

# 450!—Celebrating the Anniversary of Religious Tolerance

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North Universalist Chapel Society

## Welcome

**G**ood morning. It is good to be together. It's been raining a lot recently. I like the rain. Do you like the rain? It's cleansing. It can be cleansing...which is probably true on a soul level but I was really thinking about my car.

I developed a practice some years ago...inside the rain of the warmer months usually but Friday's rain would do. I would fill up a bucket with soapy, warm water, put on a waterproof coat and wash my car in the falling rain. It's the natural-rinse method...and was strangely meditative, especially down in DC. Almost everyone I know who found out I had this practice pretty much thought I was crazy but I didn't care and I still don't care. It's actually a lot of fun...and it makes for funny stories. You learn a lot about people...you learn a lot about yourself when you wash your car in the falling rain...and what you learn makes for funny stories.

I like funny stories, especially on a day like today, a day that recognizes the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an important document in our history, a document that celebrates spiritual tolerance and religious diversity. This is central, this is fundamental to Unitarian Universalism. According to Earl Morse Wilbur, one of the foremost historians of our faith, the centuries-old tradition called Unitarianism is founded on three pillars—freedom, reason and tolerance.<sup>1</sup> To him, this is very clear and by freedom, reason and tolerance, Morse means:

1. The freedom—and, indeed, the rigorous and disciplined responsibility—to read, to question and to interpret the holy word according to the true arc of one's own life,
2. The skillful use of reason as applied to the study of the Abrahamic faiths—the Jewish, Christian and Muslim teachings—which call us to respond to God's love, as applied to all of the world's religions and as applied to humanist teachings as well, teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of critical thought over and against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
3. And, finally, tolerance, or the spiritual courage and hospitality to nurture loving community over lines of outward, social difference until those lines of difference, until our myths of separation are replaced somehow by bridges of connected.

Earl Morse Wilbur was a fairly serious man. I don't know any funny stories about him but I do know a funny story about religious tolerance...or in-tolerance, depending on how you look at it. It's one of those "once upon a time" kind of stories. Are you ready to hear it? Can I share? [] I will use the first-person, narrative point of view, even though this didn't happen to me. Ok. Here we go!

Once upon a time, there was a passionate man on a bridge, a man who was afraid to live his life. He was about to jump to end it all and right before he did, I said, "Oh, just don't do it, man!" And he said, "Nobody loves me." I took a deep breath. I put down my big, yellow backpack full of books and I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Me, too. Is that the Abrahamic God or otherwise?" And he said, "Abrahamic." And I said, "Me, too. Are you a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew?" And he said, "A Christian." And I said, "Wow. Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" And he said, "Protestant." And I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" And he said, "Baptist." And I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" And he said, "Northern Baptist." And I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

And he said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." And I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" And he said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." And I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" And he said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." And I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over the edge and into the water down below.<sup>2</sup> There is just no getting over certain such monumental differences. No measure of tolerance does the trick.

I've always liked that story. I like when folks in our movement tell it. I like thinking that love and laughter are also central to our theology. Earl Morse Wilbur never mentioned it but wouldn't it be great if the pillars of our faith were love and laughter in addition to freedom, reason and tolerance? ... if lightness became central to who we are? It might teach us how to better accept one another. It might teach us how to better accept ourselves. What would that be like? How would it feel? Who would we be?

Come. Let us worship together.

Reflection

I think it all comes down to this: You have to get ready to dive in. I think that's what it's really all about. I think that what's really going on here. We're figuring out how to dive in...and how do so in a way that reveals us to ourselves. We have to allow ourselves to be truly seen, I believe that's what we yearn for deeply. I hope it is, at any rate. I have already set my sail. It might take a day or a month or a year...or maybe many years but it will happen. We will decide to leap on out into the open air like butterflies or dive down deep into the darkwaters of life for the glory of it all...or just for fun of it... just for the thrill...or to fulfill life's purpose and provide meaning somehow. Who knows why we do as we do but we all do take the heroes journey in this life—each to our gift and in our own sweet way. We dive out into the air...like that time we went to the batting cages, two hours south of here on Route 91.

We had gone to sharpened our baseball skills somewhere in Western Mass—Marshall, Hank, Heidi and Dave and Frannie Lou, me and Chris. Hannah and Celeste stayed home. They had other things to do. During our roadside grilled cheeses, we noticed that planes had been steadily taking off and landing from an airstrip in the distance. All of the planes carved the same path in the late-summer sky and at intervals of altitude, likely marked by competence qualifications or by price, absurd human beings would cast themselves from the plane, diving into the sky, leading shoulder to the wind and leaping—presumably for pleasure—out and into the empty sky with nothing whatsoever to hold on to.

For some reason, this made me think of the Unitarian Universalist Church, a faith tradition—the only one I know—without a creed, without dogma and with multiplicity and ambiguity intentionally set at its very core and center...which is radical, to say the very least. As theologian Susan Richie reminds us,

Unitarian Universalism is that religious tradition which is absolutely, unabashedly multireligious. I think that we are the religious tradition that understands that religious is never just a container for holding things but instead, always a matrix of relationships that move in complicated ways, always a mixture of identities and that that is not some sort of compromise of religious identity or a problem not to have a pure identity. But, instead, this is our very integrity.<sup>3</sup>

We are a faith with integrity at our core and center. This is what learn to dive into! We are called to take a leap of faith, not unlike the skydivers that we noticed when we went to batting cages in Western Mass. We are called to take a leap of faith and so were they.

Called (and not only by gravity), these thrill-seeking skydivers leapt into the air and came back down to earth in strangest rhythm, mightily crashing through the sky months ago, in late summer and early fall, with force and with thunderous conviction...and now, months later, more softly, with winter's whimsy, grace and lightness... The younger divers come down to earth with passion—as if from adolescent rainclouds, heavy in the air—storming the earth and making splashes...and the older ones come down more like slow snow, cautiously mature, gentle, patient, trying hard to make a joyful noise and utterly failing. They blanket down, silent and spectacular by the morning. Fast or slow, rain or snow, each diver dares the same commitment. Each of our journeys in faith is sacred and beautiful. So, dive out and drive on in. As a poet [David Wilcox, *The Farthest Shore*] writes,

We were there in the woods by the water  
We left our packs up against that willow tree  
We dove right in, keeping just what we were born with  
Our Memories, Knowledge and Dreams

As I swam away from our possessions  
I imagined that they were gone forever more  
And for once I was glad that all I treasured  
Would still be with me as I reached other shore

So...Let me dive into the water  
Leave behind all that I've worked for  
Except what I remember and believe  
And when I stand on the farthest shore  
I will have all I need

When my time to live this life is over  
I'll tip my hat when I think about that swim  
And of all the things that make a life worth living  
That only come to those who dive right in

So...Let me dive into the water...

and I will have all I need

Dive out and drive on in. Let's drench ourselves in life's imperfections...so long as you'll still love me until the end. Let's dive in—leading shoulder down, shoulder to the wind with the wind against the rain against the odds and against the grain. We all sail out into the mystery...

with a pin to pull  
at the fingertips  
of gravity

We dive on out and we pull the pin and some parachute unfolds, unfurls and flowers high above us and saves us from the fate that was suffered by tragic skybound fliers from Icarus to Amelia Earhart and beyond.

Do you know the name David Ferenc was...or anglicized as Francis David? He was famous for saying, "we do not need to think alike to love alike," even though it's not clear that he actually said this. We still attribute it to him. He was born around the time that Leonardo da Vinci died. Da Vinci died in 1519, David Ferenc was born very soon thereafter.

Ferenc was a Unitarian preacher from Transylvania and the driver behind a document of religious tolerance called the Edict of Torda. The Edict reads:

His majesty, our Lord, in what manner he – together with his realm – legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same matter now, in this Diet, reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.<sup>4</sup>

The language is just so fabulous but what does it mean and why is it important? Why do we celebrate its existence at 450 years old and a day?

The meaning of the Edict of Torda is that we get to build our own spirit's crucible, the place in which we discover faith and spiritual practice for ourselves. It means we get to choose our leaders and it means that these leaders are deeply beholden to the will of the congregation. It means that

there is a strong and responsive tissue called community that holds us fast together, one and all. It means that no one tells us what to do. It's down to us. We make spiritual and religious meaning in our lives. It is not handed down to us from a higher authority. The Edict of Torda (and our honoring of it) means we get to learn about what it means to live with difference...which is a major, major deal. David Ferenc knew what he was doing.

Ferenc was the court preacher for our one and only Unitarian king—John Sigismund Zapolya—who reigned two times as the King of Hungary...first, between 1540 and 1551 and then, between 1556 and 1570.

Historians have praised the edict as an outstanding example of religious toleration in that it grants freedom of practice to four churches (Lutheran, Calvinist, Catholic and Unitarian) rather than to a single religion of state.<sup>5</sup>

Susan Richie reminds us that,

We have known forever and ever inside of Unitarian Universalism that there was something magical that happen in that Transylvania, mid-16<sup>th</sup>-century moment when our church was first formed... King John Sigismund made this Edict of Torda in 1568. That was the absolute first time inside a European state that a proclamation on the level of the state was made that allowed people to practice a religious tradition other than the one known to the monarch... So, it was absolutely radical. From our point of view today, it had some real short comings...because it only recognized four religions. It didn't include Jews. It didn't include Christian minorities. At the same time, this notion that you didn't have to proclaim yourself to belong to the religious tradition of the ruler of your country, that was an advancement in religious toleration.<sup>6</sup>

Especially so when you consider that mid-16<sup>th</sup>-century Transylvania—with its fractious Lutherans and Calvinists and Catholics and Unitarians—fell squarely under the political authority of the Ottoman Empire at that time. The governing authority was Muslim. This is our cultural inheritance, insha Allah. Do you know the song...

Come, come whoever you are  
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving  
Ours is no caravan of despair  
Come yet again come.

It's number 188 in our hymnal and it comes to us from a man named Rumi (who I heard ran for president recently). This song comes to us from Mevlana Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sunni

Muslim poet, jurist, scholar, theologian and Sufi mystic. Let's sing this song together but let's prepare it well...with the part of the song that we often leave out. Let's sing that part together first.

Though you've broken your vows a thousand times  
Though you've broken your vows a thousand times  
Come, come whoever you are  
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving  
Ours is no caravan of despair  
Come yet again come.

What is this if not the wisdom of a strong community? This is a part of our inheritance—rich, fantastic and complex.

So, we celebrate the Edict of Torda because it marks an important moment of religious toleration, an important moment of cultural freedom and an important moment in normal, human complexity. But what are the implications today? What is the “state religion” of our time? In other words, if contemporary American culture imposes a standard of belief, what are some of its markers?

One could argue that the “state religion” of our time is cultural identity, the idea that we are purely (or sometimes even discernably) this identity or that. Its markers are the border wall and the travel ban and Charlottesville to say nothing of recant false dichotomies between the wanderers and the worshipers that come from Haiti as opposed to the ones that come from Norway. If you do not know this reference, ask me later and I'll tell you but I will not use such language in the pulpit.

It's so important to remain wise in this, our age of “multiculturalism.” It's so important to stay honest with ourselves. Our stories of cultural identity seem to give our lives such meaning, even though the substance of our knowledge is often ambiguous. Cornel West reminds us that...

...from the beginning, we must call into question any notions of pure traditions or pristine heritages, or any civilization having a monopoly on virtue or insight. [] Every culture that we know is the result of a weaving of antecedent cultures. Elements of antecedent cultures create something new based on that which came before.

This is so true in the United States, of course. There is not jazz without European instruments. But this is true all the way back to the beginning of the human adventure in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Pakistan and Northern China off the Yellow River. So when we talk about Europe, we are not talking about anything monolithic or homogeneous. When we talk about multiculturalism, we are talking about a particular critique of something that is already multicultural.<sup>7</sup>

So many appeals are made to the baser levels of human awareness but what bouys us? It's important that we learn to stay afloat. Fortunately, we have all the answers that we need right here, in this very room. Susan Richie teaches us that...

The grounds for religious toleration affirmed in the Edict of Torda were prepared by the everyday lives of actual people who were already living in a multireligious way. The various religious lawbooks that were written in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Transylvania have fascinating requirements for what counts as a marriage and when you can marry people of different faith traditions and when you cannot. Those prohibitions clearly add up to a situation where it is obvious that there is a great deal of intermarriage in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in Transylvania between Catholics and Protestants, between different kinds of Protestants and even between Protestants and...Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

It is the act of actually living together that invents the concept of tolerance. Let me say that again, if you don't mind. It is the act of actually living together that invents the concept of tolerance. This makes our togetherness an absolutely precious human event—not for you and I, for the sake of the obvious, optical, racial difference (although that is certainly part of the equation) but, truly, for all of us together. We are astoundingly complex and we have safety enough to name it. It takes so long to understand complexity so dive right in. Let's start right now. We've got a lot of work to do, especially because it is so easy to fail. There are energies around us whose only job it is to disable the foray of human connection. There are enemies around us...and sometimes, those enemies are us. So, take the leap of faith. Let's do our best.

Let's decide to leap on out into the air like butterflies or dive down deep into the darkwaters of life for glory...or just for fun. Each to our gift and in our own sweet way. We dive out into the air... or we dive down into dark waters. Either way, we find our joy.

Once upon a story that is fun to tell in church, there was a passionate man standing on a bridge. He was just standing there. He was immobile, afraid to cross. When I saw him, I smiled. I took a deep breath. I put down the package of my belongings and said, "Oh, man. I think you oughta jump." I said, "Just do it, man! Take the leap!! Go on. I'll watch. This bridge is a wonderful bridge and the water below is warm and fine!! How are you feeling, anyway? I've been meaning to ask you." And he said, "I am well. I have good days and I have bad ones but on each day, my good friend, I find a little joy." And I said, "Me, too! Joy is precious. Do you believe in joy?" And he said, "Yes."



And I said, "Me, too! Do you keep joy to yourself or have you joy enough to share with me?" And he said, "I have enough, more than enough, to share with you, my friend."

And I said, "Me, too! Should we keep it for ourselves or have we enough to share with others?" And he said, "I believe we have more than enough to share with others."

And I said, "Me, too! Others, like the friends at church that we already know or other folks, like all the folks that we have not befriended yet?" And he said, "I think we can share joy with friends we have and with friends to be."

And I said, "Me, too! Shall we share joy just here at North Chapel or should we offer it throughout the town of Woodstock?" And he said, "I think we should offer up our joy all over town."

And I said, "Well, I don't know. I don't want to come off as creepy or weird to anybody. I don't want to be offensive. We live in a quiet, little town in the Upper Valley in central Vermont. This is northern New England, my friend. It's not the coast of California!! I don't want to 'spread joy' in a way that makes others feel uncomfortable...or, maybe more importantly, in a way that causes me public embarrassment.

And he said, "Me, neither! That's not what I mean." And I said, "It's not?" And he said, "No, it's not. I'm evangelist, not a proselytizer." And he saw me get a little confused. I slowed down and said, "Do you mean to say that you freely share the root and core of your faith but you are not necessarily interested in converting anyone?" Then, I saw him get a little confused and we both paused for a moment.

He said, "Let me put it to you this way. Even though I am Northern, Conservative, Great Lakes Region Council of 1912, Christian, Baptist, I don't care that you're just Universe, University... what type of Muslim did you say you were again?" And I said, "I am not a Muslim. I am a Unitarian Universalist. But what exactly do you mean when you said "just"?"

He winced. He knew something wrong had happened. He didn't know what it was but he could tell from the rhythm of the conversation that he was in trouble. "When I said "just" what?" he asked, anxiously.

And I said, "A moment ago, when you were talking. You didn't complete the sentence. I thought that you were going to say that you didn't care that I was "just" a Unitarian Universalist. What's that about? It could be me but I thought that it sounded like you were putting on airs and looking down at me."

And he said, “Me, too. I thought it sounded like I was putting on some airs...and I think I was looking down at you and I didn’t even know it...like a part of me was looking down, anyway. I didn’t mean to do that. I apologize. I meant no disrespect. Well... Let me put it this way. I didn’t fully know I was being disrespectful. My growing edges hide where I can’t see them sometimes. I’m blind until I make a big mistake. My language was disrespectful but I want to reassure you now that my heart for you is made of solid gold. I spoke without thinking, my friend. I’m sorry. I have habits that I don’t know that I have and I make mistakes sometimes. I really do feel bad about them. Sometimes, I say or I do the wrong thing. I break my own heart and yours and then, I’m in need of forgiveness. Do you know what I mean?”

And I said, “I do. Me, too. I totally know what you mean. I make mistakes myself. [As an aside, I reassure you, of course, that I don’t actually make mistakes. I just said that I did because I wanted to make my new friend feel tolerated. I didn’t want him to feel like a total loser, even though part of me thinks that he probably is.] And my new friend said, “What do you mean by that? What are you talking about?”

I winced. I knew something was wrong but I didn’t know what it was. I could tell from the rhythm of the conversation that I was in trouble this time. “What do I mean by what?” I asked him anxiously.

He said, “What do you mean by what you just said? I heard you. I was standing right here.” And I said, “But I only said those words as an aside to the congregation!!” And he said, “I am an imaginary character but that doesn’t mean that I can’t hear when you say your words out loud.” And I said, “Shoot! I feel embarrassed. I wish that I hadn’t said those words.” And he said, “I’m glad that you did. It’s better than building a friendship out of your pretense.”

I said, “I’m terribly sorry for saying the words I said and I’m even more sorry for feeling that way. I was wrong. I feel worst of all because you were building a friendship with me. You wanted to be my friend and I totally blew it.” And he said, “I still want to be your friend.”

And I said, “You do? Thank God!! Me, too!!” I said, “Even though you’re a Northern, Conservative, Great Lakes Region Council of 1912, Christian, Baptist and even though I’m an Eastern, Progressive, Boston Brahmin, Counsel of the Red Sox, UU liberal (which is obnoxious)... I’m glad we can still see God in one another...and for the needs of our forgiveness—forgiveness, being the bridge that we build to meet each other—we can still see the God within ourselves.

And he said, "Excuse me. I'm sorry. Did you just say that you're a Red Sox fan?" I looked at him helplessly and said, "Guilty as charged." And he said, "Die, heretic!" and he pushed me over the edge of the bridge. I didn't have time to grab my backpack...which turned out to be a good thing. He pushed me over...and then he took off his jacket and stepped into the open air. He leapt off of the bridge with a holler. He turned himself into a cannonball and then, he splashed down right beside to me. I was very impressed. There was a major Kaboom!!! When he surfaced, he said, "I can talk theology with you as long as you want but don't ever talk baseball with me or we'll fight. I'm a Yankees fan. Promise me that you won't mention the Red Sox ever, ever again. And we both laughed and I said, "No!!!" and started naming all my favorite players...as loud as I could and he came after me and I had to swim fast to get away but I kept calling out the names and he kept coming. He wouldn't give up. He didn't give up and neither did I. We didn't give up on each other and...

As I swam away from our possessions  
I imagined that they were gone forever more  
And for once I was glad that all I treasured  
Would still be with me as I reached other shore

When my time to live this life is over  
I'll tip my hat when I think about that swim  
And of all the things that make a life worth living  
That only come to those who dive right in

So...Let me dive into the water  
and I will have all I need

I think it all comes down to this: You have to be ready to dive on in. I think that's what it's really all about. I think that what's really going on. We dive in...and we do so in a way that reveals us to ourselves. We have to allow ourselves to be truly seen.

Happy birthday, Edict of Torda!!! And congratulations us. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

Benediction

And I said, "Live a life that is worth the dying! Find your joy today. It is a good one. You are precious in all the world. You are singular. Unique." Let's let life push us right on over the edge. It's going to, anyway. So, let's do it with dignity. Let's do it with honor. Let's do it with integrity. Let's live life hard until we break out laughing at ourselves, having learned to see the sacred in one another.

<sup>1</sup> Wilbur. *A History of Unitarianism*. Earl Morse Wilbur, 1945

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>

<sup>3</sup> Ritchie. *Children of the Same God - Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmD\\_H9Yh-xo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmD_H9Yh-xo)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uua.org/international/blog/celebrating-declaration-religious-freedom-tolerance>

<sup>5</sup> McKanon. *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism—From the Beginning to 1899*, Dan McKanon. April 7, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ritchie. *Children of the Same God - Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmD\\_H9Yh-xo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmD_H9Yh-xo)

<sup>7</sup> *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*. Cornel West, January 28, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Ritchie. *Children of the Same God - Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmD\\_H9Yh-xo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmD_H9Yh-xo)