

**A WATERY ONE:**  
**RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRACTICE**

**A sermon given for Ingathering Sunday  
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at  
UU Wellesley Hills on September 9th, 2018**

Summer seemed to slip away pretty quickly this year, and then suddenly September slid onto our calendars, and here we are, sitting in this Sanctuary, holding our liquid souvenirs of the season that just was. We have arrived for our Ingathering Celebration, where we usher in a new program year and return more fully to our usual routines. This Sunday, you all are gathering me in, as your newly settled minister, and I am just getting situated in this pulpit I have not preached from since last spring, when you called me to UU Wellesley by congregational vote. We are gathered in a familiar place, but in a way we never have before.

As the Greek philosophers Heraclitus noted, we can never step into the same river twice, because waterways are constantly changing and our own lives are continuously evolving. So the Water Ceremony we have planned for today could not be any more timely. This year, I remembered to bring my own vial! I even brought it over the Atlantic and across state lines. No doubt, its water was destined for this place.

Before I said my final farewell to New York City and moved up here Metro Boston, my husband Ben and I were able to travel for a couple of weeks. So we took a trip to Transylvania as part of a pilgrimage arranged through the UU Partner Church Council. This was timed so that the start of it would coincide with

grand opening of the House of Religious Freedom in the city of Kolosvar. From there, we would go to Torocko, the picturesque mountain village where UU Wellesley has its partner church (some of you here know it quite well), then deeper into the Transylvanian countryside, then onto the city of Deva, where a makeshift memorial to the Unitarian hero Francis David sits atop the citadel mount where he died in prison. Ours was a circuitous route, but we covered necessary ground.

Along the way, I remembered to pour some water in a small bottle. By the end, though, that felt a bit redundant. Everywhere we went, being foreigners, we pilgrims were served bottled water. We were extended that extravagant brand of hospitality reserved for tourists, in a region that only very recently become developed enough attract tourists. We were celebrating religious freedom in a country that had, in living memory, been subject to a brutal totalitarian regime. The history there is complicated, as history is almost everywhere.

But I felt its complications most powerfully in Deva, where we all stayed in a modern hotel overlooking the citadel. In the evening, music from the town square floated in through our windows, and we could watch a light show from our balcony. In the morning, we would ride — not walk, ride — a shiny funicular to the top of the citadel and visit the David memorial. It was rather comfortable, commemorating religious freedom in this style, and I could see how readily it could become the stuff of satire.

“In the past,” that satiric voice-over said, “people died for the cause of free religion, so that you might live according to the dictates of your conscience and not be threatened with death for holding your own beliefs, but please — by all means — enjoy this nighttime view and your sparkling mineral water!”

Too often, we are tempted to treat the struggle for religious freedom as a historic relic, but that that would be a grave error, I think. Standing inside the prison cell where David was thought to have died — key details get lost when a history is especially shameful — I thought how convenient it would have been for him to recant his beliefs and how heroic it was of him to refuse. It mattered little that David effectively authored the declaration of religious toleration that was for a few golden years constitutes the law of the land in Transylvania. Even his high standing as bishop did not prevent the Unitarian church there from disavowing him when they feared his views were becoming too radical. His imprisonment represented such a stark betrayal of one of the founders of the faith.

It seems fair to say that his death as a religious dissident still haunts the Unitarian churches there. Today, anyone who wishes to be included in congregational membership must sign a declaration that they are joining free the church free from any coercion. Centuries of religious persecution have made the people in Transylvania wary. For them, martyrdom was a dreaded reality and a distinct possibility. It's hard for most of us in this Sanctuary today to absorb the emotional import of that - and also important that we try.

In the ten points he outlines in response to the perennial question, “What Do Unitarian Universalists Believe?”, American minister David O. Rankin first states: “We believe in the freedom of religious expression.” He considers chief among “Our Beliefs” this notion that “[a]ll individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theologies, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.” The freedom that Rankin describes is non-negotiable as the foundation of liberal faith.

Rankin's journey to Unitarian Universalism began with his departure from the Methodism of his upbringing. Like the vast majority of American UUs, Rankin

came into this religious tradition from another. He rejected creedal Christianity, but I find it telling that one of the prime ambitions of his ministry was articulating these ten core beliefs. Over the course of the coming program year at UU Wellesley, we will consider each of his ten points, one by one, month after month, in the sermon series we've just this morning begun together, titled "What We Believe." So this is your first installment.

Surprise! It feels a bit slippery, honestly, to do this at the outset of our time together, but I am also convinced that it is imperative to the future of this faith community. Because what I have found in my various ministries, honestly, is that as much as we UUs value freedom of religion as an abstract ideal, we are quickly confounded by it in its human particularities.

Notice the order of the challenge Rankin issues us by insisting that we find our own authentic "religious expression" by developing our "own personal theologies" and by openly presenting our religious views "without fear". I sometimes question how fearless people can be in openly presenting their religious perspectives in our UU congregations - not their political views, mind you, or social ideals, but their religious beliefs.

In the same passage of the UUA bylaws that outline the seven UU principles and six sources of our UU faith, there's lovely language that proclaims: "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision." To my mind, we don't put those lines on nearly enough of our pamphlets and bookmarks. Because in our UU congregations, we are asked to embrace our religious pluralism, not merely tolerate it.

To be clear: there are very few places around the globe where this is customary. There are relatively few places in America where it is. When I think of what our UU congregations are attempting, I am awed and humbled by the project. We are creating a religious counterculture that considers pluralism “enriching” and “ennobling” instead of threatening or destabilizing. We look to encounter one another at profound levels, surrendering our preconceptions and prejudices, expanding our ideas of what lies in bounds or out of bounds of this religious movement. How better to pursue our shared spiritual growth?

According to Rankin, religion that is truly relevant teaches us to respond to the challenges in our lives and “is connected... to actual experience.” As UUs, we have a religious outlook that looks to support our integrating our individual experiences into a coherent whole. The Quakers have an old adage: “Let your life speak.” As probably our closest cousins in the Radical Reformation, Quakers have a great deal to teach us. Let your life speak — and then listen closely to what it has to tell you. Because our life experiences are revelations in their own right. We UUs can share them with one another as freely as we would dare. So dare. Please, dare!

We cannot lose our sense of religious daring; we need it rather desperately these days. As a particularly small religious minority, we UUs are asked to live their faith boldly. Many of you found your way to these pews by striking out in spiritual exploration of uncharted waters. Others of you may have come, originally, for a spouse or for your children or your parents or possibly for a friend. Maybe you stayed and they went. Maybe you are now wondering whether you, too, should go. Maybe you grew in the church and would never dream of going anywhere else, because what other option would possibly rival it? One of the primer books on Unitarian Universalism is titled A Chosen Faith, which seems as pithy a

description as any. It requires our continually choosing, though, and that makes some folks understandably nervous.

When he was religiously unaffiliated, Rankin writes, he believed he was faced with “a clear choice to be bound or to be free.” In our UU congregations, paradoxically, we are bound to be free. Rankin calls us “to build a new and positive commitment to religion” even as we find “peaceful closure with what has been”. Today, I can have a healthy appreciation for elements of my religious upbringing, and coming into spiritual maturity means that I no longer speak disparagingly of it or its present adherents.

A while ago, I made a promise to myself to not denigrate anyone's religion, and to name religious prejudice whenever it arose, which I noticed it did, with alarming frequency, in our UU circles. If our first principle is “freedom of religious expression”, as Rankin maintains, that we hold that freedom sacrosanct - for the people in our pews and the people not in our ranks. “There is a particular genius to the eclecticism or the UU faith,” Rankin writes, “which lies... in its recognition that religion is not an isolated incident or event, but the expression of... spirit's relationship to the world in the search for meaning and the joy of discovery”.

Standing with my fellow pilgrims at the David's memorial high up on the citadel mount that DeWa, I felt the impenetrable strength of his spirit. We remember him as a great Unitarian, but he came to that theology later in life. Before he became the preacher who converted the only Unitarian sovereign in history, David was a Calvinist bishop. Before that, he had been a Lutheran priest. And before that, he was a Catholic priest. Certainly, the days of the Protestant Reformation were heady times, when so much was in flux. But clearly, David was a seeker. He was not only a seeker, but also a finder. He would rather forfeit his life than surrender his long-sought truth.

“It is commonly charged that the Unitarian Universalist churches have become a haven for people who cannot quite make up their minds,” Rankin wrote in his piece on our beliefs. “One wit has written that a Unitarian Universalist is a person who walks the thin line between confusion and indecision.” As UU jokes go, that’s not bad. It at least hints at how difficult it is to keep an open mind, especially in a world that wants matters decided, already.

The rising tides of authoritarian movements are troubling, globally. During my weeks abroad, I was every bit as disturbed by what I saw and heard of it in Eastern Europe as I am by what I see and heard of it lately in the U.S. Their brands nationalism and xenophobia are antithetical to our religious values of freedom and toleration. They tighten borders and constrict imaginations. Sadly, they revile pluralistic practices.

Historic Unitarianism could take root in Transylvania because it was a region full of religious intersections, a place where European Jews settled alongside Muslims at the edge of the Ottoman Empire, where Protestants could straddle the border between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Here, the dynamics of faith were for fluid for a little while fluid. People intermarried; they exchanged sacred scripture; they risked getting better acquainted; they wondered whether they weren’t actually all children of the same God, reading different books. As we were reminded at opening of the House of Religious Freedom in Kolosvar, the 1568 Edict of Torda proclaimed that “none should be reviled” on account of their faith.

The Hungarian Unitarian Catechism still used in Transylvanian churches today declares: *Egy az Ishten*, which translates as ‘God is One.’ That was the prayer I offered up at the David memorial when asked to do, not just because it was the

only Transylvanian prayer I knew by heart, but because deep in my soul, I believe it to be true. You may believe differently, and that is fine. Although the God of my understanding is One, we are many, and here, we all belong. We are as motley a crew as we need to be; I hold that as an article of faith. Every one of you is a blessing and I am grateful to whatever currents carried you our way.

Each year, our Ingathering Celebration gives us to step in Heraclitus' never-the-same-river-twice and wade out a bit further together, taking one courageous step after another. We arrive hoping to see faces that are familiar and also those that are not. If that makes us wishy-washy, so be it. Those who would call ours a watered-down religion probably do not appreciate water the way we do. They may not see its force and potential in the same light. Here we come to pour ourselves out to another. We acknowledge our hopes and doubts and fears and plans. Here we risk naming our authentic and evolving personal beliefs. This is very own our House of Religious Freedom and and we are determined to make it a home for all that is holy to us.