

SO THE WIND WON'T BLOW IT AWAY

It is a great joy to be with you today almost exactly forty years after I left the ministry of this congregation to accept a post with the UUA Department of Ministry in Boston. And it is deeply moving to stand in this pulpit again and take in the singular beauty of this Worship Hall, a dream realized thanks to the vision, generosity and sacrifice of so many Ottawa Unitarian Universalists in the mid-1960s. Martha and I are deeply grateful to your minister, John Marsh, and your Board for making this visit possible. John, whom I first met nearly thirty years ago when he received ministerial fellowship with the UUA, has been urging me for some time to come back to tell you what life was like in this congregation and city during our decade here. He and Alison have visited us in our home northwest of Boston, and a year ago I was invited to join several of your Board members for dinner in Concord, Mass., where they had spent the weekend meeting with Standing Committee members and the ministers of the First Parish in Concord (where Martha and I are members). You have a minister in John who brings great credit to our profession and to your congregation, and you are to be commended for having had the good sense to call him.

The world was a very different place in June 1960 when I preached for, and was interviewed by, Ottawa's ministerial search committee at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Canton, New York, about 75 miles south of here. John Diefenbaker was then Canada's prime minister, the Soviet Union had launched into space its Sputnik satellite that many of us watched as it crossed the evening skies, and Elvis Presley was a forerunner to a decade of music that would highlight such change agents as the Beatles, the Mamas and the Papas, and Neil Young. I was beginning my fourth year as assistant minister at the First Unitarian Church of Cleveland, Ohio, one of the Association's largest churches, but exploring opportunities to have a congregation of my own. What I most vividly recall of that June day was not the service as such but my dinner meeting with the committee that followed. It lasted most of the afternoon, always a good sign, and I left feeling that this could be a wonderful relationship, confirmed shortly thereafter by the committee's invitation to be its recommended candidate for this congregation's ministry. Martha joined me for the formal candidating week in Ottawa the following October and, after being extended and accepting the church's call, we arrived here with our three year old daughter, Betsy, on the first of March 1961. We lived for the next ten years in a newly-built ranch home in Parkwood Hills, about a twenty minute drive from the church, then located on the corner of Elgin and Lewis Streets. Over that period, our home hosted countless new member receptions, once-a-year Executive Board dinner meetings, and informal social occasions, while we also held periodic minister's study-discussion group meetings there whose subjects ranged from existentialist theology to Erich Fromm's "The Art of Loving". Still fresh in my mind is an April 1968 Board meeting at our home when a phone call from my mother informed us of my father having had a stroke (from which he died shortly after). Board members, in deference to my feelings, wanted to end the meeting but I felt that we should finish the agenda and we did. But the Board's sensitivity on that difficult occasion was something I never forgot.

These were the halcyon years for organized religion. Church attendance and church school enrollment were booming, none more so than for Unitarian Universalists. Ottawa's

membership reached 345 by the end of 1961 with church school enrollment at 364. My first annual report in January 1962 reported 64 new members with Sunday services attendance averaging in the mid-200s and the church school higher still.

Forty years ago, the press still covered sermons deemed news-worthy or controversial. When I preached on "The Ethics of Civil Defence", criticizing if not ridiculing the promotion of backyard bomb shelters in a nuclear age, the city's civil defence director called to express not only his disapproval but outrage. In the late Sixties, a diplomat from the U.S. Embassy attended a service here in which I reiterated my condemnation of the Vietnam War. Learning that I was an American citizen, he drew me aside at the coffee hour and accused me of being "a traitor". Ironically, several members involved in social action here, some of whom were unhappy or at least restive with what they perceived as my more pastoral than activist style of leadership, rushed to my defence, forcing him to beat a hasty retreat. In those days, too, we managed to secure some television time on both CBOT and CJOH for what the media called "inspirational messages", though we were generally relegated to 7:30 in the morning or 11:30 at night, hardly prime time. For a time, these stations had as their news anchors Peter Jennings and Alex Trebec, later to become household names in North American homes. At channel 13, where Ray Brining of our congregation was treasurer, he introduced me one day to a young Peter Jennings, who sadly died a few years ago after becoming a fixture as longtime ABC news anchor.

The cottage-style stone church on Elgin Street, built in 1900, had its own charms but nonetheless presented several obstacles to growth. Before my time, the church basement, previously unfinished, had been renovated in 1949, and in 1955 the building at 118 Lewis Street was purchased and named Unitarian House, providing space for church offices, meetings, and a caretaker's apartment. The third building, known as the Annex, was bought for some \$32,000 soon after my arrival in the spring of 1961. With much effort and another \$ 5,000 it was renovated for classrooms and a church library. Eric Inch, who is happily here today, led the planning and volunteer work parties that spring and summer. He and I still recall my being dispatched to a Brewer's Retail Store to fetch a case of beer for our many thirsty workers one Saturday. That was the least I could do, given my minimal skills with a hammer and saw. Our continuing growth, especially in the church school, prompted us to rent space in the Elgin Street School for additional classrooms. By late 1962, church school enrollment topped 400 for the first time while church membership reached 390. Such steady growth had already caused us to establish in late 1961 a Development Committee whose deliberations helped us plot a future that culminated in our relocating to this lovely site in the spring of 1967, Canada's centennial year.

We highlighted the opening of this building with a Sunday evening service of dedication followed by a week-long series of events: a special lecture named after our late minister emeritus, Norman S. Dowd, which it was hoped would become an annual affair, and featuring that year a theologian from St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, Leslie Dewart; a mid-week concert by the Laurentian Singers of St. Lawrence University, my alma mater; and a religious education evening with one of Unitarian Universalism's most noted and beloved elder statesmen, Angus Hector MacLean, whose writings should occupy a prominent place in all of

our church libraries. The Centennial Hymn we will sing at the close of today's service has its own story, unique to this building. After several futile attempts to write the words to a dedication hymn myself, I turned for help to my friend and colleague at the Unitarian Church of Montreal, Leonard Mason, whose creative gifts resulted in a splendid text for the occasion.

The entire process of study, research, recommendations, congregational meetings, and consultations with architects, contractors and banks spanned some five years. It involved what seemed like interminable evening meetings, a lot of listening, and a series of critical congregational votes. Along the way, every vote exceeded 90%: the decision to relocate, the selection of a site, approval of a design, the final financing terms, and signing of contracts. The one exception to this was the recommendation of the Board, on a sweltering June night in the Elgin Street church, to engage the services of a professional canvass director from Boston. Many had reservations about hiring an outsider to help us raise the money we needed. The vote, following a spirited discussion, was 80% in the affirmative and we then went ahead with the guidance of a consultant named McKey Humphreys--who lived and worked among us for five critical weeks. The result was \$166,000 in pledges to the building fund over a three-year period. That, together with the sale of the Elgin Street property (\$ 145,000) to a French-speaking United Church and the securing of a mortgage for the balance of the cost (about \$ 210,000), enabled us to proceed.

The Building Fund campaign began with Board members and minister making the initial pledges. In a tiny robing room off the chancel, the president, Tom Hall, and I canvassed each other, hewing to the guidelines of 5% of household income for the Building Fund and 2.5% for the Operating Budget. Once all the leadership pledges were made, a Fellowship Dinner was held at a local hotel with well over 200 in attendance, the purpose of which was to kick off our campaign with Tom Hall announcing to everyone assembled the names and amounts of those pledging thus far. Given Tom's Glasgow accent and speedy delivery, no one could really hear or remember specific names. But the desired effect was achieved: those gathered there knew that congregational leaders were backing their verbal support for the new church with pacesetting pledges.

But enough about dates and numbers for a moment. Instead I want to call to remembrance those men and women who gave so much of their energy, talents, and vision to this First Unitarian Congregation during my ministry here. As Archibald MacLeish wrote, "I pray you, make in your mouths the words that were our names." Specific names of real people always come to mind when I recall our years in Ottawa, or when I walk through an old cemetery with its worn gravestones, or, as I did just a week ago, when I conducted a memorial service for Martha's 102 year old Uncle Carlton, a true Ancestor. And so I remember the names of those church presidents with whom I served: **Ken Rush**, whose family housed us until the moving van arrived from Ohio, and whose calm but resolute manner guided this congregation in the early years of my ministry; **Bob Berry**, whose quiet and kind demeanor belied his insight and initiative, and who actually discovered this very site for the building of the new church; **Tom Hall**, a Glasgow Scot whose strong leadership was crucial as the congregation made the hard decisions to relocate, raise the funds, and build the church that now stands here; **Frank**

Macintyre, who chaired the Development Committee and then served as president, who in both roles kept our deliberations focused on making decisions and keeping faith with the future, a man whose persuasive powers were grounded in a life of integrity and compassion, a man who called me a few years before his death (which I had no idea was imminent) to thank me for our work together and our abiding friendship; **Andy Winn**, who served for years as treasurer and then as president, whom I was privileged to visit at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston where he underwent what at the time was pioneering hip replacement surgery, and who once told the Board that the only time he heard me use the word "God" was at the service following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.; and **Fred Finlay**, former Commissioner of the Boy Scouts of Canada, a wise and politically astute leader and trusted confidant. These were great and good leaders in their time, fair but firm, patient yet persistent, and we are the beneficiaries of their gifts.

And then there were the terrific members of the staff over those years: **Ruth Haythorne**, director of religious education from 1960 to 1964, but beyond that and for countless years an energetic, steady and supportive presence for this congregation and for me, whom I later persuaded to serve on the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee, whose frequent meetings in Boston enabled us to continue our friendship there. She was simply one of the most extraordinary women I have ever known. **Joanne Stutzman** was appointed in 1964 to succeed Ruth as our first full-time religious education director, serving four years with distinction in a transitional period between Elgin Street and our new church here. Joanne is now retired in Portland, Oregon, but was treated last year to a birthday present by her daughter--a visit to Ottawa. From 1968 to 1970 we were blessed by the lively presence of an assistant minister, **Tom Ahlburn**, fresh from theological school and brimming with new ideas for our religious education program. Tom and I became soul-mates, and as senior minister I was but ten years older. We were both lovers of nature, reading, and humor. Especially the latter. In this new building we cultivated the art of playing admittedly juvenile pranks on each other. When I saw Tom heading for the rest room off the worship hall, I would hide behind a doorway and then, as he approached, leap out to startle him. If he had already made it to the men's room, I would quietly reach inside the door and, knowing he was doubtless reading a book, turn out the light. He, on his part, would crouch between the cars in the parking lot and leap out at me when I was headed for home at the end of a long day. There are many stories I could tell about our friendship over the next thirty plus years, but sadly Tom died at a youthful 63. Four months before, and but two years into an early retirement, he emailed me, saying that "this ministry thing really sticks to one. The habit is hard to kick. Someday, maybe I'll be an Elder, like you." I visited him in a Burlington, Vermont, hospital in his last days and later joined his family in a private outdoor service. Tom's ministry with us included the paint-in of the walls of the religious education floor, wildly-creative family services, and thought-provoking sermons. Nor can I fail to cite the quietly effective and always generous services of **Margaret and Donald Ridewood**, Margaret in religious education for many years, and Don as assistant treasurer and then treasurer. My first four years here were helped immeasurably by the office secretary, **Paddy Thatcher**. Her husband Fred had chaired the search committee that had recommended me as minister. Paddy was always a reliable presence in the church office and fun to work with and, until recently, had remained in touch from her home in Perth. For my last four years here, I was blessed with a terrific administrative secretary in **Lynne Dudek**, and for most of my ministry we

had a caretaker named **Hans Tonn** who was truly a care-taker in every respect. Fred Finlay noted in one of his president's reports that Hans always "put into his work that something extra that is so appreciated because it is so rare."

Every minister needs the friendship and trust of a few whom we know will always be there for us, whose integrity and empathy enables them to listen and to counsel us, even to tell us sometimes what we don't want to hear but, thanks to them, are able to hear. There was **George Haythorne**, whose attentive listening, diplomatic skills, and sound judgment I always valued, and **Gordon MacFarlane**, who one day, learning of my father's death, came and hauled me out of my study, driving me up to the Gatineau Hills where we talked of our fathers while walking along a lakeshore. **Crom Young**, executive editor of the Encyclopedia Canadiana, served for many years as my liaison to the Board, advocating for salary and benefits increases and even for a sabbatical leave which was granted me in 1970 but not taken. In the late 1990s, Martha and I had a warm visit with Crom in his Florida apartment while I was in St. Petersburg on a preaching engagement. Finally and foremost, there has been the constant and loving support of my wife, **Martha**, who in the more than 55 years of our marriage, has been both my anchor and my compass.

Is it not a good thing, then, that all of us name the names of those who have helped or continue to help us on our way? The act of remembering is one clear step all of us can take to embrace our personal and institutional histories, with all their glories and shortcomings, and to refuse to consign to a faceless and thankless anonymity the memory of those who came before us and the presence of those who are still beside us.

This congregation has a long history of personalizing, of making concrete, its social responsibility and outreach. Our efforts to go out into the world to make a difference for good are not solely about resolutions, voting and organizing, however important they are, but are also expressed by helping specific people in concrete situations. In the early 60s this congregation sponsored the settlement of a Hungarian refugee family: Ilona Julis, her mother and her son. Later we supported for three years the education of Jotham Machayo of Kenya at Carleton University. And in the late 60s we provided substantial financial support for an African American candidate for our ministry, John Frazier, who later served an inner-city ministry in Cleveland and a prison chaplaincy in North Carolina. We supported the Ottawa Memorial Society, dedicated to simpler funerals, which began in our church in 1958 with thirty members and grew to more than 400 by 1964. We gave birth to the Ottawa Society for Population Studies in 1961 and an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter specifically for Unitarians, seeking an approach to abstinence uniquely suited to free thinkers. The dedicated efforts of many members here has led as well to the Pre-School Center, to Unitarian House on your campus, and doubtless many other achievements of which I am unaware. My own involvement in social action included counseling a great many women who sought relief from unwanted pregnancies by being helped to sort out the choices, including the option of being referred to courageous and skilled physicians. In the late 60s, Tom Ahlburn and I offered counsel to many draft resisters from the U.S. who sought refuge here. One, who settled in Ottawa for a time with his family, and became active here, is now a longtime, well-respected minister of our faith.

This congregation has been a consistent supporter of the arts. While still at Elgin Street, Gordon Hauser, a member of many talents and an art teacher at Laurentian High School, created a relief mural for the chancel called "The Tree of Life" as a point of focus for our worship services. He helped us strengthen the arts in our religious education curriculum, and, with his bad back, was a credible consultant, despite Pierre Berton's book of that time, in ensuring comfortable benches for the worship hall here. Our first art exhibition (painting, graphic art, iron sculpture, weaving and ceramics) was held in 1964 and evolved into art lending as well. Prior to the designing of our new church by architect James Craig, I thought it important to share with the congregation my own convictions, in three sermons, on how our Unitarian faith might find expression in the new building in which we would worship, learn, play and serve the community. Jim Craig was wonderful with whom to work, and he has in my view designed one of the most beautiful and functional churches in our North American movement. Of course, I make no pretense of being objective, even today, forty-four years later.

With double services and church school sessions, and a steadily growing membership, it seemed clear at the outset of my ministry that we needed a strategy for building a sense of community and belonging, of intentionally planning ways to head off the forming of two congregations under the same roof. And so in 1962 we formed a Fellowship Committee to do just that. Dinners for Eight were organized, neighborhood groups formed, hospitality provided for visiting guests, and an annual congregational dinner dance (often with 200 attending) was held. In our first month here, we initiated coffee hours every Sunday and even arranged to serve tea as well. In this new building, we began holding a brief New Year's Eve service of music and readings followed by a light meal in Fellowship Hall, with surprisingly large attendance. In all of these things, the intent was to bring people together, to avoid creating two congregations, and, frankly, to have fun. One of the highlights of every year was the annual June Family Picnic at the home of Jack and Eleanor Todd on the Rideau River and, every September to have a church year kick-off with a Wiener Roast there.

In the autumn of 1985, I was granted a sabbatical leave from my work as director of ministry at UUA headquarters in Boston to serve as minister of our church in Adelaide, South Australia for four months. Ed and Margaret Youldon, devoted members of this congregation, hearing this and remembering our times together in Ottawa, arranged for a relative, Tim Youldon and wife Jackie, who live in New South Wales, to greet and host us for a day when our flight landed in Sydney. They gave us a hurried but grand tour of Sydney, and a few years later we hosted them on a visit to Boston. When, at the end of our sabbatical, we were waiting in the concourse of the Christchurch, New Zealand, airport for our return flight to Honolulu, I went to the men's room before boarding. A complete stranger came up to me and rather shyly asked, "Would you happen to be David Pohl?" Taken aback at this shocking loss of anonymity, I said "yes, but why?" Well, he was the recently-married husband of Doris Ulliyatt, a member of the Ottawa congregation who lost her first husband during my ministry here. She saw us across the concourse and thinking it might be us, sent her spouse over to see if it was so. Yes, even 15 years later and 14,000 miles from home.

Thomas Wolfe once said that "you can't go home again." True enough, since the place

where we once lived is continually changing, and we too are not exactly who we once were. Still, Wolfe also wrote that “some things never change, some things remain the same” and, to that extent, there is always a partial sense of “coming home” when we return to some of the roots that nurtured us: in our case, the waves of tulips that border the Rideau Canal and Dow’s Lake, Confederation Square on Christmas Eve, the Canadian Guards swinging through the gates of Parliament Hill playing “The Standard of St. George”, even passing the Ottawa Civic Hospital where, perhaps, some of your children were born. (And here’s a secret--did you know that on August 24, 1962, three infants from families in this congregation came into this world on that very day at the Civic, one of whom was our son Eric?) For a moment, it appeared that Unitarians might have our own baby boom here.

And now, in closing, I come to the meaning behind the title of today’s sermon: “So the Wind Won’t Blow It Away”. In a short story about living on the prairie during the Dust Bowl years, Nebraska writer Emily Uzondoski used the metaphor of a dust storm blowing away the precious top soil to convey her concern that we not lose through neglect our own histories, our own personal and institutional stories. May we not let them become dust that vanishes into oblivion, either through neglect or disdain. In this glorious and free land, this beautiful capital city on the route of the voyageurs, this house of cedar and glass that shelters a free religious community, may you continue to honor your congregation’s legacy even as you dream new dreams for the ever-changing future and the children who succeed us. I thank John and you for this occasion and wish you all good things, now and always.

--David C. Pohl, First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa,
Ontario, Canada, Sunday, May 8, 2011

Ottawa,