around social issues. The CUC, our ACMs and the regional gatherings would have as their mandate to protect and to nurture that open space in which deep dialogue and personal transformation could occur. The purpose of our gatherings would be dialogue and personal transformation as each is invited to become their “whole and holy self.”³⁷ Maybe then we could truly become the quintessential Boomer religious community, without the narcissism that too often accompanies it. In his recent visit to Ottawa the Dalai Lama said, “The next century should be the century of dialogue.” We could become the community of dialogue.

How sad that in our global societies meanness and violence rather than respectful dialogue seems to have triumphed in the world. James Forbes,

senior pastor of Riverside Church in New York said, "I really think that ... (The Golden Rule) is not the current policy of our citizens." ³⁸ How tragic that in our world today it is considered spiritually naive or radical or counterculture to promote politeness, random acts of kindness, respectful engagement, dialogue, reverence for difference and amicable collision.

AMICABLE COLLISION

I like that phrase amicable collision. It takes us back to our roots and to two Irish non-subscribing Presbyterian ministers: Thomas Drennan, whom I mentioned earlier and his good friend Francis Hutcheson, the father of Scottish Enlightenment. Both men were greatly influenced by Lord Shaftesbury, who in the early 18th century, coined the term "amicable collision". Shaftesbury wrote, *Politeness ... kindness, compassion, self-restraint, and a sense of humour (are) ... the final fruits of a 'polished culture ... We polish one another, and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable collision. To restrain this, is inevitably to bring a rust upon [our] understanding.*" ³⁹

Such amicable collision does not mean snuffing out or smoothing over disagreements, but rather opening up spaces that are safe enough for critique, appreciative listening and communion. Within a safe and open space we could experiment with how to honour deep dialogue and otherness. What is more sacred than communion with otherness, entering the holy of holies of another's hopes and dreams and loves and losses? Is that not the sign of a deeply spiritual and mature movement? What is spirituality after all but, "that which connects one to all that is." ⁴⁰ Honouring otherness has always been the central aspect of authentic spirituality, the place of deep and nourishing spirit, although we have too often deflected it onto a transcendent being rather than exploring it within the human family.

IDENTITY: VERY LIKE CANADA ITSELF

Since Unitarianism left Christianity, we have spent too long struggling over our identity. Following this path would bring to a close these seemingly interminable identity questions. Ironically in this regard our identity turns out to be *très canadien aussi*. Even though I have mixed feelings about Pierre Trudeau, since he seemed to talk more about civility than he lived it, he certainly had a conceptual framework for our country's identity that makes sense.

Canada, he said ... is a human place, a sanctuary of sanity in an increasingly troubled world. We need not search further for our identity. These traits of tolerance, and courtesy and respect for our environment and one another provide it. I suggest that a superior form of identity would be difficult to find. ⁴¹

Need we look any further for our Canadian U*U identity? On this path, when we have moved beyond religion, identity would simply be the way we invite others into respectful engagement. Our identity would be that of dialogue, respectful engagement, and bridge-building. We would be known as a place where opinions may be heard and greater understanding possible, where inclusive structures are birthed. Is this not a revolutionary idea? Paul Woodruff says it this way, "*We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent ...*" ⁴² Wouldn't it be great if when people thought of Unitarians they thought of reverential engagement leading to transformation?

NOT A DEBATING CLUB BUT FACILITATORS OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Some of you might be arguing with me here. "Ray, such a path would merely turn us into a debating club; a club that fiddles as our global community

burns." I would ask you to stop and to reflect for a moment. Where do you really believe that hope for humanity lies? Do you truly believe that hope for this planet and for all its living beings lies in partisan politics and lobby groups, that cajole and manipulate the political agenda through shouting the loudest or through money or military might? Surely we have seen where such partisan politics lead.

Traditional value-based, tribal religions, which have been duped into becoming mere voices for partisan politics, have been part of the problem, not the solution. We Unitarians are part of the problem if we believe that our ideas, our way of being or our truth (enlightened of course) is the only answer, the one-size that fits all. Does the world really need another tiny, religious-based lobby group? There are lots of other groups more effective than we are. Does the true hope for humanity not rest in the possibility that we can learn to understand and celebrate the diversity that we are? Doesn't the hope for humanity lie in the possibility that humanity will find the wisdom to enter into deep dialogue and human communion across vast distance, from which truly respectful and inclusive structures of being together on this tiny interrelated planet can emerge? Is this open space not the essence of deep spirituality; the birthplace of peace and justice? Harrison Owen has said, "*the depth of love is measured by the breadth of the Open Space.*" ⁴³ An entire lecture could be devoted to that one sentence.

Comprehension, communion, peace, safety, justice, well-being and the survival of the planet surely depend on developing forums of conversation, dialogue, appreciative listening, the embracing of complexity and the welcoming of the marvellous diversity of humankind into the structures of societies. Rather than being debating societies, might our congregations not model for our world a political,

cultural and spiritual “pluralism [that] understands human life as existing in a multiplicity of spheres, some overlapping, but each sphere enjoying a limited, but nonetheless real, autonomy.”⁴⁴ Rather than sitting in our towers word-smithing, might our congregations not be turned into centres of deep dialogue, personal transformation and training grounds for “facilitators of cultural transformation?”⁴⁵ Our communities then would send out individuals transformed and equipped who, within effective coalitions, could transform society into respectful communities of inclusion and justice. Within Unitarianism there is the seed of that possibility. We could become known as a place where spirit is strong.

CONCLUSION

I must end here. Georges Erasmus, commenting upon the Lafontaine and Baldwin era of Canadian history, said “Creating and sustaining a national community is an ongoing act of imagination, fueled by stories of who we are.”⁴⁶ I hope my alphabet today of paths and ideas has stirred your imagination, helped provoke your thinking, and will inspire you to act, if even just a little. Let me sum up what I have been saying.

Unitarianism has lived too convergent with the mainstream of Canadian values and culture, rather than being a much needed confluent, challenging, countercurrent within it. Our movement, its liberal values and place of privilege in our one-third world nourishes a culture of injustice at home and is strangling the other two-thirds world. As I see it the status quo won't do, for it offers little room for growth and vitality. Perhaps we are further down Max Weber's path, somewhere between “the original storm (and) a slow death by suffocation”⁴⁷ than we care to acknowledge most days.

I have suggested two paths which we might follow into the future. One

challenges us to leave our mildly liberal agenda and transform ourselves into a more distinctive counterculture value tribe, both politically and socially. Path two challenges us to boldly move beyond religion altogether and to dare to gather spiritually in a transformative way. Rather than mere social change activists, or a lobby group for liberal values we would become places of personal and cultural transformation. I believe that this second path offers us the best chance of success. Canada and our world need spiritual forums and open spaces of deep dialogue to effectively communicate across vast distances of land, philosophy, culture and belief. In this idea rest vast possibilities.

HOW MIGHT WE GET THERE?

How might we get there? How might we move beyond where we are and start out on the path? We could wait. We could wait until we are pushed once again, though there is no telling what shape our movement or our world might be in by then. There doesn't seem to be a way to ease into it. It most probably would require us to simply jump into it. Nearly every advance of the human species has been a leap in the dark, whether it was that first creature which crawled onto land or the first person who tried to fly. It begins by imagining it.⁴⁸

May we together in this movement learn how to imagine boldly and then to leap and then to fly. May we imagine ourselves into the future. May we imagine ourselves anew in order to bring to birth in this land more of the possibilities inherent within the dynamic idea of Canadian Unitarianism. Our survival as a country and as a species and maybe the survival of our tiny, fragile and inter-dependent planet may depend on humanity imagining the possibilities inherent in this bold idea.

Marni Harmony said it this way and I will end here: “*I say that we shall never leave the harbour if we do not hoist the*

sail. I say that we have got to walk the waves as well as the solid ground. I say anyone who goes without consciousness of this will remain chained to a rusty anchor. May the journey find us worthy.”^{49 50}

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PART ONE

1. In what way does your congregation and our U*U movement parallel or not parallel Canadian social values and ideals?
2. In what way is your congregation and our Canadian U*U Movement respectable and mainstream? What makes us so?
3. In what way is your congregation and our Canadian U*U Movement counter-culture and radical? What makes us so?
4. How does your idea (map) of Canadian Unitarianism fit with the actual details of the territory of our history and reality? Where does it not fit?
5. What is the purpose of religious community?

PART TWO

1. In what way does your congregation or our Canadian U*U movement live deviant or dissonant from Canadian social values?
2. Does your congregation promote a particular constellation of values, positions or ideas? Who might be excluded because of this?
3. We are a liberal religious group which promotes laudable social issues. In what ways, if any, do we challenge the privileges of our own class?
4. What would need to change in your congregation and in our Canadian U*U movement in order for us to become a counter-culture / radical alternative religion? Should we move in this direction?

PART THREE

1. Is Canadian U*Uism a real religion? Should we be one?
2. Spirituality is "That which connects one to all that is." What does this mean for you, your congregation and our Canadian U*U movement?
3. In what way might your congregation and our Canadian Unitarian movement be different if we emptied our centre of all content and became fully-empty?
4. "Only when the centre is truly empty can the full possibilities of deep spirituality enter among us." What do you understand by this statement?
5. What would need to change in order for your congregation and our Canadian U*U Movement to become centres for respectful engagement and deep dialogue? Should we move in this direction?
6. Where do you believe the hope for our world lies?

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- A special thanks to Ruth di Giovanni, Elizabeth Speyer and Ann Vickers for all the help in editing and proof-reading this lecture.