



*A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister*

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## LEARNING TO YEARN

One of the questions that some of your lay leaders and I have been asking in various settings since about New Year's is, "What do you yearn for in relation to this church?" It's not something to keep asking annually but it's a vital question for us now. Our church is in a time of transition and change; it would be a huge oversight for us at this time not to delve into what we the members and friends, leaders and staff, and I too want this church to move towards as we are changing. So we've been asking. If no one's yet asked you, don't wait to be asked; we're not being formal about it. Just tell someone: phone the office, send me an e-mail, speak to a Board member or someone you know works on a committee. Just tell someone if you yearn for something in this church and what it is, if you can identify it.

But I bet that many of you don't yearn for anything here; that's based on the number of folks so far who've said they don't. I was puzzled by that till I realized that some people hear the word 'yearn' and think it means 'want or desire.' "What do you want or desire in and from the church?" is quite a different question from what you yearn for, and it's an easier one to answer. You might say, "I want accessibility," or "I desire for us to have a name for ourselves recognized by my neighbours, friends and co-workers," or "I want to feel proud to bring anyone I know to church on Sunday." These wants and desires are also very important for us to identify during this stage of our church's development.

It's little wonder, though, that many of you haven't identified a *yearning* here, and that's not a bad thing at all. It means that what you want can be named, planned for and achieved. What I want for this church, just for starters looking around the room, is for everyone who has trouble hearing to be able to hear far better; for there to be some way for those of you who sit in the center not to be blinded by the light behind me, welcome as it usually is in our corner of the world. I want the hymnbooks to find their way magically back into order when everyone's gone after the service, either put in their holders in front of you, or neatly stacked on the seat where you found them. Can I perform magic? Do you suppose just [wiggling my nose] or [snapping my fingers] might make that happen? I'll let you know next week if it worked.

Rather than what we want, what we *yearn for* is often impossible to define let alone to attain; in the sense of what a church yearns to be, the answer may well be in the realm of an ideal: something always out of reach but *worthy* of being

striven for. I, for instance, yearn for this church to be populated with people who are in love with it, so devoted to it they wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here on Sunday mornings. I yearn for there to be waitlists for some of the most challenging volunteer positions because members are so committed to the church growing in both maturity and service. I yearn for every member to engage in a conscious process of transformation, open and willing for each life to be lifted, shaken, stirred and moved.

I know that not all of us can ever be ready for that, certainly not all at the same time; there will always be some members on fire, some just starting to smolder, some whose coals are cooling, and some roasting marshmallows from the sidelines. A congregation is made up of all these people because we often take turns going through these phases of attachment and commitment.

So your answers to "What do you yearn for here at North Shore Unitarian?" are necessarily different, including "Nothing at all." Some of you hear a different question from what we think we're asking.

In fact, this morning I'll ask you a different question: "Do you yearn - period?" Again, I won't be surprised if your answer is no because I hope that many of you have happy, fulfilled lives both at home and here at church. As I said earlier, we call it yearning when what we want is somehow impossible or unattainable; I hope that many of you have already attained what in the past seemed impossible to you, or that you have learned how to let go of or deal with yearning for the impossible. Yet still it's possible to yearn for more.

It is difficult to yearn. It's sad and painful. Young people often yearn to get to the point in life they believe they see in others: that point of arrival, of success, of finally becoming confident, independent and in control. Some days, I yearn for that! Elders sometimes yearn for what the young still have: time ahead, vigour, a variety of choices to make. Some who are single, yearn to be in love; some who are married, yearn to be - in love.

I have a suspicion that it is perhaps particularly difficult for us Unitarian Universalists to yearn. We're practically minded people most of us; we may yearn for peace in the world, but we'll turn that into organizing a march. We're rational by and large, so we refuse to waste time envying the young, even if by young we mean, oh, the groundedness of 40 and not the excitement of 21. Instead we offer ourselves as a youth advisor or tutor young adults. Living by our values and principles, we don't display much longing, which I imagine many of us would see as pointless.

And if I'm wrong about it being pointless to many of us, I bet I'm not wrong that we tend to see it as *private* because it is also difficult to talk about yearning. Yearning arises from our deeper needs, our intimate desires; to yearn is to be vulnerable. To disclose *that* we yearn and what we yearn *for* is to expose a

wound. We cannot be sure that everyone around us will aim not to bump or scuff or abrade this aching spot.

I know this because I found it unusually difficult to open this morning with some of my own story, just as I imagine it would be for many of you. I usually have the easiest time and the most fun telling you some anecdote or episode of my own that leads into what I want to say. This week I realized I felt a need to cushion my tale here in the middle of my time.

You see, I yearn rather well and quite frequently. I'd go so far as to say that I have a co-dependent relationship with yearning: no matter how often I think I've escaped this withholding lover, and have a short period of freedom and comfort, far too soon yearning pulls me back into its dark boudoir, pinning me in its cold, suffocating embrace. If the band were playing this morning, the anthem would be "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" – no, no, no. I can use the mature defence of humour to deal with it, but the fact is that I feel shame and anxiety about what I see as a tenacious immaturity in this area. So it's hard to disclose this yearning. It comes from one of my weak spots.

On the other hand, if I weren't someone who has yearned long and hard, I would not have the life I have today; I'd not have the *spiritual* life I have today. For what I have done repeatedly – I'm not sure why; no one at any given point ever told me to do this – what I've done is to turn my yearning towards the divine. I temporarily surrender hope in human beings with all their, all *my* frailties and capacities for treachery, and I yearn for a more reliable and satisfying attachment to the Ultimate.

It's not that surprising in our culture that I would imagine this might work; that message is all around us. But what I mean is that at those most difficult times I never talked with anyone who suggested that my answer might lie in the spirit. Or, what is my experience, in the sense of Contact and Presence that I've been granted on far more occasions than anyone could earn through virtue. The point I'm stressing today is that I see this as happening because of my inability to avoid yearning for something, and, I conclude, my willingness to allow the idea that there might *be* Something.

Now, I know that not all, and most likely not even very many of you would ever do this, and I want to acknowledge right away that I'm not suggesting it's necessary. I don't see it as the right way, or a better decision to make, just that it has been right for me and has made *my* life better. And from time to time this does need to be stated here; this is *one* path to spiritual growth that Unitarian Universalists can take if so inclined. It's the mystical, inexplicable path of direct experience, and it should not be rendered less real than any other precisely because it can be so clearly transformative.

I chose the reading this morning from Denise Levertov because it stood out for me as a way to think about this yearning, a kind of through-line of my spirit, although one a bit like a wire that at times can be sharp or cold or carry a bit of a jolt. She imagined a thread that softly tugged at her, so gently that she's unsure if it just appeared or has always been there. When she feels its pull, she is stirred with wonder. There are others who speak of this as a *lure*, some hint of fascination or appeal that turns the head, or the spirit, and re-orient it towards something beyond the everyday.

Whether yearning, or a thread, or a lure, this gravitational force on the heart brings us closer to where we live most meaningfully. It just might lure you to believe something you've not before, but it's far more likely that it is grounded in what you already believe in deeply. That does not mean, however, that you are open to it. It takes a decision to pay attention to the tug and to welcome the turning. In this sense, I suggest that we need to learn to yearn.

There are those among us who feel if they yearn one second more it will tear them apart. Recently, I heard through another minister from far away about one of her parishioners who is wrapped in yearning for more spirituality at church; this Unitarian Universalist feels starved for the nourishment of mystical experience. This is not an unfamiliar story to me or to any of my colleagues. It might seem that the answer to this is easily identifiable: either go somewhere else that does feed the spirit (the assumption often being that such a person wants the god that's apparently available in almost any neighbourhood church); or the minister should improve the worship experience (the assumption being that improving for one improves it for all, and that ministers aren't constantly working to 'improve' worship); or the church needs a spiritual program of some kind for such members.

I have in mind another possibility. I have in mind the possibility that we all could join the yearning. I have the impression – I may be wrong, but it does seem to me that many Unitarian Universalists, including some people here, feel you have come to an end point in what you believe, meaning that your thinking has been fully and finally shaped, possibly years ago. It's not uncommon to hear that someone made a particular spiritual decision as a teenager and has been satisfied with it ever since. I don't doubt that's possible; in my own case, some fundamental aspects of what I believe about anything religious did come to me in high school if not earlier, and I've never doubted those particular things since. But I ask you to really think about how many *other* decisions you made as a teenager that still seem the wisest and best ones you could ever make.

This brings to my mind the image of a billiard ball. Our hardened beliefs make us a smooth round object, well laminated and shiny, and practically unbreakable. That can also mean we're impermeable. A billiard ball needs nothing; it's not open to the world around it; it can't absorb anything new. Without changing the shape, colour or number on that billiard ball, what would happen if we let its

surface become porous or absorbent? It would be your choice as to what fluid you'd expose this new porous object to, but it would have room for something new to enter it. You would have room for something new to enter.

Those who are in painful yearning for something more *are* porous and so brittle as to be at risk of cracking. That risk is greater if all those around them are hard and impermeable, but what's worse, hope wanes when what they see around them is all shininess. On the other hand, it's quite possible that this person in painful yearning is in a highly receptive spiritual state, empty but also ready to be filled. In this sense, we all might learn from yearning.

Instead of holding to the image of completely enclosed beliefs, we could be porous, open to the new, expecting something more from the universe, even if all that we expect is more inspiration, more energy to let our current beliefs take us further into a fully engaged life. Further, what is porous also allows what is inside to flow out.

If we lived, and worshiped, and sang, and learned, and served in some degree of yearning, of not just hoping for more, but of longing for more, we'd develop an appetite and a thirst for what fills us. In the odd quantum state of the spirit, that hunger and thirst alone would in some way feed us all, for what is porous attracts what can flow in, and what comes in can also flow out to others.

May these thoughts help us to a new way of believing and living, with our hearts porous to the flow of what is ultimate, as together we learn to yearn.