

MARCH'S THEME: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PEOPLE OF LIBERATION?
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG
MARCH 6, 2016

OPENING WORDS *For the Freedom of Faith (adapted)* ~ Heather K. Janules

Our prophets, our ancestors, died for the freedom of faith;
We are here in their spirit.
We are here to practice and sustain this living tradition.
In our free faith,
We are here,
Seeking freedom from despair,
The freedom to be loved as ourselves,
And the freedom to grow beyond imagination.
We are here,
Gathered in the name of all that we find holy.
Let us give thanks for the gift of gathering here.
For indeed to practice one's religion freely is a gift.

In gratitude, we are here.

STORY FOR ALL *Drum Dream Girl* ~ Margarita Engle

The story of a girl who lives on an island of music who dreams of playing drums, but only boys are allowed to play them. Until one day, something changes.

READING *The Edict of Torda*¹

One of the characteristics of Unitarian Universalists is that we never assume that any of us have 'arrived' at the truth. In our statement of Principles, we covenant to encourage spiritual growth, and often share the ongoing stories of our individual religious journeys with one another.

This journey of ongoing discovery is in our DNA. During the time of the Protestant Reformation, Francis David, a founder of our faith, journeyed from being Catholic to Lutheran to Calvinist and then to Unitarian religious perspectives. Let me tell you a little more.

The setting is Transylvania. Not only had the king died, leaving an infant son, but there was both political and religious unrest. The country was invaded by Ferdinand by Spain who was driven back with the help of the Turkish Sultan's army, and simultaneously, Lutheran and Calvinist Reformations were displacing centuries of Catholic tradition. Priests were being

¹ Source document: <https://www.uufec.com/wordpress/sermons/religious-freedom-day-the-edict-of-torda-a-safe-place-to-grow/>

turned out, images torn down and sacred vessels melted down for coinage.

European monarchs up to this date would declare their religion the religion of the entire nation, and other faiths would be banished. But, seeking to end the violence, and rather than declaring Transylvania Catholic, Queen Isabella, acting as regent for her seventeen-year-old son, John Sigismund, made this remarkable decree at the Diet of Torda, in 1557:

“Inasmuch as We and Our Most Serene Son have assented to the most instant supplication of the Peers of the Realm, that each person maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all...”

Optimistically, Queen Isabella then established a national synod, a series of debates, hoping to resolve differences of religious opinion. Not surprisingly, the synods did not resolve all religious differences, and in 1563, King Sigismund renewed his mother’s decree ordering *“that each may embrace the religion that he prefers without any compulsion, and may be free to support preachers of his own faith, and in the use of the sacraments, and that neither party must do injury or violence to the other.”*

Here’s where Francis David comes in. Having been Catholic, then Lutheran, then Calvinist, by 1565 he was preaching publicly against the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. In fact, the founding of Unitarianism is often dated to the 1566 Synod in which Francis David succeeded in limiting the debate to the language of scripture, thereby excluding the language of the Trinity.

Francis David’s arguments for the unity of God carried the day, and throngs of Transylvanians embraced the Unitarian faith. In that same year, 1568, King John Sigismund decreed this Edict of Religious Toleration:

“His Majesty, our Lord...reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore ...no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone...for faith is the gift of God...”

This historic, first of its kind, Edict of Religious Toleration acknowledges that religious integrity resides in the heart and conscience of each person. This is in our Unitarian DNA.

After centuries of ongoing innovation and journeying, our Radical Reformation has only begun. Our promise to respect the right of conscience calls us to look at difference not as something strange and scary, but rather look to see difference as a wonderful and transforming gift, so that, rather than being fearful, we will be able to embrace every stranger.

This commitment to religious liberty...the right of conscience...remains a hallmark of our

faith. As our UU Principles conclude: “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and to expand our vision.”

MESSAGE *Being People of Liberation* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

A sermon about religious freedom. It could be a historical survey, romping through centuries of ideas, councils, treatises, and holy wars. It could be a fervent, pulpit-pounding testimony on the centrality of religious freedom among our most basic human rights. It could focus on the role that Unitarian Universalists have played throughout the years in ensuring religious freedom...within the political sphere, within society, and in individual lives. It could even look at the many places in our world today, our city not excepted, where religious freedoms are denied, where those with differing beliefs are harassed, persecuted, even killed. All of these options are compelling – from a preacher’s point of view.

But then I got to thinking about YOUR point of view...as I strive to do each week...and I began to realize that you might not be interested in a dry lecture, or zealous, foaming-at-the-mouth rhetoric, or even evangelistic hubris. So, I wondered, what is it about religious freedom, religious liberty, that would be of interest to you? And more than interest, what might help to ‘awaken quiet springs’ within you...give you pause for thought...offer you some way to examine your own heart, and reflect on your own life?

And for all that pondering, I decided to tell you my own story. It’s not that my story has any more authority than yours, or even that it’s particularly compelling. It’s just that stories are highly valued in this community. We understand them to be the scripture of our lives. Within our stories...stories shared and stories heard...we find wisdom, insight, guidance, revelation. May this story offer you some of that this morning.

I was born into religion. My father was a Baptist minister (he was a convert; the first Baptist in his family of origin.) My mother was the daughter of a Baptist minister, and a devoted pastor’s wife. I am the third of six children; by the time I was born, my two older brothers had already been indoctrinated into the family culture. There was no question that I would do anything but follow suit.

Religion sat at the very center of our family life; almost literally, as through my public school years, we lived next door to the church. We attended services twice on Sundays, once on Wednesdays, and on Saturday, the whole family was involved in preparing for Sunday morning...folding bulletins, cleaning communion cups, tidying pews. During the week, we rode along with Dad to visit congregants at neighbouring farms, and in the summers, our family vacation centered around attending the annual General Baptist Conference. My young impressionable mind and heart were not granted ‘freedom of religion,’ in spite of the fact that the central message of my family’s tradition was that salvation was found in a personal decision to accept Jesus as one’s savior. In truth, there was no room to freely make a personal

decision.

I remember a moment when I was 11 or 12 years old, lying in bed trying to make patterns and pictures out of the swirling plaster on my bedroom ceiling. I don't remember any particular event leading up to this moment, yet I guess I was engaged in a kind of adolescent meaning-making...a time of reflection on the whole of my life...which, as I've already said, was about 90% church.

In those layers of swirls and circle segments, I saw, or felt, that I didn't fit into the mold my family circumstances had poured me into. I couldn't resolve the disconnect I felt between the religion that claimed the hearts of my parents, and the reality that my own heart wasn't in it. That was the moment of my reckoning, the moment when I entered the age of reason.

Truth be told, I did not make a 180 degree turn right then. I was, after all, a good girl who couldn't bear to disappoint my parents. So, I continued to question and to turn things over...silently...without ever talking to anyone about it. I can't tell you how many altar calls I sweated through, wondering if in fact, I was in need of salvation, and that I should step forward and follow the expected path. I went ahead with being baptized, by immersion, by my father, although I nearly had to cross my fingers behind my back. I can't tell you how many tortured Sunday school lessons I sat through, unable to share what I was feeling or thinking. By the time I entered high school, it was clear to me that I could not, in good conscience, be a born-again kind of Christian.

In good conscience. I'll come back to my story after a short diversion.

Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote seven principles which both guide and ground us. (They can be found in the grey hymnal, on the page just before the first hymn, or on one of the welcome brochures.) The fifth principle affirms the right of conscience. And before that, the fourth, promotes a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And before that, the first claims that every person has inherent worth and dignity. So you can see that while there are seven separate principles, they build upon, and intertwine with, each other. And, it needs to be said that this current set of principles has evolved over centuries; surely they will be revised again, at least once, during my lifetime. They reflect the spirit of this faith; still, they cannot be claimed as unerring, final, dogmatic truths.

Historian Earl Morse Wilbur, in *A History of Unitarianism; Socinianism and its Antecedents*, first published in 1945, wrote that his intention was not so much to present the history Unitarians as a particular sect, but "to consider broadly the development of a movement fundamentally characterized...by its steadfast and increasing devotion to these three leading principles: first, complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; second, the unrestricted use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past

tradition; third, generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity.”

Mental freedom – or, as found in our principles, the personal search for truth and meaning. The unrestricted use of reason – the right of conscience. Generous tolerance – an assurance that each person be allowed the dignity of choice.

While not the reality in 1568, at the time of the Edict of Torda, religious freedom is now commonly understood to be a basic human right...the United Nations and our Charter of Rights and Freedoms both guarantee it. Still, as we well know, this right is routinely and repeatedly denied to many. Even in ‘free countries’, those who hold ‘different’ beliefs are bullied, harassed, maligned, and feared.

But why is religious freedom important? Why does it matter so much? As our society becomes more and more secular, couldn’t we start caring less about religious freedom?

I didn’t have a bad childhood. My parents loved me and cared for me as best they could. They had certainly come a long way from their religious ancestors who might have branded me with a scarlet letter or hung me as a witch. They were wonderful role models for me as relates to commitment and caring. They wanted me to get a good education; they wanted me to excel at things like music and math; they didn’t limit my activities to those that were appropriate only for girls.

Still, I have often wondered who I might be, or how I might have evolved, if my personal search for truth had been both honoured and encouraged. There’s an ageless text in our hymnal² by William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister of the 19th century, that speaks to the purpose of religious instruction. He said that its purpose is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; Not to give them knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; Not to form some regularity, but to touch inward springs; Not to impose religion upon them, but to awaken the conscience; In a word, he said, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life. Applied to all persons, all ages, this is the essence of religious freedom.

I wonder what my life would be if this had been the spirit in which I was raised. Instead, I was told that there was One Truth, One Way. And when I could not, in good conscience accept that way...well, it had consequences. I am loved by my family, although somewhat conditionally, and seen by some as a lost soul that needs saving. Feeling the outcast (even though I chose it,) I was left with going on a painful and isolating search for ‘my people’, my tribe. It is still difficult for me to celebrate and embrace my choices, as I learned early that free

² #652, Singing the Living Tradition

choice carries a shadow of betrayal and desertion. I wonder what my life would be like without these shadows.

So what happened? I grew up. I grew away from the church. I became an outsider within my family. I rejected any spiritual search for a couple of decades. In some ways, my soul was temporarily amputated, and it's still growing back. It started growing back out of an emptiness I felt in my life...an emptiness that led to some spiritual exploration, which led to seminary, which introduced me to Unitarian Universalism, which I eventually claimed as my own, which led me to ministry, which led me here to you. And my soul is still growing.

Why is religious freedom so crucial? Why must we still talk about it, advocate for it?

If we accept that the soul...the conscience, one's reason, the spirit...whatever you want to call the 'central operating system' within each of us...if we accept that this is an essential and intrinsic part of each of us...if we accept that it is this center, this core, that creates in us our passions, that pulls us toward those things that we must believe, those things that we must do and express in order to fully be who we are, then it needs freedom in order to flourish. It seems to me that religious freedom is inseparable from the freedom to fully be who we are in the world.

I know...religion implies church...organized religion...but I'm not thinking of it in that way. Of course, religious freedom must include the right to congregate with others who hold similar beliefs. But more basically, religious freedom is the right to explore and create and hold personal beliefs and philosophies, as well as to participate in ceremonies and rituals that help us give meaning to our lives. As William Hammond once preached: "To be religious is to strive, with constancy and devotion to live in keeping with one's understanding about the nature of life, the world, and the self."

One of the constant tensions in this tradition, I think, is that we are a religion...a coming together...without an expectation that we will think the same...without intentionally trying to pour each person into the same mold. Yet, as an institution, we can fall into culture and practices and language that might petrify and feel prescriptive. We sometimes use a children's chalice lighting which includes the words, "we are the people of the open mind." Therein lies the challenge. For each of us to stand firm in what we believe while at the same time being open to change, open to learning new things from those who differ from us.

And actually, that is the beauty of this religion...a fecund mix of building meaning while simultaneously challenging ourselves to dismantle it...a counter-cultural practice of claiming our individual beliefs without expecting or needing others to feel the same way...an insistence on the liberty to find our own path, yet freely choosing to walk alongside others who may be going in different directions.

You know, one of the great ironies in religious history is the 17th century journey of religious outcasts...across the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of this continent, leaving behind a society in which they were not free to practice their chosen beliefs. The irony is that they then re-created a society in which only their beliefs were accepted. I don't think that was their intention, but it was the only way they knew. We're still trying to learn new ways.

Queen Isabella believed that an open enough, or long enough, debate would lead to universal understanding of the Truth. True religious freedom is to understand that there is no one Truth, and that each of us holds only a piece of it. To live as people of liberation would be to actually model a pluralistic society. It would be to live in confidence that one's right to believe as one chooses would be respected, while simultaneously granting others the same freedom, without trying to impose our beliefs on others. It would be to be curious and open to being changed without fear of being forced to compromise ourselves.

What might happen if every child were encouraged to grow up and out from that beautiful, unique spirit with which they entered the world? What possibilities are open to you, if assured of religious freedom? Who can others be, when we offer them the same possibilities? Imagine who we might be...learning for ourselves, modeling for others...what it means to be free, religiously. Imagine.

What will you do with this freedom? It's yours. It's ours. The freedom to love and be loved as ourselves. The freedom to grow beyond imagination. So be it.

READING *Is this Your Religion?*³ ~ A. Powell Davies

A. Powell Davies was the minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, D.C. in the middle of the last century. He came to national prominence in the U.S. through his activism advocating civil rights for African-Americans and women and ethical during the era of McCarthyism. These are his words:

We are the consummation of thousands of years of religious history. We are thousands of years that have stripped off superstition and battled with tyranny; thousands of years that struggled to take fear out of religion - to take it right out of human life; thousands of years that have marched, sometimes joyfully, sometimes in agony, toward spiritual emancipation. We are indeed the consummation of something.

Yet in this world of blood and sorrow it is scarcely important, hardly worth mentioning, unless in addition we are the beginning of something, unless our religion is new - the religion that has always been new in every prophet who died rather than forsake it; the religion that has been buried over and over again in creeds and rituals and sacred

³ <http://www.uucr.org/sites/default/files/sermons/readings/Is%20This%20Your%20Religion.pdf>

sepulchers and yet has always come to life; the religion that today is new all over the earth, stammering itself into utterance in every language known to humankind.

The religion that says freedom! – freedom from ignorance and false belief; freedom from spurious claims and bitter prejudices; freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it; freedom from the hate and greed that divide humankind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought; freedom for equal justice; freedom to seek the true, the good and the beautiful with minds unimpaired by cramping dogmas and spirits uncrippled by abject dependences.

The religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brotherhood and sisterhood unbounded! The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the worldwide love of one another.

As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in: the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith. And if you still can say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, then ask yourself this question: What are you doing with it?

***CLOSING WORDS**

~ *Fulgence Ndagijimana*

Many of you know the story of the Unitarians who are being persecuted in present day Burundi. Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana has been forced to flee his country. These are his words:

When strangers meet, endless possibilities emerge.

New experiences, new ways of understanding and new ways of taking action.

When strangers meet, each pays special attention to the other.

Each is called to serve something larger than the self.

[As we extinguish our chalice, let us carry it's light with us:]

For openness, for willingness to grow, for rich curiosity and, for common purpose.

There is great possibility in meeting something new, and great liberty in the ability to be changed by that encounter. May you have met something, or someone, new today. Go in good conscience, go in the spirit of new understanding, go willing to be changed, go in freedom and in peace.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME