UU 101: Unitarianism and Universalism as evolving theologies, as committed congregations, and as purposeful personal experience.
Rev. Fran Dearman, delivered at the Unitarian Church of Calgary Sunday, September 20th, 2009.

About fifty years ago, my father overheard a noted public figure on CBC Radio say, "Don't lie to your children about Santa Claus." Which raised issues with various relatives; but that's another story. My father said, "Whatever that man on the radio is, that's what I want to be." And that's how my family became Unitarians.

We accepted the gift of a four hundred year old liberal religious tradition. We took our personal journeys into the ferment of a living, breathing congregation. We did not always agree with those who walked beside us, but our lives were the better for knowing them.

When the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged in 1961 some folks stuck with the term Unitarian alone, especially in Canada. South of the border the term Unitarian Universalist or UU is generally used. The differences between the two denominations had been mostly cultural, rural versus urban, blue collar versus white collar, formal schooling versus self-taught. With the drain of population from the farms into the cities, the differences became less significant.

What are the basics of the evolving Unitarian Universalist tradition, and how is it lived out in congregations and individual lives?

We could seek our answers in books, or on the world wide web. Or in a mirror.

We could ask, where is authority?

Unitarian thinkers once looked to scripture for religious authority, and worked hard at biblical scholarship. But that search through scripture led to a wider view, that revelation was not sealed, but rather all the world was a potential wellspring of insight.

And authority? For a Unitarian, religious authority rests with the individual. Each person brings their own interpretation to the evidence they find meaningful, be it

word, observation, tradition, or an immediate experience that shatters all you have previously known.

And then you test your insight and interpretation in community. And we learn to speak the truth in love with one another.

Unitarians traditionally prize the right to private judgment, or freedom of conscience. Universalists traditionally prize the worth and dignity of every human being. We learned not to chain our faith with statements of belief, but to let our understandings grow as we grow. There is fluidity here, and room for new things; and one learns to live with uncertainty. And that is how Unitarians have come to encompass humanism, agnosticism, atheism, feminism, paganism and a positive engagement with diverse lifestyles, cultures and beliefs as part of our religious spectrum. On a good day. Being human, some days are better than others. A broad embrace of diversity brings many challenges, as well as many gifts.

I believe that the religious impulse emerges from the human condition. We respond to the beauty of this world with joy and gratitude. We seek out hope and purpose. We search for meaning. We seek a stillness in which to ponder the great questions: where do we come from? who are we? where are we going?

We know that the rain falls on the just and the unjust, we know that bad things do happen to good people, we know that we hunger for love. And we know that one day we must die. We gather in religious community as social beings to engage these questions. Some answers continue over time; some change with the passing of each generation. For example, it is only in the last forty years that we have seen significant numbers of women in ministry and as presidents of congregations. It is only in the last forty years that we have actively championed civil rights for people of colour and people who are homosexual.

I believe that Unitarians embrace change relatively quickly because we have no creed; and there is challenge to that, as well as opportunity. Further, like any human society, we have our differences, and we seek to empower our own initiatives first.

Where there are two ideas in one place there will be conflict. But if we are to claim the right to interpret for ourselves, we must also grant that right to others. And that

is why democratic process and mutual respect are essential to Unitarian congregational life. Civil discourse is a spiritual discipline.

When you walked in this morning, you probably walked past a framed document at the top of the stairs. You may have noticed, it is not a creed. It is not a statement of belief. It is a covenant among Unitarian and Universalist congregations, an agreement to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person; to affirm justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, to affirm mutual acceptance , a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience, and the use of the democratic process. We are people of covenant and we covenant to walk with one another towards peace and justice. We are mindful of where we have come from and how we shall abide with one another.

There is a rich history of how Unitarianism and Universalism have evolved. I'll be exploring more of our traditions in the months to come. And I welcome your questions after the service, over coffee.

Today I invite you to imagine three snapshot moments from the UU family album, so to speak, and see what these three snapshots can tell us about Unitarian Universalism.

The first snapshot shows a statue of the renaissance physician and foundational unitarian thinker Michael Servetus. This statue is located in the town of his birth, Villanova de Sijena, in the north east of Spain. It's pretty country there, high plains country, much like here in Calgary. On a clear day you can look north towards France and see the mountains of the Pyrenees.

The second snapshot shows the reformation preacher Francis David. You'll see him, arm raised, standing in a pool of light, in a framed print hanging in the boardroom in the older part of this building.

The third snapshot shows a modern Unitarian, just the other day, gazing west at the Rocky Mountains. The figure stands motionless, literally awestruck at the stark silhouette of the rugged peaks against the sunset.

Each of these three snapshot moments conveys some basic sense of the Unitarian and Universalist tradition.

First, let’s take a look at that statue of Michael Servetus in Villanova de Sijena. I saw it, two years ago, while on sabbatical in northern Spain. I had heard that the folks in Villanova had put up a statue for their native son. Now, if Servetus had returned to the town of his birth during his lifetime, they might have burned him at the stake. But in the course of five hundred years, for this small town of five hundred persons, sending Michael Servetus into the world – physician, scholar, heretic, and all round rabble rouser – was maybe the most exciting thing that had ever happened. So they put up a statue.

There is a pleasant garden there, in front of the old church, across the square from city hall. Green shrubbery surrounds the base of the statue. But the interesting thing is that the stone Servetus sits with his back to the church. Also, the statue is seated, at rest. The historical Servetus was not a restful man. His writings are aggressive and scornful of those who disagreed with him. Servetus was not strong on civil discourse. He led an active life, travelled much, and was learned in many fields.

As a physician and medical lecturer at the Sorbonne he described the pneumatic circulation of the blood at least eighty years before William Harvey. Servetus wrote that the Holy Spirit was like the breath of air, circulating through the body, like that pink frothy stuff in your lungs.

Servetus could do theology, for which he had a fatal attraction, in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic. He wrote two books about theology, one called, “On the Errors of the Trinity”, the other called, “The Restitution of Christianity”.

He figured if we could all just sit down and talk together and use our reason to work our way to some shared truths, we could all be happy together, and see things his way.

Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva.

Servetus reckoned he’d followed the right of private conscience. He had studied scripture with care, using his God-given reason. It was clear to him that God was one not three, Jesus was special but not God, and baptism made no sense before

adulthood because a person didn't know enough to commit a serious sin until they were about twenty-one years of age.

Servetus' enemies charged him as an anabaptist (meaning he rejected infant baptism) and an anti-trinitarian, meaning he rejected the three-fold God of the Nicene Creed.

Servetus died with the name of Jesus on his lips. In his agony he called out to Jesus the son of God, not God the son. A fine point, but theology was serious business in those days. Frightened, angry people do ugly things.

A wonderful thing happened after Servetus was executed. For the first time in western Christendom, folks began to speak seriously of the need for religious toleration. Someone dared to say that when we burn someone at the stake, we have not stopped a heresy, we have merely killed a human being.

Servetus would not have called himself a Unitarian. But those who sent him to trial for heresy had condemned him by that name. Folks who read his books and were convinced by his reasoning, that the holy was one and Jesus was special but not God, chose to take the name of unitarian. And they gathered in congregations that named themselves as Unitarian.

One of those who read Servetus and was convinced by what he read was Francis David, court preacher to King John Sigismund of Transylvania. The name Transylvania is Latin for 'the land across the forest'. Transylvania was home to Hungarian-speaking ethnic Magyars and various other cultures and ethnicities. Nowadays Transylvania lies partly in Hungary and partly in Romania.

Our second snapshot shows the preacher Francis David in debate before King John Sigismund and his legislative assembly, the Diet. This preacher, Francis David, is saying something new. He is saying that he may be right, or he may be wrong. But if he is right and his opponents are wrong, that is no reason for his opponents to be put to death. King John liked what he heard, and Francis David became his court preacher. The congregations who followed David's teachings took the name of Unitarian—that God is one.

King John and his legislative assembly passed the first western edicts of toleration, in the middle of the sixteenth century. They may have drawn upon legislation from the Ottoman Empire, a close neighbour; the Koran states that there shall be no compulsion in matters of religion.

And that, in part, is why this congregation, here in Calgary, was able to elect a search committee to seek out your next settled minister. Your right to choose your minister emerged as an essential for free religion amongst the cultural diversity of central Europe in the mid-1500s.

[I would like to share the words of King John's edict with you][from David Parke's "Epic of Unitarianism", ~~which offers translations of pivotal documents.~~ Here we go:]

"His Majesty, ~~our Lord, in what manner he — together with his realm [i.e. the Diet] — legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same manner now, in this Diet, he~~ 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 none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone~~, according to the previous statutes,~~ and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God." ~~[Parke pp19,20.]~~

~~[1557, renewed 1563]~~

When King John Sigismund died ~~[in 1571]~~ the legislation for toleration lived on. But it was severely constrained. Unitarians in Transylvania were permitted to continue in their faith. However, they were forbidden to change their faith. But Francis David could not keep himself from growing and seeking and learning and changing his ideas. He was arrested under a charge of innovation. He died in prison.

[Some of the ideas he passed along are found in hymnal reading #566.]

Despite four centuries of repression, the Unitarian congregations in Transylvania still exist. It is a generous culture that values the right of private judgment for all persons, and lives that out in the ongoing dialogue of community.

It is easy to be tolerant if you only mingle with those who agree with you. It is in the rough and tumble of community that our ideas are challenged, and our best selves rise to the surface. How we share power with one another is a religious choice. Unitarian Universalists chose democracy.

We've looked at Servetus and David, two of the many whose lives shaped the Unitarian tradition in sixteenth-century Europe, England, and North America. Historian George H. Williams described our Unitarian tradition as rational radical reform. We are inheritors of John Calvin and the reform tradition. Our place in the tradition was radical – folks went to the roots in the search for truth. And they prized individual reason above all other sources of religious authority. We are the inheritors of rational radical reform.

It's a tangled skein, UU history. We've just looked at a couple of snapshots. We haven't even got to North America yet.

Let's hold up the third snapshot, a twenty-first-century Unitarian here in Calgary. You could look in the mirror for this photo, or look at your neighbour. Much has changed in the material culture and theological outlook since the sixteenth century. But much is the same.

Today, as then, the Unitarian tradition lifts up respect for reason and respect for conscience and private judgment, tested in community.

Our human need to make meaning, to acknowledge awe and wonder at the gift of life, and to come to terms with death, impel us to some coherent world view—somewhere we place our confidence, our faith.

We interpret as individuals. We covenant to walk with one another towards peace and justice. We do not need to think alike to love alike. We can be confident enough in our own judgement to tolerate the free thoughts of another.

Historian Earl Morse Wilbur studied long and hard to see what held Unitarians together. He observed that over the centuries, the Unitarian tradition is characterized by freedom, reason and tolerance.

Since 1961, the Unitarians—in the United States if not in Canada—have also named themselves as Universalists.

In historical language, the Unitarian issue was the oneness of God. The Universalist issue was 'the larger hope' – that all shall be saved—a generous and compassionate posture. After a long courtship, the two denominations finally merged, in North America, in 1961. The connection is circular. I think of it this way: if the holy is one, then the holy will gather all back into itself in the fullness of time. And if we begin at the place in the circle affirming that all shall be saved, that all persons have worth and dignity, then surely one great wholeness encompasses the universe.

I think of the Unitarian-Universalist connection sort of like fraternal twins: same parentage, but not identical. And for me it is logical that a deep embrace of one twin will sooner or later lead to a deep, familial affection for the other.

There is at least one more element of the UU tradition that we might name in all three of our snapshots. We live in this world. Consider Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician contemplating the wonders of the human body, speculating that the holy spirit was like the air that bubbles through our heart and lungs. Consider Francis David the court preacher, unable to cease innovation, continuing to examine faith in the light of reason, conscience and experience. Consider the modern Unitarian, perhaps yourself, rapt in the contemplation of the beauty of nature, like Henry David Thoreau, woodsman, poet, and all round rabble-rouser.

We share with those who handed down the Unitarian Universalist tradition an abiding engagement with the world we live in and the human bodies we walk around in, gifted with reason, empathy, understanding and love, gifted with the capacity for reverence in response to the natural world.

In conclusion, I believe that the essence of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is rational radical reform, characterized by freedom, reason and tolerance. We honour the right to private judgment, or freedom of conscience, and so no imposition of creed or requirement of belief can endure. Accordingly we value our free pulpit, for we would not be satisfied otherwise. And so we change more rapidly than most, pulled by the daily round, but reaching to ideals beyond the day. We tend to be liberal and generous and recognize the worth and dignity of all persons. We live in this world. We respond to this world from a posture of wonder and awe.

Rev. Fran Dearman

Bibliography

Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone. “Out of the Flames: The Remarkable Story of a fearless Scholar, a fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest Books in the World”. New York, 2002. I have a few quibbles about some of the history laid out in this book, but nit picking aside, I love the account of how the few surviving first editions of Servetus’ last book were located. In essence, it’s a detective story. I recommend it. Available on Amazon dot com.

David B. Parke. “The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion”. Skinner House, Boston, 1957 1985.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica offers succinct summaries regarding Unitarian and Universalist topics and thinkers.

See the websites of the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian Universalist Association for further information.