

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Defiant Heretics”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore January 31, 2016

Call to Celebration

Defiance is part of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. William Ellery Channing’s defining sermon titled, “Unitarian Christianity,” preached at the ordination of Jared Sparks, in Baltimore in 1819, divided New England congregations Unitarian from Trinitarian over their differing understanding of who Jesus was. The abolitionist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker is said to have preached with a pistol on his pulpit during one of the more agitated periods before the Civil War. Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony and Lydia Ann Jenkins were strong voices for women’s rights. The Rev. Dana McClean Greely, President of the UUA went down to Selma with the UUA Board, UU ministers and many others and marched with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr.

We have a proud history of not going along with the status quo of the times and speaking out for reform. I notice that just about any progressive social, political or religious reform movement is likely to have Unitarian Universalist representation and leadership. Even though we have left Puritan theology behind, we remain animated by a shared desire to create a better, more just world.

Our strategy of resistance has problems with it however. The spirit of anti-authoritarianism and disestablishmentarianism common among us can also turn inward against our leaders. We need to entrust our leaders with the responsibilities of caring for our congregation and supporting its growth and development. The challenge is coming to intentional agreement about *how much* power and authority to grant.

Just being against beliefs, norms, traditions and practices we think are wrong isn’t enough. We also need to have a positive program too. This is one of the reasons for our principles and purposes. Our positive vision, organized to move forward in constructive and affirming directions is as important as resisting what we don’t believe.

As one person, most of us can make little difference. But as a worldwide movement, Unitarian Universalists can have far more influence and, at the same time, protect each other from religious oppression. These are very important reasons we gather at 405

Washington Avenue here in Albany on a weekly basis to join together in the celebration of life.

Sermon

The spirit of defiance was part of the birth of American Unitarianism and Universalism. Each tradition rejected the Puritan's corrupted understanding of John Calvin's theology. Calvin, a Frenchman born in 1509 and early Protestant reformer, is known for his systematic reformed Christian theology he developed in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin's leadership and ministry in Geneva had great influence in the British Isles through the Puritans. Many of them fled across the Atlantic to New England after coming into conflict with the Church of England.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the early Unitarians were the elites of Boston giving birth to a new nation. They saw themselves as fulfilling prophecy, building a New Jerusalem, a shining city on a hill, Beacon Hill in fact. This new nation was creating a democratic civilization, recreating the best of Greek and Roman visions of governance. They *did not* see themselves as depraved sinners who could do no right as the Puritan tradition admonished them. The advances in knowledge coming from every direction led them to recognize the greatness of human minds to know and to serve the good, rather than be bound in slavery to the flesh. They praised in us a capacity, the glory of creation, our amazing power of rational, analytical thought.

When the Unitarians carefully read, analyzed and studied the Bible in light of advancing thought, they couldn't accept that Jesus was the equal of God. They still saw Jesus as a high being, but they doubted the birth story requiring Mary to be a virgin. They doubted the miracle stories. They wanted to reshape Christianity to be more rational, to align with the science of their day.

The Universalists didn't like Puritanism much either, but had a different critique. They rejected predestination. Calvin struggled with believing God to be all powerful, all knowing, and all good and imagining that sinful man could influence God to grant salvation. He wondered, how could a finite, subordinate creature somehow influence an infinite God? Calvin decided that there was nothing we could do to earn salvation for ourselves, thus salvation from sin was only possible through God's Grace. To preserve God's freedom to offer salvation, those who would be saved must have been elected to that status before birth. And since the Book of Revelations said only a fixed

number of people would be saved, by one accounting 144,000, the rest would be hopelessly damned to hell without any recourse. The only problem was, you couldn't tell which way you were going, up or down. The Puritans exploited a suggestion Calvin made that you *might* see signs of election in your life, signs like character traits, wealth and status. The Puritans pounced on this idea and made signs of election a requirement of membership in the church of living saints.

Our Universalist forebears like John Murray and Hosea Ballou read their Bibles very, very carefully and didn't see any of this Puritan nonsense. They discovered a different story, a story of universal salvation. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, he abolished hell and liberated those trapped there. They interpreted the New Jerusalem of America as the gradual liberation of the world as we bring to fruition the universal salvation of all people. We are living in a new world, the gift of Jesus' sacrifice for all people, a gift of grace for everyone. This was really, really good news to them!

Both the American Unitarians and Universalists, in critiquing Puritan theology, were following the directive of Martin Luther who started the Protestant Reformation in 1517 by nailing 95 theses or critiques of Rome to the Wittenberg church door in Germany. He resisted and questioned the pope's authority to raise funds for building projects by selling indulgences. Indulgences are offerings that allow you to buy your own and your relative's way into heaven. Since we are mired in sin, confidence in one's salvation can be a chancy proposition. Paying some money to the church to assist you and all your family members, people like cranky old Uncle Harry, to get their forgiveness taken care of and their tickets to heaven punched could be expensive, especially if you have a lot of unsavory relatives, but also very reassuring.

Luther rejected the unscriptural papal claim to step into God's unique authority to grant forgiveness through selling indulgences. Rejecting the pope, Luther substituted the Bible as the sole authority that should guide the church. In a sense, Luther started the fundamentalist ball rolling. Solo scriptorium was his cry, scripture alone should be our authority. The printing press was making Bibles available for the first time at a more reasonable cost, translated into the vernacular so people could read it for themselves in their own language. Up to this time, these hand duplicated Latin texts were the property of the church, to be interpreted for the masses solely by priests.

Once people started reading scripture for themselves, they splintered in every direction. Unitarians come out of one grouping of churches called the Radical Reformation. These were the ones who rejected the authority of the church most strongly, giving the most independence to read the Bible and allow it to speak through the individual rather than the learned clergy.

I give you all this history to help you understand how *old* our resistance to authority is and how deeply committed we are to using our individual minds to discern what is true. That resistance has other sources as well. It also comes from the advancement of knowledge and the use of the scientific method. Scientific knowledge is built on theory and hypothesis that can be demonstrated through experiment. Moses didn't bring $F=MA$ or $E=MC^2$ down on tablets from Mount Sinai. Humans came up with these formulas then tested them to see if they were true. Science is based on skepticism and repeatable experiment rather than on revelation. Many of us have far more trust in science to reveal what is true than someone in a cave talking to angels.

In encounters with Jewish, Islamic and Asian religious thought and belief, Unitarians and to some degree Universalists began to question Christian claims to religious *supremacy*. The Transcendentalists of the 1830's and 1840's, enthralled with the English and German Romantics, believed they could have direct contact with God through their intuition and through the natural world. Thoreau living in the woods was discovering the divine through his encounter with flowers, trees, insects, birds and animals. These forerunners of the Free Religious Association were radical for their time. Today however, their thinking is far more common among us than Unitarian or Universalist Christianity.

Our tradition of self-reliance and independent thinking over the years has encouraged in our membership a resistance to authority. I don't expect anyone to believe what I say and accept my words on faith because of my office of minister. In a way, I'm glad you don't as it lightens the burden on me to bring to you the absolute truth as revealed by God and interpreted into language everyone can easily understand. Ideally, you take what I say as a proposition you test for yourselves before accepting it. And in that testing process, you may find error that can help perfect my understanding. There is mutuality in our search for truth and meaning – that search is not a one-way street with me always at the head of the line.

Unfortunately, the resistance to authority can also go in a direction that leads to a dead end. That dead end is a deconstruction of every truth claim using the withering tools of post-modern critique. The last hundred years or so, the Bible has been put under a microscope and heavily analyzed. The linguists have discovered different styles and voices edited together representing different interests and concerns rather than a coherent author with a unified message. Historians and archeologists have tried to validate and find second sources for the stories in the Bible. In this analysis, the authority of the text as a revealed document by God has been weakened. There are even errors introduced in the copying of manuscripts that have crept in over time and changed meanings. The Bible looks more and more like a flawed human document, valuable to be sure, as a record of a religious tradition and an attempt to capture its message, but still incomplete as a communication of their truth.

The problem is if we only doubt and question, we only reject every flawed jewel, we miss the diamonds hidden in the dirt, the gold in the dross. It is possible for a story to be inaccurate, edited and modified and still convey truth *through the message* embedded in the text. The Bible can be a flawed, edited, and even, at times, fictional document and yet still convey deep truth and meaning. The meaning isn't necessarily in the facts and substance of the story but is transmitted *through* the story, *through* the relationships and actions described. Thus a story in the Bible can be false and true at the same time.

The same can be said for all the sacred texts of all the world's religions, as well as poetry, prose and fiction. I felt I was in contact with truth reading Ta-Nehisi Coates book *Between the World and Me* as he wrote to his son and pointed at racism in America.

This broad approach to truth is a gift to us from our Unitarian Universalist tradition. We have an unlimited field of human communication from which we can draw inspiration, truth and meaning. We need not restrict ourselves to one canon of sacred literature, one time period, or one kind of communication. The greatest revelatory texts may be under construction right now as a writer is laboring before a computer screen, or scratching out verses at a Starbucks in a composition book.

Most important, we don't restrict ourselves to what comes to us from the outside world. We can turn inward to discover truth and meaning in our lived experience.

This is why I go to Buddhist meditation retreats every year or so. The kind of meditation I do is a mindfulness practice. It puts the experiences of the mind and the senses under intense observation. Subtle human experiences that we typically overlook in daily living come forward in bold relief. Old invisible habits and patterns become noticeable. Once you notice something, change becomes possible. Growth of awareness and knowing results in increasing one's freedom of choice. That increase gradually leads to greater and greater liberation. That self-knowledge is not just for me but cultivates an awareness and a compassion that I bring to others.

Our heretical resistance can serve the good. It pushes away powers and principalities that would force our minds to conform to ways of thinking and believing that may be flawed and inaccurate, even dangerous and compromising. It makes us less vulnerable to corrupt authorities that do not have our best interests at heart. Resistance to abusive authority should be celebrated not demonized.

One great value of resistance is protecting a space for us to be and to discover ourselves outside the forces of manipulation and conversion. In the idea of the inherent worth and dignity we cherish as our first principle, is an indwelling knowing and inner guidance. It is the compass we must follow independent of what others may tell us. There are truths already written in our hearts that we can discover for ourselves.

Our lack of a unifying belief and scripture, doctrine and dogma, can be very confusing for newcomers. It is quite unusual for a religious tradition to grant its members the authority to guide their growth and development and their faith formation. Some do not want *that much* responsibility for their lives. They want someone to tell them what to believe and what to do. I respect that path for those who do not trust they have a reliable sense of inner guidance.

The people who do believe they can trust their own judgement *more* than that of an outside authority **are the ones that feel at home** in our congregation. My commitment to you is to honor each person's inner guidance, while at the same time being willing to test it and challenge it when I sense it has gone astray. It is our individual task to refine that inner guidance system to better direct us. It is an imperfect process, but we believe it works better than shutting it off and transplanting someone else's guidance system in its place.

If you find an affinity with our heretical, at times defiant approach, you've come to the right place.

Benediction

I conclude with the words of Francis David, Transylvanian minister who helped start the Unitarian tradition by getting King Sigismund to make the Edict of Torda, an edict of religious toleration in 1568. He was imprisoned after the death of the King in a hunting accident and a repressive, religiously intolerant ruler took over. These are the words he scrawled on the wall of the cave in which he was imprisoned, before he died.

Nor lightening, nor cross, nor sword of the Pope,
nor death's visible face,
No power whatever can stay the progress of Truth.
What I have felt, I have written,
with faithful heart I have spoken.
After my death the dogmas of untruth shall fall

May we live and die defiant heretics as individuals, while making room for diversity within our congregational life.