2007-12-16 Radical Ideas

Opening Words

We are here,
as winter approaches with snow and wind,
to worship, to remember that our stories
are but small chapters in far greater stories
of both radical heritage and blossoming cosmos.

And so, with renewing joy, we say:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

The snow comes with beauty and danger.
Just like beauty and danger arrive at other times of the year.
The holidays come with joy and resistance.
Just like joy and resistance arrive at other times of the year.
The carols of the season are repeated over and over. Just like the popular songs are repeated over and over at other times of the year.

The year has its seasons and cycles, O Love. Yes. But no matter if it's dark or light, holiday or ordinary day, morning or afternoon or night, it's all woven together into one living, the joy *and* sorrow, one fear *and* exaltation, one seductive culture *and* the resistance to it; one beauty *and* the danger joined together. So, come O Love. Weave yourself into this, our silence, and wrap us for a time in the quilt of your comforting strength and warmth in the midst of it all.

silence

Joys and sorrows are woven together with
our lives of work and play and worship.
Our whole lives flow into this brief morning time. Let us pause, therefore, to remember
the rest of our lives, our loves, losses, laughter
and tears, and name the ones which call
to us today, either in our inner quiet, or whispered into this our house of praise.

naming

O Love, let silence process into music now,
and music to word, and word to flesh, and
flesh to life, and life to the comfort of gratitude.

Readings

The First Reading *comes from the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible. It's from the book of Daniel, a fanciful, non-historical book written at the time of the first Hanukkah, the present celebration of which ended this week. It was meant to be critical of the Greek culture, and to encourage resistance. The story is set almost 400 years earlier in a fictionalized account of the Babylonian era.*

Long ago, the emperor of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar, captured Jerusalem and took all the Judean royalty to the great city of Babylon as prisoners. He ransacked the temple in Jerusalem and looted its precious plate for his own treasury.

He ordered his Lord High Chamberlain to choose some of the young men of the Judean nobility for service in the palace – fine, good-looking, well-educated, bright and clever young men – and to teach them to speak the Babylonian language. He made them a handsome allowance for rich food and wine. They were to be given three years' education.

Among those chosen were four young men, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The Lord High Chamberlain renamed them with Babylonian names – Bel-teshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Daniel was sincere. He made up his mind that he would not deny his religious convictions by eating un-kosher food. He explained this to the Lord High Chamberlain, and asked him not to make him do anything against his conscience. Now the Lord High Chamberlain rather liked Daniel. But he said to him: "It's the emperor I'm afraid of. His orders must be obeyed; he decided what food you should be given. If, at the end of your first session, you weren't as fit as the others, I'd be executed."

Daniel talked to the guard in charge of the four of them. "Please test our theory for ten days," he said. "Lentils and water are all we want. In ten days' time compare our fitness with the fitness of the others."

The guard agreed. When the ten days were over, the four of them looked better and fitter than all the young men who had been given the rich food and wine the emperor had ordered. That settled the matter. They could have the food of their conscience.

The Second Reading *comes from a very fine scholarly paper written by Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie, the minister of our neighboring congregation up in Lewis Center. She is considered by her colleagues, especially me, to be the historian par excellence among Unitarian Universalist clergy in these present days. She is speaking of our Unitarian ancestors in Hungary around the mid-15 hundreds. I will speak of the Edict of Torda in the sermon. Just be aware it was issued to guarantee religious toleration in Hungary. And Ferenc David, mentioned in this reading, is one of our religious ancestors,*
the first Unitarian Bishop in Europe.

The borders between the Ottoman and Hungarian cultures were, in this period, crossed, renegotiated, and re-crossed. The basis for the Edict of Torda was established, not only in Francis David's mind, not only in European humanist influence, not even through the direct political and legal influence of the Ottoman Empire. The grounds for religious toleration were also prepared for in the everyday lives of actual persons, who experienced the negotiations of intermarriage before any legal proclamation of toleration, and who knew the attractions of Islam

and the safety it accorded progressive Protestants, before the publication of any theological treatise.

Could it be that toleration, that most precious inheritance of the Enlightenment, has always been a shared East/West undertaking? It is especially ironic that while we praise the progressive, diversity-promoting character of our earliest statements of religious toleration, we have also defined them heartily as products of liberal European genius. It is well past the time for the paradigm of shared understanding.

Sermon

History, we say, is something that supposedly happened long ago, and often quite far away. Some people like to study history anyway, reading books on kings and queens, wars and religious heresies… with relish. Others find history difficult, dull, boring, and even, some say, irrelevant.

But whether we study it or not, I'd like to propose this morning that history is not only something that happened long ago and far away. History, even our own particular Unitarian history, is around us all the time. It's there whenever we make decisions as our ancestors did, or hold an ideal against strong odds. We are not, after all, the first to make decisions, or hold ideals tenaciously…our whole history is packed with folks who did just that.

At its best, historical study allows us to look at the world through many eyes, not just the eyes of our own private and personal experience. When history reminds us that what we have experienced in our own lives others have experienced before us, it can even help us to make sense of a sometimes very strange world.

"Oh, I understand now. That's why that happens!" But it can do more than that: it can sometimes lift up a vision of hope when hope is difficult to see.

But, before I lift up history at its best, I'd like to start off by suggesting that, at the very *least*, the stories that underlie our present age are still around. Just in really nifty disguises. *(And here I have to thank Susan Ritchie for the following bit of history fun.)*

For example, you and I can go to almost any bakery or even supermarket and buy something called a *croissant.* It's a flaky, buttery pastry that sometimes, with butter and jam, is breakfast, and sometimes turns out to be lunch, when it's stuffed with egg salad.

I have always assumed Parisian bakers first invented it, because the word is French after all.

But I was wrong. Croissants were first baked in the city of Wien, or what we call in English Vienna. In the year 1526, about 150,000 troops under the leadership of Suleyman the Magnificent, Sultan, or emperor, of the Ottoman Empire, camped outside the walls of Vienna, preparing to attack and push his vast Empire well into central Europe. They had already claimed the city of Buda in Magyarország, the country which we call in English, Hungary.

The bakers in Vienna had little hope. They were sure the overwhelming Ottoman forces would triumph. Still, they grit their teeth and fought back in the only way they knew how…being bakers, with baking. They saw the Ottoman flags festooned with the crescent moon design across

the green cloth, and all at once they knew what they had to do. They created a pastry in the shape of that crescent moon so that people could tear at it with their teeth…and yet be fed.

To everyone's surprise, including Suleyman's, a series of weather disasters, including terrible rainstorms, and spates of both sickness and desertions, raged through the camp, serving to weaken the Ottoman resolve. They finally retreated without attacking. They never went any further into Europe after that.

But to this day, we still eat croissants. Almost 500 years later, we still eat the symbol of the Ottoman Empire. History is not lost forever…it only takes on disguises.

Now you may be surprised to learn that Ottoman Islamic history has unexpected connections to our own history, if we call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. After all, one place you could surely find Unitarians in Europe in those days, as now, was in the Hungarian territories in Europe, which bordered on the Ottoman Empire. A man named Ferenc David (or Francis David, as we say in English, with first names first, not second, as in Hungarian) was the court preacher of a man named Zsigismond Zapolya Janos (or in English, King John Sigismund), the reigning monarch in a territory of Hungary called by the strange title: "That place on the other side of the forest," or in Latin, Transylvania.

Both of these men, Ferenc David and Zapolya Zsigismund Janos, had lived in or near Buda when the Ottomans ruled there. Both of them had learned something about Islamic toleration policies. They carried this knowledge with them when they moved over the mountains to Transylvania.

In fact, it would seem that they both knew of an edict which came out of Buda, from the Pasha, or Ottoman governor, there. A group of conservative Catholics were angry at a Lutheran cleric for preaching sermons which undermined their influence in the area. They asked the Pasha to have the pastor driven away, or even killed. But he responded with these words, in the form of an edict, as Dr. Susan Ritchie makes clear in another part of her paper:

"Preachers of the faith invented by Luther should be allowed to preach…everywhere to everybody. Whoever wants to hear, freely, and without fear, should be able to listen and receive the word without any danger."

Two decades later, when Zsigismond Zapolya Janos was ruling in Transylvania, he helped issue the famous Edict of Torda, saying pretty much the same thing as the Pasha did, down to the Edict's appeal to the privilege of individual hearing, thus lifting up freedom of the individual conscience. This was a very radical and quite modern idea indeed. It allowed Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed Church folks and Unitarians to live side by side without clubbing each other on the head all the time, which was rather the practice elsewhere in Europe. In our usual telling of our history, Zsigismond Zapolya Janos is given credit for this radical idea of religious toleration, of each individual left to make up his or her mind according to conscience. Now the Edict of Torda was indeed a *radical* idea (that is, an idea which got down to the *radix*, that is, the root of things) It was largely new to European thought. Tolerance after all had not been a European virtue since the fall of Rome. But religious tolerance was not a rare idea in Muslim lands. And Torda was based, clearly, on another Edict, one from a Muslim voice. From a Muslim empire where religious tolerance was already such a byword that today, Jews consider that age, and their settlements within that empire in that age, to be one of their golden eras.

But underneath this radical idea I find another idea. And this is the idea of *uncontrolled mutual influence.*

Mostly, history is the story of folks trying to control influence. You don't allow yourself to be influenced by your Catholic or Lutheran or Unitarian or Jewish or Muslim friend. You burn them at the stake instead, or imprison them or ridicule them. You get rid of them. You purify your life of foreign cultural influence and reestablish your control over it.

In short, what I am asserting is this: the history of the world, tragically, is most often told in terms of "them" and "us."

They invaded *us*. *We* discovered this idea and *they* used it. *They* were in conflict with *us. We* were at war with *them.* And sure, there is some truth in this. All you have to do is look at the European colonists and the Native nations here on these American continents. But, just *some* truth. For the boundaries of the world have always been perforated. And the edges of the world have ever been frayed.

Susan Ritchie points out that Muslims didn't just live in some remote *there,* while our ancestors lived in the local Hungarian *here*. No, Europeans and Muslim individuals knew each other the whole while. They were neighbors. They married each other. Mixed families, with Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians, Jews and Muslims, all sitting around the holiday table, were surprisingly common back then. It's not some new-fangled American melting-pot idea, as if we invented even *that* idea in the first place. Muslim/Christian weddings were not rare. Unitarian/ Muslim friendships were not odd back then, any more than my friendship with my Muslim friend Babar is odd now. The idea of mutual tolerance was not just an edict. It was already being practiced by a large part of the community. The Edict of Torda, as in the case of the original Buda edict of the Pasha, was not offering a novel idea that had never been heard before. Or practiced. No, both edicts, I have to surmise, were issued simply to make sure that the fanatics, as in the case of the people who wanted to have the Protestant pastor killed, did not put a stop to what had already begun.

And these friendships were not just at the peasant level. Zsigismund Zapolya Janos, good King John of Transylvania, was well known to the Emperor's family in Istanbul. The emperor, says Susan Ritchie, had even dispatched a man to watch the young prince being nursed, to make sure he was being well taken care of.

And Suleyman brought many young Unitarians from Hungary to his court, since he respected the Unitarian theological opinion very highly.

In fact, the anti-Unitarian factions in Europe, from east to west, often used just that fondness as a way of bashing our ancestors. "Why, they are nothing more than a bunch of nasty Muslims infiltrating Christian Europe."

But we were never Muslims, because the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire never required us to convert to Islam, contrary to what the American press and Christian right try to say about Muslims these days. They liked us as we were. In fact, they helped to translate our religious literature into Arabic and Turkish for us.

But why did they help us to translate our religious literature into those languages, since we were Hungarian speakers? Because, as in the case of the Biblical story of Daniel and the healthful lentils, many of the brightest young minds of the era were brought to the Ottoman court, where they were educated with the best schooling possible, and treated with the greatest respect. There is ample evidence that many a young Unitarian living within the Muslim empire rose to high office and responsibility, without ever being required to give up their religion. They, in fact, brought their European wisdom and expertise into the Ottoman world, just as lentils and good health came to the court of Nebuchadnezzer.

Now this history may sound like a story of men, like so many histories told today. But it is not. Queen Isabella Jagiello, Zsigismund Janos's mother, appreciated the exchange of ideas with the Ottomans. With her liberal upbringing in Poland, her intellectual rigor, her favorite book written by the radical humanist Erasmus tucked under her arm and well-read, she was able to engage fully with the cultural exchanges that marked the progressive spirit of that age. Without Isabella, the story of our Unitarian ancestors in Hungary would never have come to pass. Her diplomacy and her steady, non-anxious style enriched the realm of Transylvania---after all, it was she who ruled, with the encouragement of Suleyman, as her infant son Janos Zsigimund grew to manhood.

Modern historians with a progressive eye also note that what we now call "same-gender" relationships were also tolerated in the Ottoman Empire. So, in full view of the Ottomans in his court, Janos Zsigismund Zapolya lived out his life with a man named Gaspar Bekes. And he was never either mocked or attacked because of it. This, in the 16th century, a time not famous for peace, love, justice and tolerance.

This history, our history, is the story of perforated boundaries and frayed edges.
Like the children's story this morning, Scribbleville, our story talks of the power of singular individuals to make a difference.

Our story is the story of the power of influence and individual conscience to challenge an unjust world.

However:`
If I needed to be right above all else, I would not want to hear these stories.
If I needed to be certain above all else, I would not want to hear these stories.
If I felt entitled to be just where I am without being challenged, I would not want to hear these stories.
If I was convinced the whole world is divided into *them* and *us*, I would curse these stories.
If I thought I knew exactly what the following words mean, once and for all: male, female, transgender, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, black, white, brown, yellow or red, gay, bi, straight, athletic or practical or old or young or idealistic or religious or Catholic or Protestant or Jew or Muslim…I would wince when our history was told. If I thought that things or categories had some essential reality, some diamond-hard quality beyond any outside influence, then I would *really hate* these stories.

Then I would try to disdain history, say it's boring, say it has nothing at all to do with my own life in the present world. Then I'd get up, leave the house, go off to some comfortable café, and sit down for a cup of coffee from Arabia, and a nice buttered croissant.

No, for me, the power of our history is that it illuminates our possibility, and illustrates our theological center, the very one our critics don't imagine that we have. Our history tells us that we can, in deliberate community, influence each other spiritually outside any hierarchical control. We can influence each other to engage in well-planned social justice work without guilt or shame being a motivator. We can influence each other to celebrate holidays as we need to…with richness and welcoming joy, or quiet and private peace, the whole way influencing each other with kindness, counsel, compassion and love.

So how, I wonder, is it even possible, that history, our history, could ever be boring? And who, I wonder, are we influencing right now with our lives, our decisions, our tolerance?

Offering

Our strength is a shared strength.
Our joy is a shared joy.
Our responsibilities are a shared commitment.
This moment is the opportunity we offer
to share the strength and joy by the giving
of pledged gifts. The offering will now be
given and received in the circle of our shared community.

Gaudete! *(An adapted form of the medieval hymn always sung on this Sunday in December, for a thousand years.)*

Gaudete, gaudete! Tempus adest gratiæ
Hoc quod optabamus, carmina lætitiæ
amore reddamus.

Soon arrives the days of forbearance that we've been desiring. Let us lovingly sing, rejoicing.

Omnia natura mirante, mundus renovatus est
cum rosae. Porta clausa pertransitur.
Ecce! Amor, simili asteram, invenitur.
And all of nature marvels,
the world is renewed again with roses.
The gates once closed now seem to open.
Behold! Love's there, like a star, waiting.

Ergo nostra cantio, psallat iam
in pulchritudo; benedicat nunc
Spiritus Vitae in iubilo. Amen.
Therefore let us, like a choir,
now sing a canticle in beauty.
Let the Spirit of Life
now be blessed with joy. Amen.