

“We Give at the Office”

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Second Parish in Hingham, www.secondparish.org

October 12, 2008

Kathleen McTigue, minister of the Unitarian Society of New Haven, author of our first reading, tells this “old folk tale from the Christian tradition about the saintly Brother Bruno, who was at prayer one night when he found his concentration interrupted by the loud croaking of a bullfrog. He kept trying to ignore the noise, but the harder he tried to concentrate the more annoying the sound became. Finally he leaned out of his window and shouted, "Quiet! I'm at my prayers!" Instantly there was complete silence, as the bullfrog and every other creature obeyed his command. Brother Bruno settled back into prayer, but now he found himself even more deeply disturbed by a nagging doubt: Why would God create the bullfrog and its rasping voice unless there was something pleasing in the sound? Could it be that Bruno's own prayer sounded, to God's ears, like the arrogant croaking of another sort of frog?

Bruno could not push away this uneasiness, and so he finally leaned out his window again and gave the command, "Sing!" The throaty croak of the bullfrog again filled the air, along with all the other creatures that had fallen silent. Brother Bruno listened carefully to the sound, and to his amazement he discovered that it was beautiful. Once he no longer resisted it as noise, the

joyful concert actually enriched the peacefulness of the night. With that discovery, Bruno understood for the first time in his life what it really meant to pray.”¹

We start here, at the level of our spirits. Here, in this place, we make our spiritual lives together. Here, in this place, we find ways to grow ourselves through our whole lives. Today we will speak of how that personal dimension reaches out beyond each of us as individuals, beyond the walls of this sacred place we call our spiritual home, to the religious movement of Unitarian Universalism of which we are a part.

We have been reminded in the last months of the fragility of material possessions. The value of homes, jobs, investments, all have become riskier as the economic turmoil around us threatens to tear apart the material comfort which has become a habit to our nation. A few, in despair over their losses, have ended their lives, unable to face ruin. It is a good time to remember the words with which Jesus ended the story of the Rich Farmer from our reading this morning: [Luke 12:]²² ...”Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on.²³ Life is more than food, and the body *is more* than clothing.” He continued by saying “²⁴ Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value

are you than the birds?” It’s a good time to stand back from the precipice of despair and remember once again that life is so much more than money, that our souls matter more than our wallets, that there are tides in the affairs of our society and our economy. It is good at a time like this to take stock of what is truly most precious to us.

I want to refer today to a topic we raised during our Time for All Ages this morning – Unitarian Universalist Super Heroes – as we consider this liberal religious movement of which we are a part. I want to raise up three UU Super Heroes of our own this morning: Francis David, one of the founders of the Unitarian movement in Transylvania in the sixteenth century, Hosea Ballou, a leading Universalist in the United States during the early years of the nineteenth century, and James Luther Adams, described in the online Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography as “the most influential theologian among American Unitarian Universalists of the 20th century, and one of the finest 20th-century American liberal Christian theologians generally.”²

We start in the sixteenth century, when the Unitarian churches of Transylvania which survive to this day were founded; we have this account by Gwen Foss:

During the Protestant Reformation, religious doctrinal debates became major life-and-death events. In the kingdom of Transylvania, 1568, the sovereign declared that the people of his kingdom would adopt the religion of whichever combatant won the debate. Unitarian bishop Francis David and Calvinist bishop Peter Melius prepared to address the question of the trinity, with the king in attendance. Naturally, each man had strong reason to succeed.

Melius was in little doubt that he would triumph. “If I win this debate,” he told David, “you will be executed.”

David responded, “If I win this debate, you and everyone else in this country will be given complete religious freedom, and the tolerance due to every child of Man.”

David won the debate.³

The connection between Unitarians and U.U.s in this country and those in Transylvania has waxed and waned over the years, but after the fall of the Communist regime in Romania in 1989 a concerted effort was made by churches in our association to reach out to those churches, which have suffered centuries of repression and persecution, and today many of the Transylvanian congregations are partnered with our churches in this country. Some of my friends at King’s Chapel recently returned from a working visit to their partner church in Transylvania.

Like many of the religious innovations which Unitarians and Universalists have pioneered in the course of our history, there’s an upside and a downside

to the religious tolerance which Francis David advocated in that debate 440 years ago. On the plus side, it represents a blow for freedom of conscience in religion, and it spared Transylvania from many of the bloody religious conflicts which engulfed Europe during that century. On the other hand, freedom of conscience means that people are no longer compelled to join a particular congregation or indeed any congregation at all. Ironically, it was our Unitarian forebears in this country who inherited the established or Standing Order churches of New England and who therefore did their best to keep out religious competitors. Indeed, this parish was founded at a time when the leaders of First Parish, now better known as Old Ship, were loathe to give up the tax revenues from South Hingham which supported their church – which is why our original building went up in 1742 while the congregation wasn't allowed to call our first minister, Daniel Shute, and start worshipping together until four years later, in 1746.

In this country, it was our Universalist forebears who agitated for independence from the Established churches. They were harassed by ministers from other churches who argued that churches that didn't believe sinners would burn in hellfire for eternity could not be teachers of morality; after all, without the threat of eternal damnation, what would keep anyone on the straight and narrow? Gwen Foss tells this story of Hosea Ballou, born

tenth and youngest in a deeply Calvinist Baptist family, the boy who loved mud from our Time for All Ages this morning:

Hosea Ballou, the great Universalist preacher of the nineteenth century, was arguing the question of eternal damnation with a Methodist man of the cloth. Ballou quoted a number of Bible verses that showed the love of God for all, but the Methodist preacher was unconvinced.

“Brother Ballou,” he remonstrated, “if I were a Universalist, and feared not the first of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and sadly and ride away, and I’d *still* go to heaven!”

“If you were a Universalist,” Ballou replied, “the idea would never occur to you.”⁴

Once again, our religious forebears led the way to a better understanding of the true nature of religion and of God’s love for everyone under the sun. The influence of this simple idea was so powerful that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Universalist Church of America could claim to be the sixth largest denomination in the United States. Indeed, its message was so compelling that it was adopted by many of the mainline Protestant denominations, which in turn undercut the uniqueness of its message and led to a significant decline in numbers thereafter. And again, there is an upside to this belief as well as a downside: many of us have been able to leave behind the deep anxiety over eternal punishment and death that was so characteristic of earlier periods in our religious history; on the other hand, as Ballou’s

Methodist friend astutely noted, without that fear hanging over our heads, the idea that nothing is required of us can gain a footing and we find ourselves wondering why we must be concerned about anyone outside of ourselves and our own families. We see around us that churches which convince their followers that hellfire awaits disbelievers are growing and have more reliable attendance and financial support. Nevertheless, we believe it is profoundly wrong to threaten in this way; that is our good news, and we are called upon to share it.

Finally, let us consider the teachings of James Luther Adams, preeminent Unitarian and then Unitarian Universalist theologian of the twentieth century, minister in Salem and Wellesley Hills, professor at our seminary in Chicago, Meadville/Lombard, and then at Harvard Divinity School. Adams recalled the story of David and Goliath in the book of Samuel. You remember the story: The giant Goliath raged against the army of Israel and challenged any hero to single combat. All of the grown men quaked before the giant's strength. Then David, a shepherd boy skilled in the use of the slingshot to defend his father's sheep, offered his services. He gathered five smooth stones from the riverbed, put one in his slingshot, and let loose a missile which struck the giant in the forehead and felled him. Adams told this story to introduce his idea that there are five smooth stones which define our liberal

religious tradition. First, he said, we believe that revelation is continuous; while we honor and respect the revelations passed down to us in the Bible and in our other sacred traditions, we also recognize that new insights, new interpretations, new revelations spring forth from our apprehension of nature, of science, and of our own life experiences. Second, all relations between human beings should be based on mutual consent. As Hosea Ballou might have put it, we are all children of God and must be treated as such. Third, we have a moral obligation to work toward the establishment of a just and loving community. This is a new way of referring to what Jesus called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. Fourth, religious liberals “deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation. There is no such thing as goodness as such.... The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms.”⁵ That means that only by joining together, by forming associations, can we achieve a just and loving community. The kind of hyper-individualism of which religious liberals are sometimes guilty cannot be a sufficient outcome of our faith. And fifth, “liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.”⁶

To return to Adams' fourth smooth stone: goodness and virtue ultimately exist only as they are embodied in individuals and in institutions. Good and evil, right and wrong do not exist as abstractions but as embodied in people and in organizations. This poses a challenge to the notion that our Unitarian Universalist faith frees us from any obligations to each other and to our larger movement. We as a congregation have had our differences with the Unitarian Universalist Association, but I believe that the association and its members are moving our way in affirming that the religious elements of our faith are more important than any particular political stands any of us may take. We are seeing a new development in our movement of a language of reverence and a new hunger for spiritual depth – a tendency we have long nurtured here. Whatever our disagreements in the past, it is only through our association – only through the combination of all of our congregations, the embodiment or incarnation of our faith in institutions, as Adams puts it – that we can do the things we cannot develop as a single, isolated congregation:

- create curricula for our children's and adult religious education;
- support the development of hymnals and other worship resources;
- support Beacon Press, long an incubator of liberal religious authors;
- provide resources for congregations to improve accessibility – a department which helped us acquire our assistive listening devices;
- provide resources for congregational growth and financial planning and fundraising;

- support a Department of Ministry which ensures the quality of our ministers and has helped this congregation acquire the services of myself and Rev. Kim Preveza over the last several years.

All of this is why we have Association Sunday today; our offering will support the development of excellence in ministry for both lay leaders and clergy as described in the insert in your order of service.

This place matters. It nourishes our spirits, helps us through hard times and brings us joy in good times. This movement matters. It brings good news to a world which is suffering and needs a healing touch. Our religious heritage matters. It inspires us and helps us remain humble as we learn how to avoid the pitfalls our living tradition can lead us into. It reminds us that many voices raised in freedom make a wonderful melody even if sometimes it sounds like the croaking of frogs! Let's not silence the frogs. Let's join together to incarnate our commitment to the establishment of a just and loving community.

Amen.

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¹ Kathleen McTigue, Worship Resources for Association Sunday, www.uua.org

² "James Luther Adams," Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography, <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jameslutheradams.html>

³ Gwen Foss, compiler and editor, The Church Where People Laugh: A Treasury of Jokes, Quotations, Observations, and True Stories about Unitarians, Universalist, and U.U.s, Farmington, MI: 2004, p. 17

⁴ Gwen Foss, p. 23

⁵ James Luther Adams, *Guiding Principles for a Free Faith*, "The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism," in On Being Human Religiously, ed. By Max L. Stackhouse, Boston: Beacon Press, 1976, pp. 17-18

⁶ "Five Smooth Stones," p. 18