Rebels (With Causes)

Rev. Lisa Doege

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

On my first day of kindergarten at Nelson Elementary School my best friend and I somehow failed to board the school bus back home. We spent a couple hours crying on the playground before the principal, Mr. Johnson, found us and drove us home. The end of my tenure at Nelson Elementary was marked by a milder sort of drama. The last week of sixth grade brought with it typical June weather--hot, still, and humid. I recall sitting at the long tables in the lunchroom with my classmates, working on some end of the year busy work. We worked in dim, almost windowless gloom. I suppose the theory was that the lunchroom was airier than the classroom, and that leaving the lights out was cooler than turning them on. A bit overheated but mostly bored I scribbled a rough petition on a piece of notebook paper. "It is too hot to work." I passed it along for a couple signatures and some amusement. Soon it was out of my hands, and without my really intending it, it made its way to the new principal, Mr. Kovalak. Unlike Sara Ford's petition, mine bore no results and little in terms of fall-out, other than mild embarrassment for my mom who was a substitute teacher in that same school district and heard about the affair from Mr. Kovalak and many of her colleagues.

That was the last I petition I initiated, but I've signed many petitions over the years. More significantly, I've brought my awareness of my political power, my acknowledgment of my place of privilege as a straight, white, educated American, and my expanding understanding of injustice to bear for the benefit of those with less voice, less power and less privilege. In other words, I grew up, grew into the proper exercise of skills and knowledge I learned in school, at home, and in church. No longer making use of the tools of rebellion and protest and reform for personal gain, I stood in the middle of a worship service and directed that the speaker be removed from the pulpit because he was condemning homosexuality during an observance of World AIDS Day. I told an overzealous member of a local political party that my congregation would go ahead and host a noted expert on social security reform despite his misguided threat to our 501c3 (non-profit) status. I prayed at a candle light vigil following the torture and murder of Matthew Shepard. I walked in support of Planned Parenthood last Good Friday, part of a group countering the presence of anti-choice protesters. I will continue to stand on the side of love and justice whenever and wherever I am invited to do so, whenever and wherever I am moved to do so. And I readily acknowledge that I am among the least social justice oriented and active Unitarian Universalist ministers I know.

At a family dinner several months ago, my aunt and uncle responded with amusement and surprise when my sister mentioned that my niece hoped to be in the martyrs and heretics Sunday School class the next quarter. Their reaction was an appropriate one for two unchurched individuals with traditional middle America protestant upbringings. In our tradition, however, in Unitarian Universalism, we celebrate a proud heritage of martyrs and heretics.

Many timelines of Unitarian and Universalist history begin in the very early centuries of Christianity, citing the 544 C.E. church council condemnation of the concept of universal salvation as a heresy. Skipping forward about a thousand years we come across the birth, life and death of Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician/theologian who was the first to accurately describe the pulmonary circulatory system and who was also burned at the stake for his religious views. Another several hundred years brings us to the middle of the twentieth century and the deaths of James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo in Selma, Alabama. In between we find references to scores of men and women and congregations, who, if not exactly heretics and martyrs, nevertheless embodied the spirit, courage and faith of those who actually were condemned and died for their convictions. Men and women who were rebels with causes.

Long before there was a Unitarian church, the first to die in the name of the belief in the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus was a woman, Katherine Weigel (or Vogel), of Krakow, Poland. In 1529 she was accused of apostasy and for ten years she defended her beliefs and refused to make an orthodox confession. On April 19, 1539, at the age of 80, she was burned at the stake in the Krakow marketplace.

Sixty years later, also in Krakow, Faustus Socinus an elderly Italian born Polish theologian and writer was branded a heretic for his Unitarianism, dragged from his sick bed and forced to watch a mob burn his papers and books. He escaped with his life when university professors whisked him away, as the mob debated whether he should be drowned or burned with his books. More than three hundred years after the death of Socinus in 1604, American Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur organized the establishment of a monument to him, inscribed “IN RECOGNITION OF HIS EFFORTS FOR FREEDOM, REASON, AND TOLERANCE IN RELIGION.” Some of you will recognize that characteristic phrase, freedom, reason and tolerance having long been dubbed the Unitarian trinity.

Michael Servetus, the man for whom my previous (and Dana Reynold’s present) congregation was named, was burned at the stake just over four hundred and fifty years ago in Geneva. Servetus was born in 1511. He authored two books, On the Errors of the Trinity and The Restoration of Christianity—books considered heretical for their

refutation of the doctrine of the trinity and their embrace of salvation by character and adult baptism. Servetus lived in hiding under assumed identities for years, hunted by Catholics and Protestants alike for his outspoken beliefs, before being executed on Calvin's orders in 1553.

Within fifteen years of Servetus' death a young Transylvanian king, John Sigismond came under the influence of a Unitarian theologian named Francis David. David, originally trained as a Catholic priest, and having cycled through Lutheranism and Calvinism before embracing Unitarianism, took part in a debate, the outcome of which was to determine the official religion of the region. David impressed Sigismond with his arguments and convinced him that to establish a state religion and compel all under his rule to follow that religion was wrong. In 1568 Sigismond issued the Edict of Torda, the first edict of religious tolerance in history. It read, in part:

> "His Majesty, our Lord, in what manner he --- together with his realm --- legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same manner now, in this Diet, he reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, 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, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God."

To be sure, the tolerance extended only to established Christian religions of the day; still it was the first edict of its kind and stands as a testament to the deep and lasting relationship between Unitarian theology and religious tolerance.

Joseph Priestly is known to the scientific community as the man who "discovered" oxygen, isolating it in its gaseous state. Unitarian Universalists honor him as a founder of Unitarianism in both England and the U.S., where he fled after mob destroyed his home, laboratory, and church in Birmingham in 1791.

In the late nineteenth century this congregation was gathered by a handful of families who rebelled against the constraints of the spirit and the mind common to the Norwegian Lutheran church.

In the nineteen-twenties, when all the other churches in the Dallas, Texas phonebook were label “black” or “white,” First Unitarian Church was labeled “other.” During World War II, the Reverend Waitsill Sharp and his wife Martha left their children and their Unitarian congregation in Wellesley, Massachusetts to the care of friends and family, to go to Europe to save those whose lives were in danger under the Third Reich, Jews and non-Jews. Reverend and Mrs. Sharp were recently named Righteous Among the Nations for their work. In the late sixties/early seventies, the Unitarian Universalist church in Jackson, Mississippi hosted the first integrated Head Start program in the city. Unitarian Universalist congregations of all sizes, in communities across the country, have similar stories to tell of the stands they took in the name of justice and love.

In 1965 hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers answered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call to Selma, in answer to the violence of Bloody Sunday. Among them were James Reeb, Clark Olson and Orloff Miller. On March 9 the three ministers were seen leaving a black restaurant. They were followed and beaten. Reeb died of his injuries two days later. Lay Unitarian Universalists also heeded King’s call. Viola Liuzzo was one. A mother of five from Detroit, she drove to Selma and volunteered. Two weeks after Reeb’s death, Liuzzo was driving a fellow voting rights worker home after a meeting when members of the Ku Klux Klan pulled up alongside her car and shot her to death.

At the height of the furor over the US involvement in the Viet Nam war, amid intimidation at the hands of President Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover, Beacon Press, the publishing arm of the Unitarian Universalist Association, published the Pentagon Papers, which had been leaked by Daniel Ellsberg and read into the record by Unitarian Universalist senator Mike Gravel.

Throughout the years leading up to the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, scores of Unitarian and Universalist ministers put their reputations and careers at risk serving as members of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion—referring women to providers of safe but illegal abortion, offering support, transportation and financial assistance. And when the decision was made to bring a challenge before the Supreme Court, the Women’s Alliance of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas encouraged the young lead lawyer Sarah Weddington and filed an amicus brief.

I. F. Stone wrote, “The only kinds of fights worth fighting are those you are going to lose, because somebody has to fight them and lose and lose and lose until someday, somebody who believes as you do wins. In order for somebody to win an important, major fight 100 years hence, a lot of other people have got to be willing - for the sheer

fun and joy of it - to go right ahead and fight, knowing you're going to lose. You mustn't feel like a martyr. You've got to enjoy it."

Unitarians and Universalists have been fighting those fights for hundreds of years—battles over faith and belief, battles over justice, and battles where the line between the two is blurred. Our martyrs and our heretics and our rebels don't make us unique among the various religions and traditions of the world and of the ages. They and their beliefs and their actions have, however, defined us and continue to do so today. Writer Graham Greene said, "Heresy is another word for freedom of thought." The burning desire for freedom of religious thought put our theological forbears at the edges of society. The continuing desire for freedom of thought, and of determination and action, in all arenas of human endeavor has brought Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists again and again to the edges of acceptable society—and pushed those edges out. Heresy, martyrdom, rebellion—these are the way the human world changes.

"You can die for it—an idea…". Or you can live for it. Sometimes you have to do both. I give thanks every day that my religious community, my faith tradition, is filled with shining examples of men and women who have and continue to change the world with their ideas, and their deaths, and their lives. May I take my place among them. And so may we all. Amen.