

A Triumph

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

9 October, 2022



Blue Flame © Rod E.S.Q.

In our tradition, we don't talk much about martyrs, we might rarely know their names, and we don't really have an established practice of venerating them – no stained-glass windows featuring church ancestors in the midst of execution, or feast days in their names.

And yet, our historians have compiled lists of people who we have come to consider martyrs in our tradition.

Put very simply a martyr might be someone who is put to death as a result of practicing their religion... there are more precise and sophisticated definitions, but this gives you a general sense of who we're talking about. This death is often the result of a martyr taking action against injustice to others, as established by the ethical guidance of one's faith.

So, who are these people?

And what are we to make of their lives and what it means to us as their faith descendants?

The list is long enough that I won't go through them all today – each of them could be a sermon in their own right – but I'll go over some of the ones that are most often mentioned when we talk about martyrs in our tradition.

Last week, our guest speaker, Liz James mentioned her evolving engagement with the story of Unitarian martyr Michael Servetus, who

in the 16th century, was very vocal in criticizing Trinitarian doctrines – hence Unitarian. Although that specific distinction of doctrines may not sound particularly essential to how we currently practice our tradition today, it was a pretty big deal around the times of the Reformation in 16th century Europe.

Of course, there are nuances in the telling of his story. We often speak of Servetus as the Unitarian who was burnt at the stake by Calvin. There is truth to this, in that this is how Servetus was executed, though Calvin's involvement is more nuanced than that. And last week, Liz highlighted the notion that Michael Servetus put himself in harm's way more often than we usually let on, when UUs tell his story. Nonetheless, Servetus *was* killed as a result of his beliefs, including a zeal for questioning established doctrine, which was instrumental in establishing our current tradition.

A contemporary of Servetus was Francis David, another founding member of what became the Unitarian side of our tradition. Francis David promoted a practice of religious tolerance in 16th century Transylvania, during the reign of King John Sigismund. He did this under the auspices of a Unitarian theology, and this approach to religious coexistence has also become a hallmark of our tradition. However, when King Sigismund died, the support for Francis David's approach dwindled, and he died in prison, which establishes him as a martyr.

A newer name, which you might be more familiar with, is Norbert Čapek. We usually remember him and his wife as the creators of the Flower Ceremony that we celebrate in June. He founded the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia and aided in raising funds for relief work during World War II. He was imprisoned by the Gestapo and died in the Dachau concentration camp.

More recently, we might remember Rev. James Reeb, an American Unitarian minister who actively supported the Selma to Montgomery Marches led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. After eating dinner with

colleagues at an integrated restaurant, following a protest, Rev. Reeb was beaten with clubs by White men, in retaliation for his support of equal rights for Black people. He died in hospital.

A name that is not spoken as often but has a related story is that of Viola Liuzzo, a member of the First UU Church of Detroit, who also joined the civil rights movement in Selma, helping with, among other things, transportation and logistics. She was murdered by Klansmen as she was transporting a Black activist (who thankfully survived).

I've been mentioning a lot of *Unitarian* martyrs, but there is also Toribio Quimada, a Unitarian Universalist, who founded the UU Church of the Philippines, holding what is more appropriately labeled a Universalist theology. It is believed he was murdered as a result of his social justice activism through the church.

There are also Unitarian Universalist martyrs in this century. In 2008 Greg McKendry and Linda Kreager, were members of the UU Church of Knoxville, who were killed by a shooter who resented the church's support for social justice, including 2SLGBTQ+ rights. McKendry is reported to have deliberately stood in front of the shooter to protect others, while Kreager died for simply being in her spiritual home.

Something to note here, there are other names recognized with heroism that day. These include church members: John Bohstedt, Robert Birdwell, Arthur Bolds, and Terry Uselton. There was also a visitor called Jamie Parkey. All of these people were instrumental in stopping the shooting and preventing further tragedy – and they survived. The shooter's plan had been to shoot until the police came to kill him. Because of the bravery the martyrs *and* of survivors, his plan did not go further, and the shooter is now serving time in prison.

This brings up questions of how we recognize those before us, who have done important and notable deeds, as part of their participation in

our faith. All of them were prepared to take a risk, even when it might have ended in death, but death does not always have to be the outcome.

I have already noted that, in Unitarian Universalism, we don't have a regular practice of... fetishizing martyrdom. We have recognized it at times, but we don't typically celebrate the act of death in the name of faith as a primary goal – rather, we might recognize that, sometimes, we may need to accept the possibility of making some sacrifice as a result of our faith's guidance.

When death is the outcome, we recognize the tragedy *alongside* the contribution, and we may be grateful to the people who were willing to take that risk, despite ultimately sacrificing their lives. We also don't forget that others have taken a risk, and gratefully survived. My friends, for all of them we are thankful.

My friends, this congregation is no stranger to taking principled stands based on our faith's guiding principles, which has included taking some risks, alongside an experience of sacrifice. For instance, there are those among you, who still remember our church's struggle to stop mandatory prayer in public schools – not as a stance against prayer itself, but rather as a stand against the imposition of one religious approach in a space that purports to welcome a diverse community.

That particular quest was successful... and it came at a cost for our community, with a sense that it created distance with our neighbouring faith communities. Our relationships with other faith communities are closer these days, but that sad memory lingers. My friends, it was a costly triumph, but not in vain. And for that bold action, and the people who took part in it, we are thankful.

My friends, not all of us are called to put our lives on the line for just causes – that is OK. All contributions in the name of justice offer their own triumph, sometimes only in the long term. And for these we are also grateful.

So may it be,
In gratitude,
Amen

Copyright © 2022 Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

Suggested Hymns

Opening Hymn #67 We Sing Now Together

~)-| Words: Edwin T. Buchrer, 1894-1969, alt © UUA

Music: Adrian Valerius's *Netherlandtsch Gedenckclanck*, 1626,
arr. by Edward Kremser, 1838-1914

KREMSER

Hymn #300 With Heart and Mind

~)-| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1990 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Johann Hermann Schein, 1586-1630, harmony by J. S. Bach, 1685-1750

MACH'S MIT MIR, GOTT

Closing Hymn #187 It Sounds Along the Ages

~)-| Words: William Channing Gannett, 1840-1923

Music: Melody of the Bohemian Brethren, *Hemlandssånger*, Rock Island, Illinois, 1892, arr.

FAR OFF LANDS