

# “To Trust the Dawning Future More”

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Sermon for the Installation of Mara J. Dowdall  
as Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Society  
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There is a chair in Mara’s hometown of Philadelphia that is more than a chair—it’s a symbol.

The chair, much like one of these up here on the chancel, is on a slightly elevated platform at the front of the room inside Independence Hall where the Framers hammered out the American Constitution in 1787.

What’s most intriguing about this particular chair is not that it was where George Washington sat, while presiding over those three contentious months of meetings.

And it’s not even the intricate image of the sun that is carved, complete with a face and shining, outstretched rays, into the top of the seatback itself.

What is of enduring interest about this particular chair is the observation made by Benjamin Franklin about where that symbolic sun sat on the larger horizon of history.

At 81, Franklin was the oldest delegate at the Convention, and, by far, the most famous.

He was an international celebrity,

widely known for his work as a scientist, author, and diplomat.

His colleagues held him in highest regard,  
and his voice carried the weight required  
when he implored them to move beyond their differences  
to accept that their final draft  
was the best compromise they could achieve.

As the Convention came to an end,  
with the last of the delegates signing this foundational document,  
Franklin pointed toward the chair up front, with its shining sun,  
and observed in a brief and final speech  
that painters had always found it difficult in their paintings  
to distinguish a sunrise from a sunset.

He went on to say:

“I have often...in the course of th[is] session...  
looked at that sun behind [Mr. Washington]  
without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting.  
But now at length I have the happiness to know  
it is a rising and not a setting sun.”

I wonder if we feel we could—if we feel we can—say the same?

That same happiness, that same confidence,  
can be a highly elusive thing in our lives today—  
whether it’s our national life, our personal life,  
or, to be sure, our shared religious life.

Many of us look to the horizon and wonder

whether what we see before us is a sunrise or a sunset.

And amid that uncertainty, the worrying question often bubbles up of whether our best days may already be well behind us.

This is a question asked with appropriate urgency in religious circles today, and it certainly comes up frequently among Unitarian Universalist leaders—often through rants found on facebook, or over a late-night round of beers at the hotel bar at General Assembly.

We wonder: is the light of our faith rising or might it be setting?

While we've basically held our own as other denominations dwindle, the trends in recent years point to a precipitous decline in the general population's engagement with religious institutions.

I'm guessing this comes as little of a surprise to you living in Burlington, as it does to me in Toronto, given that we live in two of the most staunchly secular cities in North America.

It's why, today, it's all the more a radically counter-cultural act for us to wake up on a Sunday morning and schlep to a house of worship—even one with Unitarian Universalist in the name.

A few months ago, I was at a party with a number of people who work in Canadian film and television.

At one point, I found myself in an awkward conversation with a woman, something of a Toronto socialite, who asked what I do.

There was that vexing temptation every minister faces in such moments—the desperate pull to explain that I work as a writer, or a tattoo artist, or the regional sales rep for company that makes leather dog chew toys... anything, really—to avoid being a total buzzkill by introducing myself as a member of the clergy.

But, I told the truth, and, as often happens, the woman recoiled and let out a little incredulous gasp, as if to say, “does anyone really still do that anymore?”

As she shook her head from side to side, she said, “you know, my husband and I must know fifty couples in this city, and I can’t think of a single one of them that goes to church.”

I had no problem believing her.

For good measure, I did try explaining that our congregation is quite a bit different from what the word “church” might typically conjure up. . .

But, still, I had no expectation I’d be seeing her in a service anytime soon.

She, frankly, had no interest in what we are selling.

Truth be told, this is almost certainly going to be the case for more and more people in the years ahead, given the cultural context in which we live and in which we try to live out our faith.

While we may be convinced the world needs more Unitarian Universalism, that need isn't so clearly appreciated by people outside our own walls.

It's not so much their open hostility we face, but, arguably, even worse, their indifference.

And therein exists a danger for us: in the face of such indifference, there is a great risk of our turning inward, of growing insular, succumbing to ambivalence and inaction, and practicing a faith too small for the times in which we live.

There is a danger of our giving up on relevance.

In religious communities, it's very easy (and highly seductive) to look longingly to our bygone glory days—to celebrate the golden eras of our past and discount or dismiss entirely the vital call that sounds—that is sounding—in our own day and time: the call that implores us to meet the future in each present moment with every bit of faith we can summon.

Whether we heed that call greatly depends on what we believe about the future that is ever unfolding around us.

How we look to the horizon of human history or understand some larger purpose at work on this planet has a tremendous impact on how we live out the days of our lives.

Where we see our place in the future

has a great deal to do with how we understand our responsibility to the earth and to each other.

And it profoundly shapes how we practise this faith of ours.

Our religious ancestors, roughly two centuries ago— around the time this congregation was founded and this building built— made a significant shift when they declared that our religion is at least as relevant to the here-and-now as to any hope of some heavenly reward or threat of fiery damnation.

They rejected the notion that a loving God would or could condemn people to an eternal hell— because they believed that such a thought deeply dishonoured God.

They had their doubts about heaven, too, and in time, began to think differently about the meaning and purpose of their lives on this earth.

Eventually, our religious ancestors championed the idea, as Mara mentioned this morning, of “Salvation by Character,” believing we could cultivate the divine spark within us all through deliberate moral education and ethical growth.

Now, such theological issues may seem tedious or antiquated to us today, but the shifts they brought about have had enduring consequences.

They’ve meant that heaven and hell came to be seen not so much as destinations for the afterlife

but as descriptions of the human condition here and now.

With this insight, our forebears recognised everything they could dare to imagine about heaven or hell could be found right in the midst of their daily lives—in their hearts and in their homes, in their congregations and within society at large.

From their day down to ours, those who've come to see and understand that heaven and hell can both be found pretty close to home, have also found that with this realisation comes a responsibility and a calling—a calling to build up a better world, beginning with our very selves.

As Unitarian Universalists, that calling has shaped so much of our history, guiding us to actually do something about what breaks our hearts, guiding us to labour for the better part of two centuries in the cause of justice and peace.

It has led us to wrestle with what it means to live a life of integrity, to struggle with the fact that diversity need not mean division, and to endeavour to know, as though our lives depend on it, that we are profoundly caught up in a delicate dance with all of life.

Our commitment to living into this calling in the past has changed this world for the better—and it has changed us in the process.

It has certainly changed me, and I know it has changed many of you.

So often people come to this faith  
under the false, and sometimes irritating, impression  
that they can believe anything they want—  
that they can come as they are and expect to remain that way.

But, the truth is that there is a transformative power  
at the centre of this faith that works on us over the long haul—  
when we let it, and sometimes even when we resist—  
wearing down our prejudices,  
challenging our assumptions,  
enlarging our hearts and  
widening our capacity for wonder and awe  
at the great gift of life we find in this present, precious moment.

This faith teaches that there is heaven to be found here and now,  
even among the most bittersweet facts of this life—  
that because life is fragile, it is all the more precious,  
and because life is so very precious,  
that we are called into covenant with the web of being itself  
to uphold and sustain it, and pass it along as the cherished gift that it is.

This is the good news of our faith; it is our saving message.

It is a theology that holds its own in the world of ideas  
and the marketplace of religion.

And, with every fibre of my being,  
I believe it is a message we have an absolute obligation to share  
with a world that stands in desperate need of a different religious story.

For we gather this day, at a moment in time  
that I believe is asking a great deal of us—and of the faith that we hold.

The challenges confronting the human race  
and life on this planet we call home  
are arguably the most serious the world has ever known.

We live in a time of increasing alienation and fragmentation.

The enduring notion of community is being lost.

Material consumption and mass marketing  
define our existence in ways almost too powerful to resist.

Our participation in genuine democracy is eroding,  
just as it seems we need it most.

The growing concentrations of poverty and wealth  
have left our social contract with each other in tatters  
and our covenant with the earth all but broken.

And in too many places around the globe, far from helping,  
religion is ripping at the fabric of life itself,  
dividing people, rather than drawing them together in common purpose.

Every challenge I've just mentioned has, at its root, a spiritual crisis.

And, each of these challenges, has a spiritual cure  
that I believe our theology speaks to in powerful ways.

Fortunately, the healing of this world isn't entirely up to us,  
but we can play an outsized role,  
if we are willing to come alive and model a deeply different way of being.

This planet and her people are in desperate need  
of courageous souls who have come alive  
with a burning commitment to create a better and sustainable world—  
a world of justice and peace, held together in love.

We must ask ourselves, then, what is required  
if we are to be a relevant, life-giving, and truly transformative faith  
for these times in which we live.

Part of the answer is to be found in what we gather to do here today.

A service of installation is a renewal of our commitment to the sunrise.

A moment when we honour and celebrate our past,  
building on the strength of the generations of ministry  
that have come before, but renewing our resolve  
to “trust the dawning future more.”

It is a moment when we come together to affirm our faith-filled hope  
that our best days are still ahead.

Let us then, on this day and with the break of each amazing day,  
take up the call of this faith  
and help move our world toward the life-giving power that it brings.  
Amen.