

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Heroes and Heretics: Our UU Story**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**October 7, 2007**



Unitarians and Universalists are people who choose their faith. Ours is a chosen faith. We are people who want a religious tradition that matches our thinking, rather than adopting the faith of our ancestors.

We are not willing to have our choices made for us and to have our beliefs dictated to us. Even those raised Unitarian Universalist are encouraged to explore other faiths, to learn about this one, and within it to formulate their own theology.

I learned what it means to choose my faith from my ancestors. My ancestry on my mother's side stretches back to the Mennonite tradition in Switzerland. My forbearers arrived in this country in the 17th century, settled their homes near the [Susquehanna River](#), and became River Brethren.

In Europe, they were persecuted for their unconventional beliefs and driven from their homeland. Why? Because they were pacifists. They also believed in adult baptism and re-baptized converts who had been baptized as infants in other faiths. And beyond that they practiced trine baptism in which the believer is submerged three times, once for each person of the Trinity.

While I grew up United Methodist, the stories of my great grandparents were the stories of people who chose their own faith. I thought that's what people were supposed to do. And I still do.

This became part of my understanding of who I am as a religious person. The idea that we choose our faith seems to me to be the most natural thing in the world. Unitarian Universalism is both my religion of choice, and the religion that lets me choose. I credit my ancestors with making it possible for me to choose Unitarian Universalism.

The adherence to choice in matters of faith does not come without its share of private and public struggles. I know many of you have experienced this. Telling family members and friends that we have left the faith of our childhood can be scary. It can strain relationships to the near breaking point. Family members and friends can have trouble accepting choices that do not conform to their own beliefs.

Though my ancestors planted in me the seeds of choice, family members of that same lineage have not inherited the same perspective. One relative has voiced concerns about the fate of my soul. She wanted to know whether I profess Jesus as Lord and Savior and believe he died for my sins. My answer fell painfully short of what she hoped for. She died disappointed by my choice. Disappointing people we care about because of our religious choices can be painful – to us and to them.

Unitarian Universalist Denise Davidoff tells how hard it was for her to become a Unitarian Universalist because of her family history. In the 1960s she and her husband discovered a Unitarian Universalist church in Connecticut.

## **Heroes and Heretics: Our UU Story (cont'd.)**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

She says “it was a perfect fit.” But she continues, “Sounds easy, you say. But it wasn’t. Signing the membership book in a Unitarian church was scary beyond belief for me even to contemplate. How would I tell my parents I was rejecting the faith of my forefathers?”

For her, it meant a rejection of the faith of her Jewish grandfathers who had emigrated from the Ukraine. She also worried about telling friends in her Jewish community. It took her six and a half years to sign the membership book. (from Our Chosen Faith)

The concept of choice is deeply embedded in our liberal religious history. Our tradition was named for two heresies: Unitarianism and Universalism. Heretic means choice. Ours is a heretical faith.

The Unitarian heresy held there is one God. The Universalist heresy held that everyone is saved. Unitarian and Universalist beliefs not only disagreed with the Trinity and rejected predestination. They also saw Jesus as other than God. They did not adopt the Augustinian and Calvinist doctrine that human nature is corrupted by sin from birth. And they questioned the idea that Jesus’ death provided salvation for humanity by paying the price for our sins. On at least five counts, they fell outside the religious conventions of their day.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, after the establishment of the Nicene Creed in 325, these choices were not only unacceptable, but also incredibly dangerous. Anyone who openly disputed orthodox beliefs was branded a heretic and in danger of persecution.

Those who held Unitarian and Universalist opinions were among them. They were burned at the stake, ex-communicated from the church, or run out of town on threat of violence. This strain of violent persecution “runs through all the early history of liberal religious impulse within the Christian fold.” As Jack Mendelsohn explains, “Tragedy and death stalked those who first laid the foundations in Europe of the movement that was to bear the Unitarian and Universalist names.”

We see it in the early centuries of Christianity. Arius, for example, came to the Council of Nicea to argue that Jesus was not of the same essence as God. He lost his case. His punishment was exile.

Over the centuries that followed Unitarian ideas would emerge from time to time in different places. But it wasn’t until the Reformation that Unitarianism began to emerge in a defining way. During the Reformation, the Spaniard Michael Servetus spoke out in opposition to the Trinity. He was accused of the heresy of anti-Trinitarianism. For choosing a different way and spreading his heresy, he was burned at the stake.

Around the same time, similar ideas were springing up in Poland and Transylvania. The Polish Unitarians flourished briefly before being completely suppressed. In Transylvania, however, there was a period of religious toleration under the only Unitarian King in history, John Sigismund.

## **Heroes and Heretics: Our UU Story (cont'd.)**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

It was in Transylvania that we find the institutional roots of Unitarianism and the first official use of the word Unitarian. Toleration did not last in Transylvania. Francis David, who was the king's court preacher, died in prison as a martyr. It is worth noting, however, that Unitarianism continues in Transylvania to this day.

In England, dissenters found things a bit more merciful, though still not ideal. They also had reason to worry. Joseph Priestley, for example, was chased out of England. Priestley was a Unitarian minister and the noted scientist who discovered oxygen. In 1791, a Birmingham mob, inflamed by leaders of the Established Church, burned down his laboratory.

He fled to London. He was soon invited by his friend Thomas Jefferson to sail to the United States. It was in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, that Priestley gathered the first Unitarian congregation in this country. (from Mendelsohn)

The Universalist side of our tradition also marks its earliest heretical roots in the first centuries of Christianity. It was Origen of Alexandria, a great scholar, who promoted the idea that "all souls" would be saved. His Universalist convictions were vilified by the church.

But the seeds planted by Origen, just like the early seeds of Unitarian thought, resurfaced at various times. They resurfaced in a defining way for Universalism with the arrival of John Murray in America. John Murray barely escaped from England with his life. Upon arriving in this country, Murray founded the Universalist movement.

In this country, Unitarian and Universalist ideas still raised eyebrows and earned some recriminations. But rather than finding themselves the target of violence, the Unitarians and Universalists began to find themselves engaged instead in serious theological debate. Religious debate became a form of entertainment in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. These debates continued the theological disputes begun in the early centuries of Christianity.

One 19<sup>th</sup> century debate involved the great Universalist Hosea Ballou. He was arguing the point of damnation and salvation with an orthodox minister. Ballou quoted Bible passages that supported the love of God for everyone. But the other minister was unconvinced. He said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist, and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven!" Ballou, not easily set off course, said, "If you were a Universalist, that idea would never occur to you."

As Ballou suggests, our religious choice has meant following a path of religious integrity and conviction. It has not given us license to do or think whatever we will. It has, if anything, increased the demands upon us to be responsible to and for one another.

Our religious story is filled with the names of Unitarians and Universalists who chose their own faith. These individuals were both heroes and heretics. They were reformers, questioners, and seekers. They defied the religious conventions of their times. They blazed new paths and made possible greater choices for us today.

## **Heroes and Heretics: Our UU Story (cont'd.)**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

We build upon the foundation laid by these religious ancestors. We too choose our own faith. We too are heretics. We are modern day heretics seeking a living and real faith - a faith of integrity, courage, and compassion.

There is a t-shirt that reads, "Heretic in good company." We are indeed in good company with the heretics of our past. But look around you. Look to one another. We continue to be heretics in good company. I can't imagine it any other way.

Amen.