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*Honoring the legacy of choosing, given what we know.*

*It's Complicated*

History breaks my heart. I mean the “both-and” quality of history, such as when, a thousand years ago, Crusaders pillaged and killed their way across thousands of miles en route to Jerusalem to re-take it from Moslem rule...while at the very same time, Europe’s most magnificent Christian cathedrals were rising into the air. How can we wrap our heads around simultaneous blood-thirsty violence and projects of breathtaking beauty, both in the name of Christianity? As a divinity school history professor said more than once in class, “It’s complicated.”

I’m no historian, not one to go toe-to-toe with anyone on who did what when. But I like dipping into history. My dad did, too. One of his favorite finds was a huge book called *Chronicle of the World*. Put together in the ’80s by journalists from all over, it’s a USA TODAY-style collection of world headlines and stories from prehistoric times to the 1940s. Art from each time period illustrates every page. And even though it has limitations, like mostly ignoring entire continents until they’re colonized, it makes for great reading.

Last week, after Shana came up with Renaissance music to set the tone for this service, I pulled out Dad’s book and read the several hundred years leading up to the 1500s, a time we’ll look at today. Hours later, my head spinning, I thought how miraculous it is, given all that was happening back then, that threads of Unitarian and Universalist thought managed to hold on through history and would turn into our being here today in what is, for many of us, our spiritual home.

The six brutal campaigns of the Crusades and the building of those soaring cathedrals take place from about 1100-1300. Flipping the pages forward, we see the Black Plague, Persian poet Hafiz then Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales*. Meanwhile, the powerful Catholic Church is enraging people, corrupt from the abuse of selling indulgences – payments made to the Church to hasten one’s passage to heaven – the clergy rich, pompous and distant. In my dad’s book, the scandalous stories about the popes of these years read like a New York tabloid....

In 1415 Czech intellectual Jan Hus is burned at the stake for denouncing the Church’s corruption and saying the Bible needs to be translated into language everyone can read. Joan of Arc is martyred, 1431. 1440 brings Gutenberg’s printing press, and in the mid-1400s Renaissance music and art bloom– think of madrigals and lutes, the Medicis and the red-tiled dome of the Florence Cathedral, with Michelangelo and da Vinci on the horizon.

By the 1500s, European explorers have sailed the world. Colonization of the Americas, the islands and India is in full swing, fueled by genocide and slavery.

In Europe, religious thought, widely discussed and debated, undergoes revolution. Martin Luther nails his theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517, starting the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin joins the movement twenty years later with hell and damnation

doctrines of predestination and original sin. England leaves the Catholic Church. The Spanish Inquisition, begun in the late 1400s is actively chasing down heretics.

And so the 1500s become a time of religious authorities and of people on the run from them. New ways of thinking are in the air. So-called “humanists” champion learning and reason. Erasmus of Rotterdam, is one. Questioning the church’s authority, rituals and ceremony, debating the origins of Trinitarian doctrine, he is accused of heresy.

In these times, tumultuous in so many places (and we’re focusing on Europe, though the book chronicles Asia, too), in Eastern Europe occur two events, relatively close together, both considered milestones in UU history. The first, in 1553, is the execution of Michael Servetus.

A Spanish cartographer, physician and researcher known for his pioneering work on how blood circulates in the body, Servetus is a theologian too, who studies the Bible and disputes the doctrine of the Trinity. From his twenties, he runs most of his life to escape persecution. He lives all over Europe and eventually engages directly with John Calvin in Geneva, enraging him with strong, provocative language. Calvin brands Servetus a heretic and, at his orders, has him burned at the stake, one of his books about the Trinity tied to his arm and the logs beneath him unseasoned. Servetus is 42. The execution shocks Europe – surely we can talk about these things?

The other occurrence is a decade or so of official, state-led religious openness in Transylvania, what is now Romania and also in Poland. No matter how many times I read the history, the sequence of events is dizzying. Fascinating, too, and all on line for the curious. The long cast of characters includes a queen and her physician/theologian Biandrata, the gifted court preacher Frances David – thought by some to have said, “We need not think alike to love alike” – and a Unitarian king whose peaceful reign is cut short when he falls off his horse.

The gist of the story is, as we just heard in the reading of the Edict of Torda, is that for a brief shining moment a Unitarian king lives, his lands known as a place where multiple religions are encouraged and peacefully coexist. Indeed the moment is short-lived, ending with the imprisonment and continued persecution of the people who made it possible.

These two stories are about choosing: about individuals whose beliefs trace back to the first few centuries of Christianity, before the doctrine was finalized; about individuals who used reason to figure out what they believed and, taking a stand, moved the needle of religious choice and freedom forward forever.

Their ideas about Christian doctrine and about theological pluralism – openness to multiple faiths – persisted for many generations. What at first were slim strands of thought attracted independent-minded people along the way, people willing, sometimes against great odds, to choose a new path. I picture their collective views flowing through time, creating a theme, a through-line over the years, always there.

William Stafford's poem, "The Way It Is," comes to mind:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
 things that change. But it doesn't change.  
 People wonder about what you are pursuing  
 You have to explain about the thread.  
 But it is hard for others to see.  
 While you hold it you can't get lost.  
 Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
 or die; and you suffer and get old.  
 Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
 You don't ever let go of the thread.

We are a tiny little movement, we Unitarian Universalists. About 200,000 of us. One thousand congregations. I like to think that these times, our times, will go down in history as a period of growth for this movement, a chapter that does justice to the courageous choices made by those who came before us.

Some of us have friends who joke that UUs don't stand for anything, that they can believe whatever they want or that UUism is a watered down faith of some sort. I hope you set them straight. There's nothing wishy-washy about this faith tradition. Look at its roots. UU minister in Watertown, Mass. Mark Harris wrote a UUA pamphlet called *Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith*.<sup>1</sup> It opens with the theme of choosing:

**Unitarians and Universalists** have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious. "Heresy" in Greek means "choice." During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Among these was a belief that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Thus the word "Unitarian" developed, meaning the oneness of God. Another religious choice [at the time] was universal salvation...the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus, a Universalist believed that all people will be saved. Christianity lost its element of choice in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

How does it feel to be associated with heresy? I'm guessing some of us might like it! We are choosers, after all. How many here were born into Unitarian or Universalist families? [Only one!] The rest of us *chose* this faith tradition.

We may have come, the first few times, out of curiosity or a sense of longing. Maybe we wanted connection, kindred souls, community. Maybe, when we first come to this place, we don't know why nor whether we are seeking anything at all. But those of us who stay have chosen to stay. We chose not a class nor a lecture series, not a social or political club, but something else. We

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<sup>1</sup> Mark W. Harris, *Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith*, a Unitarian Universalist Association pamphlet, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/history/faith>

discerned and reasoned, and we chose a faith tradition, this beloved community. How many of us surprised ourselves by landing in a religious institution?!

We have chosen a faith tradition that has a rich history. A history of bold choosing. We exercise free choice all the time...with how we spend our day, how we greet one another. Here, we exercise free choice with how and whether we participate in the life of UUFES, with deciding which Sundays to come to services, with choosing to help support UUFES.

Moreover, no matter what a Sunday service is about, as people of conscience, it is ours also – our privilege and I would suggest our responsibility - to choose every Sunday how we will now go back into the world out there. Who do we want to be out there? How do we want to be?

If we are living into our faith each day, we might look at every service through this lens and ask ourselves on Sundays, “Given today’s service, how do I choose to live, going forward?” Or, given that people died for their right to choose what they believe, paving the way for this faith tradition, how will I choose where to put my attention and energies? Given the heartache in today’s world of hope and beauty and justice, on the one hand, and all manner of violence, on the other, how shall I choose my way forward from here?

We come. We participate. We sing, reflect, we listen. Sometimes we dive deep. Sometimes we take something home and keep it a long time. Always we experience each other. A Sunday morning experience. And what about Monday and Tuesday and the rest of the week? We can always fall in line, follow someone else, or just do what feels good in the moment.

Or... we can make a conscious choice. A choice for hope – hope for yourself. Hope for your spiritual well-being. Hope for a better world. Let us light candles of intention and *choose* our way forward, honoring our religious ancestors and answering the mysterious call forward. Let us take this faith tradition’s legacy of choosing seriously.

So may it be.