

September 18th, 2016, Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda
“UU Bedrock: A Sermon for Church Shoppers

If you were a hawk on a hillside, hovering high, gazing down over town after town, over cities and cross roads, you would see people walking through doors into churches and temples, synagogues and mosques, and perhaps you might wonder, hovering high, you might wonder at why *that* person went in through *that* door.

Here we are gathered, in memory and hope, to celebrate, to mourn, to make meaning. I wonder what brought you through *these* doors *this* morning, and what you brought with you, and what you will carry away, when our time is complete, this day.

Long ago and far away, 'neath the tall timbers of Vancouver Island, my family lived in a small house my parents built with their own hands. For the building of this home and the moving of much rock and gravel my father made a sledge—a stone boat we called it. I was much taken by that sledge. In later years I heard of other stone boats: a ship of stone in a lake at the old imperial palace in Beijing; a Hellenistic trireme carved into a cliff face at Lindos on the island of Rhodes; the stone boat in which, according to legend, the body of Saint James was borne across the waters to the pilgrim city of Santiago de Compostella in northern Spain.

As a onetime professional seafarer I can assure you that a stone vessel is theoretically possible; the vessel will float if the weight of the vessel is equal to or less than the weight of the water displaced by that vessel. If you were to take a piece of stone and hollow it out very very thin, making it very very light, and broad, then it might float, upon still waters. As long as the vessel kept her balance, as long as the winds stayed calm and the waves did not overwhelm, as long as the crew of tiny mice kept up their bailing and did not all run to the same side at the same time, as long as those mice steered clear of the rocks, it would float.

I am intrigued that our planet will celebrated equinox this coming week round about the third anniversary of the return to upright balance of the cruise ship Costa Concordia, wrecked off Italy in January of 2012 with the loss of many lives, and parbuckled back into a vertical equanimity on September seventeenth, 2013. Costa Concordia needed a lot of love to get her back upright, and floated off to the shipyards.

I like this image of autumn equanimity—equal day and equal night, equal rights, equal access to the law, equal opportunity. Equinox. Equanimity. Balance. And love, to make it so.

The imagery of stone boats intrigues me: the stability of stone, the variability of wind, wave and weather. I see here an image of the Unitarian and Universalist tradition: some elements of stone that abide—bedrock one might say—and some elements that change over time.

The galvanizing issue of one generation might become the new normal for the next.

First, let us consider the ancient world. Like archaeologists, we could scrape back the layers of human habitation, looking for ourselves. Consider the paintings deep in the caves of Cro-Magnon era. I believe that the religious impulse is inborn in our human nature—the drive to make meaning in our world, to express gratitude, share sorrow, endure loss, shape purpose and hope. This innate religious impulse, I believe, is bedrock.

Consider a cave painting made by laying one's hand against the stone, then sending forth a fine spray of pigment across the area, so that when we withdraw our hand the outline remains, and the shape of our hand abides on the wall millennia after the shaper is dust. Is there a question, or a statement—who am I?—within this action? Is this the same question to be found in our new teal hymnal supplement at #1003, the question of the painter Paul Gauguin—Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Gauguin was going to Tahiti, and he got there. Who are we? Where are we going?

Moving into historic time, two and a half thousand years ago, we can call up from the ancient world the very words of pre-Socratic natural philosophers. Consider #655 in our grey hymnals, by Heraklitos of Ephesos: “Change Alone is Unchanging.... Whosoever wishes to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details.... In searching for the truth be ready for the unexpected.... the beginning of a circle is also its end.... [and] all is one.... and yet everything comes in season.”

All is one.

I read that as one of the rocks foundational to our UU tradition. All is one. Whatever the holy is, the holy is vast enough to hold us all. All is one, and everything is connected. The Spanish physician Michael Servetus took that as his rock also. All is one. The holy is one.

We're moving ahead a tad here, into the Sixteenth Century and the Protestant Reformation.

So the story goes like this: in fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue, because Queen Isabella of Castile and Leon, co-ruler with her husband King Ferdinand of Aragon, had finally driven the Moors out of Spain. And any Moors or Jews who stayed in Spain had better become Christian fast: flee, convert, or die. This quickly became embarrassing; sincerity of religious feeling might not go too deep when the alternative to faith is death.

Exciting times. Many Jewish refugees emigrated to Constantinople. The Ottoman emperor is reported to have observed that his enemies had sent him these talented, capable, hardworking people—would that his friends would do as much!

In comes Michael Servetus, also from Aragon, born just over five hundred years ago. I have visited his hometown there. Think Calgary: high, dry, and wild. With more Spanish. Snuggled up against the Pyrennees.

Servetus was a scholar and a doctor, with a talent for languages and a fatal enthusiasm for theology. He thought that if we all read our Bible carefully, and read it his way, we could all be happy together. They burned him at the stake. Over a slow fire.

It happened like this. Well, it really starts when the Ottoman Turks take Constantinople in 1453. Greek speakers flee to Venice, bringing with them Greek Bibles. Western scholars can now compare their Latin bibles to older Greek versions. The Dutch scholar Erasmus gets busy, brings out a corrected edition, and as soon as possible retires into private life, riding out the storm he has raised.

Erasmus' corrections from the Greek reveal that the so-called Johannine comma—The first letter of John, Chapter five: verses seven and eight, is a late addition, no earlier than Fourth Century. Which means that the only Biblical witness for the Trinity is a late intrusion. Gutenberg's new printing press helps spread the word. Servetus writes a book, *De Erroribus Trinitatis*, *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity*.

To his amazement, people did not like it that he had written this heresy. Young Michael left town abruptly, for the sake of his health, changed his name, and kept busy in Paris at the Université de Sorbonne. Twenty years flew by. Servetus could work in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, and French. Perhaps he had been able to read some Arabic medical books in Spain. Eventually, he wrote a paper describing the pulmonary circulation of the blood decades before William Harvey.

Old habits die hard; the challenge of any witness protection programme is that the witnesses keep going back their old hobbies. Michael Servetus just couldn't keep away from theology. John Calvin wrote a book called *The Christian Institutes—Institutio Christianae Religionis*; Servetus thought he'd be helpful and point out how wrong Calvin was about the predestination thing. Servetus wrote his own book, *Christianismi Restitutio—the Restoration of Christianity*. Calvin did not take it well. Servetus now had both the Catholic and Protestant authorities determined to burn him as a heretic. Heresy—from the Latin, one who chooses.

This is a piece from the *Restitutio*, where Servetus folded anatomy into theology.

“Such is the entire nature of the soul, and the reason why the soul of all the flesh is in the blood, and why the soul itself is the blood, as God says. For by God's breath the gust of the heavenly spirit or the ideal spark has been infused through the mouth and nostrils into the heart and brain

of Adam himself and into that of his children, and it has been joined in essence to that spiritual, bloody material within; it has been made soul within his innards.”
(pp. 255-256) [*C. Restitutio*. Hoffman/Hiller translation 2007]

So here we have Servetus the scientist fused with Servetus the theologian, drawing on both scripture and observation as well as perhaps Arabic or Jewish medical texts, to describe the circulation of the blood from heart through lungs and back to heart, and that the holy spirit and the soul are like this brightening of the blood through breath.

Servetus made the mistake of wandering into Geneva on a Sunday. It cost him his life.

Then, after his death, something wonderful happened. For the first time in western Christendom, execution for heresy was publicly condemned and religious freedom lifted up. A scholar hiding behind the name of Sebastian Castellio wrote a pamphlet condemning the persecution of Servetus, and advocating toleration. It was a new idea in the west, though customary in areas of Europe controlled by Islamic rulers. Castellio included in his arguments for toleration the words of two Protestant theologians, written in their younger years, Luther and Calvin.

And we are children of Calvin; his gift to us was his sense of the right to private judgement. This too is a rock. Sadly, Calvin felt a need to insist that everyone else's private judgement should agree with his. I grieve for Calvin; in old age he had become the oppressive force his younger self had resisted.

If I am to have my right to private judgement, then I must respect your right to private judgement. Bedrock.

So Servetus died, condemned for unitarianism, for denying the Trinity. With his dying breath he called on Jesus the Son of God, as we all are children of the holy, not Jesus as God the Son.

Servetus was also condemned for anabaptism, this is for insisting that a person younger than twenty-one could not sin, being not yet of adult mind, for insisting that a person younger than twenty-one could not be meaningfully baptized. Anabaptists preferred to wait on an adult conversion experience.

Furthermore, Servetus had refuted the notion of predestination. Servetus could not believe that his God would judge arbitrarily, whimsically. Servetus believed that the holy would hold us accountably for our deeds, not our beliefs, that we would be saved by good works, gathered back to God's Self in the fullness of time, by how we walked with our neighbours, by how we lived our faith. Our choices do matter. As Dumbledore said to Harry Potter, it is our choices that make us who we are.

There is a risk here; some of us make really poor choices. And some of us are born into a holy simplicity, yet still we are loved, even though we will never read theology. It is enough that we live; it is enough that we love.

This is the gift of Universalism. (Unitarians and Universalists merged their denominations in 1961, after almost a century of discussion.) According to Universalism, all persons have worth and dignity. In traditional language, all shall be saved. That's a rock.

(Universalists begin from the position that all shall be saved, therefore the holy has arms big enough to hold us all, so the holy is one immense providence; Unitarians begin from the position that the holy is one, so God, or whatever name we use to imagine whatever holds the universe together, is one, so such immensity has room for all of us. The differences between the two denominations were essentially social and cultural; Universalists tend to be rural and self-educated, while Unitarians tended to be more urban and more formally educated. By the mid-Twentieth Century the differences were no longer so significant.)

Back to Sixteenth Century Central Europe and the Reformation: Servetus wrote in Latin, so theologians all across Europe could understand him. The preacher David Ferencz—Francis David—read Servetus and preached his ideas in Transylvania, now Hungary and Romania. It was there the first congregations took the name of Unitarian. The Socinians and others spread those ideas to Poland, then to the west, to Britain, and eventually to the new world.

William Ellery Channing and others in the New England states built on these ideas in the Enlightenment. The wind that filled their sails was sometimes miracles—how are we to understand miracles? How are we to understand scripture? The transcendentalists pushed the parameters to include how we would understand emotion and personality. Darwin pushed us to understand ourselves as creatures within the animal kingdom, evolved beings, rather than the crown of creation. Humanists pushed us to understand our place in the world as if we lived for ourselves, as if to be human was enough.

Time passed, issues changed focus. What does it mean to be a faithful person in the face of slavery? What does it mean to be faithful in the face of legal personhood for women? What does it mean to be faithful for Civil Rights, for Peace, for Environmental integrity? What does it mean to hunger for connection and community in a world of overwhelming complexity and violence?

Who are we? How shall we be whole? Where is our purpose, our meaning and hope?

There is a pair of islands off Sydney, British Columbia, called Dock Islands. In the days of the fur trade Hudsons Bay Company vessels would enter between these rocky islands at high tide, and carefully prop their vessels upright as the waters receded. They'd scrub down the hulls and

scrape the keels at low tide, then float the vessel free when the next flood tide lifted her clear of the sea bed.

What is your rock, where you rest and renew? What are the winds that fill your sails?

May this community be a safe place where you might discern your path in equanimity.

May it be so.

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