

A Passion for Freedom: The Legacy of Francis David

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In the tradition of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, where during every service we read from the Bible, my theme today is from the New Testament, the letter of James (2, 8):

“What good is it,” queried Jesus, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him: “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

“Deeds, not creeds” is one of the favorite sayings of the American UU and Transylvanian Unitarian people. And indeed, this was a trademark of Unitarianism throughout the centuries – to emphasize the practical side of religion and spirituality, keeping a balance between personal – what we would call private faith and social justice work.

According to the Transylvanian Unitarian tradition, starting from the 16th century, when in the name of God and Jesus thousands and thousands were persecuted and humiliated, the Unitarians were those who emphasized religious tolerance and peace. It was probably the first time in European history, when religious diversity and pluralism was not just accepted but promoted by a regime, and the Edict of Torda in 1568 was and still is the greatest achievement of Unitarians in Transylvania. And for that kind of passion for freedom, tolerance, reason and peace Transylvanian Unitarians paid a heavy price. Refusing to strike against other religions and Christian denominations when Unitarianism was the main religion in Transylvania, and the political and military power was in the hands of Unitarians, was in itself a testimony of the teaching of Jesus, and an act of honoring and accepting different beliefs and religions. This courageous attitude, this peaceful act of tolerance for many years was regarded by other regimes and denominations as a weakness of Unitarians, who were persecuted and forced to be “more Christian,” than they were. But the flames of passion – for the freedom of conscience, for the liberation of the physically or ideologically oppressed – were kept alive. The dream of Francis David was to restore true Christianity – as he would have said – meaning: restoring the teachings of Jesus, living according to the good news that even in an inhuman society, even totally oppressed and humiliated, people still have the ability and the means to live in dignity, as human beings.

I know that the term “Christian” has lots of nuances and tweaks in the ears of many Unitarian Universalists. Still, I will use this term, because, despite the fact that the term has a huge historical baggage, it expresses the commitment to follow Jesus. Francis David’s passion was to revive the teaching of Jesus, without the traditions about Jesus. Isn’t it weird, that the

mainstream Christian creeds tell a lot about a person called Jesus, in the Apostolic creed there they found a place even for poor Pilate, but there is none, not a single word, that this man from Galilee was first and foremost a wisdom teacher and radical social prophet.

I have to confess that I am equally touched by the teaching and way of life of the Buddha, and masters, gurus from other traditions. But it is the teaching of Jesus that makes me passionate about peace, tolerance, justice. And as a Transylvanian Unitarian I feel also responsible for the legacy of Francis David: liberating Jesus from the rigidity, fundamentalism of mainstream Christianity, and liberating people raised in Christian tradition from the shackles of what many still think they were “supposed” to believe about Jesus if they were to remain Christians. My own religious experience and Christianity would certainly put me in a dogmatic church in a box labeled “lost heretic.” I am, and we, Transylvanian Unitarians are used to being called this – and believe me, it is helpful. It is helpful because it always reminds us that the really important question to answer throughout our lives is not who we are, but rather: how we are, not what we think about ourselves, but rather how we relate to others, to life. Deeds tell us who we are, not the creeds.

But still, there are important questions to answer, like: what are we becoming? What do we wish to achieve for ourselves and for those we love? We have to live in the present, to be aware of our sorrow or joy, knowing there is nothing in our lives that we might call “waterproof.” But the longing for pure hearts, the desire for true spirituality, the voice of our calm, silent heart and mind – all these longings are routed in the depths of our souls. We might call this longing and spiritual desire the spirit of adventure: always seeking, searching, and the logo on my favorite T-shirt states, that “Not all who wander are lost...”

I feel that there is a certain kind of tension in our communities in Transylvania, in our lives – and there is a certain kind of tension even here, although it manifests very differently, than in Transylvania, a tension at the social and political level as well. In Transylvania this is probably coming from the fact that we do know the future, which seems very uncertain, when you live in a double minority status: Hungarian in Romania, and Unitarian among the other Hungarian denominations. This uncertainty is a reality now because we always have to defend ourselves. But we have learned: we are those who, even in very difficult times, have to show more compassion, tolerance, kindness and love towards everyone.

In the 16th century Francis David made a daring move and became the first martyr of Unitarianism and religious tolerance – because he listened to his heart and reason, and not to the tradition and dogmas of the mainstream Christians.

For being liberal there will be always a price to pay. And no one could say where the road we started on would lead. It is only natural that the road running in front of us hides the unknown. We might walk in the dark for a while and stumble around obstacles until we find the light that would show us the direction.

Sometimes we human beings are tempted to easily despair and give up our liberal values in a traditional or conservative society, but we have to assume personal responsibility, the challenges of the present, together with the risks that lie in the decisions we take.

There is the feeling that we are interacting units in a vastly mysterious and complex web of being, not separate and isolated, but integral parts of the total whole. In the western tradition the mystics knew that, and in the modern era [*it*] was formulated by C. G. Jung as the collective unconscious. We share the same life, the life that is in you and me is the same life which is in the birds in the sky or the grass below our feet. That is why our true life is love and peace and tenderness: forgiving one another and not laying accusations one against another, but praying one for another and helping one another up with tender hand.

There are considerable differences between American UUs and our Transylvanian Unitarians because we live in different societies and in slightly different kinds of cultures. But we share the common passion for justice, human dignity, true fellowship, real peace and love – and we feel responsible for all those values. We, progressive liberals, know that true unity is in the Spirit, in the inward life, and not in an outward uniformity. The great error and terror of the ages was to set up an outward order and uniformity, and to make the person's consciousness bend, either by arguments of wisdom or by force. But for example, the property of the true church government is to leave the conscience to its full liberty, to seek unity in the Light and in the Spirit. This is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man or woman walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same spirit and life in him or her.

Unitarians in Transylvania always emphasized that, according to the teachings of Jesus too, there is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind and heart, which in different places and Ages have had different names. It is however pure and proceeds from the Spirit, it is deep and inward, confined to no Forms and Religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. Jesus called this the Kingdom of God – using an expression of his age in Galilee and Judea, what we would consider today as a state of mind, the feeling of love, kindness and compassion towards everything that is living, and every human being. Walking – as seekers of the Truth – the paths of spirituality – the experience cannot be adequately formulated in words. It might come from outside sometimes, but is felt within, and it brings a sense of joy and apprehension of communion with all life.

Francis David in the 16th century tried to save Jesus and his teachings from the mainstream Christian Church – in Transylvanian Unitarianism tried to save Jesus from the claws of the Christian Church and theology, instead of believing that Jesus saved us by dying on the cross. Jesus said – “By the fruits shall you know them,” by the deeds and purity of the heart – and not by the creeds and theology. The Bible helps us in many ways, but the scriptures, any religious scriptures, are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not

to be esteemed as the principle ground of all truth and knowledge. The fountain is the life itself – in the present moment, in this place, as Jesus said – the kingdom is among you, it is in you.

So let us celebrate our faith, the many beliefs we share, our feeling of commitment and responsibility for each other, for this world, for our liberal values that make a difference in this world.

Let us always remember and live according to our liberal values, and pray for wisdom and passion in our work for making this world, our world, a better place to live, as Gandhi said, that **We must be the change we wish to see!**

We must be the change we wish to see! ... Amen.

Transcribed on 5/26/2012 by Phyllis Valentine