

# Essential

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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In this prime time for home streaming of movies, shows, and music, it has been interesting to see the how pop culture has adapted to the realities of the pandemic. In early March, it only took a few days for singer Lady Gaga's latest music video *Stupid Love*, to be parodied into the song *Stupid Cough*, about coping with the latest aspects of our lives. I'll add that both of these videos were remarkably fun to watch.

The American singer, Chris Mann, made an entire cottage industry out of parodying pop music songs and adapting them to reflect our emerging culture in the wake of this year's pandemic.

Many of these parodies are intended to bring a measure of humour during this difficult time. One of his parodies, however, is more of an homage... a reinterpretation of Canadian singer Alanis Morissette's classic *Thank U*. Alanis Morissette's original song is an act of thanksgiving to the many people and places that have made her life what it is. Chris Mann's *Thank U Frontline* kept the thanksgiving theme and adapted the song for this time, seeking to recognize as many workers as he could think of.

The question of who is an essential worker is a tricky one. When the government of Ontario first came up with a list of essential workers who were allowed to work outside the home, the list went on for 74 items...

and many of those items included several sub-categories. A lot of people were considered *essential*.

This wasn't without some controversy. It was noted that some types of work catered only to some very special interests, rather than fundamental infrastructure for our society to function.

At the same time, one might note that several *roles* were not in that list. This is partly because some of these are not remunerated, such as stay-at-home parents, but at a deeper level, it is also because the question of what is essential, hinges on *who* it is essential to.

The Ontario essential workers list has since been revised. Some kinds of work, such as construction on certain projects has been deemed less urgent, when balanced against the priority of reducing the spread of disease. But the question lingers about what it is that we *need* for us to go about our lives, to live, to survive, to thrive. Each of these is a slightly different question. Each is important.

When Chris Mann parodied Alanis Morissette, he went over a large span of occupations – and roles. From the very evident healthcare workers, to the store clerks, truck drivers, sanitation workers, teachers, stay-at-home parents. Some of these have historically been less glamourized, and yet we are more deeply aware of how vital these all are for communities.

When Chris Mann names appreciating all that we take for granted, he specifies what that is – everything.

Really, all workers that make our life what it is, are often – in some way – unrecognized at different points in our lives... people who do things that we don't know *how* to do, or we don't *want* to do, or didn't even *know needed* to be done.

In his short story "Circle of Friends", speculative writer David Eagleman observes that the people we know, who already offer so much

in our lives, are still a tiny fraction of the folks who make our life what we know it to be.

My friends, over the past couple months, you will have heard a word come up increasingly often and increasingly broadly – *heroes*. It is being applied to an exponentially growing category of people – and rightly so. There are millions of people who are risking their lives every day. Some went into their work knowing the risks; some knew it was risky, but it is now even riskier; some never thought it would involve potentially lethal risk; and some just need to get the work done, no matter what, because they have a duty - duty to themselves, duty to their family, or duty to their communities.

I'm not worried about over-using the word *heroes*. I know that, if anything, I'm underusing it, overlooking people whom I don't know, and might never be aware of how they are part of my life.

As the National Worker's Day of Mourning draws near this Tuesday, April 28, I am reminded that the people who are making a living, in my local community and my global community, are always giving of themselves, sometimes at great, clear and present risk, and other times with unexpected dangers, or at the expense of other parts of their lives.

With some of the things we're doing without these days, we are also getting a grasp for another dimension to this question of what is essential in our lives – another one of the revelations of this special time.

As we see our spending habits shift, we are also getting clarity on those things that we really *really* need, as opposed to those that we *thought* we wanted... but upon consideration, probably don't make the impact in our lives that we have made them out to do.

Travel for commuting has decreased noticeably over the past several weeks, and with that, air pollution. Some of it has been out of necessity,

and will return over the next year. Some, it is now clear, may simply be unnecessary, and many things could be done differently to carry out our daily business, with a smaller impact on our environment.

The David Eagleman's story "Circle of Friends", which I offered as a reading, is a thought experiment in awareness about the people who we don't often think of, and what would happen if we suddenly found ourselves in a reality where the only people in our lives were the people we actually remember, leading us to eventually miss the vital contributions of people we have never met.

This year, we are taking part in a somewhat similar, real-life experiment. Professor Paul Monks, from the University of Leicester declares that "We are now, inadvertently, conducting the largest scale experiment ever seen" in relation to observing our suddenly-reduced impact on the environment. This experiment, I might add, also includes considering those things we can do with less, as well as the people who we cannot do without.

There are services that are not on the Ontario government's list, which we are still missing. Things like grooming services that cater to our sense of dignity, and which are nonetheless not considered a matter of life and death. Even medical supports that are important to our own sense of well-being are sometimes taking the backseat to the more pressing question of the pandemic. And yet, these have an essential quality, that is sometimes difficult to express.

My friends, there are intangible things that we are becoming more aware of – our sense of freedom, our tactile sense of community, our sense of security in livelihood, or even in our expectations of daily routine. These are things that are both secondary to public health, and yet essential to our long-term sense of self and community.

What does this mean? I am not going to give you a final pronouncement on what is categorically essential and what is not. If we were to draw up a list, we will likely disagree on some specific items.

My friends, the deeper revelation, is on the clearer truth that is being exposed to us – that many of the things that we’ve brought ourselves to rely on, may not be nearly as essential as we’ve made ourselves to think, while others we rarely think of are far more essential than we may have imagined, and that *we* are much more essential to each other than we might realize.

For all of you, and all the people in our lives, we are thankful.  
So may it be.  
Amen

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*Suggested hymns:*

**#16 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple**

Words: Joseph Bracket, 18<sup>th</sup> cent.

Music: American Shaker tune

SIMPLE GIFTS Irregular with refrains

**#352 Find a Stillness**

~)-| Words: Carl G. Seaburg, 1922-1998, based on a Unitarian Transylvanian text,

© 1992 UUA

Music: Transylvanian hymn tune,

~)-| harmony by Larry Phillips, 1948- , © 1992 UUA

**#67 We Sing Now Together**

~)-| Words: Edwin T. Buehrer, 1894-1969, alt © UUA

Music: Adrian Valerius's *Netherlandtsch Gedenckclanck*, 1626,

arr. by Edward Kremser, 1838-1914

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