

Children of the Same God: Boundary Zones

January 10, 2016

Rev. Roger Jones

With Child Naming and Blessing Ceremony*

Hymns: #364, Come Sing a Song with Me; #1101, Return Again; #159, This Is My Song.

Piano Music: “Gitanerias” and “Cordoba” from Spanish Suite “Andalusia” by Lecuona Ernesto

Sermon

Today in our service we have named and blessed two of the new children among us, and given them a welcome. The world into which we have welcomed these babies can be a place of beauty, blessed by human courage, understanding and generosity. It is can also be a scary and harsh place, with people divided by suspicion, ignorance, ideology and unequal access to the necessities of life.

For a little while this morning I’d like to reflect on what we gain and learn by reaching out beyond the borders that we human beings have constructed among one another. Call this inhabiting the boundary zones of life—the boundary zones of culture, faith, circumstance and perspective. I want to start with a story of a man from our Universalist heritage.

He was George DeBenneville, the first preacher in America of the radical message of Universal salvation. He was born in 1703 in London to aristocratic French Protestant parents. DeBenneville spent most of his life in Pennsylvania, and passed away at age 90, quite a feat in the 1700s. He was a doctor who wrote seven volumes on medical treatments of his day, showing formulas in English, German and Latin. He was a schoolmaster who taught Native American students as well as youth from Germany and France. He was a preacher, who wanted everyone to know about an inclusive, loving spirit. This love holds everyone in its care. It reaches across boundaries of culture, class and gender, as well as denomination. DeBenneville wrote books about his faith and spoke about it, but he felt it was too important to be embodied in one denomination, so he didn’t start any churches. Universalist congregations came after he died. He wanted *everybody* to know about this love.

He wrote:

No church is pure in all things, so none can be found that does not contain some truth. Glorious truths are found in every church and religion under the sun. And this glorious chain of truths which we believe will someday unite all of them into one form of love.ⁱ

How did this happen? How did he come to this vision? He recalled an early experience. When he was 12 years old, DeBenneville became a sailor and left London. “When his ship docked in Algiers,” on the northwestern tip of Africa, he met North African Muslims for the first time, when they came onto the ship. This was over a century before the French invasion and colonization of Algeria.ⁱⁱ

The Muslims of North Africa were known by the Europeans as Moors. DeBenneville recalled that several of the men

had just come aboard [the] ship when one of them fell and injured his leg. Young DeBenneville was revolted by what he thought was ... [an] excessively emotional reaction

by the man’s friends. In the words of author Susan Ritchie, “Two of them fell to the deck alongside their friend, kissed his wound, shed copious tears over it, and then cried loudly, apparently to the sun. DeBenneville confronted them [about] their heathen silliness, only to have them [explain]:

They had kissed their wounded companion’s leg in sympathy, ...they [had] shed tears so that their salt would clean the wound, and ... they [had] cried to the sun so that its creator would have compassion and heal him quickly. (61)

For George DeBenneville, this experience was a humbling kick in the heart.

“Are these men heathens?” he asked. *No, I’m the heathen!* He gave these Muslims credit for teaching him the true meaning of Christian love. He thanked God for bringing him into contact with strangers of another faith, color and culture so they could teach him a lesson. (61)

Fortunately, when he confronted them, he let them explain their actions. Perhaps being on a ship together makes you drop your defenses, makes you less able to leave the conversation. He listened, and he learned. And the Algerian men were gracious enough to overlook his insults and help him understand. He didn't turn away, he reached out. They didn't turn away. They reached out.

This pivotal experience fueled his message that God's love makes no distinctions between people of different faiths and places and circumstances and views. This is what he preached. By putting himself in the border spaces between "us" and "them," he found his heart opened and his life changed. DeBenneville lived a life marked by compassionate service and generosity.

Can you think of moments that changed your heart, or opened your eyes? When I stop to look back on my life, I can see times when I entered a situation with a certain attitude, often a tightly held attitude, and then emerged with a fresh perspective. I believe such moments can happen especially when we step out of our comfort zones and our habits of mind, when we loosen the hold we have on our comforting assumptions.

The Reverend Dr. Susan Ritchie says this is what our tradition invites us to do. She is a Unitarian Universalist minister and a seminary professor who is a historian. She asserts that in many periods of history, Unitarian Universalism has been a border-crossing faith movement. Inhabiting the boundary zones can change our perspective, our heart, and our sense of purpose. She calls our UU tradition "a multi-religious religion." Her recent book, *Children of the Same God*, explores the historical relationships between Unitarianism, Judaism and Islam, especially in Europe.

Ritchie's book has many good stories about border-crossing, but for today I wish to mention only more one of them, especially because the occasion for that story has an anniversary this week.

On January 13, the Hungarian Unitarian Church in Transylvania will celebrate the 448th anniversary of the most famous decree made by the only Unitarian king in history. When he was the young leader of the principality of Transylvania, King John Sigismund issued an edict of religious toleration, on behalf of the diet, or legislature.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here's the background. By the mid 1500s, the Protestant Reformation had spread from German and French speaking lands outward in many directions. The ensuing struggles caused much bloodshed and grief.

Kings, nobles and church leaders fought over doctrine. They used force in matters of faith. Yet, in the Transylvanian city of Torda, in the year 1568, the king said: "In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel, each to his understanding of it." No preacher should be imprisoned for his teaching or given any other kind of threat. If people agreed with what a minister preached or taught, that was fine, but if they did not, the people would not be compelled to accept it. No one should be "reviled" for their genuine faith. The reason for this, the King said, is that "faith is the gift of God." This Wednesday the Unitarians in Transylvania will commemorate this early declaration of religious toleration in Christian-dominated Europe. It should be noted that this protection extended to only four approved Protestant faiths, but you have to start somewhere.

In any case, John Sigismund did allow for differences of belief, and he engaged with others openly. He held public debates over theology, inviting preachers from these four different traditions to make their best case. This is how the king became a Unitarian; he was drawn in by another border crosser, by a preacher by the name of Francis David. Originally a Roman Catholic, David converted to Lutheranism, then Calvinism. In each one he quickly rose to leadership. David argued with each of those traditions, and by doing so he changed his mind about them. Be careful when you step into a boundary zone! (21-23)

Finally he described a new idea, which had come from anti-trinitarian thinkers elsewhere in Europe. David said that Jesus was a human being. He was a Jewish prophet, and not equal to God or part of God. Eventually this faith would be called Unitarian. He became the court preacher. Present-day Unitarians in Transylvania recall Francis David as their founder.

Tolerance, dialogue, debate, understanding, and a prohibition on threats and coercion! How did this happen in the 1560s? It is not a coincidence, as Susan Ritchie argues, that Transylvania was connected to the Muslims of the Turkish Ottoman empire.

In the mid-1500s, the Ottoman empire controlled much territory, and much of the time it left its subject peoples to practice their own ways of life. This was not the case at all times in every place; there were some regrettable exceptions to this policy of tolerance and autonomy for subject peoples.

However, the Ottoman rulers did provide a safe haven for Hungarian Protestants. In 1541 the Ottomans won control over the city of Buda, the western part of what is now Budapest. Susan Ritchie notes that Hungarian Protestants in “lands directly ruled by the Ottomans arranged for their doctrinal debates with the Catholics to be [refereed] by Turkish officials.” (32)

These Muslim rulers granted internal freedom to the Transylvanian principality. Transylvania was a buffer zone between the Ottoman and the Catholic Hungarian empires. Rather than overthrow Transylvania’s nobility after gaining control of the lands, the Turkish Sultan’s local governor in Buda, known as the Pasha, visited the Transylvanian court. Along with such high-level contact, Ritchie says it is important to note that ordinary people also reached out beyond the boundaries of their own faith and culture. The exchanges of goods, ideas and friendship among the Transylvanians and the Ottoman Turks gave ordinary people a multi-religious experience.

In 1648, twenty years before King John Sigismund made his decree of religious toleration, the Turkish official overseeing Hungarian lands had been asked to protect an outspoken Hungarian Lutheran pastor from Catholic antagonism. This Muslim official said this: “Preachers should be allowed to preach... everywhere to everybody, whoever wants to hear, freely and without fear.” It was, he said, what Christianity taught. The Edict of Torda would echo those very words 20 years later. (32)

It can be tempting to think the high moments of official decrees for tolerance and respect for diversity came fresh from the minds of the elite, especially the educated ones. Yet, Ritchie argues, the seeds for this tolerance were planted “by the everyday lives of people who were already living in a multi-religious way.” The mixed lives of ordinary Jews, Muslims, Christians and Unitarians prepared the ground for this flourishing of official toleration. When we get down to the ordinary level of life, we can be blessed by new understandings and insights.

When we can see and hear and listen to the people around us, we can grow in compassion and gain a more open heart. It doesn’t happen everywhere, and there are often exceptions and complications. Yet we can find in history, including in our own heritage, those times when stepping into the border zones did make life new.

Unfortunately, religious toleration did not last. Young John Sigismund, the king, died in 1571 after an accident. The Catholic Hungarian empire gained control of Transylvania. The empire said the Unitarians could continue to worship without interference, so long as they made no more innovations in theology. Yet the Transylvanian preacher Francis David had converted three times, and he wasn’t a person to stop changing his mind. He said even more heretical things about Jesus. As a result he died in a dungeon cell at the bottom of a cylindrical tower. (45-47)

You can visit that place if you take a tour of Unitarian sites in Transylvania. While traveling in the countryside, you can see his words painted in Hungarian on the front of churches which are still in operation there: God Is One.

I saw those words painted on churches during my first visit to Transylvania, 18 years ago. I was part of a tour, a spiritual pilgrimage organized by the [UU Partner Church Council](#).

I should mention that after the First World War, the land of Transylvania was given to Romania, ending three centuries of Roman Catholic Hungarian dominance. Catholics are now on a par with Calvinists and Unitarians. Now all of the Hungarian speakers of Transylvania are ethnic and linguistic minorities in Romania. They don’t engage in public theological debates as they did in the 1560s, but when I was there, a few ministers sat around the table drinking pear brandy, smoking cigarettes, and talking about life.

In the Transylvanian village I visited in 1998, I walked down the road with Maria, my Unitarian minister host. We stopped in at the little Catholic church, and we chatted awhile with its middle-aged priest in his living room in the rectory or parsonage. Along with him was his female companion, who officially was known as his live-in housekeeper. My friend Maria said to me later, “My husband and I are so glad he has a girlfriend. He was lonely and I was worried about how much he was drinking.” Before I left he showed me the church and gave us a demonstration of music on a

small electronic piano. Like Maria the Unitarian minister, he not only presides over the spoken rituals of the Sunday service, he plays the hymns.

For them in their village, this was everyday ordinary life. For me to stop in at that plain parsonage was eye-opening, and unforgettable.

Reaching out may feel sometimes like a risk of our comfort or our confidence. Yet, reaching out is a religious practice.

It may be for you that stretching yourself looks much more adventuresome or daring than going on a pilgrimage tour with the [Unitarian Universalist Partner Church](#) program. Whatever it may be, person-to-person encounters can change our hearts and our perspectives.

For you, entering a boundary zone could be a matter of going out of your familiar neighborhood and your familiar habits of mind. It could mean reading a novel or a memoir from the perspective of someone from a different circumstance, culture, or gender. It could mean reaching out in conversation, in listening, in seeking to learn.

The human family is more complex and rich with difference than many people want us to realize, let alone to celebrate. Yet we can celebrate, and we can learn. We can put ourselves in the place of overlapping worlds, in the boundary zones of human life as it really is in all its richness.

So may we live, seeking always to connect, learn, celebrate and love. Amen.

***Child Blessing and Community Dedication Ceremony**

Minister's Introduction by Rev. Roger Jones

Today it is our joy to welcome two children formally into our spiritual community, and make our commitments to them. I would like to invite the families of the children to be blessed this day to bring them forward.

This ritual comes from our heritage. The Unitarian faith has affirmed that all of us are born worthy of love. We have the ability to grow in our likeness to the divine. There is no spiritual blemish to wash away. Our Universalist faith teaches that the divine embrace is a loving embrace for all people, for all time.

For this ritual we use the living and fragile symbol of a rose, and we use water which has been collected over the years and sterilized. The water comes from our yearly ingathering ritual, when we mingle in a common vessel the waters brought from near and far.

As we name and bless these babies, we also dedicate ourselves to the care of all the children in our midst and in advocacy for the well being of all children of the human family.

Questions for Family Members

You are the main spiritual teachers of your children. Do you pledge to share with them the goodness and beauty of life? (We do.) Will you bring them up in the ways of compassion and courage, joy and generosity? (We will.)

We urge you to care for your own spirits. Will you strive to stay connected to your sources of strength, to all that may ground you and restore your soul? (We will.) Do you promise never to be shy to call on your sources of support in community? (We do.)

Questions for Godparents and Supportive Friends

As important sources of support and care, your love and presence can make a crucial difference in these children's lives. Do you promise to stay available to them? (We do.) Will you model for them an open heart and a generosity of spirit? (We will.)

Questions for the Congregation

An authentic and resilient community is life giving. Do you in this congregation pledge to show hospitality to these children, and to all children in this religious society? (We do.) Do you promise to show them patience, curiosity, kindness, and the gift of attention? (We do.) Will you learn their names, and tell them your names? (We will.)

Naming and Blessing Rev. Roger Jones

What is this child's full name?

— —, we bless you with this rose. It is a sign of unique beauty, just as you are unique and beautiful.

We bless you with water. It gives life and connects each of us with all members of the human family and with all beings.

We bless your **head** so that you may keep your mind open to the possibilities of life. [tap head]

We bless your **heart** that it may be open to giving and receiving love. [tap heart]

We bless your **hands** that they find meaning in play and work. [tap hands]

We bless your **feet** that you may find your path in this life. [tap feet]

Prayer

Now we invite the congregation to hold your hands out in a gesture of blessing toward these children, as I offer these words of prayer.

Spirit of All Beings, Breath of Lie, God of Love, we give you thanks for the gift of life, and the gift of these lives among us. Each child comes to us as a new hope and a new beginning for the human family. Let us be joyful!

We pray that each one of them might have not only a long life, but also one that is full of joy, love, courage, and wisdom.

Let us tend their spirits with care and with our shared commitment. Let us remember to care for our own spirits, that we may continue to deepen our lives, all through our lives.

Let us pray and work to be a force for healing in the world, to build a better world for all children and for all people, a world of peace, understanding, and hope. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

END NOTES

ⁱ Thandeka, *What Moves Us: Unitarian Universalist Theology* (Tapestry of Faith series), handout 1: "Introducing George DeBonneville," Unitarian Universalist Association, www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/movesus accessed Jan. 9, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Susan Ritchie, *Children of the Same God* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014), 61. All page citations in parentheses are from this book.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Celebrating the Declaration of Religious Freedom and Tolerance," on the "News" page of website of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, <http://icuu.net/>, accessed January 9, 2016.