



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Transylvanian Roots”

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### Centering Thoughts

*Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is one.* Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:29

*Whom God enlightened by His spirit must not be silent and must not hide the truth.* Francis David

*All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.* Martin Buber

*I soon realized that no journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us,  
it goes an equal distance into the world within.* Lillian Smith

### Sermon

Unless we identify as Native American, our families came to this country from somewhere else. Whatever our country of origin, we want to know the stories of our ancestors. What brought them here; did they have a hard time once they arrived; how did our parents meet; and where were we born. We ask these questions because they connect us to our ancestors. We listen to their stories because they tell us about who we are and why our families have certain traditions and particular behaviors.

Religious families also have stories that explain who and why they are as they are. Roman Catholics tell the stories of the apostles; Lutherans of Martin Luther; and Methodists of John Wesley. Jews tell about Abraham and Moses; Buddhists about Siddhartha; and Muslims about Muhammad. In contrast, Unitarian Universalism has many foundational stories. We differ from most religions because who we are has changed significantly over time. We have no single doctrine handed down for generations, unless you claim that to question everything and change *is* our doctrine.

When we host Newcomer Orientations, our New to UUFA sessions, we ask you to share your spiritual journeys—what religion, if any, were you raised in, what made you reject it, and what brings you to our door to seek something new.

Many of you say that at some point you stopped believing the doctrine, the theological ideas you were told to affirm. You also say you come to UUFA because it's a safe place to explore new

ideas and ask questions. We welcome your heresy. We encourage you to choose your own beliefs, rather than faithfully accept someone else's. The process of listening to your own conscience and seeking ideas that make sense to you is a well-honored Unitarian and Universalist practice.

This may seem like a very modern idea, but it has ancient roots. It is why I head to Transylvania this week to participate in a pilgrimage with eleven other people with ties to this Fellowship. Once there, we will walk the holy ground where our religious ancestors lived, died and helped make possible our tradition of freedom and tolerance.

One path we'll walk is that of Francis David, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian court minister to the regent Queen Isabella and her son King John Sigismund, who once ruled the kingdom of Transylvania, now a part of Romania. We'll also visit UUFA's Transylvanian partner church community in Okland to strengthen our bonds and experience something of their Unitarianism. We'll share our experiences in a service once we return. But for now, let me share some of our Unitarian family story and how we diverged.

In 1566, David challenged the orthodox doctrine of the trinity that God is three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost or Spirit by publishing a book he titled, *On the True and False Knowledge of the One God*. Basing his views on the Bible which does not support it, David denied the trinity and affirmed that God is one, therefore Jesus was not God incarnate. David's views were supported by an earlier work published by the Spaniard Michael Servetus titled *On the Errors of the Trinity* (1553). Not very subtle book titles, were they?

In the book's dedication to King John, David wrote: "There is no greater piece of folly than to try to exercise power over conscience and soul, both of which are subject only to their creator." David believed faith was a gift from God and no one should be forced to profess a faith they did not have. Sound familiar?

But not surprisingly Orthodox Roman Catholics and emergent Protestants like John Calvin found Servetus and David's ideas too radical. Calvin believed these ideas posed a threat to his own less radical reform movement. Believing that their death would end the proliferation of new ideas and save souls from heresy, Calvin captured Servetus and put him to death by burning at the stake along with copies of his book. Catholic authorities arrested David but feared killing him outright. Instead, they condemned him to life in prison where he died from ill treatment and neglect.

But before their deaths, many people responded positively to their ideas. In 1568, two years after David published his book, he was able to argue his position against Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists at the Diet of Torda. The debate lasted ten days and was conducted entirely in Latin. In the end, the diet or council conceded that the Unitarian David won the debate by his oratorical skill and biblical knowledge. Even so, the more orthodox continued to persecute what they considered to be Unitarian heresies.

As a result of the debate King John issued the Edict of Toleration. It decreed the right of each person to follow the religion of their choice and it allowed preachers to preach according to their

conscience. With David's triumph and royal family endorsement the kingdom essentially became Unitarian. And in that same year, 1568, the very first church in the world officially named Unitarian was built in Kolozsvár, the city where David preached. Unitarian services continue to be held in that church today and it is where our upcoming pilgrimage will begin.

Between David's death in 1579 and now, life has not been easy for Transylvanian Unitarians. Their religion has been oppressed and outlawed, and they have been persecuted. But Unitarianism has not died. In villages like Okland, 'God is one', *Egy az Isten*, continues to be the central tenet of their faith, a tradition with similarities and differences from our own Unitarian Universalism. We share the first half of our name because historically we shared the theological idea that God is one. Like our Okland partners, we generally deny the doctrine of the trinity that declares Jesus *the* only son of God. Instead, we affirm that Jesus is a special son of God, but not inherently different from you or me. Neither we nor our partners worship Jesus as God made flesh. Instead, we affirm that Jesus is a model of divine living whose teachings are worthy of our following.

We differ in that they almost exclusively use biblical scripture for their worship. We use biblical scripture, too, just not exclusively. Where we claim many beliefs about God and no God, they continue to identify as theists. Where we have lived with freedom of religion relatively soon after our country's founding, they have not enjoyed that right, even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We also share the belief that our faith must be lived. Deeds are important, not creeds. In a 2008 sermon by a Transylvanian minister, Bela-Botond Jakabhazi, at the UU Church in Corvallis, Oregon, Jakabhazi said:

... the really important question to answer throughout our lives *is not who we are, but rather: how we are*, not what we think about ourselves, but *rather how we relate to others, to life*. Deeds tell us who we are, not the creeds.

Jakabhazi ended this sermon by quoting Jesus, "By your fruits shall you know them." The fruits of your compassionate good works say more about who is a Christian and who is not.

How we live is also a UU standard. As I have said many times, it is not enough to hold beliefs if our lives don't mirror them. Whatever you believe about Jesus or God, I know we share with our partners in Okland a desire to be the best people we can be and by our actions be a blessing to the world.

May we always be a blessing to the world.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. How does UU history connect with you? Does it deepen your understanding of who we are today or make UU traditions or symbols more meaningful? Please share.
2. In what ways do 'God Is One' or 'God Is Spirit' resonate with your understanding of the divine?
3. Do you value your right to be a heretic and choose your own beliefs? Do you see religious freedom being challenged in American culture or politics today? Please share.