

A Reading from the Minutes

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Every once in a while, a *friendly* rivalry makes the rounds between the Unitarian Church of Montreal and the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax, particularly around the times of their respective anniversaries, with each of them staking a claim for the oldest Canadian congregation in our denomination.

The Unitarian Church of Montreal celebrates its anniversary in June, and that is when it sometimes makes its claim of maximal longevity, as it was founded in 1842.

Not so fast – says the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax – yes, Montreal may be the oldest *Unitarian* congregation in Canada, but the Halifax church was founded as a *Universalist* congregation in 1837 – this is a heritage that is still reflected in its name, as it places the Universalist “u” before the other one.

It is usually at this point when I point out that Olinda claims the oldest *building* in continuous use by *either* a Universalist, a Unitarian, or a Unitarian Universalist church (in Canada) – and we have the historical plaque to prove it.

But technical quibbles aside, there is one aspect in these founding stories that reminds me that the churches in these two traditions have quite a bit in common... aside from the fact that they’re now part of the same amalgamated tradition.

When the Church of Montreal was founded in late June of 1842, the assembly drafting its emerging constitution debated something that would have been considered a thorny issue (at the time) – whether they would allow membership for folks who accepted the doctrine of the Trinity.

This specific theological point might not seem particularly troubling to current UUs these days, but the emerging Unitarians in 19th-century Montreal had endured sidelining by the mainline trinitarian churches, and there was a question around how graceful they were prepared to be in their membership requirements around questions of religious doctrine.

This debate was documented in the minutes of the constitutional drafting meeting. And when the Montreal church celebrated its 170th anniversary ten years ago in 2012, it actually did a ritual reading of these minutes as one of the morning readings.

I won't go into the line-by-line reading of those minutes here, but I can offer a bit of a play-by-play, to give you an idea of how this shaped up. Essentially, in that 1842 meeting, a motion was made to forbid membership to anyone who did not formally denounce the doctrine of the Trinity. If adopted, the Montreal church would be – from then on – intentionally excluding individuals based on a matter of faith...

The resounding majority response was that a test of faith would be antithetical to the founding character of the Unitarian church, which had been forged by a tradition of espousing freedom of religious thought.

The motion was defeated.

A test of faith would *not* be implemented at the new Unitarian Church of Montreal – perhaps this Unitarian church was more Universalist than it might have given itself credit for, having taken such a step toward radical inclusion.

That doesn't mean that, in our shared histories, we don't continue to seek a balance between promoting freedom of thought, while also establishing norms of respectful behaviour toward each other, but personal religious and spiritual beliefs are not in themselves a barrier to membership and participation in our congregations.

It was this very mindset that inspired the origin of one of our tradition's homegrown holidays – the Flower Celebration – created by Norbert Čapek at the Liberal Religious Fellowship, a Unitarian congregation in Prague, in what was then Czechoslovakia.

Čapek created this Flower Celebration quite intentionally to ensure that everyone could take part in it, including anyone who had been, or felt, excluded by some other churches from their bread and wine communions. This was another Unitarian creation that gave witness to a Universalist approach for radical inclusion.

If you've heard this story before – and we like to reprise it from time to time – you might remember that Čapek's life ended tragically during World War II in the Dachau concentration camp. The official crime that he was charged with was listening to foreign broadcasts – a capital offence. He is on record as having died for the sake of listening to the voices against tyranny.

Today, we remember his commitment to a broadminded approach toward inclusivity. And we have honoured his legacy by re-enacting the ritual he created as a practice of inclusion. Not only is everyone invited to participate, but everyone is invited to partake in the enjoyment of the flower gifts offered by others, whether or not you were able to make an offering today. In fact, over the past two years, we have expanded this option to participate, whether or not you were able to be here in person.

And in the same way, my friends, we honour the minutes of a founding meeting of the Unitarian Church of Montreal, in which a practice of radical inclusion – a universalism of sorts – was enacted.

Because, my friends, even when it doesn't use that label, the *Universalist* spirit is alive in our tradition. The spirit of intentional inclusion, the spirit of active inclusion, the spirit of radical inclusion, is alive in our tradition.

My friends, may we continue the Universalist imperative.

So may it be,
In the spirit of inclusion,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #65 The Sweet June Days

~)| Words: Samuel Longfellow, 1819-1892

Music: English melody, arr. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958,
used by perm. of Oxford University Press

FOREST GREEN C.M.D.

Hymn #78 Color and Fragrance

~)| Words: Norbert F. Čapek, 1870-1942

~)| trans. by Paul and Anita Munk, © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

~)| English version by Grace Ulp, 1926-

~)| Music: Norbert F. Čapek, 1870-1942

O BARVY VUNE 5.5.5.5.11.11.

Closing Hymn #66 When the Summer Sun Is Shining

~)| Words: Sydney Henry Knight, 1923-

Music: From *The Southern Harmony*, 1855, arr. by Margaret W. Mealy, b. 1922, © 1984 Margaret W. Mealy

HOLY MANNA 8.7.8.7.D