

The Mosaic of Our Gathering

Some Thoughts on the 2005 Eastern Regional Fall Gathering of the CUC at Kingston

By Jean Pfleiderer

When I became a Canadian citizen not quite two years ago, I participated in a ceremony. I went to this ceremony because that is one of the things you must do to become a citizen, not expecting it to be a particularly moving experience for me. It was, certainly, very nice, having my son Andrew on one side of me, a young woman from China who had been a student of mine on the other, and dozens of other people—123 of us in all—from more than 30 countries, all singing *O Canada* in both official languages and several unofficial ones, all at once! But after all, I was not a refugee fleeing oppression. I was a United States citizen, and the sea of faces happily taking on the rights and responsibilities of a free north American society didn't look that different to me from dozens of similar ceremonies I'd seen on the evening news in the U.S.

In fact, I think I knew full well that I would not see in this Canadian ceremony the dedication to a noble idea of nationhood that is expected at such a ceremony in the U.S. As Charles Eddis has said, being an American is more than a matter of birth or citizenship, it is an ideological commitment. Frankly, as the francophone judge led us in swearing fealty to an English Queen, the picture of what it would mean to be a Canadian seemed a little blurry to me; certainly there seemed to be no ideology attached.

But then, we were told what we must do to be Canadians. Not what we must believe, mind you, but what we must do. And what we must do was so simple: we must participate in civic life, the judge said, and we must help our neighbours. Being a

Canadian was not an ideological commitment. It was an exercise in civil discourse and decency.

I think something similar might be said about being a Unitarian. Is it fair to say that this, too, is an exercise, not a commitment—a spiritual process, and not a theological commitment? Humanism—that rational, Enlightenment approach to truth-seeking—has not just influenced, but is right at the heart of, the tradition called Unitarianism. And humanism is probably in large measure responsible for a Unitarian notion that the emphasis in the words “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”¹ belongs on *search*, not on truth and meaning. There is a long-held recognition that it’s the journey—the search—and not the destination that matters.

Our deepest roots, of course, go back into 16th century Poland and Transylvania, well before the Enlightenment, to people who were not satisfied with a protestant reformation of what had been a catholic church, but insisted on going further in their thinking than the boundaries set by either of those groups. But then the Polish church all but disappears; the Transylvanian church labours on more or less in isolation. One of the things I like about Unitarianism is these odd discontinuities in its history—it does not have a single “grand narrative,” but rather lays claim to a variety of stories that reflect certain kinds of thinking, typically the kinds that result in dissent that goes beyond the current dissenters. The stories come from various times and places.

¹ “The Principles and Sources of Our Religious Faith / Les principes et les sources de notre tradition religieuse,” as adopted by the Canadian Unitarian Council / Conseil Unitarien du Canada, http://www.cuc.ca/who_we_are/principles/principles_sources.htm#x

As Phillip Hewett says, various “eighteenth-century movements had a direct influence in Canada, not so much through the spread of literature as by immigration.”² We ended up with small congregations being started by preachers and thinkers from Ireland, England, the U.S.—even Iceland. Canadian Unitarianism is not just another American export, despite its long association with the UUA.

There’s a world of difference between the evolution of Unitarianism in the United States, radiating out as it has from Boston, and the evolution of Unitarianism and Universalism in Canada, where it is a product, yes, certainly, of some of those New England thinkers, but in combination with the ideas of Irishmen in Montreal, Icelanders in Winnipeg, and many, many lay-led discussion groups, “fellowships” like our own here in Kingston that goes back fifty years now.

Canadian Unitarianism recognizes that the huge, organized, self-confident Unitarian Universalist religion to the south does rest upon a grand narrative, one that does not take us into account. And I think that we Canadian Unitarians recognize our task to be, not to create another, counter, grand narrative here in the north, but instead, like the political confederation that defines our geographic boundaries, to be a loose federation of small groups, each with our own story about truth and meaning, full of respect for and enjoyment of all the other stories.

And that is what makes our gathering together like this so important. Our Eastern Regional Gathering, at its heart, is meant to be a place to swap stories, to share the harvest of our religion which we have grown in the rich soils of our individual congregations.

² Phillip Hewett, “History of the Unitarian Movement,” http://www.cuc.ca/who_we_are/history/history_hewett.htm

We've called this the Eastern Regional Gathering mosaic:



But really that's not quite the right metaphor. Gorgeous as a mosaic can be, intricate in design, brilliant in colour, greater by far than the sum of its individual parts, mosaics have one significant drawback as a metaphor for our gathering. And that is, that the individual bits that make up the pattern have to be glued in place; they are, literally, stuck being this and only this pattern. Perhaps a kaleidoscope would work better as an image for us. At any given moment in time, we gather together to form a beautiful pattern, and then in the next moment, an equally beautiful but quite different pattern. In the moments of our Eastern Regional Gathering, the Mosaic represents but one of the many wonderful patterns we have created. Is this one somehow better now, this morning, than it was on Friday night when it sheltered mostly empty frames? Not necessarily. On Friday night it was stark, intriguing, suggestive--and these qualities have value. They are the very things

in life that invite us to do something, to be creative. This morning, it is colourful and warm and fulfilled. And these qualities, too, have value. They nurture us, they join us together, they bring us into harmony and provide us with a kind of peace. They gather us in.

We call what we do here together a gathering. That's a homey word, isn't it, redolent of gathering in the harvest, and then gathering together to give thanks for it. In many traditions, this time of the year, the harvest time, is seen as the beginning of the year, precisely because we gather in and store the harvest, which will sustain us through the coming year and provide the seeds for next spring's sowing. Let it be a beginning, then, for all of us, as we return to our congregations to start the cycle anew.