

## A NEW VISION FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM IN CANADA

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### OPENING WORDS ~ *Rev. Shawn Newton*

Let us remember that there is a transformative power at the centre of this faith that works on us over the long haul – when we let it, and sometimes even when we resist – wearing down our prejudices, challenging our assumptions, enlarging our hearts and widening our capacity for wonder and awe at the great gift of life we find in this present, precious moment. In this moment, let us worship together.

### STORY FOR ALL AGES *Mary Smith* ~ *A. U'Ren*

*(Mary Smith is the town's knocker up – the person responsible for waking people up in the morning. She does this by shooting dried peas at their windows.)*

### READING *from Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*

Interconnection between and among Unitarian Universalist congregations is embedded in our polity...that is, in the way that we govern ourselves. We are independent congregations committed to living inter-dependently with other congregations. So, our polity could be said to include a covenant between congregations.

In 1997, the UUA Commission on Appraisal wrote a report on the relationship between congregations. The report was titled *Interdependence*. This was part of the introduction:

One of the deepest convictions that unites us as Unitarian Universalists is a belief in the possibility of a beloved community among people, whether members of a family or the most diverse representatives of humanity. We affirm that such communities are in part a natural outgrowth of human life, but that they must also be deliberately formed and reformed, nurtured and renewed.

[This spiritual vision sees] the individual person and the community of persons in harmony with each other, the world around us, and the spirit of life itself.

Unitarian Universalism seeks to embody this spiritual vision and to advance its fuller realization. We seek a way of being in the present that leads toward the future. A primary way that we try to embody our spiritual vision is through the congregation, the face-to community of people who seek to walk together faithfully, courageously, and joyfully. We want our religious community and the network of relationships that extends beyond itself to be a living model for the good of human relationships through life....

There is an inherent tension between the concepts of community and autonomy, similar to the often-expressed tension between responsibility and freedom. However, community and autonomy do not exclude one another but enhance one another, for the essential function of the congregation is to link the individual to a religious community. It is to mediate between the individual and the 'church universal.' It is to link the local congregation with other congregations and indeed with peoples of faith universally....

We take our commitment to congregational polity (the autonomous congregation) as an established principle. We recognize that this principle is deeply rooted in our sense of

the local congregation as the center and spring of our vitality as a religious movement. But we also note that, because of our strong emphasis on individual freedom and local autonomy, the associational dimension of our congregational polity has tended to be ignored...

The future integrity and vitality of the Unitarian Universalist movement depend most directly on deepening our sense of mutual accountability.

## MESSAGE

*(This message included a visual component...circles were distributed to folks through the congregation...each representing a interlocking concept/entity.)*

I'm getting out my little pea shooter...as a reminder that we're always in need of 'waking up'.<sup>1</sup>

I wasn't sure where or how that reading would land with you...fascinating? Boring?

Somewhere inbetween? But it seemed important to share as a foundation for some inter-related concepts that I'm going to explore this morning.

And I'd like ask your help in creating a visual for these concepts... As we go along, I'll ask for a few volunteers. If you volunteer, you'll be asked to hold one of these *circles*, and to remember what it represents, to lift it up when you hear it mentioned, and to maybe participate in an exercise of connection later.

The first, broadly, represents 'our interdependence.' This was the theme of last week's service, and we imagined several word pictures that might help us to better envision interconnection... as atoms of stardust continually remaking themselves...as an entwined network of strings or vines...as points of light in an infinite web of connections...as drops in an ocean, and as oceans within each drop. We spoke of interdependence as an inextricable reality, and saw that to be is to 'inter-be' with all that is.

We also talked about what interdependence demands of us...because our connections can be used for good or ill. Our choices, our words, our actions all create ripples in the sea of interdependence; who we are and what we do matters.

Would someone volunteer to hold this circle...representing our interdependence? Your job is to notice when interdependence comes up today...and when you hear something about it, to raise it up, and maybe wave it around a little. Hint...you're going to be the busiest one, I think. Be bold!

The second concept for today is our web of congregations, which we can call the Canadian Unitarian Council, but which really extends beyond our national borders. The CUC is, in part, what John just read about...and he offered that reading as a way to give you a very broad picture of how we as congregations govern ourselves, along with the need for us to be mutually accountable. We are independent and yet we inter-be with other congregations, as well as individual UU's.

Would someone volunteer to hold this circle...representing the CUC?

This one can be hard for us to see. As a Unitarian congregation in Peterborough, we are rather isolated. There is no other Unitarian congregation just down the road. And this is a reality for almost every Unitarian congregation in Canada. Some...like the congregations in Winnipeg or

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<sup>1</sup> References the story "Mary Smith" which tells of a woman whose job it is to go through the town shooting peas at windows, to wake people up so they can play their part...as bakers, and maids, and governors...in a vibrant community.

Thunder Bay...are as far as an eight-hour drive from the nearest CUC congregation. (So, we're actually quite fortunate to be in a virtual clump of sixteen UU congregations in Southern Ontario.)

Still, it can feel that we function pretty much separately from one another. How many of you have visited another UU congregation? One in Southern Ontario? How many of you have been to a CUC event...an annual meeting or a fall regional gathering? Have you ever called the CUC office or reached out to one of the staff? How many have attended a CUC training...leadership school or lay chaplaincy or youth advisor or something else? Been on the CUC's website?

All of these things are represented by the circle that \_\_\_\_\_ holds.

There's a big, big sermon that could be done about what interdependence means in the context of our association of congregations...a sermon that connects those two circles...interdependence and the CUC...a sermon that would begin with the struggle for religious freedom that brought so many settlers to this continent...the fight for separation between church and state...which envisioned a community of free churches who relied on one another for mutual support, care, AND, at least historically, for admonition of one another (maybe early Unitarians had some pea shooters too! To wake one another up.)

*Circle.* Then we have this congregation, this community of gathered souls...UFP. We are independent and autonomous...we are self-sustaining and self-governing. We...whoever the 'we' includes at any given point...are the ones who make this community what it is. We make it happen and make it happen the way it happens. And, we are the main resource we have for responding to any call for love and justice. Each other. Us.

Would someone volunteer to hold this circle...representing this congregation?

BUT remember, always remember, that we are conjoined with a wider web of UUs... joined both at the heart and the hand. We may be able to name these circles separately (UFP and the CUC) but they are completely interdependent. They provide resources to us, and we provide resources to them. Sometimes that comes from a neighbouring congregation, or an individual UU somewhere, or from Unitarian organizations in other parts of the world. Together, we are larger and more impactful than any one part. Together there are infinitely more ideas and exponentially more energy. We are connected to all of this. All of this possibility. All of this love.

I believe that the connections themselves...that reach out beyond the body that is this congregation...are essential to our life. These connections give us strength...vitamins, you might say...or oxygen...so that we can really live. This web of congregations, and Unitarian Universalists around the world, feeds us. Enlivens us. Emboldens us. Challenges us. Wakes us up. That is...if we're listening. If we're not too sound asleep.

And we, as a congregation, and as individual UUs, do the same for all of them.

And then there's you. And you. And you. And you. Who will hold these circles?

And each of us has a role to play, just like Mary Smith in today's story. Whether or not you like this being compared to shooting peas, it is a truth that we each have a role to play in 'waking one another up'...and in being woke up...and waking ourselves up. We depend on one another...we inter-depend on one another.

And that's the real focus for today...that our interdependence is central to Unitarian Universalism, and is also central in the new CUC vision statement, adopted in May 2017, which begins "We envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice." Our interdependence calls us to love and justice. I love that line.

So this circle represents this vision statement. Who will hold it? This represents the CUC's Vision Statement.

But just saying this... We envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice...reminds us that there is something missing from this web that we're vision casting. We are called to love and justice because we see the voids or lacks or spaces where there is not love, where there is not justice. We are well aware of the places where we have not lived up to a vision of a beloved community. Every day we see that the world is hurting...children are hungry, our political and economic systems depend on exploitation of millions, the ice caps are melting, racism is rampant, we live on stolen land<sup>2</sup>...Any picture of our interdependence has to include these sad realities of war and devastation and violence in the world.

This circle represents all the hurt in the world. Who will hold it?

So it is all of this. Interdependence as the ground of how we understand ourselves. And despite that interdependence, we live on a hurting planet where love and justice are sorely needed. There's the association of congregations and communities that we call the Canadian Unitarian Council. There's this congregation. And you. And you. And you. And you. And me. And there's our shared vision...that we can envision a world in which our interdependence...a web made up of all of these things connected...calls us to love and justice.

Let me tell you just a bit about how the CUC's vision statement came into being. As an association of independent congregations, overseen by a volunteer board and administered by a small paid staff, just about anything the CUC does requires input from the member congregations. When the CUC Board determined that it was time to recast its vision, they put together a Vision Task Force who led us in three years of study and consultation. Common truths emerged, and the process culminated in this new vision, which includes five aspirational statements which we'll read together at the end of the service. And this was adopted at last year's CUC Annual Meeting, which is a gathering of delegates from all of our congregations.

And so the challenge now is to live into this vision. We envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice. This vision recognizes we are not THERE yet...we are not yet completely woke. It looks forward to another time...rather like MLK Jr saying "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

We dream of a world of love and justice. We envision making love a reality, making justice a reality.

We.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Fiona Heath, A Beacon to Light the Path, The Canadian Unitarian

But we have a history of hyper individualism – a legacy which makes us resistant to communal truths. It is hard to get us to think as a “we” when we are used to thinking as an “I”.<sup>3</sup> We are truly inextricably entwined, AND it is difficult for us to see this.

And here we have it so visibly portrayed...separate circles...seemingly isolated. And, we envision a world...a world in which we are inextricably aware of, awake to, our connections.

If I could shoot a pea at each of these circles...these windows into our imagined separateness...would we ‘wake up’ to see the ways in which we are called to get up, and get out, and play our roles in a society of mutual relatedness...one in which love and justice are the norms?

Let’s see them all. Can you see how these circles might connect to one another? Can you imagine what that interconnectedness...our interdependence... looks like?

This new vision expresses the deepest hopes of Canadian Unitarian Universalism. This vision lights the path toward that future, toward a world we want, a world we can help create, that we can imagine into being.

As Canadian Unitarian Universalists, we envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice.

May we wake up to this world of possibility. Amen.

## **RESPONSIVE READING**

### *The CUC Vision Statement*

**All:** As Canadian Unitarian Universalists, we envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice.

**West:** As Canadian Unitarian Universalists: Seven principles guide our choices, Six sources nourish our spirits, Five aspirations help us grow.

**East:** We aspire to be: Deeply Connected. We strive to foster healthy relationships amongst and within UU communities, with the broader world and with all life.

**West:** Radically Inclusive. We strive to create hospitable, diverse, multi- generational communities.

**East:** Actively Engaged. We strive to work joyfully for a just and compassionate society, experimenting with new forms of community.

**West:** Theologically Alive. We seek to be ever-evolving in our understanding, open to new knowledge.

**East:** Spiritually Grounded. We seek transformation through personal spiritual experiences and shared ritual.

**All:** Holding this in common we come together, committed to the growth, sustainability and nurture of this our liberal faith

## **CLOSING WORDS**

~ *Starhawk*

When a system is whole and healthy, when it is based on relationships of interdependence and cooperation that further resilience, diversity, abundance, sustainability, creativity and freedom, it exhibits what humans call ‘justice’.

May our lives be dedicated to healthy systems of interdependence, love and justice.

May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Fiona Health, sermon “Choosing the Circle” February 12th, 2017