

**Riding the UU Tide**  
**Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship**  
**May 28, 2006**  
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Perhaps you've seen this service advertised as "Riding the UU Wave," but I arrived in Saint John to discover that the CUC conference was actually titled, "Riding the UU Tide." No, they didn't do a switcheroo...It was my own blinders and prejudices...I have never lived where I have been in touch with the tides, at least not on a daily basis, and my error here is an example of making assumptions...in my view, you need a wave to ride water, not a tide, and I completed the phrase before even reading to its end...a perfect example of an myopic worldview.

As it turns out, the congregation in Saint John is inextricably connected to the tides, and the name of the conference, *Riding the UU Tide*, was a way for them to share the reality of their worldview with the rest of us. The Bay of Fundy, on which Saint John rests, has the highest tides in the world, with a difference of fifty feet in sea level at the most extreme times. The tide rises so high, that its force, a tidal bore, actually sends the area rivers running back in the opposite direction. The power of water plays a major role in their lives, (their congregation's logo is a chalice floating on water) and I believe that all of us attending were struck by how much their 'sense of place' was held up throughout the conference. What a wonderful way for disparate UUs to come to a meeting of understanding and to learn about one another.

I don't really want to give you a blow-by-blow account of the week...but I do want to share several of my learnings and experiences. I know that some of you had some explicit hopes for this conference... hopes that it would address areas that you think are missing in the CUC's leadership and direction, or hopes that I would make some connections there that would benefit the life or even the financial health of LUF...and I do have at least a bit of a response to these questions. But most of my learning is going to have to be parsed out a little bit at a time, as I use this experience to better serve you.

Certainly there was something there for everyone. The lay chaplains, Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice, Young Adult ministry and the religious educators had mini-conferences beforehand, and the ministers had a retreat after. At the conference itself, over the course of three-plus days, there were six major time blocks for concurrent workshops, and the annual business meeting, which required the attendance of our delegates was spread out over three meeting slots. I spent two of those workshop times in choir rehearsal, which for a while seemed like a self-serving choice, until I

realized that it put me in touch with someone who does workshops on getting a choir going in small congregations... another great resource! While I wish I'd been able to attend more sessions, there were seven or more of us actively attending workshops, so perhaps between us, we covered most of them!

After the ACM, I traveled north to Bouctouche where, as I said, the UUMOC gathered for a three-day retreat and workshop. This was extremely valuable for me...in helping me to understand the Canadian Unitarian culture, and perhaps for that culture to grow more in me. It is so helpful to get to know ministers from across the country; to know who to call when I have a question; and, I made connections that can address some of the isolation I have tended to feel here. It was also a wonderful opportunity for me to be an ambassador for you...to tell them what a wonderful congregation this is, and to build up Thunder Bay's reputation as a great place to do ministry.

Let me first talk briefly about a few points of interest. The opening night featured an ingathering ceremony, preceded by the traditional banner parade. This always gets to me...seeing these visual and unique representations of all of the congregations in Canada, paraded around the room by proud and smiling flag carriers. The ingathering itself was a water ceremony, with each congregation contributing a bit of water from their natural sources to the common bowl. This was accompanied by slides showing the meeting and water places for each. It was wonderful to see LUF up on the screen, brandishing a new and very visible sign, as Suzanne added water from Lake Superior. It made me proud.

Later that evening, the ministers met with the CUC board, to enter into conversation and discussion, but primarily for the Board to share with the ministers the initial work of the Visioning Task Force before it was rolled out at a meeting for everyone the next day. As many of you know, the CUC is quite young as an independent organization. Since splitting off from the (American) UUA in 2001, the Board has been primarily involved in the process of getting established both structurally and financially. I was pleased to hear the Rev. Brian Kiely, now past-president of the CUC, say that he felt that this initial work was largely done, and that the CUC could now get on with work that more directly addresses our mission in the world. There has been a Visioning Task Force at work for several years, doing much the same kind of work that our Way Forward Task Force is beginning to do. It was particularly exciting for me to see that the background research and documentation for that work is posted on the CUC website, and ready for us to use and to build upon.

Briefly, the CUC Visioning Task Force has presented what they are calling a Strategic Planning Framework. It is not the strategic plan itself, but rather a structure for both the CUC and individual congregations to use in their own planning. It is called “Go - 4 - It” and features a four-directional model. At the first point we find “Go on” which uses appreciative inquiry to identify those things we do well, to make improvements as possible, and to continue doing them.

At the second point is “Go Deep” which encourages us to enhance understanding, deepen connections, and develop spiritually in all aspects of our lives. This is the primary point of exploring “why” we are doing what we are doing.

“Go Out” is the third point, and it uses somewhat Thunder Bay-nian language to suggest that it’s our calling to waken the sleeping giant of spiritual progressives throughout Canada.

At the fourth point is “Go Big”, advocating that we set our sights high and dramatically increase our presence on the Canadian landscape. I’m looking forward to sharing more about this with our Way Forward Task Force, but also suggest that we apply this model to our decision and vision-making work in all corners of LUF.

Now, the second thing I want to share with you is the development-in-process of a new Lifespan Learning Curriculum called “In Our Voices: A Canadian Contextual Theology Project.” The Rev. Carole Martignacco is the person working on this project. She serves the congregation in North Hatley and has recently published a book called “The Everything Seed”. Carole has immense creative and imagining skills, and is building a curriculum intentionally built in and upon the Canadian context...for we know that just as the tides play a huge role in the worldview of the people of Saint John, where we live and where we come from influence our personal theologies in a formative way. The idea is to have a published resource of Canadian source texts, but also a living web-based library where things can be added continually. The curriculum itself takes one through Canadian UU history, teaches us about famous Canadian UUs, helps us to look at how we (in our individual contexts) fit into the Canadian mosaic, looks at our role in the social justice movements in this country, and calls us forward into shaping the Canadian UU future. It is projected that it might be available by December, and I’m just itching to use it here.

Finally, I want to share with you a bit of what I heard at the annual Confluence Lecture given by the Rev. Peter Boullata, who is presently the interim minister in Montreal. The title for his lecture was “Many Words for Snow: Canadian Unitarianism in the Twenty-First Century” and his task was

to explore how themes from our geography, history, natural environment and social condition can inform a distinct theology and practice, particularly in an increasingly pluralistic context. I'm looking forward to reading his entire lecture on the web (it's not up yet) as I missed the first bit of it. But as I understand it, he built his argument toward a close examination of UU worship, asking us to carefully consider how participants are transformed by being part of our communities. His point is that worship, or liturgy, is the work of the people, and that it must touch people in order for it to be meaningful. To touch people, it must really speak our language. From Rev. Bouallata's perspective (and he is much younger than I), UU worship needs to focus less on the spoken word, and move toward using poetry, music, motion, and physical elements that speak a language of the soul. Such worship would focus on story and symbol, and emphasize teachings on how we are to fully live out our principles. Communities built around such worship, he says, will depend more upon emotional intelligence, will foster a mutual relatedness, and celebrate an authentic religious pluralism...all of which will be instrumental in bring *tikkun olam*, the healing of the earth, into being. Needless to say, his lecture gave me much food for thought.

And now for a bit of deeper reflection...what did the 2006 CUC ACM teach me? What kind of indications did it give for the future of Unitarianism in Canada? First of all, as others have said, it gave me great hope. I saw possibility in this weekend...in the projects underway, in the ideas expressed, in the energy generated, and most of all in the spirit and commitment of the people.

Perhaps the most provocative thing I heard during the week was the keynote address by Dr. Alan Sharp, a physicist by profession, and Dean of Science at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. Dr. Sharp gave me the elementary education I needed to begin to understand the tides, particularly in the Bay of Fundy. I suppose that we all know that the tides are caused by the gravitational pull and positioning of the moon and the sun in relation to the Earth. But what I didn't know, or hadn't remembered was that these forces pull the Earth's waters into a slightly elliptical shape, working against the rigidity of the earth, and also against the earth's rotation beneath these bulges. In the case of the Bay of Fundy, the shape of the bay gradually narrows toward its head, which constricts the tidal flow, creating a sort of bathtub. The bay is also just the right length, as the time it takes for the tide to flood the length of the Bay is nearly identical to the time it takes for the tide to come in from the adjoining Gulf of Maine. Hence, Fundy's high tides are created by an unusual combination of resonance... or a meshing of the rhythms...between the bay and the Atlantic

Ocean, creating an effect something like a child sloshing water back and forth in a bathtub, with each wave higher than the one previous. In other words, there are unique conditions present creating a tidal contribution that equals the total daily discharge of all the world's rivers...about 100 cubic kilometers of water each day.

Even so, it is incredibly boring to watch the tide move. It sounds so dramatic, but you can stand in one place for hours without seeing much change. As one young woman asked me as I left the hotel to go down to the bay, "Will you come back and let me know if the tide has come in?" Apparently she'd been down to 'see it' several times, but hadn't noticed any change. And so, at this conference, I also experienced a kind of patience, perhaps like watching a tide, in seeing that while we as a movement are not growing quickly, the CUC is consciously and carefully building a base upon which to move and act. Perhaps for those of you who have been around a long time, this doesn't feel like enough, but I'm convinced that it provides the opportunity and the support for those of us poised to act quickly, while at the same time, it continues to articulate exactly who we are and where we're going.

Another important aspect of the power of tides was Dr. Sharp's analogy of the tides in Fundy Bay as having a certain exact tuning...where amazing things happen because all of the factors and variables line up just right. The world's tides are an amazing natural phenomenon, and yet the water that is pulled into the tidal bulge is but a tiny fraction of the earth's water...only 3 parts per 10 million form the tidal waters. Sharp joked, rather ironically, that 5000 Unitarians in Canada may seem like a respectable number, but that according to the last census, this is a smaller number than the number of people in Canada whose first language is Hakha. (I'd never even heard of this language before, but apparently it is the language of a tight-knit trading culture in Burma and India.) Yes, we are small. But here's the good news. Only three parts in ten million are able to create a fifty-foot difference in the water level on the shores of Saint John, New Brunswick. Only fifteen LUFers can go to a conference and come back with fellowship-changing insights and resources. Only three hundred Unitarians can gather on the Bay of Fundy to create a certain resonance in our rubbing together that causes the UU tide to rise. In Dr. Sharp's thinking, only ten committed and well-tuned UUs in Canada could have a huge effect. It just takes the right conditions. Like Mrs. Armitage and the Big Wave, we can adjust and add and work and fine-tune our ride to optimum effect. In other words, we must not only wait for the big wave, we must prepare for it.

One of the ministers at the retreat shared this story: The day after the keynote address, she stopped in a little shop and got to talking with the proprietor who was a woman of Asian descent. This woman asked the minister why she was in St. John, and they proceeded into a conversation about Unitarian Universalism. The minister was surprised to hear that this woman had actually heard of Unitarian Universalism, and knew a bit about it (unlike the St. John native who sat next to me on the plane on the way out.)

When another customer came in, the shopkeeper switched to French, and later the minister asked her if how many languages she spoke, to which the woman answered that she spoke English and French and Mandarin, but that her first language was Hakha.

While I was interning in Wausau, the wayside pulpit contained the message: No individual snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible. And perhaps, no drop of water in a tide feels responsible for the resonant action that changes the landscape. But, I point out the myopic view of these snowflakes and drops...for in fact, every snowflake in an avalanche is responsible, every drop of water is part of the tide. We are not only riding the tide, we are creating the rising waters.

Even small numbers can make a difference. Even disparate worldviews can come together to create a resonance of tremendous power. May we each accept the responsibility to work together for change. And may it be so for each and every one of us.

So be it.