



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“With Roots and Wings”

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Centering Thoughts

Those who have been enlightened by God’s spirit must not cease to speak nor can they suppress the truth. Such is the power of the spirit that the mind of man...strives only to add to the glory of God, let the whole world rage and oppose it. Francis David

A living tradition is not bequeathed through some law of inheritance; it must be earned, not without dust and heat, and not without humbling grace. James Luther Adams

A wise woman once said to me: ‘There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings. Hodding Carter

Sermon

Like perhaps many of you, I’m interested in family history. If you’ve been to my house you may have seen my ancestor wall—pictures of Eskildsens and Wilburs going back a few generations. I also research my ancestry because knowing where I come from helps me to understand who I am.

Some of who I am may be obvious. I am a white, female, Unitarian Universalist. My whiteness is rooted in Scotland, England, and Germany. My parents came from the Boston area and Canada’s New Brunswick province. The culture and traditions of these regions were taught to me by example and contribute to how I act, what I believe, and how I understand and engage in the world around me. The culture we live in also influences our personality, beliefs, and life choices.

The more I learn about what it means to be white living in a dominant white culture, I realize how much it influences how I view myself and the world around me. My view differs dramatically from someone who does not identify as white. We need only look at what’s happening to our black neighbors and friends around the country to know this is true.

Let me pause a moment to express my grief and yours at the loss of more black lives. I offer my sympathy to communities suffering from the loss of yet more men to gun violence. I

know police need our support and their job is difficult, especially in states where open carry is the law—a law most police oppose—and I am grateful for their service to our communities. But I am also confused and outraged by what appears to be unjustified death. We must stop this. To that end I appreciate the work our own Exploring Racial Justice team is doing to raise consciousness on these issues here. I encourage you to participate in their activities.

Just as exploring my family history and culture teaches me about the person I am, similarly exploring Unitarian Universalist history offers insight into who we are as UUs. If our early stories were different, we UUs might be different.

Our sacred Unitarian story began centuries ago, but it is to the 16th century in Hungarian Transylvania that we turn to today. Our past enters present through our relationship with the Unitarian village of Oklánd, in the Transylvanian region of what is now Romania. In Oklánd, the villagers celebrated a Thanksgiving service earlier today. This Sunday is one of four when they share a bread and wine communion. Our communion feast at the 4th Sunday Lunch will consist of vegetarian goulash, coleslaw, potatoes, chicken paprikash, and more.

In the Transylvanian city of Kolozsvár, or Cluj-Napoca to Romanians, sits the first named Unitarian Church ever built. From that city one of our founding fathers, Francis David, led the transformation of Transylvania from the Roman Catholic faith to Lutheranism to Calvinism and finally to Unitarianism. It was David's reasoning and oratorical skill which convinced the King of Transylvania, John Sigismund, and his mother, Queen Isabella, to become Unitarian.

But more importantly, King John issued the Edict of Toleration in the city of Torda in 1568. This proclamation gave Unitarianism legal status in the kingdom, along with Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. The Edict recognized these four Christian faiths (as well as the faith of the Jews and Muslims in the country) and gave permission for them to practice the religion of their choice. For the first time in the western world, religious freedom became the rule of a nation. The Edict affirmed that preachers had the freedom to explain the Gospel as they understood it. If the people didn't like it, no one compelled them to attend that preacher's church.

Further, no one, no one, could abuse, revile, or threaten the preachers with imprisonment or removal from their pulpit. Finally, the Edict said 'faith was a gift of God' and no one could be coerced or converted to a particular belief except by God.

This proclamation was truly radical. This Edict appeared when there was no toleration elsewhere. The Spanish Inquisitors violently opposed it. Even the reformer John Calvin believed the religious activity of the more radical reformers like David threatened his lesser reforms to Catholic doctrine and practice. Calvin went after heretics, too.

Sadly, the Edict's support of religious freedom and the right of conscience in religious belief and practice was short-lived in Transylvania. After King John died in 1571 from a horse riding accident and Francis David subsequently was imprisoned and martyred for supposed heresy he preached, the country returned to more restrictive Calvinism and Roman Catholicism. David's heresy, by the way, was that he preached the oneness or unity of God, thus defining himself as a *unitarian* theologically. He believed scripture did not support the *trinitarian* idea that God was

three persons. As our modern 5th Principle affirms, David followed his conscience, he believed what he must, not what he was told to believe, and for this he gave up his life.

After David's death the people of Transylvania continued to follow his Unitarian faith, even in the face of much later repressive communism and oppressive dictators. We honor Transylvanian Unitarians for following their faith despite such pressure to renounce it. And, we honor Transylvanian Unitarians for lifting up religious toleration. Their example of resistance in the face of religious oppression should inspire us to resist those who would prevent our modern form of Unitarian Universalism.

Yesterday, I facilitated the first in a series of 'This I Believe' sessions. Ten people gathered to begin following the demands of our 4th Principle, the 'free and responsible search for truth and meaning'. If it were not for the Transylvanian Unitarians, and later American Unitarians and Universalists, who fought and won the right to believe as they must and practice the faith of their choice, our 4th or 5th Principles might not exist.

Thankfully, they do. And, thankfully, the United States uses the same democratic process we use in this Fellowship. I expect you will be exercising the right to express your opinions by voting in the Presidential elections. To paraphrase something Francis David reportedly said, "We need not vote alike, to love alike."

May we remain respectful of our religious and political differences not only through the elections season, but well after November 8. Our future may depend upon it.

May our roots in this faith tradition continue to grow in strength, and may our spirits soar on wings of our own choosing.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When or how do you feel most rooted in Unitarian Universalism and when do you feel most free to spread your spiritual, religious or philosophical wings? If you don't feel firmly rooted, what might change that?
2. If you were reading about Unitarian Universalist history 100 years from now, what do you hope it will say about our time?
3. How might your ancestors feel about your connection to Unitarian Universalism today?