

Universalist Unitarian Church of Olinda, October 8th, 2017,

Rev. Fran Dearman, Interim Minister

Thanksgiving Sunday: A Sermon in Three Parts,

engaging John Ralston Saul's "Canada: A Fair Country",

and the recent visit to Stratford of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Beverley McLachlin.

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday. En français—Action de Grace.

Many years ago my ship was unloading grain in Quebec City. I was roaming around some that afternoon, and wandered into the old church in the lower town, first set up about four hundred years ago. I looked up, and there was a model ship hanging there, a few feet above our heads. This beautiful model of a sailing ship was an offering, an expression of thankfulness for safe passage from the people whom the ship had carried across the waters.

Let us give thanks for safe journeys, let us give thanks for harvest home, let us thanks this day, and every day, for health, for love, for peace and friendship.

PART ONE: THESIS. Beverley McLachlin at Stratford

I give thanks for Stratford Ontario, where I visited last weekend. There was theatre. There were walks by the river. But I especially enjoyed two particular dramas starring Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Beverley McLachlin. Seems that Madame Chief Justice is a big fan of Stratford, also.

The first event was a mock Appeal, initiated by Romeo against the Prince of Verona, that Romeo not be exiled to Mantua. Two thousand people filled Festival Hall to see this! The three judges and two lawyers made sure they got a good show. It would appear there are a lot of ham actors in our court-rooms!

Former Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson appeared on behalf of the Prince of Verona, to affirm, tongue firmly in cheek, the right of her prince to do whatever was needful to keep the peace, including expelling unruly elements. Others spoke against exile, lifting up the right to identity, to belong somewhere. Much mention was made of the charter of rights and the constitution. Sonnets were expanded, at length. *[This Appeal was co-sponsored by CBC Radio's "Ideas" programme, and can be seen on line.]*

At the close, Madame Chief Justice reserved judgement—Shakespeare, she said, had set up too messy a scenario for a clear decision.

The Chief requires that the law have clarity, a beautiful clarity.

Next morning saw the Avon Theatre filled. Madame Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada Beverley McLachlin, who has announced her retirement as of December 15th of this year, was interviewed on stage by long-time CBC journalist, now retired, Lloyd Robertson.

Both at the Appeal and in the Interview, the Chief's passion for the law was clearly evident. She spoke of growing up in Pincher Creek, where she learned how difficult life could be for folks; the Chief requires that the law have compassion, that good law should make peoples' lives better. At Pincher Creek, young Beverley had gone to school with children and youth from the nearby Reserve. On the bench, she has participated in significant court decisions regarding indigenous rights and First Nations. Chief Justice Beverley upholds that the law is a Living Tree: we grow, we learn, and the tree of law grows with us.

Let us pause for a moment, and consider what in our lives rooted in compassion, has grown into a beautiful clarity, unfurling like a living tree. What new thing, in law or elsewhere, has made your life better?

SECOND SECTION: FIRST NATIONS

I'm going to change gears a little now, and pick up the thread of First Nations, mindful that Thanksgiving in Canada coincides with Columbus Day for our neighbour to the west, north, and south of Essex County. Columbus Day is also known nowadays as Indigenous Peoples Day in the United States.

A few years ago, some of my beloved colleagues in ministry decided that they needed to read a really serious book; so willy nilly I had my mind improved. But in the end I was grateful to the leadership of my beloved colleagues that led me to read this thick heavy book! The book we read was John Ralston Saul's "A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada", published 2008.

I would commend to you, similarly, comedian Will Ferguson's book, "Why I Hate Canadians", published in 1997—which also lifts up issues affecting indigenous peoples in Canada. So many new books are emerging that enrich our understanding of this Canada where we make our homes—books that make heard the voices of indigenous persons.

After due discussion, a review of the reviews, and even reading the actual book! the UU Ministers of Canada decided that Saul's book is not a history book; it is polemic—a deliberately controversial attack on a political opponent. Saul's book is not history, but it does make me want

to read more Canadian history, and learn why Saul gets so excited about the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701.

I looked it up. There's a commemorative stamp and everything!

The Great Peace of Montreal, August 4th 1701 is important to Essex County and vital to the settlements of Detroit, Windsor, Amherstburg and environs—it is the Great Peace of Montreal that made it possible for the fur trade to follow the waters westward.

About forty aboriginal nations, numbering over thirteen hundred persons—they could have filled Festival Hall at Stratford—forty first nations, Huron, Algonquin, the Iroquois Confederacy, and beyond—travelled far, spoke much, and came to agreement with Louis-Hector de Callière, governor of New France, at Montreal. 1701.

One might think of it as a North American fair fur-trade agreement....

The Great Peace of Montreal endured some sixty years—three generations—until breached by force of arms and General Sir James Wolfe at the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City.

The influence of the Great Peace of Montreal endures to this day.

The basis of Saul's argument is that Canada is essentially a métis nation, that Europeans survived their first two hundred years here because of the generous mentorship of the First Nations peoples. Saul argues that some characteristics of indigenous peoples shaped Canadian culture ever after.

First, Saul argues that indigenous culture offers a model of inclusivity, and so, on a good day, we would naturally enlarge our circles of community to include others—as Hebrew scripture would have it, to welcome the stranger amongst us.

Further, Saul argues that this indigenous model of community, coupled with the best of French and British law, would lead us to a policy of minimal impairment—that being in the majority is no licence to trample on minorities; rather that any change enacted by a majority should diminish others as little as possible.

Next, Saul argues that the indigenous model of community calls for the building of relationship and continual on-going re-negotiation. Relationship means we keep talking to each other. We keep in touch. We check back in, again and again. We are wary of lines drawn in the sand. We have immeasurable patience with one another as we walk towards mutual understanding.

Modern authors on relationship say much the same thing; certain phrases have entered our daily speech: for example—How do you feel about that? Does that work for you? What do you need out of this? Where's the win-win? Continual ongoing re-negotiation takes resources,

commitment, time and patience. Lasting peace—and hope for the future—are well worth that effort, well worth the price.

When I consider the price of patience, I am mindful of a movie called “The Devil’s Brigade”, based on the Special Service Force in World War Two. It seems that while the brigade fought in Italy there was an officer, a former football player, who was negotiating the surrender of a trapped enemy unit. There was a land line telephone; the officer became impatient, and he slammed down the phone and said, to heck with it, let’s just take the hill, which they did. But men died who did not need to die, because their leader chose to charge a heavily defended position, rather than take time to negotiate. And I can understand that; negotiation takes its own form of patient courage.

According to John Ralston Saul, the indigenous model of ongoing re-negotiation is part of our Canadian cultural heritage. From this gift for relationship and patient courage we can build a lasting peace and a hopeful community.

We need leaders who will look beyond fear and greed and self-interest and manipulation, to look beyond our egos to our values and to the vision of society that we imagine.

Leaders emerge in response to time and place and circumstance. Some leaders just hold things together, and that’s a good thing; some inspire, some model a reassuring confidence. Each leader is unique, each will see their leadership wax and wane over time. Each, in their moment, offers a vision of hope.

“Leadership for Dummies” puts it this way: “successful leadership really requires that you do only three things, [and do them consistently, with no surprises]: elicit the cooperation of others, listen, and put others before yourself.” The rest is details.

Let’s go back to John Ralston Saul’s vision of Canada, the fair country. (That’s the meaning of Olinda, isn’t it—the Fair Country?)

John Ralston Saul’s polemic of 2008 leads up to an attack on the leadership of Canada for, well, reluctance to lead. Saul berates civil servants who do not generate constructive policies, and businessmen who would rather pillage their companies than take on the responsibility of owning a company that does real work and creates real wealth.

Saul charges that too many of our leaders in business and politics have forgotten who they are and where they are and what they should be doing. To know who we are is a deeply religious question, one that shapes our shared values, fosters a healthy community, and helps us engage

our conflicts in a healthy, respectful manner. When we consider how we do leadership—and we all do leadership—let us remember who we are.

SECTION THREE: WHERE DO WE GO WITH THIS?

I invite you now to take a moment and call to mind the teachers, leaders, and family members who have helped shape you, whom you most admire. Was there some special moment, some good day, some event, some decision, that stays with you? Was there a sermon that left some seed within you? A service that moved you deeply? A judgement at law, perhaps, that made your life or the life of someone you love, better? I invite you to remember the ministers you have known—I invite you to recall two good things you remember, moments where you found inspiration, and perhaps one thing you might have wished had been otherwise. Judgement involves balance, and seeing all sides. For whom, for whose work, have you been thankful?

I believe we are people of worth and dignity; and so is everyone else. I believe we engage the world through an essential reverence—a due respect— as modeled in our feelings for the trees, the waters, and the high mountains. Let us extend that feeling of reverence also towards one another. Let us offer no less to one another, and let us expect no less for ourselves.

IN CONCLUSION, there will always be two or more good ideas in one place. There will always be room for conflict. May there always be good leaders who respond to the call to serve their communities. May there also always be room for continued negotiation, and ongoing communication—the teachings of our métis nation.

May it be so.

Bibliography

Sharon Strand Ellison, “Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication”, 1998-2007. One of many books on healthy communication models.

Will Ferguson, “Why I Hate Canadians”, 1997. Ferguson’s review of Canada’s formative history and ongoing social justice issues engages aboriginal concerns, among others, at length.

Robert Latham, “Moving on from Church Folly Lane”, 2008. Latham speaks to a range of church policy issues, especially the systems dynamic of the pastoral to programme size shift, and that nothing happens unless someone makes it happen.

Marshall Loeb and Stephen Kindel, “Leadership for Dummies”, 1999. Much of the book is geared to the corporate model, and little to churches or non-profits, but still there is much that is basic and useful in a congregational setting.

Horace, “Odes”, Book 2, tenth ode, line 9-12; a poem about the middle way.

John Ralston Saul, “A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada”, 2008. Saul argues that Canada’s heritage as a métis nation includes some healthy patterns for nationhood, especially inclusion, ongoing negotiation, and minimal impairment. Much of my interpretation of this book, and of Saul’s argument, emerged from a group reading among the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada.

Film, “The Devil’s Brigade”, 1968, starring William Holden and Cliff Robertson, based on the formation of the first Special Service Force in the second World War.

Various personal communications from the Interim Chat Line.

This sermon is adapted from a sermon delivered at the Unitarian Church of Calgary in February of 2010 concerning communication skills and adaptive responses to conflict; that sermon was adapted for an address on leadership presented at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax, May 15th 2011, and again adapted for presentation on Thanksgiving Sunday at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Olinda. The Olinda version engaged experience of two events at Stratford, September 29th and 30th, 2017, and various media announcements re the imminent retirement on December 15th, 2017 of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada Beverley McLachlin, whose career includes notable decisions specific to First Nations.

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