

"Innovation and Adaptation"

A talk given by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

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<http://firstunitarian.org/assembly-february-11-innovation-and-adaptation/>

This talk was preceded by a reflection by Amanda Harrington, which is available at <http://firstunitarian.org/innovation-and-adaption-children/>

We're going to start with a quick survey, a show of hands. How many of you still have cassette tapes around your house? Now, how many of you live in a house that has cassette tapes but no longer has a functioning cassette player? I thought there would be a few.

I am fortunate to still have one fully functioning cassette player. The catch is that it's in my car. So if I want to listen to the tape of my dad interviewing me when I was 7, or my truly painful middle-school orchestra concerts, or any of my college mix tapes, I have to sit in the garage or go for a drive. There's been a lot of innovation in audio technology since all those tapes were made.

As you might imagine, any car with a cassette player is not very new, and my little car recently celebrated its 18th birthday. If it were a human being, it would be a legal adult and free to strike out on its own. But 18 is fairly old in car years, so its existence is more like assisted living – we take it on short trips around town, and we bring it in for regular check-ups.

I once mentioned to our mechanic that we were thinking of replacing my car with a something newer. "Why would you do that?" she said. "It's a perfectly good car, with lots of miles left." Her point, while not without self-interest, was actually countercultural. The loudest voices in our capitalist country, or at least the best-funded voices, tell us to always have the newest thing, and that the newest is the best. It's almost radical to keep an old car if you can afford a new one. My car does get me where I need to go, and it can even play music stored on my phone, by using a special adapter inserted into that cassette player.

My car reminds me of the Swedish concept of *lagom*, which means "just the right amount." This concept of moderation pervades Sweden and other egalitarian nations – just enough for me leaves enough for others. And for someone who drives about 20 miles a week, my car suffices. Lagom.

But – we live in a world of innovations and temptations. A few weeks ago, I flew south to attend a ministers' conference, and when I landed, I headed to the car-rental counter. I'd reserved a compact car – cheap, fuel-efficient, practical, plenty of room for one person. Lagom. However, the rental company gave me a free upgrade, to a 2018 Chevy Impala. In the past, I've actually rejected an upgrade because I didn't want more vehicle than I needed, but I accepted this one because I had crossed paths with a couple of colleagues who needed a ride to the hotel. I looked over the freshly washed hulk of steel and tried to imagine whether any vehicle could be less "me." I could've brought my car from home and put in the trunk.

But it was a done deal, and it would only be for a short time. Plus, I had some curiosity. Whom might I become by driving an enormous black car?

As I piloted this land yacht through the night, I was amazed – a big, heavy, quiet new car on roads that had never heaved by frost. It felt like sailing across a glassy lake compared to what I was used to. And it was surprising how rapidly I adapted – how quickly I saw this kind of ride and this kind of roominess as normal, as worth the extra carbon emissions, how quickly I saw myself as worthy of what had only hours before seemed like excess. Seduced by the new, I found it remarkably easy to abandon lagom by the side of the road.

Adaptation is our assembly theme this month at FUS, and adaptation has a number of sides. It's a great thing if you're an evolving species, or a person who needs to survive a new circumstance. It's more complicated when we adapt to the comforts of consumer society, or when authoritarianism creeps up on us and we adjust rather than resist. As a subject for reflection, adaptation invites us to look at our relationship with what's old and what's new, to look at our relationship with change, and to look at how we balance tradition and innovation, in our lives, in our organizations, and in the world.

Before we go on, let me briefly finish the story about my dalliance with the giant car. It basically a vacation romance – not a perfect match, but enjoyable for as long as it lasted. When I returned to Minnesota, I rediscovered my lagom, and I did not run out and buy myself a black limo. But the experience was enlightening in a couple of ways.

One, it reminded me that my daily life worked just fine with the car I already have. For me, a good day is not going to be ruined by a bumpy drive home, any more than a hard day is going to be fixed by gliding home on good shocks. And two, the experience got me doing some research, research that led to a critical examination of my values. I learned that the newest model of my current car has eight air bags; my car has two. That's the kind of innovation that matters to me, and motivates me, and may

inspire me to upgrade my ride. I can adapt to relative luxury or the lack of it, but safety is a core value of mine. And in this case, the innovations are improvements I value, rather than just being the next new thing.

Values are so important to consider when evaluating the old and the new, when deciding whether or how to adapt. Last year I spoke with a person who had moved into a brand-new house in a housing development called Tradition. That right there illustrates the conundrum – a simultaneous seduction, both the old and the new. Tradition is a completely made-up settlement, carved out of wetlands. It has no actual physical tradition, but it upholds other traditions. Some people who live there say that it reminds them of the 1950s. The Fifties are often held up as some kind of American heyday, and certainly a number of good things came out of the Fifties – many people in this room were born in the Fifties, for example, and this beautiful room itself made its debut in 1951. Lots of people were happy in the Fifties.

But as with many kinds of nostalgia, this nostalgia is steeped in privilege. I'm a gay man; I don't want to live in the Fifties. Many women in this congregation had to fight very hard during that decade to have the careers and the lives that they wanted. And you won't hear people of color or indigenous people asking to go back to the Fifties – back to legal segregation and to Indian boarding schools. Marginalized people had to do incredible amounts of adapting, often damaging adapting, to get through those times, even more than they do now. As you might imagine, behind its many gates, Tradition is super-duper white.

There is, I think, a human tendency, a human desire, to want to freeze things in time, at a time that is or was just right for you. The people who claim that they want to Make America Great Again don't seem to be thinking much about the United States as a whole; they remember a time when they were somehow happier or more prosperous, and they want that era to return, regardless of what that would mean for other individuals or groups of people. Maybe you move into a house or a neighborhood, or you take a job at a new workplace, because you love it the way it is, that day, that moment, that season. It fits you as you as you are. But you or it will change. There may be innovation, or deterioration. Something in the relationship will have to bend. Will there be adaptation, by you or by the thing that drew you in?

A few weeks ago, Rev. Kelli talked about the Edict of Torda, a religious toleration declaration issued in a small corner of Europe in 1568. It was remarkable not for the number of people affected, but for its uniqueness – it allowed people of different religions to coexist. Although those religions were all variations of Christianity, allowing

even that level of freedom of conscience was all but unheard of in a world of absolute monarchs.

As Kelli shared with us, the spirit of the edict didn't last – the young Transylvanian king behind it died after a carriage accident. The prince chosen to succeed him allowed the four religions to continue to be practiced, but then came one of the more striking laws in history: a ban on innovation. A ban on religious innovation. That meant that the four co-existing faiths were supposed to be frozen as they were – no further questions could be asked, no further doctrines could be examined.

This did not go over well with everyone. Francis David was a prominent Transylvanian clergyperson at the time; he's credited with saying "We need not think alike to love alike." Francis David asked a lot of questions about theology during his life, so many questions that he ended up going from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism to Unitarianism. He tried all four of the "tolerated" religions until he found one that was just right.

But even then, he still had questions, and he kept asking them, out loud – until he was convicted of innovation. He died in a prison cell, locked away for thinking critically and speaking his mind. The leaders who locked him away thought they were doing not only themselves but the world a favor – keeping a heretic from spreading even more views among the populace, banning ideas that, if embraced, might cause their adherents to be banished to hell for all eternity.

But, the ability to ban innovation – wouldn't that be a power to have? Your car or your mobile phone would never be out of date, because nothing newer would ever come along. Your religion or your congregation or your workplace would always do things in predictable, comfortable ways. No pesky initiatives or upgrades. This is of course not very realistic, but my point is that it's important to examine these dueling idolatries I've been talking about – the worship of the old and the worship of the new.

Idolatry is often thought of as a strictly religious word, but it has a useful secular meaning – "excessive devotion to some person or thing." We can be excessively devoted to the way things used to be, or excessively devoted to having the newest and shiniest. Either of these tendencies risks taking us away from the present reality, and away from our individual and shared values.

As a creative person, I like to think I have a lot in common with our nation's innovators, or at least more in common than I do with those who look backward. But I see a big values gap there, too. Just because some new thing can be done, or manufactured

(often in an oppressive country); just because some new way of employing people, or half-employing them, is possible; just because some new algorithm can more fully addict customers to a device or to social media – just because something can exist doesn't make it good. Google is one of the most valuable brands in the world, and for most of its existence, its corporate motto was "Don't be Evil." Only a few years ago, the company finally acknowledged what a low bar that was. So we have to bring a critical eye to the old and to the new, to tradition and innovation, and choose when to resist, and when to adapt. Innovation and progress are not always the same thing.

My final story is a small one, but it's one that has taught me about how to adapt when things change, how to stay grounded in love across change, how to adapt to what's new and what's no longer new. I think this story is particularly useful for thinking about our relationships with congregations, as they inevitably change from week to week and year to year with new visitors, and new members, but I think the story has relevance for any number of situations.

So, I have one niece, and she's the only kid in my family of origin, or my partner's family of origin. That means this one niece, whose name is Elizabeth, gets a lot of my attention. One thing that's interesting to note is that she was born three days after Steve Jobs announced the creation of the iPhone. My niece was taking decent digital pictures when she was two. She is a native to so much of what grown-ups have adapted to. She also loves all kinds of more traditional kid activities, like drawing and playing in the snow. She's a good model for embracing a mix of the old and the new.

So, back when my niece was six, she and her parents came to town to visit. This was my first time in the role of being an uncle to a six-year-old. On the previous visit, Elizabeth had been a five-year-old. The time before that, she was just three. And when she and her parents were here on that trip when she was six, I took us all to the same playground that we had gone to on one of their earlier visits. Once we were there, however, I soon realized that most of the climbing areas in this particular playground were designed for preschoolers, kids younger than Elizabeth now was. My ever-changing niece had outgrown that playground. She would not ever be a preschooler again.

I very much enjoyed her younger days, but I couldn't hold on to those experiences. I could treasure them, but I couldn't hold onto them. That trip to the playground helped me realize that I needed to not only cherish the past but also celebrate what was new, and celebrate the change – celebrate the things Elizabeth could do as a six-year-old that she couldn't do when she was three or four or even five, celebrate the new things I could teach her in her new identity.

Elizabeth is now eleven. She still likes swing sets and slides but has aged out of most playgrounds altogether. She's been texting and FaceTiming with me for years. And she's turning out to be much smarter than any of her relatives. I've already begun another shift in identity, from Uncle as Teacher to Uncle as Learner. She recently taught me the right way to play a scale on the piano, something I'd never before known how to do. I have a delightfully ambiguous combination of roles. It's an adaptation that I've welcomed, because it's rooted in my values and because it takes place on a foundation of love.

And so it is with any healthy relationship – with friends, with relatives, with organizations, with our country. We don't try to freeze things in time any more than we try to freeze our children in time. We don't try to rush to the next thing without thinking about the impact on everyone. We do the personal work of finding our own truth, and we do what is necessary through the ups and downs. And in doing so, by being faithful to our values and the things we care about, we help there to be more ups and fewer downs. We take steps toward building the world we dream about.

So let's pop in a mix tape and keep going.