



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

September 9, 2007

DECISIONS, DECISIONS!

Well, friends, I am between a rock and a hard place today, a place many of you as individuals share with me, as certainly does this whole congregation. We may experience this hard-rock place differently, but we're all in it together. And let's not waste energy resenting that it is *today* that raw geology is all up in our face because it could have been any time. Some think this day should have come long ago; others say, "no, no, not ever, at least not yet!" It didn't come five years ago, but it could have, and it now won't be next year because it is *today*. That's simply a fact.

For those of you new with us this morning, this is a unique Sunday. If you haven't heard by now, we face the momentous decision about whether to sell our property in order to build a new and improved church home, or whether to commit our lives and resources to improving this one. Either way, we enter a period of uncertainty. But not one that will affect our Sundays together for a long time.

If a big congregational vote isn't enough, I'm the brand new minister here at North Shore Unitarian, and this is my first paid gig. It so happens, though, that the *last* time I spoke from this pulpit there was another vital congregational meeting and vote, so I'm warning you all: if you keep having these big meetings every time I preach, *I want more money!*

And a *house*.

And a little *dog*, too!

And if I had a dog today, I'd be walking him here in this tiny wedge between a rock and a hard place. For me, the rock is that I must preach to you with passion and vision that will inspire you, and the hard place is that I must do so without defining a specific vision or giving concrete form to my passion. I'm the minister of you all, and if I were to take one side on this issue, I'd betray many of you. I feel called to be your minister precisely because of your vitality as you face challenges, but it's not up to me how you decide fundamentally to bring that vitality into the world. My call is to serve and guide you in articulating your vision; I'll do that wherever you decide to locate your work. I'll offer suggestions of vision while you become clearer about what it is, but I won't start today. First, you must decide simply on your first step out from this in-between-place.

Actually, this congregation has been in this predicament for a long time and this brink you're on is all too familiar to you. But, on this same spot, geographically and metaphorically, you have stood *together* for many years, and *that* will not change today whatever is the outcome of your vote, just as it has not changed in the past. You have stood in this proverbial image of impasse before and you will again because today only one decision is being made. It just happens to be a pivotal one upon which will turn many subsequent decisions, and meetings, and contested debates.

Some of you have shared with me your difficulty with this decision. Some of you yearn to be truly visionary within this church yet find yourselves governed by prudence and your assessment of risk. Others feel truly attached to these grounds and our building but recognize the many problems that arise from this place, sometimes literally when the sewage backs up. You see the writing on these lovely walls. What a hard choice it is.

This dilemma also affects the congregation as a whole. I have seen the emotion represented on both sides of this issue, and begun to realize how it sets up sub-groups within the church. Some tell me it's the old against the young, but I *know* it's not nearly that clear-cut. Nor is it the rash against the careful, for how is it rash to want to have a church home that will proudly house our children's children? And how is it careful to let the roof go years beyond when it should have been repaired? No, our dilemma arises from our love for this Unitarian congregation.

But we have different reasons to love it and various views of what it should be. Right now those views are being played out with respect to real estate, but the *real* differences are internal. That's why I've been saying that today's meeting, though crucial, decides just *one* thing. One of my concerns is that these *real* differences will be swept away by the avalanche of facts and changes that will inevitably come after this vote, whether it's to push out the back wall or to dismantle them all. As we consider the building and the land, we must remember to cherish and nurture what they contain: your mutual creation, this vibrant community.

So, in the face of all this, what vision and passion can I offer you?

I'll start with a lesson I began to learn nine years ago. After many months of thinking and fretting and dreaming and suffering, I decided that it was absolutely necessary to change my life by leaving my profession, although it wasn't long until I began again to dream and fret about what to do *after* that. Still, something crucial happened with that first decision that I didn't yet see: I had decided to change the *way* I decide.

I didn't know it right away, but I'd cut myself loose from the illusions of certainty that had been so important before. As a young person, I built many years of my life around a long-term career plan; many decisions depended upon earlier ones and I expected a relative lack of choice oftentimes. Practising psychiatry made life

fairly predictable and I *loved* that. I knew who I'd see any particular hour at work and what patterns would govern most of our talk. I'd see a movie every Friday, go to market on Saturday and cook on Sunday while listening to Cross Country Check-Up. That regularity structured life for me, but later I abandoned constructed stability. With the decision to stop working, I loosened those moorings because I needed to start floating on destiny. In the place of consistency, I discovered an internal gyroscope to keep me upright.

It's not that I stopped making decisions, or weighing options. Instead, I was content to make one or two decisions at a time and see where that led. I no longer had a life-plan; instead I had a plan for living. Take a step. Look around. What do I now see from here? How does this feel? Take another step.

On the other hand, it's not unusual for a *young* person to live freely, even aimlessly, only to settle down and choose a more set path later on. Many, though not all of us, fit one of these patterns; we've made decisions differently during one period of our lives compared to another. It's important that we value both these ways of living as different kinds of decisiveness, responsibility and freedom, for what is living if it's not a series of decisions we make about what to do and how to live? And what is putting off deciding but a decision itself?

A problem arises when people come together and mix up these different ways of approaching things; the mode we're in now always feels superior to the one we abandoned before, and we lose sight of our own histories of changing. It's even harder to see the wisdom in a way of living that we've never even considered, or have always scoffed at. So at a time like this, when we must each make an individual choice to help guide our corporate future, what do we do? How do we each decide? How do we decide together?

And then there's the painful process of adjusting to change. In the past 7 years, I've lived in 6 apartments in 3 provinces and 2 states; sold some of my favourite belongings, stuffed others into 3 different cars, stored the rest and have as yet to unpack everything because I'm likely to move again within the next year to make a real home in this area. I've had so many phone numbers I don't remember my *last* one. Believe me, I know from change and I hope there won't be anymore ever... except that without all those changes we wouldn't be together today. So the hope to avoid change is a good hope to abandon.

But in this room right now, someone who can barely stand the idea of more change is sitting right beside someone else who can barely stand it if things don't change. And it strikes me that there's more similarity between those states of mind than we might think. Is it possible that both these people feel a kind of anxiety? Someone resisting change might be fearful of losing what he has; someone driven forward by a desire to change might be fearful of not getting what she wants or needs. So with our different feelings about change, what do we do?

And anxiety brings us to the idea of risk, which lies in *whichever* decision we make. Let me say that again: risk lies in *whichever* decision we make. It may surprise you to hear that I really dislike taking risks. If something feels risky, I want to avoid it instead of plunging in and getting it over with. But, the critical term here is *feels*. If something *feels* risky. In the eyes of some, I risked everything by walking away from social and financial security, but I *perceived* a far greater risk in keeping it rather than letting it go for my soul's sake.

Risk is subjective even if it can be crunched into a number. We forget this subjectivity because our society distorts risk; for example, the risk of dying in our own cars is significant, but we don't quite stop at that stop sign. The risk of being bombed in an airplane is miniscule, but we all pour our mouthwash into little bottles. Our society distorts actual risk. Among us are members who see acutely the risk of our church losing what it's built and treasured in the past, and others who fear we will lose what we might become in the future. They're both significant risks that we subjectively assess differently. So what do we do?

A congregation is an entity with a life of its own. It may be vital, or feeble, or vulnerable. Like a baby it may need constant attention, or like a youth, subtle but firm re-direction; it may act like an adult striding along forthrightly. But whatever a congregation is *like*, it doesn't take care of itself; its judgment and autonomy are in the hands of its members and leaders. We call this 'stewardship' and think that means money; now money is undoubtedly important, but underlying money is legacy. Stewardship protects the legacy of the church which includes far more than money.

Our legacy is our history, our intentions, our dreams, our customs and our structures, not just in the physical sense, but in the ways we do what we do. But thinking of legacy, do we accept only what has been left to us by our forebears? Or do we also plan carefully what we will leave those who follow us? If there is only value in preserving, none of our grandchildren will be Unitarian because we won't have succeeded in making it relevant to them and their times. But, if there is no value in preserving, none of our grandchildren will be Unitarian because we will not have taught them what it really means. So what do we do?

With all this in mind this is what I say to you:

I call upon you today to value the commitment to this community that we hear in each other's arguments for or against the sale. I am in awe of how the cases on each side have been so carefully planned and fairly presented, and I am proud to have watched you listen to each other with an admirable degree of respect. The suggestion of selling may be surprising and bold to some, but my goodness it's been backed up with hard work on details and amazing forethought. The resistance to selling may seem stubborn and short-sighted to some, but out of that point of view have come new insights into the possibilities we could develop right here. So through the meeting today and on into the following months of many subsequent decisions to make, recognize in the hearts of all those around you here the heartfelt

commitment to this church that I see and deeply value. Respect each other's commitment.

I call upon you today to think past the numbers. In these past few weeks, for sound reasons, we've had to study figures and contract provisions. What we've not done much is to talk about what they can lead to, even if we're not all in agreement. If we have to go over the numbers again, OK, but let's not allow them to distract us from the larger picture. Consider our purpose.

I call upon you today to follow our principles and the democratic process that will set our future. The biggest error any of you could make is to try to thwart the will of the congregation; any attempt to prove the decision wrong by working against it is simply destructiveness. A community is not a government. Here, the way to prove a decision wrong is to put your heart, mind and back into *supporting* it because only that will clearly show if it's right or wrong. It's not the way that the world around us works, but, for goodness sake, we Unitarians critique sharply the ways of the world, so it behooves us not to imitate it at its worst. Accept our democratic decision.

I call upon you today to spend no more time thinking about fixing our roof than you do on fixing our dream. If your collective vision of what you want to be were in better shape, you'd have fewer problems with this building because you'd already have solved them in order to get on with bringing about your deeper plan. Another of my concerns is that the concreteness of the question of selling makes it seem as though we'll *either* pursue a dream *or* stick with what we have. That distinction is artificial only if you actually don't have a vision driving your point of view. Focus on your vision.

I call upon you today to think forward whatever way you're drawn to vote. A vote to move is not automatically for change or growth; it could just be a transfer. A vote to stay is not automatically against growth and change; it can be a re-investment in your dreams for the future in this place. Either way, you must think far ahead beyond your own personal interests. Unitarianism demands that we act beyond self-interest and too often we forget to do just that within our own congregations. Vote from your highest self.

You know, last night doing the final edit of this sermon, I suddenly feared that I was only telling you what I'd already said before, so I re-read the two sermons I gave last April. Boy, they were good! Far better than this one. In fact, so much better I'm going to quote myself. I said, "If I'm to be your minister, I will take the responsibility to remind you that life calls this congregation to become more than it has been." Now, I'm not telling you *what* to become, but I ask you to focus on becoming *more*, to continue unfolding the courageous story of this church.

Today is the day for each of you to decide *how* to decide, and what to become.