

**Singing for Our Souls**  
**Rev. Diane Rollert**  
**The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 24 May 2009**

I bring you greetings from the Annual Meeting and Conference of the Canadian Unitarian Council, as well as the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada (affectionately known as UUMOC). Anyone who spoke to me the week before I left for Thunder Bay knows that I wasn't exactly looking forward to the trip. "Don't forget to take your down coat," Verna, our office administrator, teased me. To leave the blooming apple trees, the lilacs and the greenness of this island for the north was not easy.

When we arrived at the conference, our hosts proudly assured us that we would experience all four seasons during our visit – and they were right. We arrived with fall-like weather a week ago Friday, and then yes, it did snow all day that Saturday, only to be followed by spring and a touch of summer. When I left two days ago, the buds on the trees were beginning to look a little green. Thunder Bay is a long way from home, in so many ways.

But what gratitude I have that I did go. We were a small gathering compared to the previous year in Ottawa, perhaps 250 in total. During the conference, I especially cherished the time that I got to spend with the many youth who came (including three of our teens) -- they must have been the largest and most enthusiastic age group present. This led several of us to consider half seriously that we should let our youth organize our future gatherings and that they could then invite the adults.

I was especially impressed with the youth who were graduating into young adulthood and taking on major leadership roles in our national movement. They gave me much hope for our future.

After the lay leaders left, we, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada, gathered for our annual retreat. There were 28 of us. As a movement, we are challenged by our small numbers and the vastness of this country. We are colleagues who spend most of the year hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from each other, even when we supposedly live in the same region. This is the one time of the year when we are able to gather together to take a long-range look at the ministry we share in this country.

In five short days, we revised our By-Laws, worked out new ways to be in partnership with the CUC Board, and came up with a number of very exciting new initiatives that we believe will strengthen Unitarian Universalism in Canada. It wasn't much of a retreat (in the relaxing sense of the word), but we were electrified, transformed, and surprised by all that we accomplished and what it might mean for the future of our movement. My hope is that you will someday soon be hearing from me about Northern Lights, a program to give major grants to our congregations for transformative work, or Ministry on the Move, a program to deliver high quality worship and other resources to smaller, lay-led or new congregations and fellowships – to name just a few ideas that we developed this week.

Thursday night, your former minister, Ray Drennan, and I shared a unique honour. Together we read to our colleagues the odyssey of Charles and Nancy Eddis. There has

long been a tradition that one of our elder ministers shares the story of his or her ministry during our annual gathering. Charles, our minister emeritus here, and his wife, Nancy, had planned to join us in Thunder Bay, but when the doctors wouldn't give Charles clearance to travel, Ray and I stepped in. We did have some discussion about which one of us would get to play Nancy, but in the end, Ray read Charles's reflections and I read Nancy's.

I am in awe of all that Charles has done for Unitarianism in Canada. He built the Edmonton and Montreal Lakeshore fellowships into churches, he brought this church back to life at a very difficult time in its history, and he really was a founder of the Canadian Unitarian Council. Combining intellect, a love for our institutions and a passion for social justice, he did it all without ever breaking a sweat. And Nancy, well, we are all grateful to Nancy for keeping us – and Charles – real.

Now let me take you back to the very beginning of the week and the beginning of the CUC conference, to another major source of inspiration during my stay in Thunder Bay. It was an American visitor, keynote speaker Rev. Chris Buice, minister of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, in Knoxville, Tennessee, who reminded us why it is that we come together to tend this flame that we call Unitarian Universalism.

Last May, Chris decided to spend a few days of his sabbatical leave in Ottawa at last year's CUC annual conference and meeting. He just thought it might be worthwhile to expand his view of Unitarian Universalism by crossing an international border. It was a pleasant exchange, as some of us got to know Chris and he got to know us. He took back with him the music for a song that Tony Turner had composed for that year's conference, "The Circle of Song." That's what we ministers often do. We stuff these readings and song sheets into our travel bags, and bring them home to share someday, hoping we'll remember to bring them out when the right occasion arises.

A few months later, while Chris was still away on sabbatical leave, an armed man intent on killing "liberals" walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville – Chris's church – and opened fire as a group of children were singing songs from the musical "Annie Jr." to a filled sanctuary. Before the man was tackled to the ground by members of the congregation, he fatally shot two people: Greg McKendry, a most beloved member, and Linda Lee Kraeger, a visitor from nearby Westside Unitarian Universalist Church.

This week, Chris recounted the story that I had heard third-hand from so many others. The evening after the shooting, a shocked community gathered for an interfaith candlelight service at a neighbouring Presbyterian Church that had truly provided sanctuary during the shooting the day before. Recalling that very night, Chris told us about the children who anxiously came forward and asked him if they could sing at the end of the service. They weren't sure what they would sing, or who would feel strong enough to sing, but in the end, sing they did. The crowd was overflowing into the rain soaked night, and the children came forward and sang, "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow."

When the children sang, Chris said, "I felt as though I was present at the creation."

A week later, Chris and his congregation reclaimed their sanctuary and rededicated it. On that day, Chris spoke these words in his homily:

*“A man tried to divide us, divide us into liberals and conservatives, gay and straight; instead his actions united us, making us more willing to listen to each other, care for each other, respect each other, support each other, and—let’s be honest—feed each other—feeding each other in body and spirit. He came into this space to inflict death; and he took away the lives of two precious people, wounded six others, traumatized the rest of us, traumatized our community and the world. But strangely, at the same time, reminding us of the preciousness of our children, the sacredness of life, and at this moment in time the true value of friendship and family, and how much we need good neighbors.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is the message that Chris brought to us in Thunder Bay. A life worth living needs worship, he said. It isn’t God who needs worship, it is us. Worship at its best invites us into something much larger. We come together to find something worth living for. We have to find the good in life and praise it, even as we confront evil and violence. Chris’s message kept me afloat throughout the week and focused my work with my colleagues. This is why we do this, I kept saying to myself.

At the end of the rededication service at the Tennessee Unitarian Universalist Church, Chris spoke these words:

*“...our community is part of a larger world community and we have many names for trying to describe that world community, and we are all of them today. We are God’s children: red, yellow, black and white, gay and straight. We are all human, members of the human family, sharing one earth, sharing one common home. We are tied together, we are woven together, we are bound together in more ways that we can ever really know.*

*“We are one.”*

Then those present in the sanctuary, members from both congregations that had faced so much pain, and guests from many faith communities in Knoxville, joined together in singing a simple song that Chris had heard a few months earlier while visiting a gathering of Canadian Unitarian Universalists: “The Circle of Song.”

*Come join with me in the circle of song.*

*The young and the old, the weak and the strong.*

*Singing in one voice, tho’ we may speak different tongues.*

*In the circle of song, we are one.*

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<sup>1</sup> UU World, Summer 2009, Vol.XXIII No. 2:  
<http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/117966.shtml>

The Sunday after that fateful July shooting, two women appeared at our doorstep. Merry and Mary were here from Knoxville Tennessee, for one semester while Merry taught at McGill. They were members of the Westside Unitarian Universalist Church and had known fellow member Linda Kraeger who had died in the shooting. Shocked and overwhelmed, they came seeking the support of Montreal's Unitarians. They stayed with us, joined our choir, and became members of our family if only for a short time. Sadly for us, in January, they had to return to Knoxville.

These days, Mary and Merry keep in touch via e-mail. When Jack Cobb sent out special lyrics for "Oh We Give Thanks" for Mother's Day, Mary picked up the words and sang them to her congregation *a cappella* for the chalice lighting that day.

Across this vast country, across this vast continent, we are connected by these simple acts of faith and song. Together we sing and we connect to something greater than ourselves. Even if you don't sing, you are surrounded by all of us singing for you. We are singing for our lives. In the circle of song, we are one.

Many of you know it; will you sing with me:

*Come join with me in the circle of song.*

*The young and the old, the weak and the strong.*

*Singing in one voice, tho' we may speak different tongues.*

*In the circle of song, we are one.*