

Friendship Saves

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Friendship, often the topic of story, song and verse, comes in many forms. There are the friends we meet through common endeavors -- we are all gardeners or readers or sports fans -- and this shared interest is where the friendship begins and ends; other friends are found through shared experiences -- I have school friends (nurse's training in my day was a bonding experience), work friends, and neighborhood friends (long lasting bonds with those neighbors who were also mothers of toddlers nearly 40 years ago); still others are circumstantial friendships, those times when a chance meeting results in the sense that this connection holds promise and is worth pursuing. I call these kindred spirit experiences (a la Anne of Green Gables). We all need friends, all the friends we can gather around us. We want to increase the volume of friendship in our lives. When friendships become deep and profound relationships they have the power to keep us spiritually healthy. Carefully nurtured they grow, putting us on a path of mutual affection, respect, and trust. The friendships that surround us will often rescue us from ourselves. We are "saved."

Friendship we're lifting up this morning is your relationship with your partner church. Nearly ten years old, it qualifies as a long term relationship. Some of you have visited there; your partner church minister, Maria Pap, has visited you more than once. You've already heard from her and have a better idea of what this friendship means there, as well as from Mark and Nancy, so you know a depth of feeling flows in both directions. Stronger connections with this smaller, urban, and more Christian congregation could create a saving friendship for this congregation, but this won't just happen. Cultivating friendship requires effort. You are a congregation in transition. Your plate feels quite full so you may be thinking, "*interesting, Fran, but, why should I care?*" Reasonable question. Let me first tell you how I came to care.

My home congregation is one whose history began during the Cold War, so my first chance to learn this part of our Unitarian story came after the Iron Curtain rusted and the Unitarian Church of Transylvania was again accessible to the west. My introduction to this part of Unitarian history came in story form, a moving story told by Rev. Peter Raible, then serving University Unitarian Church in Seattle. (Thrill of walking in historic places, humbling realization of all present day Unitarians there had endured to keep the church alive through decades of communist oppression, sobering knowledge that we have so much religious freedom and fail to appreciate it.)

I'd known Peter for over 25 years, knew him as a strong preacher and dedicated churchman, but never before as a tearful story teller. My need to be connected to this distant past began with his story. It took hearing stories from travelers to partner churches and seminary studies to help me travel further back in time and learn how Unitarian thought in an out of the way corner of eastern

Europe had influenced religious thinking over 400 years ago, leading to the very development of the concepts of freedom of conscience and religious tolerance which we value so highly. Our Transylvanian Unitarian cousins' theology captures both sides of our present movement: God as indivisible spirit who is almighty, wise, good and just, and the love of God reaching every human being. Belief in humanity is a foundational thesis. Francis David, the founding father, felt that what God requires from us is that humanness and that love must be visible in all our actions. Visible love is a radical concept now, but think how amazing it must have been in the 1560's, a period of coercion and brutal force against those who publicly held differing religious views. God, in Francis David's view, wants us to be tolerant and thus toleration comes from a place of strength. He did not see it as indifference, weakness, or uncertainty. He found toleration to be an expression of his religious principles, a way of life, and an attitude which excluded fear, force, oppression, or fanaticism, and assured the free exchange of ideas, experiences. [God] valued the approaches of different religious views to help people respect each other and live in peace.

For Francis David, love of human beings was made manifest in freedom. He preached that in matters of faith, violence must be excluded. For him even moral sense argued for toleration: "*Society tolerates bad behavior, stinginess, envy, sloth among us; how much more we should allow life and thinking to those who have other ideas about Jesus.*" David held that only toleration can liberate Christians from impatience and its consequences! When John Sigismund, the only Unitarian king in history, died, his successor converted to Catholicism and David was prosecuted for "innovations in doctrine." He was urged by many to recant, but would not and, rather than deny his truth, went to prison. He died there in 1579. He died for the idea of freedom of conscience.

David felt that faith, the most important personal human cause, liberates us from fear and loneliness. And that faith and action are inseparable. As a contemporary District minister, Lasso Nagy wrote in his sermon "*Service is the Task of a Human Being,*" "*Each human starts like a young Jeremiah, tortured by questions and doubts, do I have power, faith, trust, will and perseverance enough to support my calling?*" He goes on to quote William Ellery Channing (our 19th century organizing father) that "*people's function is to be a member of society...that we need not move early and sky, only fulfill with honesty our place.*" Rev. Dennis Hamilton says that we Unitarian Universalists busy ourselves trying to create a world beautiful to love rather than loving the broken world we live in. There is a lot we could learn from our Transylvanian cousins about working and living in a broken world, keeping the faith and offering hope during difficult times.

The choices we have today were not available to David, a religious leader who saw toleration as a basic human right and spent his life trying to make religious tolerance a reality. What Francis David did and stood for is important to us, here in this place at this time. His life reflected the turmoil of his time. He kept striving and changing until he found a way of being religious that he felt adequately HONORED GOD. A sense of vocation, living one's life in the spirit of a sense

of vocation can be life changing and is what I believe can change the world. We all ask ourselves “*Do I have power, faith, trust, will, and perseverance enough to support my calling?*”

The lesson I have been learning lately is two-fold. First, let us not be blinded by language and ritual – let us see the deeper similarities between our faiths. And secondly, perhaps we UUs can learn from our Transylvanian cousins that as we explore our beliefs, we need not shy away from the words and traditions of Christians any more than we should shy away from those of Buddhists or Hindus or anyone else. Transylvanian Unitarians provide a vibrant example of people very comfortable with the language and ritual of Christianity without having lost their commitment to openness, tolerance, and right of individual conscience.

I need to be reminded about the life and death of Francis David. It helps me remember that being a UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST is about more than my personal religious needs. That we come together on Sundays in the spirit of something older than even the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor. Something larger. We rest on a solid foundation.

Transylvanian Unitarianism can seem quite foreign, or too traditionally religious, from the perspective of many Unitarian Universalist ... and yet, I find that in important, deeper aspects of our respective religions (than discomfort with words and ritual), and in these areas Unitarian Universalism and Transylvanian Unitarianism are in remarkable accord.

I am humbled that 450 years ago ancestors could, in the face of the persecution of the time, make this the law of the land for even a brief period. I am grateful for these roots of freedom and tolerance growing from the radical reformation. I want to stay aware of them. We are living in a time that cries out for love and understanding in the world.

Will we take up the cause? Will we become that religion that, like love, goes everywhere spreading the gospel that we need not think alike to love alike? Whoever forgets the past must repeat it. Those who remember the past can find in it directions for the present and the future and can revive tradition in all its richness.

This congregation signed on to become a partner church in the early days of the program, embracing the enterprise with the enthusiasm of a new friendship. That was nearly 10 years ago. Any long term relationship has peaks and valleys. Your Partnership is in a holding pattern, the next year as you plan to celebrate your tenth anniversary can be a time to not only renew but strengthen this important friendship. Effort is the key; through such effort some of you will discover friendships of shared interests or experiences, perhaps occasionally a kindred spirit. All who participate will be, in some way, “saved” from yourselves. Will more of you decide this is your ministry?

The Partner Church movement is largely about sharing and learning from one another. There is much you can give to them and also much to be learned from them, perhaps the most valuable is a new comfort and connection with your religious heritage.

Trusted, we are confided in. Loved, we offer an open ear. Respected, we advise and counsel. These acts of friendship are more powerful than we sometimes realize.

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