



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“What Our Ancestors Dreamed”

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Centering Thoughts:

... 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... King John Sigismund of Transylvania, ‘The Edict of Torda’ (1568)

The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the struggles we choose for ourselves, in the ways we move forward in our lives and bring our world forward with us, it is right to remember the names of those who gave us strength in this choice of living. It is right to name the power of hard lives well-lived. Rev. Kathleen McTigue

Sermon:

Four hundred and fifty years ago, the Transylvanian Queen Isabella and her son King John witnessed incredible suffering and death across the Christian world due to religious intolerance. Their own beliefs were targets of the orthodox because they accepted the reasoning of their court minister, Francis David, that the Doctrine of the Trinity was not supported by the Bible.

Rather than force their subjects to adopt their belief that God is one, not three, they chose to end religious persecution because they also believed that faith was a gift from God and couldn't be forced upon anyone. After a debate in the town of Torda, in 1568, the monarchs issued the Edict of Toleration which stated, “No one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone...”

This was huge! No earlier edict for religious toleration had been so unlimited in scope. For one shining moment in the tiny eastern European principality of Transylvania, religious freedom ruled. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Unitarian beliefs were recognized. Even Jewish and Muslim practices were allowed.

After the Edict was made, Francis David returned to the city of Kolozsvár where, atop a huge rock outdoors, he preached a sermon extolling the Unitarian theology. Legend says he converted thousands by his reasoned and inspired preaching. In that moment Unitarianism as an

organized religion was born. The world's first Unitarian Church still resides in Kolozsvár and preserves the rock David supposedly preached from. Sadly, the Edict did not survive subsequent monarchs and David was imprisoned and died. But Unitarianism's legacy of freedom, reason, and tolerance lives in us today.

In the 16th century, our Unitarian ancestors chose a peaceful, non-violent path that allowed for religious diversity and a measure of freedom and equality. In the 20th century, Martin Luther King, Jr., also advocated peaceful, non-violent methods to promote equality and basic human rights.

King suggested that if we considered each other one family living within one global house, we would stop fighting and start using love to solve any differences. Long before Apollo astronauts looked back and saw one planet earth without borders, and long before anyone imagined the World Wide Web, King considered the world connected by global transportation, televised news, and phone communication. King advocated that we stop sending outrageous sums of money to the vast military industrial complex and instead invest that money in reducing poverty, improving education, and eliminating racism. Only peaceful methods could create lasting peace he believed.

Like our modern interconnected world, Transylvania's geographic location made it a cultural crossroads. The country was surrounded by the Islamic Ottoman Empire to the south, the Eastern Orthodox to the north, the Roman Catholic and growing Protestant population to the west. And trade waters of the Black Sea lapped just beyond Transylvania's border to the east. Tolerating difference made sense then, just as it does today. / Those who think they can turn the US into an isolated white mono-culture fool themselves. That is neither possible nor desirable. Racism and religious intolerance have no place in an interconnected and interdependent world.

Tolerating difference is a good thing. Embracing difference is even better. Within Unitarian Universalism, we say we embrace difference, but we know the difficulties of inclusivity. Whether I use religious language or not, whether I urge active engagement with justice issues or not, and whether I refer to politics or not, I'm bound to exclude or offend someone. Clearly, we're not perfectly tolerant.

But if we follow the 4th Principle by searching for our own responsible path to truth and meaning *while being part of a community*, then we need to keep working on becoming more tolerant and even going beyond tolerance. Our 1st and 7th Principles require that of us. I believe we must learn to let go of any prejudice—religious, racial, or otherwise—and learn to respect others unconditionally. Toleration isn't enough.

King didn't like toleration either. He didn't want white people to tolerate people of color. He wanted equality and respect. He wanted color not to matter. Not that we should be blind to color, but that we shouldn't stereotype. He wanted all people to be treated as the unique individuals we are.

But, and it's a big but, there are some things I don't intend to tolerate. As King said in a 1963 speech in Michigan:

*I say to you, my friends, ... there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted ... I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few...
etc*

Like King, I'm intolerant of racism. I'm intolerant of religious bigotry. I'm intolerant of poverty and the increasing wealth disparity. I'm intolerant of endless war and gun violence. And I don't intend to become tolerant. My intolerance and my UU Principles prompt me to act for justice. They prompt me to work to eliminate what divides us because we can't afford to live divided. History shows this. Reason proves this. Our Principles affirm this.

But I also know I risk becoming as intolerant of those who don't agree with my progressive values as some conservatives are of me. If I stop listening, then my intolerance is a hindrance, not a help. I don't want engagement in particular social justice causes to be a litmus test for membership in UU congregations. But neither do I want us sitting on the sidelines because we don't all agree. Right or wrong, each of us must follow our conscience. Where we may not have unanimity of opinion, I want us in dialogue. I want you to share your convictions with me, just as I share mine with you. UU's need not be stereotyped as one variety only any more than any other group wants to be painted as one size only.

We do not need to be uniform on all issues. But I hope we're all leaning or bending the arc of justice toward love and not hate. Justice and not injustice. Multiculturalism and not privileged mono-culturalism.

I know our individual experiences may lead us to different stances. But if we all side with love, we'll eventually arrive at the right place for all of us. We may not get there at the same time or at the same speed. But I hope you're taking a step on the journey towards greater love. It can begin by examining your feelings and reflecting on your experiences. I hope such reflection gives you greater self-awareness. I hope such reflection helps to heal any trauma you may have experienced. That is something I've had to do myself.

During 8th or 9th grade, either 1967 or '68, I was walking home from junior high one afternoon with a friend when two black older teens stopped us. One stuck a small switchblade in my face. The teens verbally taunted us, proving they had the power to terrorize two white girls. Eventually, they ran off.

Although we weren't physically harmed, it was traumatic. I don't think I told my parents what happened that day. Perhaps I thought they would restrict my freedom somehow. Perhaps I just wanted to forget it happened.

Given the racially turbulent times, I wasn't surprised to experience racial anger directed at me. My whole school was pretty tense. I worried walking through the hallways that a riot might break out at any time. Like a Jersey West Side Story, the LatinX-, Italian- or Sicilian-, and African-Americans all seemed angry. To this volatile mix of ethnicities, the neighboring Newark

riots of July 1967 didn't help. During four hot days, 26 people died and roughly 700 were injured, along with billions of dollars in property damage. That event was followed by King's assassination in April 1968. Racial fever was high. And I didn't know how high my fear was until I moved to Louisville, Kentucky, in the fall of 1969.

Students in my new suburban high school were almost entirely white. During my first week or so, I was late getting to a class. I ran up a stairwell, but unfortunately I ran smack into another student, sending his books flying. I immediately offered apologies as I hurriedly picked up his books. I recall him looking at me like I was crazy. I was certainly frantic. You see, he was black and I was doing everything I could to avoid getting beaten up even though he gave no intention of doing so.

It wasn't until later that I understood my reaction resulted from trauma. Unknowingly, I had stereotyped all young black men as angry black men. Indeed, many were at that time, but I wrongly had become fearful of all blacks. I wasn't allowing their individuality to determine who they were.

I'm not alone in having such stories. Some of you who also identify as white may have felt the pain of reverse discrimination in a job or a similar disappointment. But I hope our personal experiences don't cloud our view of the bigger picture. As a white person, I know any trauma I've experienced pales in comparison to what historically marginalized and oppressed groups have experienced. If I focus on my suffering rather than on ending the systemic racism that disproportionately harms people of color, then I wrongly protect my white dominance.

Time and intentional reflection and commitment will bring about healing for all of us, black, white and inbetween. As we mark the 450th anniversary of the Edict of Toleration and as we approach the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, let us recommit to freedom, reason, and maybe something more than mere tolerance. Our ancestors dreamed of a better way, let's fulfill their promise. Let's draw our circle wide.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What do you find hardest to tolerate in other people or religions? What makes that difficult?
2. Do you feel like groups have become more intolerant around the world? If so, what might increase the level of tolerance or even an embrace of difference?
3. Do you believe other religious traditions are becoming more or less tolerant of different faiths?