

Reading Tea Leaves

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

23 May, 2021



Flying Bee © 2021 Rod E.S.Q.

With Victoria Day coming up tomorrow, we have a major Canadian holiday in our sights.

But there's another worldwide holiday that you might have missed last Friday – it was International Tea Day on May 21. And this day isn't some self-proclaimed holiday by some random guy on the internet, it has the full backing of the United Nations General Assembly. Now, if you haven't heard about it, it might be because this was only the second year it's been implemented, and its purpose is to expand awareness about the global

importance of sustainable tea agriculture around the world, recognizing that tea is a major economic source of livelihood for many, and it can be even more sustainable, for our planet and the farmers, if environmental and fair-trade best practices take better hold – which is to say, if better standards are adopted.

There's also a similar holiday of this sort in Japan on March 28: it's the commemoration of a fellow named Sen no Rikyu – who was a major influence in the development of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Now these ceremonies can have some very exacting standards for when, where, and how tea is prepared, served, and consumed. The standards matter – and they also shift. There are, indeed, many schools of the Japanese tea ceremony, and I suspect, each of them was developed for its specific cultural setting.

Many of us might not conform to those particular standards if it's not part of our culture. But every once in a while, we might bump into *other* standards for tea. In the case of the International Standards

Organisation's standard *ISO 3103 – Tea – preparation of liquor for use in sensory tests*, the standard is there for a very specific purpose. It lays out very specific instructions on equipment, portions, and timing. Sam Wendover and Tom Scott, however, have made videos pointing out that those particular standards are there for the goal of ensuring that the preparation of the tea is not a variable in experiments regarding flavour perception. It is an important standard – for *that* specific purpose. Outside of that scope, the best cup of tea is the one that suits *you* best – and any company you might *eventually* have.

Standards, however we define *and* redefine them, help us navigate the fog of the future – offering us guidelines that can help ground us whenever what's next is uncertain. And they also require a degree of interpretation as situations shift.

We continue to be in a time when it's increasingly obvious that... the future isn't obvious. Over the past year, it has become increasingly clear that having clarity about the future is an imperfect science, and that even educated guesses are still... guesses.

As we read the proverbial tea leaves while we attempt to make sense of what's in store, we can nonetheless find comfort in the knowledge that, yes – there are guideposts along the way, which help us and our society move along, with a hazy map... or at least a steady compass to point us through the haze.

And in the coming months, we have *some* idea of what we expect our timelines to be for things like in-person gatherings and other things we haven't been able to do for a while. When and how these things happen will depend on whether we meet certain standards, on things like vaccination rates, and the feasibility of other safety protocols.

We've talked about vaccines, and how it was important for researchers and regulators to hold them to a high standard of safety and efficacy before they were made available to the public. At the same time, there was some flexibility in streamlining the clinical trial processes, to

reduce lag time and red tape. This was done while still keeping the core standards on safety and efficacy in mind.

But standards can be deceptive. The published efficacy rates for our current approved vaccines have been quoted as ranging from 60-95%, giving the impression that some are substantially better than others. Epidemiologists have been quick to point out that the meaning of those numbers doesn't represent what we might think it does. For starters, they measure slightly different things – in trials that were conducted in different places, at different times, and facing slightly different variants.

But there's an entirely different matter at play – those numbers also don't answer what are possibly more important questions. They relate to infection rates, but where the vaccines really shine is in preventing serious illness, hospitalization, and death... and using *those* metrics – those standards – all vaccines in Canada are *virtually* 100% effective. (This of course is not medical advice – your healthcare provider is a better resource.)

My friends, the standards matter – when you know what you use them for, who you use them for, *when* you use them for.

In our Unitarian Universalist congregations, we are familiar with a number of standards. Perhaps the best-known standard in our North American setting is the covenant to affirm and promote the 7 Principles. These Principles haven't always looked the way they do now – the first 6 were only adopted in 1960, and the 7th principle is the newest, adopted in 1984.

You may have now heard that there's been talk of adopting an 8th principle to clarify our commitment to dismantle racism and other oppressions. In fact, some individual congregations have already adopted it, and our system of governance leaves room to do that, regardless of whether the Unitarian Universalist Association or the Canadian Unitarian Council have done so. The fact remains that even

in the case of this well-known standard, we know that it has changed, and that it can do so unevenly.

You may have also heard that – for a few brief days – it looked like the Canadian Unitarian Council – the CUC – had indeed adopted the 8th Principle at its Annual General Meeting a couple weeks ago... as it turns out, the process that took place earlier this month did not meet the standards for that kind of decision to be formalized, but it did show that there is widespread enthusiasm for us to take bolder action in the coming months.

This is more than a pedantic debate on technicalities, it is partly about following our denomination's legal commitments, as a non-profit, and perhaps more importantly, honouring more deeply our 5th Principle promise in following a democratic process – another standard that we have set for ourselves – that ensures that our collective voices have been heard on the matter, while also moving as swiftly as we can.

And one of the steps toward that goal is taking part in the kind of conversations that the CUC is hosting this coming Saturday and again later in June. (I also encourage you to read the CUC letter “A Way Forward for the 8th Principle Process”, which will answer many of the questions you might have.)

It will also require a degree of flexibility, being open to embrace a degree of imperfection, and perhaps being willing to live with some degree of dissatisfaction if the precise wording of the new principle doesn't exactly match your preferred wording. In working toward a general consensus, not everyone will get everything they want, but we may work toward something that we are OK with, and can support.

There are other standards in our tradition – ministers have a set of standards on conduct and professional expectations. How exactly those apply in specific circumstances *can* and *has* changed, but the fact that

they are there guides us on our goal of offering the best service that we can, under the circumstances.

Our liturgies – the order of service – in each individual congregation can have many commonly recognized elements across the country and the continent... you can usually tell when you're at a Unitarian Universalist gathering. And we know that they are also different in each congregation – sometimes they are different within the same congregation, depending on the time and space in which we operate. The last few months have shown us that flexibility on how we gather and hold a Sunday service is important, even as we keep a general sense to guide us on what is important as we search for truth.

My friends, in the coming months, new questions will be coming up. Questions on how might continue to gather as circumstances change – quite possibly for the better. We will be exploring the feasibility of in-person gatherings, as well as how we might incorporate our new knowledge of how to offer multiple platforms to make our services accessible to our wider community.

My friends, the answers to these questions still remain somewhat enshrined in the fog of the future. But there will be some standards, from our covenants, our principles, our values, and our practices, to help guide us and point us in the direction that may best suit our communities. My friends, the standards might not always matter in the sense that we think they do – but they *do* matter. And perhaps the best standard – and guideline – that we have, is our covenant, our promise, to proceed in love.

So may it be,
In Solidarity and Love,
Amen

Copyright © 2021 Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

#145 As Tranquil Streams

~)-| Words: Marion Franklin Ham, 1867-1956

Music: *Musicalisches Hand-buch*, Hamburg, 1690, adapt.

WINCHESTER NEW

#299 Make Channels for the Streams of Love

Words: From Richard Chenevix Trench, 1807-1886

Music: American folk melody, arr. by Annabel Morris Buchanan, 1889-1983, © 1938, renewed 1966 J. Fischer & Bros. Co., harmony by Charles H. Webb, 1933- , © 1989 J. Fischer & Bros. Co.

LAND OF REST