

## *The Mists of Time*

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How many here were history majors? In the last ten years there has been a 41% increase in undergrad history majors – 44% in public schools and 17% in private schools. UCLA has by far the largest number of history majors, almost twice its nearest rival, the University of Texas. The number of PhD is slowly declining.

I am sure you have heard George Santayana's claim that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This is an astonishing claim, often treated as obviously true. It is one of those claims that a colleague of mine used to call 100% half right.

Anyway - here is a little edifying history – not in chronological order - since we have a history party this afternoon.

John Murray was born in England around 1740 and as a young man was swept up in the religious transformation of English society. He had been troubled by the strict Calvinism which claimed that people were either predestined to heaven or to hell and there was nothing one could do about that. No choice, no freedom – damned or saved.

Murray did not find this particularly affirming and it threw him into a deep depression. In 1759 he read a tract by a James Reilly - one of the very first to proclaim a message of universal salvation – claiming that all would be saved because of Jesus' death on the cross. Murray warmed to this and began his career as a preacher – first as a Methodist. But his growing Universalism put him at odds with the Methodists and he lost his pulpit, went into debt and ended up in debtor's prison. While in prison his wife and child died.

Despondent and alone, Murray decided to take passage to America – it was a way to get out of prison, and so, in 1770, he shipped on the brig, the Hand in Hand for America, resolved to start a new life with no religion in it.

His ship, on the passage from Philadelphia up to New York hit a storm and ran aground in New Jersey. It was stuck in tidal flats on the property of Thomas Potter, a farmer in Good Luck, New Jersey. Ten years earlier, Potter had built a church on his land and had been looking for a minister to come and serve and preach a gospel of a loving God. Sort of the first 'Build it and he will come' events ...

Well, as the story goes, Murray was elected to go ashore and find some provisions to last the ship until the tide and wind turned. He went to Potter's farm; Potter said 'I have been waiting for you.' And when he heard of Murray's history he was even surer, this was the minister he had been waiting for. Murray, of course, said no and told Potter that in any case he had to get back to the ship before the wind turned.

Potter replied that the wind would not turn until Murray had preached in his church – Sunday was several days away. And Murray reluctantly agreed. The wind did not turn; Murray came and preached and very shortly after he finished, a sailor came to tell him that the wind had now turned and they were ready to sail. Now that is preaching!

Murray returned often to Good Luck and helped a church get started before moving on to Gloucester, MA where he established a Universalist church. Among its charter members were women and an African American – unheard of in colonial Massachusetts. So began Universalism in the US.

For our benediction I often use some of Murray's words...

*Go out into the highways and the byways*

*You may possess a small light, but uncover it and let it shine*

*Bring more understanding into the hearts of men and women*

*Give them not hell, but hope and courage*

*Preach the ever-loving kindness and love of God.*

I find those stirring words - give them not hell, but hope and courage.

Not hell. But hope. And courage.

Courage - it helps in this world.

It must have helped Michael Servetus, that time in Geneva, as he stood there, tied to a stake, his writings belted as a girdle about his waist, feet resting on a pile of wood, knowing that in a minute, the torch would be put to the kindling and he would burn to death. I imagine he felt pretty lonely at that moment. I imagine there was a crowd - there usually is for public executions, and given the frenzy among modern political candidates for punishment [double Guantanamo Mitt Romney said], many there in Geneva were probably public officials. I imagine that the crowd was yelling at him, probably calling him things like 'atheist, devil, anti-Christ, heretic, homosexual, liberal.' The mood of the crowd was excited, I would guess - filled both with joy at being able to watch an enemy suffer and die right before their eyes and with the morbid satisfaction so many have with suffering and death. You can imagine Ann Coulter leading the crowd.

What would go through their minds? That they were innocent because he was guilty? That you can kill freedom and free thinking? How many of us would have shouted at Servetus 'Burn, baby, burn!'

So just imagine Servetus and how alone he must have felt: imagine being Servetus and watching someone come up to set the torch to the pyre and being asked, one last time, whether you would recant your awful claim that the doctrine of the trinity had no biblical basis. Imagine seeing the crowd jeering and cheering and celebrating.

It is a terrible thing to feel cut off, for whatever reason, from the human community. To feel alone, utterly alone. I imagine that Servetus must have wondered whether it was worth it on that day in November of 1553 in Geneva, Switzerland. I imagine he cursed his bad luck and his foolishness for being in Geneva at all. I imagine he wondered what his life was worth, what it meant that he would end up burned to death by people he thought would be his friends. I imagine John Murray felt that, too, in the London debtors prison.

And I imagine that Servetus felt some pride, too, at his courage and his honesty, that he had not wavered in his belief in the power of reason and clear thinking, in his belief in the thinking person.

Not long after Servetus burned in Geneva, the reformation begun earlier in Germany, Holland and Poland, was alive elsewhere. For some time, a century at least, an intellectual revolution was underway, from the liberal thinkers of the Netherlands to Moses Maimonides in Spain and Egypt to the mathematicians of Baghdad. The intellectual hegemony of Rome was being challenged and, in the religious world, the Reformation was the beginning of a long democratization of faith.

And into this milieu came significant people in our history - Francis David and John Sigismund. Francis David was an orphan, was recognized for his learning abilities and ended up as a rector of a catholic school and a priest. He became, by turn, Lutheran, then Reformed [the part of the Reformation which followed John Calvin, who burned Servetus, the ancestors of today's Presbyterians], and finally Unitarian after reading Michael Servetus' book 'On the Errors of the Trinity'

John Sigismund was the king of Transylvania and a liberal spirit. John Sigismund decided that it would be beneficial to have a public debate and so gathered a Unitarian [David], a Lutheran, a Reformed and a Catholic to speak publicly about religion. The outcome was the Edict of Religious toleration.

This was no small event in religious history. In January of 1568, King John Sigismund signed the Edict of Religious Toleration, proclaiming that ministers should be free to preach the truth as they saw it and that everyone should be free to join their own congregation, thus giving to congregations the right to choose their own ministers.

It is this tradition of freedom, of tolerance, of reason, to which we are heirs and caretakers. This is our inheritance, this is our gift from the past - that we should use reason in exploring religious meaning, that we should be tolerant, and that we must all be free in our belief about what is ultimate.

But Frances David was not one to rest and his religious journey continued - his life is a testament to the non-dogmatic nature of our tradition. After the death of John Sigismund, a Calvinist became king and tolerance waned and David ended up in prison where he died. On the walls of his cell were found carved these words:

*'Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death - nothing will halt the march of truth. I wrote what I felt and that is what I preached with trusting spirit.'*

David and Servetus and Murray had a kind of courage that we do not always see; the courage to stand firm in the face of oppression and to maintain the belief that the truth will prevail in the end, the belief that the truth shall indeed make us free. Frances David's courage was based in his belief that the truth is liberating and that his responsibility was to serve the truth. It was a faith and a courage he inherited by the Spaniard Michael Servetus.

These elements of our history – the love of God and the need for community, the search for truth and the need for courage – these remain with us today. Out of the mists of time, these figures can emerge to inspire us in our lives, both communally and individually.

There is no doubt in my mind that we live in times requiring courage, and that, in that, these times are like all times. There has been no golden age, some time when peace and justice prevailed and tragedies were unknown. All times require courage and faith that the world can be made better. And these are times in which we need community – communities of conscience and courage, communities that seek to redeem the world.

Our role – we who claim to be religious liberals, the heirs of Servetus and David, of Murray and Tuckerman, of Fuller and Emerson, - is to continue to maintain that truth is dynamic and not static, that creeds limit what faith can be, that the story is never over, that the book of life truth never closed. Our task is to remember that salvation, available to us all, comes from acts of love, from our belief in the worth of each of us and from the power of community.

Today we are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what is known as the Cole House, what we know as Neighborhood House. It was designed by Henry and Charles Greene – their grandparents were Unitarians in Cincinnati, OH, by the way, so it is some measure of balance that it is now part of a Unitarian Universalist community.

And in celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> year of this house, we are not only celebrating a structure, and its architects, as we are celebrating our role in this community. That house is, after all, just a thing, and its value is derived from how it is used. Neighborhood church has been a voice of liberal religion in Pasadena for 122 years now. We carry on that tradition of freedom, and justice, of equity and peace, of the redeeming possibilities of community.

The third of our seven principles is 'acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.' This unites, in a fashion, the lives of Servetus and David and Murray – that we each –each one of us – are called to find our path in life, our way of speaking truth, and that we do this best in community.

The key phrase in that principle is, I believe, 'spiritual growth.' It points to our affirmation that faith, our spiritual life, is dynamic. Like all of life, we either grow and change or we die. Life moves; life changes. We grow; we change. Life is dynamic. So too with faith – this is why we do not have creeds. And this is exactly what lay behind the courage of Servetus and Murray and David – life is dynamic. Even the Apostle Paul knew this – when I was a child I thought as a child, but now that I am grown, I have put away childish things.'

It means that our faith is meant to be used – how do we combat injustice in this world? How does our faith respond to environmental threats given what we now know? This is the faith of our ancestors – our faith grows out of our encounter with life, ever challenged and ever refreshed.

It is not unlike a house. What I love about Neighborhood House is that it is no longer Cole House – it belongs to the present. Respectful of the past but not stuck there, a place of life. Once a residence, it is now a place for this community. Staff works there; meetings are held there; receptions happen there. It's walls are not only made rich by the vision of Charles and Henry Greene but by Irene Burkner who sat in the front office for years, and by Rick Jimenez who sits there now, by Adina Singer, by Debbie Bieber and Alyssa Bellew, and J, by JoAnn DeQuattro and Beth Colcord, by Sara and Erika and Greg and Kathleen, by Judith and Lyn and Kim and JoEllen, Evelia, and Ed and Stephen and Noel, and Jacqueline and Anna, by Lee and Brandy and Hannah and me. By all of you who have sat in chairs and told your stories or shared food there, worked in its kitchen, cleaned its attic, folded newsletters.

Our free faith – grounded in the affirmation that life and truth are dynamic, that reason matters deeply, that God is love and that community can be redemptive – this can give us an abundant life.

Our free faith – found in real places in life – in buildings meant for human use, in houses, not museums, in sanctuaries, not mausoleums – can give us courage to love one another, to seek justice in this world, to think freely.

Our faith is about abundance - intellectual abundance, social abundance, abundance in music, in art, in relationships, abundance in service, spiritual abundance. Here is a place where we take out what we have - our beliefs, our hopes, our dreams and ideals. This is a place where life, not death, should rule, where hope, not despair, should live; where courage not fear should rule. This is the essence of faith - it is about life, about abundant life. It is about the open heart and the open hand. It is about hearing the song of your own heart.

This is what I hear from you all the time – be alive! Be free! Have courage!

Give them not hell, but hope and courage.

Amen