

THEMES FOR A CANADIAN THEOLOGY

a sermon series  
preached to the  
Unitarian Congregation of South Peel  
by

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THEMES FOR A CANADIAN THEOLOGY: a sermon series

The four sermons which follow began life as an attempt on my part to reflect on the role of Unitarian Universalist theology in the context of life in contemporary Canada. Originally, it was to be a series of three sermons; but before the first sermon was preached, I spoke on Robbie Burns' birthday about Burns' role in Scottish liberal religion. Given the impact the Scots have had on Canadian history, culture and life, it should not have surprised me that I found parallels and lessons to be drawn from Scotland's history to our own, and our present position. So the Burns sermon appears as a prologue.

It should be understood that I use the word, 'theology,' in its broadest sense. Theology, to me, is the human endeavour to make sense in ultimate terms of the experience of life and death. It is not simply 'words about God,' but every human attempt to inquire after the meaning of human existence.

Some have complained that my interest in "Canadian Contextual Theology" is a narrow nationalism. This charge is common whenever Unitarian Universalists, by their very name an internationalist movement, reflect seriously on their presence in Canada. It was a point of discussion in the organization of the Canadian Unitarian Council in 1961. My interest began with my attempts to "re-Canadianize" my immigrant self, to touch my ancestral roots, and learn what has grown from them and how I might make my home here. Beyond my personal concern, I serve as minister to people who live in a particular time and place and therefore experience the world from a particular point of view. Before one can approach the world, one must know from where one comes. In these sermons, I attempt to speak to the perspective born of Canadian experience. I firmly believe that Canada has much to teach the world.

Mark Mosher DeWolfe



THE KIRK'S ALARM

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January 26, 1986

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Was Robert Burns a Unitarian? Surely the English historians of our faith think so, and with good cause. And even more assuredly we can be certain that the pious Presbyterians of the Kirk of Scotland of Burns' day were glad to be rid of him. Burns was sceptical of Calvinist religion, and a man with a personal life which the kirk was proud to find scandalous.

To understand Burns' Unitarianism, we need to understand the kind of Calvinism against which he and a sizable number of his contemporaries rebelled. Scotland, as you probably know, became Calvinist in theology under the leadership of John Knox, whose name adorns colleges and Presbyterian churches across Canada to this day, testifying to their ancestry among our Canadian Scots settlers. After successfully resisting the efforts of the English to impose episcopal church government - bishops - the independent Church of Scotland, the Kirk, was established with Presbyterian polity. This form of church government gives a limited kind of independence to the local congregation, but authority for maintaining faith and morals within the church community rests with a presbytery, a council of elders elected from the various churches in an area. This form of polity exists here today in both the United and Presbyterian churches in Canada.

The Presbyteries promulgated a form of Calvinism which emphasized "double predestination" and the "innate depravity" of humanity. According to Calvin, the all-powerful God has known throughout all time which people will and will not be saved. God elects eternally who gets saved by grace and who doesn't. And the second kind of predestination is that we are predestined to be able to do nothing about it. Our human nature is so corrupt, so depraved that nothing we can do can affect our salvation. Morally, one is expected to behave well to demonstrate that one is of the elect.

As you can see, this denies the existence of any such thing as free will, human goodness, and the moral efficacy of human action. And as you can imagine, as a doctrine it goes without opposition or moderation only for short periods of time. The usual form of opposition is called Arminianism, named not for the people called Armenians but for a Dutch theologian named Jacob Arminius. Arminius believed that people have a choice to either hear or reject God's call to salvation. Things we do can in fact affect our destiny. Arminius was a liberal Reformed theology, and his difference with the "unreconstructed" Calvinists was what in England, Scotland and the U.S. marked the distinction between Unitarians and Universalists on the one hand, and the orthodox Calvinists on the other,

Burns himself had an unusual religious upbringing. His father was a member of the local Kirk, presided over by Dr William Dalrymple - of whom more in a moment. His father held liberal, Arminian views, and raised his children according to a Manual of Religious Belief he had written himself.

William Dalrymple was a peaceful, gentle man who was called to the ministry of the first church in Ayr when he was twenty-three. He died at the age of 91 still minister in that church, preaching through his old age. Perhaps longevity is the benefit of a pleasant disposition! Along with his younger associate, William McGill, minister of the second church of Ayr, he belonged theologically to a movement in British-Irish Presbyterianism called the "New Lights" - who owe their inspiration to an East Anglian Unitarian minister.

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Dr John Taylor of Norwich, a prominent and popular Unitarian minister in the east of England, wrote a book called the Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin. In England, America, Northern Ireland and Scotland it caused quite the rage. Taylor went to the Bible to examine the texts used as proofs for the Calvinist doctrine of original sin and could find no support. Instead, he favoured a view not only Arminian but also Universalist - not only do our actions matter, but the loving father god Jesus taught intends all his creation to attain reunion with their God. As a piece of scholarship it was excellent, and its popularity soared. In the North of Ireland, a preacher exhorted his congregation against the book, saying,

"I warn you, my brethern, against a book called the Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin, written by one John Taylor, of Norwich, and which has lately been printed at Belfast, and sent all around the country, to pervert the people from their good old faith. I desire that none of you read it, for it is a bad book, and a dangerous book, and an heretical book; and, what is worse than all, the book is unanswerable."

Well, it was of course answered, but the impact of its logic remained, and the Presbyterian Divines who were in sympathy when it came to be called New Lights, for what they had seen; and their opponents came to be called "old Lights" by virtue of their opposition. The name stuck in Scotland, especially in Burns' home of Ayrshire; and in Northern Ireland and in New England.

Burns speaks of the controversy in the postscript to his ode to William Simpson of Ochiltree. He explains it as a battle between old and young as to what becomes of the moon - the old, unlearned claim it dies each month, and a new one born; the new, learned young folk claim it is the same one waxing and waning. And he writes the whole thing off:

Sae, ye observe that a' this clatter  
Is naething but a "moonshine matter"  
But tho' dull prose-folk Latin splatter  
                                  In logic tulzie,  
I hope we, Bardies, ken some better  
                                  Than mind sic brulzie

The controversy came to a head in Ayr when Dr William McGill, the pastor of the second church, published a book called A Practical Essay on the Death of Christ. The Old Lights accused "Doctor Mac" of being a Socinian - that is to say, of believing what the earlier, Polish Unitarians believed. They were in fact accurate, McGill's book pointed to some key Socinian tenets - that the death of Christ offers a call to all people to live as Christ lived, and that therein lies Salvation. McGill was tried for heresy, and the trial went on for almost a year - from the 15th of July, 1789, when the battle cry was sounded, until April 14, 1790, when McGill wrote a letter of apology and explanation. English Unitarians read in McGill's apology a caving in under pressure, perhaps not recognizing how great the pressure was on McGill -

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for not only was he under ecclesiastical pressure, but his wife's fortune had just been lost in a bank failure, and he was trying to support his family on a pastor's salary.

When the Synod of Glasgow called for McGill's investigation on 15 July 1789, Burns wrote a poem called "The Kirk's Alarm" - the church's call to arms - satirizing the whole matter. No person comes out unscathed, and the names are not changed for in Burns' view, no one on the old light side was innocent. Clearly McGill and Dalrymple have his sympathy. Here are a few of the verses which will give you some of its flavour:

It begins:

Orthodox! Orthodox! -  
Wha believe in John Knox -  
Let me sound and alarm to your conscience:  
A heretic blast  
Has been blawn i' the Wast,  
That what is not sense must be nonsense -  
Orthodox!  
That what is not sense must be nonsense.

Verse II addresses McGill:

Dr. Mac! Dr. Mac!  
You should stretch on a wrack  
To strike wicked Writers wi' terror:  
To join faith and sense  
Upon onie pretence  
Was heretic, damnable error -  
Dr. Mac!  
Was heretic, damnable error.

Dalrymple reveals himself in verse IV as an outright Unitarian:

D'rymple mild! D'rymple mild!  
Tho' your heart's like a child,  
An' your life like the new-driven snaw,  
Yet that winna save ye,  
Auld Satan must have ye,  
For preaching that three's ane and twa-  
D'rymple mild!  
For preaching that three's ane and twa.

Burn's attitude to the Old Light Calvinists shows up in verse V:

Calvin's sons! Calvin's sons!  
Seize your spiritual guns;  
Ammunition you never can need:  
Your hearts are the stuff  
Will be powther enough;  
And your skulls are storehouses o' lead -  
Calvin's sons!  
Your skulls are storehouses o' lead.

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And finally, as a fair satirist should, Burns turns his pen to his own folly; only to stab back at the old lights in the process:

Poet Burns! Poet Burns!  
Wi' your priest-skelping turns,  
Why desert ye your auld native shire?  
Your Muse is a gypsy,  
Yet were she ev'n tipsy,  
She could ca' us nae waur than we are -  
Poet Burns!  
She could ca' us nae waur than we are.

Burns often made sport of the elders of the kirk in his poems; perhaps the best known phrase he has given is the description of a Holy Willie. He tagged the sobriquet upon William Fisher, by Burns' description "a rather oldish bachelor elder, in the parish of Mauchline, and much and justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tipling orthodoxy, and for that spiritualized bawdry which refines to liquorish devotion." The kind of moralizing the Kirk did was the occasion for Burns' poem Holy Willie's Prayer. It seems Burns' landlord, Gavin Hamilton, was chastized by the church publicly in the middle of worship, for failure to attend worship. Hamilton appealed to the Presbytery to have his name stricken from the minutes where his rebuke was recorded, and thanks to the advocacy of a lawyer named Aiken, he won. Burns inserted the knife with a wry twist in "Holy Willie's" side by composing the poem Holy Willie's Prayer. After processing himself to be one of the elect, the pious hypocrite then confesses a few sins - to wit:

Yet here am I, a chosen sample,  
To show Thy grace is great and ample,  
I'm here a pillar of thy Temple,  
Strong as a rock,  
A guide, a buckler, and example,  
To a' they Flock!

But yet, O Lord! Confess I must,  
At times I'm fash'd with fleshly lust,  
An' sometimes, too, in warldly trust,  
Vile self gets in;  
But Thou remembers we are dust,  
Defiled wi' sin.

O Lord! yestreen, Thou kens, wi' Meg -  
Thy pardon I sincerely beg -  
O, may't ne'er be a living plague  
To my dishonour!  
An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg  
Again upon her.

Besides, I farther maun avow -  
Wi' Leezie's lass, three times, I trow -  
But, Lord, that Friday I was fou,  
When I cam near her,  
Or else, Thou kens, Thy servant true,  
Wad never steer her.

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After making his confession, Holy Willie asks God to smite those who bring shame upon his elders, naming Hamilton and Aiken and the Presbytery of Ayr by name for showing him up in finding Hamilton innocent.

Needless to say, the elders of the church were angry with Burns. And they soon had cause to rebuke him: for he got Elizabeth Paton with child. And so Rab and Betty were rebuked in the kirk, and fined a guinea, and Burns wrote a lovely poem to the daughter.

There are more direct links between Burns and Unitarian Universalism. We know from his letters that he read John Taylor's book, as well as the religious writings of Unitarian minister Joseph Priestly (better known as the discoverer of oxygen). In a letter to the famed Clarinda he laid out his credo, and it was clearly in line with the Socinian Universalism and Christian Unitarianism of his day. He was familiar with the fate of Unitarian missionary Thomas Fyshe Palmer, who was imprisoned and finally sent to Botany Bay for his support of the French Revolution. Burns was contemporary with the founding of the first Unitarian churches in Scotland, was familiar with their founders.

But Burns' great gift to the Unitarian Universalist movement in Scotland was through his poems. He has no tolerance for hypocrisy, and helped by his lyrics to spread the word of honest dissent from the hard Calvinism of the Scottish Kirk. To have the support of the national poet cannot but be useful to a struggling religious movement.

I have long been impressed by the parallels between Scotland and Canada - not the least of which began with my own ancestry in "new Scotland," Nova Scotia, and my Scots Covenanters forebears in the Annapolis Valley. Both countries are harsh, and Northern, with a natural beauty unequalled anywhere. Both lie to the North of a dominant, imperial culture, and face absorption within it all the time. And both struggle to protect a culture unique and beautiful and all their own.

And, both face a religious climate dominated by Calvinism in theology and Presbyterianism in church government. And in neither country did Unitarian Universalism grow to the extent it did in the warmer country to the south.

But I think the history of the Scottish Unitarians may have some lessons for us in Canada. I am struck by the fact that the churches now called Unitarian in Scotland for the most part began as Universalist churches and became Unitarian later. The message of Universalism, that there is hope, we are not doomed, that the possibility for accepting the love of God is there before us, this Universalist gospel of love for all met more response, the early missionaries tell us, than the logical arguments about persons in the godhead. What the people needed to hear was not the debunking of the mysteries of the three gods in one but a gospel that offered them health, wholeness and hope.

In Canada, Calvinist attitudes show up in the national literature - Margaret Atwood describes it as a general outlook of doom. As in Scotland, it is supported by the harshness of survival in our winter climate, our smallness compared to the greater powers in the world, and the silent echoes of the

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majestic North. But this sense of doom needs a counter force, needs a reason to hope which is more here and now, not simply the possibility of an after-life. A nation with a gloomy outlook, no matter how well justified by its history and its geography, needs a voice of hope to maintain its mental health.

There is a need in Canada, I have sensed it since I came here, for a religion which offers authentic hope. Not hope in pie-in-the-sky, idealistic alternatives, but hope in possibilities for human love, for human action, for human beings. Unitarian Universalists can be a voice for hope, real hope, and answer a deep need in the Canadian spirit.

In the newsletter being mailed today, I announce a sermon series on themes for a Canadian theology. I did not expect to get into it today, but I have in reflecting upon Burns, Dalrymple and McGill, come up with one. It is the lesson of our Scottish cousins in our free faith: that offering hope builds churches faster than offering analysis. One theme we need to explore as a religious movement is how we offer real hope, spiritual hope, to those who like Burns, Dalrymple and McGill, feel themselves out of step with the gloomy perspective born of Calvinism and Northern experience.

I believe we will find reason for hope within the experience of men and women, their creativity, the possibility for new beginnings in the longings which tug at the human heart. I believe the voice of God will emerge there, and I believe that we Unitarian Universalists have the power to hear it, and that we will hear it, even here in Canada.

LIVING IN THE DARK

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February 2, 1986

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Recently I heard that settlers were attracted to the agricultural zones of Canada's prairie provinces not only by cheap land prices but also by stories of the long summer days. I am forced to wonder if they did not stop to think that long summer days have their inevitable counterpart in long winter nights. Did they imagine - could they imagine - before they arrived just what surviving a prairie winter would require of them?

A couple of years ago I mentioned in a sermon that winter (even here in Ontario, mild by Canadian standards) was a difficult thing, and that the difficulties wore down our spirits. In the discussion which followed, responses were varied between two types - those for whom winter is a burden to be endured and those who find winter to be a time of joyous, physical exhilaration. You can assume that the congregation was divided between the partisans of sail and the partisans of ski. Perhaps to be truly happy in this province of hills and lakes is to be both a skier and a sailor.

Douglas Hall, professor of theology at McGill, believes the dominant society in contemporary Canada is in fact neither of these. He believes we are, in his phrase, "a wintertime people with summertime fantasies". Winter comes and we pack off for Florida or the Caribbean, and a sign of success is for how long one can afford to be away from the ice and snow. He extends the metaphor not only to our winter vacation habits but to other aspects of our lives as well. We hope that technology will defeat the cruel, evil aspects of our existence and provide us with endless summer. We deny the evil around us - unemployment, arms build-ups, hunger and homelessness - with a naive faith that enough research and economic growth will cure the ills of our existence. And to maintain that faith, we have to deny the existence of these evils. Our attempts to deny that our true home is winter reflect the optimism which, in Hall's words, is "the official faith" of our society. In Hall's opinion, to deny the evil is a dangerous and difficult thing to do.

If we are to be realistic about our situation, we must begin to accept the fact that our true spiritual home is winter - a period of long dark nights, when what light there is does not dazzle but hangs low on the horizon, when even at noon the shadows are long. Our space is not a space pervaded by the hot lights of the tropics, which fills the air like butterscotch, or the light of the Mediterranean which reflects water and sky in reverberations of high orchestral quality. Rather, ours is a time and a space of "winter light," a phrase Hall borrows from fellow northerner Ingmar Bergman. We must learn to be at home in the dark, and to distinguish the true sources of hope which lie not in the denial of our situation but in confrontation, and acceptance.

Margaret Atwood's poem, "Interlunar," expresses the same message. Atwood in Survival describes the basic role of the Canadian in Canadian literature as that of victim. But there are ways of responding to the victim situation. You can deny it. You can let yourself be defined by it, either by submitting or by struggling against it. Or you can be, in her term, a creative non-victim. This is the role she assumes in "Interlunar". To recognize that in the periods between the moons you can still be at home in the dark, you can sit in the dark long enough that it becomes light. By letting go of the victim stance, by responding creatively to the situation of being in the dark, learning to see in the dark, we can make it our own, and return to it when the appearances of things abandon us.

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I knew when I first read Atwood's poem that I had scratched the surface of a new approach to the situation of Canadian winter. That the darkness, even the cold and the snow, can be friendly, can be home, can be mine.

German theologian Karl Rahner once spoke of a "wintry spirituality" - a spirituality who is more at home in the winter times of life than the summer. One which sees the experience of winter as the central metaphor for life. Former UUA President Gene Pickett claimed he had such a "wintry spirituality" - he understood life best in terms of its struggles, its cold times, its ending in death.

A wintry spirituality would see winter as our true home, the place where we know ourselves best, a hard reality in ice and cold.

As a norther country, Canada should be the home of such a wintry spirituality. And perhaps that spirit is embodied in our civil religion. But if that is the case, then we spend a great deal of time running from it. We become self chosen exiles, not really belonging every place.

If we are as a people truly to belong to the land and country of Canada, then we must learn spiritually how to be at home in winter.

And it might be possible to develop a stance for living creatively in Canadian winter which applies to the winters of the soul, which arrive in any season, which might be the gift of a Canadian spirituality, a Canadian theology, to the larger world.

And that to explore meant, as Hall says, to give up the summertime fantasies; and to walk in the intermoon down by a lake which doubles even the darkness.

Quebec poet and essayist Pierre Trottier wrote marvelously of his "Retour a l'hiver," his return to winter, in his book Mon Babel. The occasion of his essay was his return to Canada after a time abroad which allowed him to miss six Canadian winters. What did he fear about returning to winter? Not the physical cold, reassured as he was by the success of central heating. Rather he feared the numbing of the spirit which he said is the usual effect - the turning inward, the laziness born of resignation which is the common effect he says, of the Canadian winter. He rejected the usual remedy offered by his friends - to enjoy winter by engaging in winter sport. He claims that such work does not really excite the mind but puts in to rest while the body enervates. Either in lassitude or in exercise, the mind is lost in winter.

Trottier claims that we endure winter because it is a handy element of self-flagellation. Protestants here are largely calvinist, and Canadian Catholicism largely jansenist, which is to say in technical terms that we see the world as a veil of tears which we endure hardship for our spiritual betterment. Trottier rejects this as bogus theology, and reveals that if we believe the winter is punishing us, that we deserve it for our sins, we are not very far removed from the paganism which saw a demigod in every winter storm, a sprite with a cat-o-nine-tails just there to punish us - for our original sin. Trottier calls us to skin winter of this theological accretion and face it that we may understand it.

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To deny the winter, Trottier says, is to deny the country. And winter, stripped of its pagan psychology, provides us an opportunity to weigh the land in our minds. We can, Trottier believes, be present to our winter space with all of who we are instead of pushing it away. Freeing ourselves from the assumption that winter is punishment, from seeing ourselves as a nation of Sisyphus's rolling snowballs up a hill, gives us a new opportunity to look at the land and the sky of winter and uncover its meaning anew.

According to Trottier, we can look at the barrenness of a Canadian winter and find in it new liberty. In the Canadian winter sky we see a kind of freedom born of stripping away old life and gathering resources for the new. For what we see there is a land waiting for an explosion of spring. Waiting. Looking both forward and backward. Holding tight inside it a memory of what went before and the knowledge of what comes after.

Winter is a human time, Trottier believes. Flowers are finished in autumn, and lie dead through winter. But the human is not finished in winter. We go on. So here we meet our own infinity. The earth hardens in winter, it will not accept the dead, and so winter, rather than personify death, rejects death in Trottier's view. So here in winter the infinity of the human meets the infinity of the divine. In winter, looking at the clarity of winter light, we return to ourselves and we return to the infinity beyond.

Winter is the human time, the time which embraces even our consciousness of time. Let me quote for you a passage of Trottier's article where he develops this view:

On objectera peut-être que l'hiver est plutôt la saison abstraite du noir sur blanc, bien illustré par l'arbre nu sur la neige. On objectera encore que la virginité de l'hiver est une frigidité. Certes l'apparence qu'offre l'hiver est bien d'une abstraction froide et c'est sans doute ainsi que le verra toujours la pensée conceptuelle. Mais dans le moindre cristal de neige, il y a une goutte d'eau transformée qui garde mémoire, qui est mémoire de la mer, et qui attend son heure pour faire déborder la source, grossir la rivière, irriguer la terre et retourner en fin de compte à la mer d'ou elle est venue. Dans cette goutte d'eau, sous l'espèce d'un cristal de neige, Mémoire est Janus, une face tournée vers la mer qui fut, l'année écoulée, et l'autre face tournée vers la mer qui sera, dans l'année nouvelle. Autre illustration: Mémoire, au faite d'un arbre dépouillé de son feuillage, est un aigle à deux têtes qui fixe soleil levant aussi bien que soleil couchant, la mer orientale aussi bien que la mer occidentale. A la fois souvenir et espoir, elle est à la mesure, elle est peut-être même la seule vraie mesure de ce continent, de l'Atlantique au Pacifique.

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Some will perhaps object that winter is more the abstract season of black and white, well illustrated by the naked tree on the snow. They will object as well that the virginity of winter is frigidity. Certainly the appearance winter offers is a frigid abstraction and without a doubt that is how it will appear to those who think conceptually. But in the least crystal of snow, there is a drop of water transformed which keeps memory, a memory of the sea, and which awaits its hour to break loose from the spring, to swell the river, irrigate the land and return at the end to the sea from which it has come. In this drop of water, in the form of a snow crystal, Memory is Janus, one face turned toward the sea that was, and the other turned toward the sea that will be, in the new year. Another illustration: Memory, at the top of tree which has shed its leaves, is a two-headed eagle who stares at the rising sun as well as the setting sun, the eastern sea as well as the western. At once to remember and to hope, that is the measure, it is perhaps even the only true measure of this continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

(unauthorized translation by Mark Mosher DeWolfe)

Trottier calls us to live in a winter in which we know there are swelling streams in the snowflakes, there are fish under the ice, that for the maple tree winter is not an abstraction but the preamble to its fecundity, to the running of its sap. We can see in such a winter, Trottier says, not a punishment but an asceticism toward a possible presence. That is, that winter for Canadians can be a spiritual exercise, a time to come face to face with memory and hope. We can face winter realistically, knowing that it is in fact human time, a time to weigh our place in the universe, in time, to face our limitations and our infinitudes.

Winter as a spiritual exercise may be the special provenance of Canadians. Here, I am certain, it is easiest to pass winter in such a way that, as Trottier says, spring is not its denial but its fulfilment. For here winter is no simple interlude between fecund summers, it does not peter out gradually, blending into autumn and spring at either end, but comes and goes with an explosion, as the Ojibway tale tells. Winter is a part of our identity.

This week I went to find the song by Gilles Vigneault called, Mon Pays. It is a description of life in the north whose refrain has haunted me for some time, repeating, Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver. ("My country is not a country, it's winter".) In it, Vigneault pledges that he will be faithful to the spirit of his ancestors who built a home in the winter and invited the people of the horizons to the people of other seasons, to build beside them, for all the peoples of the world are of our race. And to the people for whom he sings, he sings Ma chanson ce n'est pas un chanson, c'est ma vie; c'est pour toi que je veuz posseder mes hivers. ("My song is not a song, it's my life; it's for you I want to own my winters".)

It is for you that I want to own my winters. We can own the winter, not exclusively, but we can make it our own, enjoin its mystical message to our spirits. We can embrace this time, not as a punishment for our non-existent sins, but as a time which this land gives us, to see ourselves again before the infinite. And to find ourselves at home here. At home in the winter. At home in un pays qui n'est pas un pays, mais l'hiver.

IN THE PRESENCE OF MAJESTY

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March 9, 1986

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One day last January, in the February thaw which came a month early, I went for a late afternoon walk in High Park. Though the air was warming a bit above freezing, the rolling hills and ravines were still snow frosted, as they are today; the ice on Grenadier Pond was too thin for skating and was abandoned - though one lone skater was looking on longingly from the shore. Having walked from Bloor Street past the pond to the Lakeshore, I climbed up to near Colborne Lodge, and from its peak, stared for a moment out at Lake Ontario. As my gaze returned to the scarred earth which formed the snow into pleats, the long ravines reaching downward to the Great Lake, I thought of the towering glacier which had once covered this place, whose coming and going left us land and lake as we know it now. I felt the historic presence of the mighty shaper of earth, whose impact on our continent was greater than anything humans have yet to wreak upon it. And I felt myself to be in the presence of something majestic.

And I laughed. I laughed for two reasons, both stemming from the feeling of being in the presence of majesty, and realizing that we almost never use the word anymore. If we do, it is addressing the monarch of this or other countries - and I laughed, first, because the majesty of the monarch is dwarfed by the majesty of the Canadian landscape. Or less often, we leave the word majesty for the romantic poets attempting to describe the land - and my second laugh was for myself, who finally and fully knew what they meant when they said "the majesty of the land." What had been poetic hyperbole became real in one afternoon walk.

Every part of Canada is touched by the sense of the presence of majesty. My grandfather DeWolfe grew up on the Minas Basin off the Bay of Fundy, where the tides daily rise in gigantic waves which swell the rivers in gigantic bores. Just to watch the water rise over 15 feet in one swell is to remember one's smallness. The fisherfolk of Atlantic Canada know the power of the cold winter ocean, the wild northern storms. Across Central Canada we confront the mystery of the Shield, with its glacial memories, its eerie light, its old stones, its railroad-engine-swallowing muskeg, its endless trains of lakes from the North West Territories around Hudson's Bay to Quebec, some of them bigger than Lake Ontario. Prairies people know the vast majesty of open space, of land which opens to the sky with out barrier, know a world shaped by cloud and growing grain, a world but a pin point in a space which goes on forever. In the Rockies and up the Pacific Coast, women and men sit between mountains which rise savagely out of the ocean, and walk among trees which dwarf the merely human. To live in Canada is to be confronted with majesty.

Pierre Berton claims that our geography itself, not only our hard winters, have made spiritual puritans of us. We are, he says, a somber people, and it is because we stand in this land surrounded by a grandeur unlike any other. For not only are our lakes larger, our mountains higher, our winters harsher than those elsewhere, ours carry a unique feel, a feel of northernness, of aloneness, opening onto an emptiness. This is why it is called the lonely land; perhaps why Hugh McLennan borrowed German Rilke's image to describe our peoples as the two solitudes; perhaps why, like the Swedes, our sense of aloneness stimulates both common cause with each other and a religious yearning after what may be behind the mystery.

## THE PRESENCE OF MAJESTY

Two observations about Canadians and Canadian culture lie behind that last statement. One is that Canadians are by and large not an individualistic people. Canadians trust collectivities more than rugged individuals. Historically, the RCMP went west before the bulk of the settlers. To present this history on 1950's television, the Americans created Sgt. Preston of the Yukon by translating old Lone Ranger scripts (the dog played the role of Tonto). The Canadian equivalent was called Tales of the Royal Mounted, with a different officer every week, not one single heroic figure. Canadians identify themselves with groups and with society as a collectively, not with heroic individuals, however rugged. This just might account for the fact that in this country socialism is not a dirty word, not to the extent it is in the U.S., the land of rugged individualism.

While the impact of collectivism on our religious identity is the subject of another sermon it does arise in connection with another question: could it perhaps be that this trust in the collective and dependence on the collective responsibility comes from - or at least is reinforced by - the fact of living in this majestic land? Living in a land which constantly reminds us of how small we are, are we not likely to huddle together for mutual protection. One of the possible origins of the name, "Canada," is from a phrase which meant, "a collection of huts". What an image - huts, in this climate, a collection gathered together for mutual support in the face of a harsh world. Could it be that we share with other northern peoples, like the Swedes, a commitment to togetherness born out of the harsh reality of Northern life?

My second observation has to do with just this similarity with the Swedes as well. Perhaps you noticed in the Globe & Mail this week a review of the festival of Swedish films after Bergman. Bergman was famous for his "Silence of God," trilogy, so much so that Woody Allen joked that after three Bergman films the whole world knew the Swedish words for "silence" and "god". The reviewer noted that Bergman's descendants are still looking for God - not for a person, but for the silent presence behind the mystery of space and human life, of suffering and of hope.

How similar this is to the Canadian, Northern spirituality! Canadian painters have pointed to the mysticism of the North, the open, calling spaces, the inscrutibly present reality of light and dark in Northern latitudes. And our sense of being present before the majesty of the land, the land like no other, gives us a sense of solemnity, a sense of austerity, a sense of awe which I believe the Swedes would understand.

Did you know that the climate in Iceland is gentler than the climate in Manitoba? And yet here, in Canada, Icelandic settlers who moved to this harsher climate found themselves prepared to shake off conservative Lutheranism which dominated this place. They embraced a Unitarian Universalist viewpoint. Here, in the face of the majesty of this land, they shook off old notions of humanity as inherently evil and affirmed the goodness of this life.

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I do not mean to draw a confused comparison between Swedes and Icelanders, Lutherans and Unitarians, when dropped into the Canadian context. But it occurs to me that here, in the presence of the majesty of this land, it is possible to be accurate about the smallness of human life, and yet positive about its worth and value. We can not sing here of humanity astride the earth like a colossus; it does not do justice to our experience. Rather we are small, conscious creatures looking out into a widening space. Here we are aware of the grandeur of space around us; it is not our playfield, or ours to use up, nor are we its obvious most important part. A Canadian conception of space puts the life to such anthropocentrism.

Maureen Killoran in a recent essay on Canadian contextual theology suggests that Canadians suffer a double alienation from the earth. On the one hand, we live in a resource-based economy, which takes from the earth, and ships abroad; what is removed from here serves the needs of others. Not only do Canadians experience an economic alienation from the land, but the economy based on resources is contrary to the experience of the land as the abode of the divine, as having its own integrity, its own worth, its grandeur and majesty beyond that of the merely human. And so we are doubly alienated: cut off from the economic use of the land, cut off from the harmony of living appropriately on it.

Is it especially Canadian to feel the grandeur of this land and to recognize our smallness beside it? Yes. And that recognition can go on to a spirituality common among the indigenous peoples of Canada, the misnamed Indians. The spirituality of the native peoples recognized the entire existence as the body of Wakantanka (to use the Lakota name), of Gitchemanitou (to use the Ojibway name) - of the great mystery. And all things, all people and all animals participate in the great mystery, embody part of it to us. To do evil is to betray the sacred relationships inherent in the great mystery.

Lately Native leaders, especially native religious leader, have come to recognize that if the world is to survive, some of the values of their ancient culture must be brought to the wider attention of humankind. Their spiritual insight is borne out scientifically with the emerging science of ecology. Unitarian Universalists have come to see ourselves as part of an interdependent web of existence, and have enshrined respect for the web in our new statement of religious principles. There it is, right next to the call for individual freedom.

Unitarian leaders of one hundred years ago glorified the free individual. Perhaps the reason our faith has not spread in Canada as much as some would hope is because the experience of life in this country is not supportive of the glory of the individual person. Rather here, in these northern climes, we feel the glory of the world, the majesty of the land, the call of the spirit in the open spaces.

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But it is also a key part of our Unitarian heritage to affirm the value of human existence. And this we can still do, even as we recognize our smallness in the scheme of things. A Canadian Unitarian spirituality would look at the vastness of existence, at our smallness, and say affirmatively, "it is something to be here." We may stop shy of proclaiming humankind the crown of creation, but we can be nonetheless, like those old Icelanders, looking out on a land of ice and snow, of majestic mountains and highrising tides, of space which stretches on, on beyond the beyond of our farthest imaginings, and say, "it is something to be here."

Recognizing our smallness and our positivity would be to affirm the necessity of our responsible behaviour while here. We cannot use up the earth as if we were not part of it; nor can we treat it as if it were all there only for us to use. You may recall that down South of the Border, President Reagan's first Secretary of the Interior - the cabinet official responsible for resource management - Earl Butz, turned a conservationist department into a bureaucracy whose prime objective was opening preserved lands for resource abuse. Based upon his reading of Genesis, Butz believed quite strongly that God put humans here to use up what was here to be used, and (he really believed this) that when this planet was depleted God would give us another one. I wish the world were so simple. Perhaps Butz's attitude was so galling to us North of the Border because here, in the face of all this majesty, we cannot look at the world and hold onto the strictly consumerist mode of thought. Even so, we have yet to learn the secret of living in large numbers so that we return to earth what it gives us. But to recognize our smallness in the grand scheme of things, our smallness in the presence of majesty, is to recognize that we cannot live as if we alone were the ends for which the universe exists - no matter what our old religious myths may seem to say.

Yet it is something to be human in the presence of majesty, if only because we can recognize it and rejoice, rejoice in the wonder of it all. We can recognize the majesty for what it is, and we can seek to know our place in right relationship, sacred relationship, to the world.

The old proclamation of sin - Calvin's proclamation - declared that God was all, humanity nothing; God was all goodness, humanity all evil. Canada is often declared a Calvinist country for the pervasive sense of doom which abides in the culture. That doom abides because the land, like the history of this country, is so much more powerful than an individual person. But Unitarianism, historically, is a liberal Calvinism, which accepts Calvinism's claims on the structure of religious community, which applies Calvinism's rigorous rationality but which does not succumb to the negative image of humankind, or ignore that we have in us the potential for the divine. In Canada we Unitarians have tended to ignore the Calvinism of Canadian experience, which is to say our smallness before the mystery, and glorified human nature. But the days of unbridled human nature are over; we have learned that unbridled human nature has its evil side, and for all our progress we are still destructive of the world and of each other.

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So a Unitarianism for Canada, for people who live in the presence of such overwhelming majesty, is one which does not denigrate the human in the face of the divine, but recognizes that the divine and the human are part of one process; that we participate in the mystery of the world and are part of what makes it turn for good or ill. Such a religion would revere the majesty of the country which surrounds us, and the wonder of human beings who carry on lives in the face of hardship, both physical and personal. Such a religion would then have, as John Cordner, the first Unitarian Minister in Canada, said, "a saviour of the soil" of this new country. And it would be a religion whose prime gift to us would be the ability to live here as AJM Smith's land does: to live with

... the beauty  
of strength  
broken by strength  
and still strong.



"REMARKS ON ASSOCIATIONS" REVISITED

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April 13, 1986

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There's a habit around here of defining Canadian identity by contrast with the American, a habit which is understandable: after all, especially in our English-speaking section, there is much to the Canadian and American identities which seem the same, a common heritage in British North America, a common democracy, an apparent classlessness, a comfortable consumer life-style for the larger part of the people. Given the similarities, Canadians look closely to notice the difference. Of course, the first thing one notices in looking at the cultures is that for all their similarities, we are comparing a Brontosaurus to a Newt. They share a similar pattern of features - but one is so much larger! My analogy distorts the scale, but it must be remembered that American cultural force comes with the strength of a powerful nation ten times larger than Canada, with economic power and global domination. To say the U.S. and Canada are alike is to compare a brontosaurus to a newt.

One item which has become almost proverbial in this cultural comparison is to say that U.S. culture praises the rugged individual, the pioneer who went out to the wilderness and tamed it by his and her private action. Canadian culture, on the other hand, identifies one almost immediately as part of a group. When England conquered Canada, the peace treaty did something which had never been done before: it recognized the right of the conquered to maintain their culture. A radical move, and one which we have inherited. Hence, originally the distinction was French or English, sometimes phrased as Protestant or Catholic; later it has multiplied into a mosaic of multiculturalism. Travel writer Jan Morris, in her review of Toronto explained multiculturalism as a word which could be coined only here.

The U.S. Constitution recognizes only three existent beings: the individual, the state, and the federal union. The Canadian constitution recognizes all sorts of other fractions: linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, and the distinct rights of indigenous people in reference to those who came from elsewhere. Governmentally at least, Canadians are seen as members of groups. I believe this relates to the fundamentally conservative impetus of the Confederation effort: its plan to insure peace, order and good government came to birth between conflicting provinces, conflicting parts of the United Province of Canada East and West, racial and economic tussles. It was an attempt to get organized in what seems to me at least to have been almost chaotic conflict. They wanted peace, order and good government - which sounds to me like they wanted to get organized!

I do believe that Canadians in a gross way are more inclined to think of themselves as parts of groups than Americans, who are trained to think of themselves as individuals. Certainly Canadians are less group oriented than the Japanese, who culturally embrace the group as basic nature of being. Canadians are closer to the Americans than the Japanese, certainly; but Canadians come nearer to the Japanese than the Americans, do for all that. And Canada is, by my experience at least, a more organized place and people. There is less dependence on individual effort to make things work right here.

A two-fold example: In our Unitarian Universalist Association, our churches are organized in districts, three of which cross the U.S.-Canadian border.

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Out in the west, the district youth council wanted to host a conference at a camp where there were a restricted number of bunks. They would be unable to take everyone who wanted to attend. Since it was a Canadian local committee who was planning it, the committee sat down to work out a way that every youth group in its district could be fairly represented at the conference. One of their American advisors smiled as they set about doing this. She smiled because she was certain that were these young people U.S. born and raised, they would have simply said, "first come, first served". Representation on an "American plan" would depend on individual initiative. But the Canadians worked out a method for fair representation by groups. According to their American advisor, she was certain before they used the word that they would call it a "scheme". And they did.

I promised this would be a two-fold example, so here's the second ply: yesterday I was in a Committee meeting in our own, bi-national St. Lawrence District. We were wrestling with how to allocate the scholarship monies available for participants in our summer leadership school. The committee was - I now recognize - unfavourably stacked, six Canadians against one American. Imagine my lack of surprise and my total bemusement when instantly a "first come first serve" policy was rejected and a Canadian member suggested we form a subcommittee come up with a fair "scheme".

Canadians habitually think of themselves as part of one or several groups which occupy the "collection of huts" which is the Canadian village, and think of Canadians as one of several groups which occupy the "collection of huts" which is the global village. The group identification and the habit of organization mark us as features of our identity.

For Canadian Unitarian Universalists, this habit toward organization puts us at a variance with one feature of our liberal religious heritage. In the tradition out of which our churches arise, there is a distinct distrust of excessive organization and of excessive loyalty to an identity other than individual. The roots of this are deep in our history.

We emerge out of the English Protestant Puritan movement, which distrusted the coercive power of bishops and so created democratically elected synods to control the churches. The churches which became Unitarian went even farther, maintaining that only the local people could rule the affairs of their church. Our ancestors distrusted excessive organization.

William Ellery Channing, the leading theologian of the Unitarian movement as it was emerging in early 19th c. Boston, framed these reservations about over-organization in his article, called "Remarks on Associations". (While Channing was known for his eloquence, he was not known for zippy titles.) In his 1829 essay, Channing noted the predisposition in the society of the time to organize for any given reason. He wrote:

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You can scarcely name an object for which some institution has not been formed. Would men (sic) spread one set of opinions or crush another? They make a society. Would they improve the penal code, or relieve poor debtors? They make societies. Would they encourage agriculture, or manufactures, or science? They make societies. Would one class encourage horse-racing, and another discourage travelling on a Sunday? They form societies.

A few years later and what Channing wrote of men would be true of women, too.

Channing held many reservations about societies, even those he wholeheartedly supported. Though he long held anti-slavery views, he came to the abolition movement late in his career, supporting the organizations long after he had made his opinion known. In "Remarks on Associations", he praises the positive power organizations have to raise issues, gather political consensus, and reform social conditions. He praises as well the power of associations to strengthen and support people as they struggle for the betterment of the world and the coming of the reign of justice.

Yet Channing also feared their power. Particularly, he feared the power of organizations in two ways: first, the fact that in organizations as he knew them, more and more work and power and responsibility was channeled into the hands of the few. As organizations grew in size, they formed elites which began to dominate the movement, and dominate the individuals within the movement. Second, people who joined organizations all too easily gave up their moral independence to the organization - they derived all their opinions from the group and ceased to think and act for themselves.

Here was Channing's great objection to associations, to groupings: they reduced the moral independence of the individual. They easily injure freedom.

To Channing, freedom was not an end to itself. It held important functions: it served to allow individuals to determine the truth, to be creative, and it was a guardian of moral rectitude. Institutions become corrupt, Channing said; and it is social pressure which frequently leads us to give up our freedom. To gain social approval we will leave behind what our own minds know to be right. For that reason we must safeguard our independence even as we engage in society.

Channing was supportive of human organizations, including the ones called to change society, even though he was wary of their negative side. His was a wide mind, capable of seeing something from two sides. This wide vision of his caused one remarkable aspect of his character: he never jumped into anything "whole-hog" with wild enthusiasm, but went into his endeavours cautiously and carefully, aware of the pitfalls. His cautious character earned him the nickname "The Reluctant Radical".

So regarding organizations Channing offered us two warnings. First, he warned us not to confuse what he believed to be natural associations from those contrived by people. Channing believed that God created in us a natural connection to family, to neighbourhood, to country and to all of humankind;

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and that these connections were more important than the ones contrived for human purposes. For example, he pointed out, Boston in 1829 had two asylums for orphans, which cared for between 100 and 200 children at any one time. Good and useful institutions, he said, ones he was proud to support. But in Boston thousands of children were cared for and nurtured in families. Are not families, humble and uncelebrated as they are, the more natural means? And do we not owe them a loyalty?

Channing would have no time for the person who spent all his or her energy supporting orphans when his or her own children were neglected. Our families need our concern and we ignore them in favour of charity only at our grave peril.

His second, and for our purposes, more important observation, has to do with how we might evaluate the various associations which lay claim to our loyalty and resources. I suspect that you, like me, receive on any given day when the mail is delivered appeals from two or three good causes; and then you open the paper or magazine you learn of more, and on the radio and TV learn of even more. How do we choose between the causes to support and those we leave to someone else? Channing says:

... (I) propose to suggest a principle by which the claims of different associations may be estimated. It is this: the value of associations is to be measured by the energy, the freedom, the activity, the moral power which they encourage and diffuse. In truth, the great object of all benevolence is to give power, activity and freedom to others.

Channing meant this in a way which was radical for his time. His was a theory not of laissez-faire, "join only organizations which leave others alone," but rather of empowerment. "We cannot", he says,

in the strict sense of the word, make (emphasis his) any being happy. We can give others the means of happiness, together with motives to the faithful use of them; but on this faithfulness, on the free and full exercise of their own powers, their happiness depends. ... (Human benevolence) can only make (people) happy through themselves, through their own freedom and energy.

Do not misunderstand Channing to be saying that a Unitarian should only be interested in organizations which secure political liberty, like Amnesty International. Channing's point is that it is more important to liberate people than to enslave them, and if this prison is economic, we must give them the ability and the opportunity to fend for themselves. Channing would support (and did) groups which give people the abilities to create their own happiness. If hunger prevents them from happiness, feed them first; but also give them what they need that they may not be hungry again. He would have found a sympathetic co-religionist in Lotta Hitschmanova, founder of USC Canada, whose motto was appropriate development: giving people the tools to care for themselves.

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I would like to apply Channing's remarks to our Canadian propensity for organization; first, let me summarize them in point form.

1. Our age has a burgeoning number of organizations for the achievement of humane ends which exercise real power in the world.
2. These organizations can tyrannize to the extent that they become elitist and encourage people to surrender their freedom.
3. Human created organizations are to be valued but not at the expense of more important associations.
4. Organizations are to be valued to the extent to which they contribute to the freedom and empowerment of both those involved in them and those they are designed to serve.

So what has all this to do with us in Canada? Like Channing, I would like to offer three of my own "Remarks" on Associations' observations:

First, the Canadian Unitarian movement, because of our emphasis on individual freedom, has usually attracted those dissatisfied with the "group" mentality of our society. We have been a group for those who wish to be ungrouped! We have often minimized the importance of belonging, the value and power of the ends for which we are organized, in the interests of freedom. An example: many of our smaller congregations remain small because they never ask people to join them. We want people to come of their own free will, but we deny them the opportunity of choosing to become members when we don't tell them how to do it. Our value on freedom has sometimes stifled our ability to meet our equal need for association.

And the irony is that the general culture in Canada would support our doing so! I believe we can benefit from recognizing the reasons Canadians have for being more organized and group-oriented than Americans.

- Together we have more resources for dealing with the harshness of life.
- Together we increase the amount of the world we take into our thinking
- Together we are in a position to balance freedom with justice, with fairness, in human relations.

Let us rejoice in the Canadian gift for these virtues. We could put them to use in such a way that our churches are strengthened, and can better the goals for which we establish them.

My second "Channing-esque" remark has to do with not forgetting how our Unitarian heritage cautions us about the flip side of associations. Canadian Unitarians can criticize the tendency of our "groups" mentality to imprison rather than liberate people. If we allow our awareness of ethnic differences to degenerate into racism, we are imprisoning people in their cultures. If instead we warmly celebrate the creative possibilities in our differing cultures, we open up new horizons of meaning for all of us. If Canadian culture,

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with its value on organization and group identity, has any need of any gift from its Unitarian Universalist minority, it is in Channing's second warning: we should endorse and support only those organizations who increase the possibilities for humankind. We must preach an openness to a society who, when its shadow is faced, can demonically demean its members.

Third, we should also recognize in Channing's remarks the importance of the individual. My group identities tell you much about me, but even if you knew every group to which I belonged, you would not know the whole me. There is a part of me which cannot be named, because it cannot be limited, and that is my capacity - and yours - to be a creative, synthesizing individual; it is the mysterious part of us which really makes us different from each other, even in our groups.

Once I was at a conference which from the point of view of my group identities, had nearly all my bases covered. It was a conference of Unitarian Universalist ministers, most of whom were younger. Here was a group where I didn't have to feel different for being Unitarian Universalist; for being a minister; for being young; for being male, as there were other men there; for coming from Canada, as there were other Canadians there; for the pattern of my personal life, as there were those who shared that distinction, too. It felt marvellous not to have to explain anything. When I described my experience, there were always people there who shared it.

But there was still part of me unexplained. I am, and you are, more than our groups. If our culture in Canada takes our groups into consideration, this can be good; but if it loses sight of our special worth as unique individuals, then it is demonic. Unitarian Universalists in Canada with our value of individual differences, of individual freedom to differ, can provide a unique service in our country: the watchers, the ones looking, with this special value, to guard against the abuses by the powers of society.

Channing, throughout his "Remarks on Associations", held in balance the paradox of the power of organizations to advance human welfare and their power to enslave. This morning I would leave you with that paradox in the balance, and ask you to weigh it in your own lives. What association can you take pride in for its work to free and empower people to greater creativity? What association has held you back, kept you in, or keeps those for whom it exists in bondage?

We will always live with these paradoxes, these opposite sides of the swinging scale, for they are inherent in conscious human life. Let us rejoice in the gift of living, for the possibility of being of real use, and go forward, cognizant of the pitfalls and potentials of being fully human.