

**“The Chalk Revolution: thoughts on Jack Layton’s death”**  
**A sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely**  
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Like many Canadians I watched with sorrow, the events surrounding the death and memorialization of Jack Layton. The passing of a sitting party leader is a new experience for Canadians, one that transcends party lines and personal politics. It is a significant event in the life of a nation and I was pleased that it was formally recognized as such. As much as I hate to say it, our Prime Minister showed some class by offering a state funeral. It was the right thing to do.

And Jack’s somewhat surprising rise to the role of Leader of the Opposition gave the story a whole impact. It had all the elements of a tragedy with his and the NDP’s success falling just short of the ultimate prize, thwarted not by the vagaries of swirling political winds, but by an uncontrollable disease. I have no doubt that within the next 10 years or so we will see the story dramatized in some way. Indeed, this powerful and poignant final letter that Lance just shared has already given the screenwriters a place to start. I mean that with utter respect for a man who I believe really was a good person and a nice guy, and who had a gift for knowing how to tell his story with maximum effect and impact. I find nothing jaded in that. Jack Layton had a gift for doing politics well, and he used his gifts even in death.

Now let me be clear. This sermon is not another memorial service. I am not a member of the NDP, nor was I a particular supporter of Jack Layton. An admirer? Yes. As minister here, I feel it important to not belong to any party, but I will say that in my lifetime I have supported and even been a member of all three major parties at one time or another. I tend to be an issues voter and a supporter of individual candidates. But I am a Canadian with an interest in politics, and a sentimental guy with an interest in the powerful, public emotional moment. Whether it’s Olympic ceremonies, or state funerals of significant figures, I am a keen and often emotion-filled observer.

Of all the powerful images, fine words and tributes that poured forth that week, none touched me more than the thousands of chalk-written messages that appeared in Toronto’s Nathan Phillips Square ...messages that, when washed away by heavy rains toward the end of the week, appeared again virtually overnight.

Why so moving? Because they weren’t official or formal. It was just ordinary people saying goodbye or thank you. It was the social media that marks our age, Facebook in chalk. It was open, uncensored, heartfelt, of the moment, real.

As a gesture it echoed of the incredible “Yes We Can” twitter-verse groundswell that marked the Obama campaign, or the cell phone enabled green revolution that has swept through the Middle East and North Africa. In a time when many among us have lost faith in government and institutionalized democracy, it was the people rising up and letting their voices be heard. It was a highly individualized collective cry of anguish...and expression of gratitude...and finally a prayer of shared hope.

I also think it was a response to the letter Lance just read. Partly personal, partly political and entirely inspirational and optimistic, it is a document that like the chalk tributes, has the potential to become legend. My job is to study and learn religion. In the language of my field, this letter is at the very least an epistle. It may even become

gospel. It is epistle because it is in the form of a letter – that’s what an epistle is a letter on a serious subject. And like the more famed epistles of Paul, it is a letter from a leader to followers. It lays out basic teachings and offers exhortation to act in the best possible manner to achieve a shared belief or goal, in this case the betterment of our country, and in some sections the betterment of his NDP.

And in the perhaps unlikely event that it gains lasting legs in our very forgetful news environment, it could acquire the status of gospel truth. For that we have to wait and see.

Now I have no intent to promote Jack Layton to sainthood or anything frivolous like that, but the words and deeds of some great figures in history do have the ability to linger. Whether Jack Layton is that figure or these words will have that longevity, I cannot say. History can be as fickle as a lottery. That said, the words clearly had an impact at the time of his death. Will the people who wrote those chalk messages remember Jack’s words or his sentiment? Will the rest of us? Will they change us so that we can change the world?

And that’s the crux of this sermon. Those tributes we found so moving were written in chalk. Nature has long ago washed away the hasty yet heartfelt sentiments. In and of themselves they were no revolution. The words of Jack’s farewell address have already beaten the media odds and were quoted widely and daily for well over a week. But will they still be with us a year from now? Will they change the world? My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic.

And we’ll change the world.

Simple, clear, direct, inspiring. Wish I had written them...

There is something in these words that remind me of our seven Unitarian Universalist Principles. Like them, they are poetic and well-written. Like them they call the reader to reach for the highest values. Like our Principles these words point out a direction without providing a road map or a prescription. How we use these ideas, how we interpret the sentiments is up to us. These words only acquire the meaning that comes from deep inside us as we resonate with them... if we resonate with them. And finally, like our seven Principles, they leave the hard work of realizing the goal firmly in our hands. There is no promise of success, no guarantee of some political Pearly Gates if only we just believe. The future is ours to shape. Jack’s words ask all Canadians to choose the way we shape the future wisely and positively.

Indeed, there is also an echo of the Buddhism’s Eightfold path in Jack’s words. In Buddhism, the follower is called to right thought, right deed, right action and so on. To agree to choose love over anger, hope over fear, optimism over despair is to set ourselves on a right thinking path – if I can be forgiven for using the word ‘right’ in a sermon mentioning Jack Layton - that leads towards good and generous change. It could be the start of a gentle revolution written in soft chalk.

But it’s not easy. Just like the biopic I envisioned, I also expect these words to turn up on orange coloured tee-shirts fairly soon. I have no problem with that. Tee-shirts are wonderful billboards. But the danger is that the dream be reduced to a simple slogan that is worn and thrown out when worn out. If that’s all it is, then this last heartfelt effort of a dying man will have finally failed.

There is another powerful phrase from Canadian poetry that occurs to me. “To

you from failing hands we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high.” This letter is Jack’s torch passed not just to party supporters, but to all Canadians...after all, he was the eternal optimist who never doubted that he could really reach all Canadians! In the end, it’s not what Jack wrote that matters. It’s what Canadians do with it.

And here’s the challenging part that didn’t get spoken about much. Jack Layton loved the word “Yes.” He had little time for “Yeah, but...” You know – that waffly way of saying NO.

I am sure that many Canadians who don’t care for the colour orange have applied, “Yeah, but...” to this letter. “Yeah, but he was just pushing his party.” “Yeah, but the Dippers don’t have a grasp of real economics.” “Yeah, but there’s a lot of money to be made from anger, fear and despair.” I imagine you can add several more and even harsher ‘Yeah...buts”.

The words are easy to dismiss, because they point to large concepts in an age when most of us are asked to ignore the big picture, to forgot larger moral precepts and work on the fine isolated details. What do I mean? Health care providers are supposed to give the care outlined in the mandated guidelines but not ask tough questions about why those guidelines are the way they are or what impact they might have on patients and families. In the oil and gas industry workers are asked to work on pipelines and drill rigs and maybe work on clean-up technologies and not consider larger issues. So it goes in industry and education, in science and politics. Do your job and don’t stop to think about how it fits into a larger moral framework. If we focus on the mundane, we make a living. If we dream big we are dismissed as – well, as dreamers.

With his last words, the Honourable Jack Layton asked us to dream big. That’s a big ask. Are we up to it?

The chalk sentiments are gone now. But will they become the symbol of a revolution that has strength and vigour? On my bad days, I doubt. On my good days, I hope. And every day, I dream.