

Explorations en/in Français
Rev. Diane Rollert
The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 31 May 2009

It has been at least a year since I last attempted to write a bilingual sermon. *Cette fois-ci je pensais que ce serait plus facile pour moi. Mes mots ne coulent pas avec perfection, mais après une année d'effort je me sens plus à l'aise. Mais, c'est assez.*¹

I know that we are a congregation that is mostly English-speaking, though we have a steadily growing membership that is increasingly bilingual, coming from francophone, allophone and anglophone backgrounds.² Our roots are steeped in the history of anglophone Montreal and the Golden Square Mile. This community has seen *La révolution tranquille*, two referendums, and the loss of many members who moved west in the 70s and 80s.

Yet now we find ourselves in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, in a changing place and time. No doubt there are old wounds yet to be healed. There is plenty of miscommunication to be untangled, and there is still much that we must do as a congregation to open our doors wider to all kinds of diversity.

The simple fact that I released a bilingual title for today's service was enough to make some uncomfortable – not in an unkind way. For some this is a topic that is just too painful to address, in either language. For those who do not speak French, especially those who grew up long, long before the 1960s, the prospect of a bilingual service is understandably daunting. Speaking as someone who has come to learn French later in life, it is not an easy language to learn as your memory and hearing are starting to fail. And yes, it can be much too easy to get by in English all the time in this city – a real frustration to me *quand tout le monde fait la "switch" à l'anglais* (when everyone switches to English) the moment I begin to struggle with my French. I now know it is mostly for politeness, and only sometimes for expedience.

Last week, I began an online conversation with some of the members of our community whom I perceive to live their lives in both English and French. Most were French speakers by birth, though for some French and English are their second, third, fourth or even fifth languages. Still others in the group are English speakers who spend a lot of their time living or working in French. The group was far from inclusive of all the people here who fit into these categories, but it was a way for me to test some waters.

I asked this group to share their reflections about life lived on the bridge between two languages. From my perspective, to live on this bridge must be both a challenge and a spiritual discipline.

Chers amis,

Le 31 mai je voudrais faire une célébration bilingue. Je me concentrerai sur la vie vécu

sur le pont (ou le trait d'union, comme Léo Poncelet dirait) entre les langues. C'est un truc qui a mon avis est à la fois un défi et une discipline spirituelle.

Etant donné que vous êtes des personnes qui habitent sur ce pont, j'aimerais avoir des vos réflexions – en anglais ou français selon votre préférence.³

The responses I received came in both English and French, and mostly, from those in the group who were francophone or allophone. The depth of what they had to say truly touched me. We spoke a bit about “franglais” in the technical sense, as in the woman walking down the street in New Brunswick who turns to her friend and says:

"J'ai fait mon skirt, mais j'aime pas la way qu'à hang."⁴

But the conversation quickly took on a more serious tone. It was a rare opportunity to step into worlds I don't really know, except as a newcomer looking in from the outside. The trust with which this group entered into conversation was far beyond my expectations. Today, I have invited some of those who wrote to share excerpts from their reflections. I wish I could share everything that was written.

Denis Barsalo (who could not join us today) really got the snowball rolling with the first response. His words came in French. For those who are worried, I am going try my best to keep a thread going in English and in French throughout the service today.

First, there is something I must explain. Last year I said in a sermon that this community dreams of becoming a bridge between ourselves and others. Leo Poncelet kindly translated that sermon into French to distribute through the online journal *Tribune Libre*. Somehow the word “pont” didn't work. So Leo decided on *trait d'union* – what we would translate as a hyphen in English. *Trait d'union* really evokes the sense of a link between one thing and another, just as a bridge is a link between one place and another.

Here's what Denis wrote about the bridge or the *trait d'union*:

Dans mon cas à moi, personnellement, je ne sens pas ce trait d'union. Pour moi, c'est une double vie - les deux solitudes, côte à côte en parallèle. Je vis mes journées presque totalement en français avec mes collègues de travail pendant que ma vie sociale se trouve presque totalement en anglais. Les deux se mélangent pas et ne se voient pas. Les quelques fois que mon épouse m'a accompagné à un événement ou rencontre social de bureau, c'était très bizarre. Je me sentais entre deux mondes.⁵

Denis confessed that he didn't see the bridge that I see. He grew up in a Liberal Québécois family that loved American culture, so he learned to speak English and did much of his later studies in English. Now his life is split in two, between French at work and English in his social life. The two solitudes, side by side in parallel.

He continued (in French) “I do agree that the Unitarian Church of Montreal could become a bridge -- *un trait d'union (-), mais moi personnellement, je me sens plus à l'oblique (/) signe de division. Un "double life" comme on dirait en anglais.*” Personally, he said, he feels more like a forward slash, the sign for division.

Later he wrote to say that he had never really considered the power of expressing his faith in his *langue maternelle* until he began to meet other francophones at Canadian Unitarian Council gatherings.

Denis's reflection opened the floodgates and others began to respond. Normand told the story of his experiences of working in the States and the rest of Canada and coming to appreciate the differences in culture. Francine Desmarais (as you will hear) reflected further on the idea of a bridge. Perhaps the younger more bilingual generation will be able to navigate two-way bridges with ease. Are the rest of us stuck on a one-way bridge? What would it take to expand the Unitarian Universalist movement beyond this small place to a large francophone world that could so benefit from what we have to offer?

Florence Stevens, now 80, wrote to say that the religious division between the school boards here meant that she grew up as a francophone going to school in English.

J'ai passé une année en français au couvent quand j'étais petite, et j'ai continué mes études en anglais, parce que ma mère a vite compris que, étant une famille catholique, je ne pourrais pas aller au secondaire -- nous n'avions pas l'argent pour me permettre une école privée -- et on est vite devenu protestants.⁶

Today she feels happily at home in both worlds.

Nancy Labonté wrote that it was only through living in Vancouver for two years that she discovered English Canadian culture and a love for its poetry.

Avant, je n'avais aucune idée de cette culture, sauf les préjugés qui circulaient parmi mes amis québécois souverainistes. Quelle ne fut pas ma surprise de lire une poésie riche et vivante! C'est vrai, il y a une barre oblique qui sépare ces deux mondes, et, à défaut de sauter la barre, on ne nous communique rien de ce qui se passe de l'autre bord! Il n'y a pas de lien entre les deux solitudes.⁷

As Nancy suggests, if we don't jump over the bar (/) we communicate nothing. I ask you to trust that it is okay to have this conversation here in church today. Come stand with us at the threshold as a door is slowly, carefully opened to welcome us in, to inspire us, and yes, to challenge us a spiritual community. "You are brave," someone wrote. But I am not. I am simply going by my gut that says we can only grow – personally and as a community -- by taking on the most challenging issues in our lives.

Je vous invite à écouter les voix des autres.

Normand Gosselin:

Denis a raison lorsqu'il parle de deux mondes parallèles. Cependant, parler anglais est pour moi beaucoup plus que parler une deuxième langue: c'est connaître une autre culture au Québec, puis une autre dans le reste du Canada, et finalement une autre aux États-Unis. En fait, c'est travailler et pratiquer une religion en anglais qui ont facilité ma relation avec les

anglophones.

Bien sûr, tant du côté francophone qu'anglophone, elles sont nombreuses les personnes qui sont susceptibles, fragiles, souvent jusqu'à la paranoïa: il suffit que quelqu'un utilise le mauvais mot au mauvais endroit, à cause d'un manque de connaissance de la culture de l'autre et de l'autre culture, pour qu'on sente le jugement s'établir. Quel dommage. Et de l'autre côté, c'est tellement fantastique de pouvoir comprendre la littérature, surtout la poésie, dans une langue comme dans l'autre. Pour moi, parler anglais au Québec, dans le reste du Canada et aux États-Unis, me permet justement d'élargir mes horizons et d'accepter les autres tels qu'ils sont.⁸

Francine Desmarais:

Ce sera avec les jeunes qui grandissent vraiment bilingues et avec moins de bagage de l'histoire des deux solitudes qu'il pourra y avoir des échanges à double-voies(2 way-streets or bridges) dans notre communauté. Etant essentiellement anglaise, l'église transporte des références anglosaxonnes qui pour ceux qui viennent d'ailleurs, n'ont pas beaucoup de résonances affectives. Il faudrait une plus grande volonté et un plus profond désir de s'ouvrir à d'autres cultures pour pouvoir traverser le pont ensemble.

Je ne veux pas me présenter de façon négative ni pessimiste et j'apprécie les efforts récents qui ont eu lieu. Il est facile de parler d'unité, d'harmonie mais les paroles ne suffisent pas....il faut faire des petits pas, au fur et à mesure des jours, pour essayer de nous rejoindre....réciproquement, un pont à deux voies....pas toujours les même qui doivent le traverser.⁹

Karine Deschamps:

I am a product of the Two Solitudes, and I have to say that a lot of the time, I do feel pulled in both directions. I grew up in Westmount, but in a francophone upbringing; spoke French at home most of the time and went to school in French as well. My father is a well known Quebecois comic who decided to move to Westmount for anonymity- a huge star in the French world, but in Westmount, a complete unknown! My mother is an anglo from Ontario, so I speak English to her, and my cousins and family from Ontario speak English only.

I am both Canadian and Québécois, but I feel most strongly attached to Quebec culture and the Quebec nation. Maybe it's cause they (we) are the underdog- misunderstood by both English Quebecers and Canadians alike. Someone's gotta stick up for us, right? Historically and politically, I feel pulled and I often get into heated arguments about Quebec and Canada, but I have to admit that I have been on both sides of the argument! I have even often been on the third, invisible side of the argument, which is a can of worms in itself- Justice for First Nations. I believe we are still on colonial land, and that before we can even get past our French and English differences, we must consider that this is still "stolen land". I can hear the protests coming forth from all the other readers, but I've gotta speak my truth.

On just the level of language, the more the better! I grew up with the two, but in my early twenties I decided to learn Spanish, which I have been speaking fluently for about 8 years now. I am married to a Cuban-Canadian, so we speak our three languages freely and almost never finish a sentence in only one language. I love that and will absolutely encourage my kids to learn a fourth language if they feel so inclined. Maybe it's cause I grew up bilingual that I understood very early on the value of being fluent in another language- you are always the "insider", you can be a chameleon! And if you are travelling to the US or English Canada, you can switch to French and gossip all you want... being multilingual is awesome!

Marie-France Boisvert:

I was born a year before the first referendum! I'm almost the post-referendum generation. And I think my age group has a less politically charged relationship to language. Which is to say: speaking French and English (either or both) is still a politically significant thing, but! It is seen, more and more, as a skill, instead of a symbol (of race, culture, political opinion, etc.). Also- I can't think of anyone, in my immediate circle, who doesn't have a firm grasp of English. And I know a few people whose French is pretty bad, but they're embarrassed about it. If it happens that someone says, with pride : "I do not speak [x]" it doesn't happen often, and the incident is generally considered as an example of ignorance and, well, weirdness.

*Which brings me to : I think bilingualism, in Montreal, is turning into a class thing, i.e., more educated = more bilingual. So if anything, I think there might be, at this point, people looking down on others because they're **not** bilingual. I've definitely seen that happening recently.*

P.S. I read Karine's e-mail, and realized who her dad had to be? And my head exploded.

Diana Romero:

When I left Peru 4 years ago, we were pushed to study English at the high school as a symbol of USA supremacy. When I left the school I spent some years to study this language in another institute. The result was I learnt Spanglish (Spanish+English). And when I decided to study French, after 2 years of intensive grammar torture I spoke Fragnol (Français+Espagnol).

When I arrived to Quebec I discovered another language: le québécois 100% pur laine. At the beginning it was hard because most of the people spoke to me in English, I guess because they were afraid I wasn't able to understand. Months later I discovered more than grammar differences in this province. I realized that to learn French was even a political issue. Between anglophones and francophones, Canadians gave me a label: they call me allophone.

Because I'm an immigrant, I've had the privilege to see both sides of these societies, two grammars and two histories in conflict. Two identities well differenced, and I belong to another one which must be absorbed or assimilated. That's a law and I'm not complaining...but to see these societies trying to do the same thing to each other is a psychological matter. The result is not to be different but distant.

Hannelore Poncelet:

La langue est un don que chacun d'entre nous reçoit des générations antérieures. Elle est un des véhicules le plus évident d'une culture. Plus de langues qu'on connaît, plus de portes s'ouvrent sur des différentes cultures. Ceux qui parlent plus d'une langue peuvent être en position de faire le 'trait-d'union' entre les cultures.

Mais l'unitarianisme transcende la langue. Je suis unitarienne de naissance, de langue hongroise, langue d'origine des premiers unitariens au 16e siècle. Le christianisme, l'histoire hongroise toujours en quête de la liberté, la littérature, la musique, les dances, la broderie... ces aspects de la culture hongroise sont toujours présents chez les unitariens hongrois.

I participated in an American Unitarian community during my first five years of learning English and discovering the American culture of Unitarians. I was with the Youth Group, searching for answers to the meaning of life, solving theoretically all the social, economical and political problems, and having fun together. This is so different from the Hungarian Unitarian community and even from the Canadian Unitarians of Montreal where I'm a member for the past 25 years.

Chaque milieu a sa propre culture. Montréal est vraiment spécial. Ici, nous pourrions vraiment faire un 'trait d'union' entre plusieurs cultures. Nous avons ici le rencontre de plusieurs horizons avec une culture française vieille de 400 ans, culture bien ancrée au niveau histoire, littérature, musique, et ses institutions; et avec une culture anglaise vieille de 250 ans, culture aussi bien ancrée, quoique minoritaire sur le territoire immédiat, mais majoritaire sur le continent.¹⁰

Français, for me is not the meeting of cultures, it is mixing two languages. Unitarianism is not a language issue, it is the meaningful search for the meaning of life, of community, of compassion in the culture or cultures that one lives. Language is the means of this meaningful communication. Unitarianism should transcend language and reach out to all those who need to talk about and share what is meaningful for them.

Rev. Diane Rollert:

Last week, while in Thunder Bay, I crossed a long pedestrian suspension bridge that swayed precariously over a towering canyon that had been deeply carved by a river. Crossing with a crowd was a terrifying experience, as the bridge swayed and bounced with

each footstep. Keeping our eyes on the horizon, singing *Spirit of Life*, we made it across without letting ourselves contemplate the long fall below us.

Stepping out on this bridge here, this *trait d'union*, between the many worlds that come together in this space and time, feels a bit like that. You have to have faith that the bridge will hold as you gather up your courage to cross from one end to the other.

A bridge is something that is always under construction, I told you in that sermon nearly two years ago. A bridge is something that has to be experienced directly. We have to walk across it. We have to hold onto its railings. We have to shore it up when it starts to sag. We have to work on it. A bridge calls us to walk back and forth, to take both directions. We cross the bridge in one direction to find our place of truth and meaning. We cross the bridge in the opposite direction to bring that understanding out into the world.

At the end of his reflection, Normand wrote that he hoped that today's service would permit us to move towards each other without looking back to the past. If only we could see that we are all human, that we all share the same desires and preoccupations. This is his wish for us.

There is no doubt that many of us find that we are more citizens of the world than citizens of one place. This is where I find myself. This is what brings many of us together, with the willingness to see beyond languages and barriers. Nancy Labonté writes that she is a stranger in the city.

*Pas vraiment lituanienne, pas vraiment québécoise, pas vraiment canadienne...
Traversée par toutes les influences, je vibre autant devant l'antique que devant le
postmoderne...*

Her language is French, she says, but her faith has found its resonance in the echoes of an anglophone religion. The poems and songs that she has adapted from English into French have shown her that emotion has no language.

“Unitarianism must not be a language issue,” Leo Poncelet writes. “It must transcend language.... A language is only a means we must acquire to relate to other human beings, to become a human person.” He gives thanks for the gift of speaking two languages, and says “it is a sad thing to see languages die.... Maybe we should train an army of linguists to save the thousands of world languages, instead of an army of generals and soldiers « to save us» from the so-called terrorists....”

This is how we take action in the world – by making space for many forms of expression, for preserving many cultures and bringing them into dialogue with each other, by moving beyond solitudes into overlapping multitudes.

As for *Franglais*? Well we mostly agreed that it was fairly incomprehensible, sometimes exclusionary, and occasionally fun. As Jean Freed piped in at the very end of our conversation:

“I still smile every time someone apologises “de m’avoir dérangée.” Thank you, but I have been deranged for years, it has nothing to do with anything that they did or did not do. And yes, I would like “glace” with my soda, just because it is so much easier to hold that way...”

¹ This time I thought it would be easier for me. My words don’t flow with perfection, but after a year’s effort I feel more comfortable. But that’s enough.

² Note to non-local readers: these are the terms we use here. Francophones grow up speaking French, anglophones grow up speaking English, and allophones are anybody who lives here and grew up speaking any other language.

³ Dear Friends,

On May 31, I would like to do a bilingual service. I will concentrate on life lived on the bridge (or “trait d’union,” - hyphen or link, as Leo Poncelet would say) between languages. As I see it, this is something that is both a challenge and a spiritual discipline. Since you live on this bridge, I would love to have your reflections, -- in English or French as you prefer.

⁴ “I made my skirt, but I don’t like how it hangs.” Heard in New Brunswick (courtesy of Denis Barsalo’s friend)

⁵ In my case, personally, I don’t feel this bridge. For me, it is a double life – the two solitudes, side by side in parallel. I live my days almost totally in French with my work colleagues, while my social life is almost totally in English. The two don’t mix and they have nothing to do with each other. The few times that my wife accompanied me to a work event or gathering, it was very bizarre. I felt as though I were between two worlds.

I admit that I had never really thought your way until recently. As for the Unitarian Church of Montreal, I agree that one could be a link (-) but personally, I feel more like a forward slash (/), sign of division. A “double life” as one would say in English. –Denis Barsalo

⁶ I spent a year [going to school] in French at the convent when I was little, and I continued my studies in English because my mother quickly realized that being in a Catholic family I wouldn’t be able to go to high school – we didn’t have money for me to attend a private school – so we quickly became Protestants.

–Florence Stevens

⁷ Before, I had no idea of [the anglophone] culture, except the prejudices that circulated among my québécois sovereignist friends. What a surprise to read such rich and lively poetry! It is true, there is an oblique bar that separates these two worlds, and without jumping over the bar, we don’t communicate anything and nothing passes from one side to the other! There isn’t a link between the two solitudes.

–Nancy Labonté

⁸ Denis is right when he speaks of two parallel worlds. However, to me, to speak English is more than

speaking a second language: it is to know another culture in Québec, then another in the rest of Canada, and finally another in the US. In fact, it is working and practicing a religion in English that has facilitated my relationship with anglophones.

Of course, both on the francophone side and the anglophone side, there are many people who are susceptible, fragile, often to the point of paranoia: All it takes is someone using a wrong word at a wrong place due to a lack of knowledge of the culture of the other person and of the other culture and one feels a negative judgment establish itself. What a shame. And on the other hand, it is so fantastic to be able to understand literature, above all poetry, in one language as in the other. For me, to speak English in Québec, in the rest of Canada, and in the US, permits me to widen my horizons and to accept others as they are.

–Normand Gosselin

⁹ It will be the young who grow up truly bilingual and with less baggage from the history of the two solitudes who will be able to have two-way exchanges in our community. Being essentially English, the church uses Anglo-Saxon references that, for those who come from other places, don't have many emotional resonances. There would have to be a greater will and a deeper desire to open up to other cultures in order to cross the bridge together. I don't want to present myself in a negative or pessimistic way, and I appreciate the recent efforts that have taken place. It is easy to speak of unity and harmony, but words are not enough... Little steps need to be taken, bit by bit, to try to meet us... reciprocally, a two-way bridge ... not always the same ones crossing it. –Francine Desmarais

¹⁰ Language is a gift that we each receive from past generations. It is one of the most evident vehicles in a culture. The more languages one knows, the more doors that open to different cultures. Those who speak more than one language can be in a position to make the bridge (le trait d'union) between cultures.

But Unitarianism transcends language. I am a Unitarian by birth, of Hungarian tongue, the first language of the first Unitarians in the 16th century. Christianity, Hungarian history always in search of freedom, literature, music, dances, embroidery... these aspects of the Hungarian culture were always present among the Hungarian Unitarians.

Each milieu has its own culture. Montreal is truly special. Here we would be able to really make a bridge between several cultures. We have here the meeting of several horizons with a 400-year old French culture, a culture well-anchored on the historic level, literature, music, and its institutions; and with a 250-year old English culture also well-anchored, although a minority on the immediate land, but a majority on the continent. –Hannelore Poncelet