

## **Juggling Identities**

October 21, 2007

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First Parish in Brookline

**Reading:** “1557 Edict of Torda”

Queen Isabella of Torda

### **Introduction:**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Isabella of Poland, a hotbed of Italian Humanists, married John Zapolya, the King of Hungary. Their son John, who was to become the first and last Unitarian king, was only two-weeks old when his father died. He named John his heir, and Isabella the Queen regent, instead of naming the Hapsburg prince who had been promised the crown. When it became clear that his successors had no intention of allowing Hungary to be part of the Hapsburg empire, the emperor laid siege on Buda. With Queen Isabella’s forces nearing collapse, Sultan Suleyman appeared with a large army and repulsed the invaders. He claimed Buda and much of lower Hungary for the Ottoman Turks and granted Transylvania to Isabella and her infant son. Queen Isabella took two important things with her as she made her escape to Transylvania -- her physician, Georgio Biandrata, who was a follower of Servetus, the Unitarian heretic who’d been burned at the stake by Calvin in 1533, and a book by Erasmus. As she raised her son, the question of his religion posed a difficulty for her. There would be a war no matter whether she baptized him Catholic or Protestant. She solved the problem by announcing that “Faith is a gift of God” and that she trusted her son to discover and name his religion for himself. Having discovered the freedom in this posture, a posture that does not choose one extreme or another, she offered it to all the people of Transylvania. Transylvania became one of the safest places in Europe for the development of the radical reformation.

(Ruth Gibson & Susan Ritchie)

### **Edict:**

*Inasmuch as We and Our Most Serene Son have assented to the most instant supplication of the Peers of the realm, that each person maintain whatever religious faith he wishes with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all, lest the followers of a new religion be a source of irritation to the old profession of faith or become in some way injurious to its followers....*

### **Sermon:**

This fall, Reverend Jim and I have been in conversation with you and each other about religious identity. We’ve been considering the nature of how we are Unitarian, Universalist, Unitarian Universalist; how we incorporate Jewish traditions, or not; how

our own transformations of self and spiritual identity are shaped by our place in the circle of age.

Often, when people or institutions are undergoing transformation, the question, “who am I?” comes forward, along with, “who do I belong with?” and “Who are my enemies?” Children of a certain age and adults under stress feel safe in the certainty of having clear categories for who they are, where they belong, and who to hate.

I love the story my colleague Victoria Safford tells about a youngster in her Sunday school. He was overheard to say, when asked by an adult about where he went to church, “I don’t know the name of it, but where we go we’re really interested in trees. All of us are believers in trees.” His mother thought this might be the moment to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Unitarian Universalist theology.

I wonder about the children here this morning, what would they say we believe in? What are they learning about who they belong to? Are they learning, also, who to hate?

Part of maturing from infant, to toddler, to child, to youth, and beyond involves developing a consciousness that can make distinctions, to create categories: me, not-me, alive, dead, girl, boy, adult, child, family, not-family, and so on.

By the time we are adults, we categorize the world, in the blink of an eye. No matter what we tell ourselves about our open mindedness and egalitarian values, we quickly size up a stranger by noticing gender, race, posture, accent, clothes, car, and so on. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Blink*, tells about the decisive first glance that makes a snap judgment about another’s intentions. He suggests that we rely on our “adaptive unconscious” to provide us with instant categories that warn of danger and guide the shape of our encounters.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystic theologian, Martin Buber, observed that this habit of categorizing and compartmentalizing is a habit of alienation. Whenever we note a detail about an Other and then create a category, we have made the Other and ourselves into an “It” — a thing. We and the other have been “thingified.” When we see an other as a conservative, or fat, or mentally ill, or a war-monger or peacenik, or whatever-have-you, we have turned an other and ourselves into an “It” — an object that can be used, manipulated, ignored, excluded, and even slaughtered.

At our most evolved and capable, when we experience the Other as alive, unique, mysterious, and absolutely part of the fabric of all time and space, we know the Other as Thou. In the process of that meeting we become an “I” -- a self that is vital, alive, unique, mysterious, and absolutely part of the fabric of all time and space.

The song we heard this morning, *The General* by Dispatch, is a good example of the consequences of an *I/Thou* encounter. The general could no longer send his troops into battle once the enemy became a *Thou*. On the eve of a great battle, he had a dream that transformed the enemy from an “it” to a *Thou*. He says in the chorus: “I have seen the

others and I have discovered that this fight is not worth fighting. I have seen their mothers and I will no other to follow me where I'm going.” (*The General*, Dispatch).

“I have seen their mothers” is shorthand for I have been met by the *Other* as a *Thou*. He has been a receptive, beholder of an *Other* who can no longer be categorized or treated as enemy.

What is so amazing about the general of our song is that he is able to transform the “thingified-*it*” category of enemy into a *Thou*, on the eve of a battle.

Fear and stress typically push human beings into using the “adaptive unconscious” modes of perception. When we are already scared or uncertain, a garden hose becomes a snake, the sound of footsteps behind us becomes a mugger, the innocent joke made by a friend becomes an insult. We humans become ever more rigid in our categories when we are under stress and we tend to see the worst in our enemies and the best in ourselves. Stress polarizes our categories into rigid opposites.

Perhaps the only way the general could have changed, was in a dream meeting with the mothers of his enemy.

Spiritual maturity then, is the capacity to rise above our “adaptive unconscious,” to witness and make a choice to meet another as whole, mysterious, unique, and absolutely part of the fabric of all time and space, and completely and absolutely *Other*. Our identity of being fully human rather than a machine that makes categories is at stake in this capacity.

I believe the roots of our tradition holds a story that is a powerful lesson in spiritual maturity in the same way that *The General* is a powerful lesson.

Let’s return to today’s story of 16<sup>th</sup> century Queen Isabella and Sultan Suleyman with some questions.

How is it that a recent widow with a newborn child, under siege of the Holy Roman Empire of the Hapsburgs, was able to develop a public policy that was generous and tolerant to the Catholics and the Protestants? How was she able to protect the very same people that would kill her son and invade her refuge? How did Isabella and the Sultan manage to juggle their various ethnic and religious identities in the midst of a dangerous time and place? How did they manage to juggle their identities in such a way that they became more open and tolerant instead of controlling, suspicious, and punishing?

According to historian John Goodman, “when Sultan Suleyman first learned of the birth of John Sigismund...he sent a guard to stand in a corner of Queen Isabella’s room to witness her nursing her infant.”

Amazingly, but apparently true — there was a Turk was in the same room when nursing mother Isabella was at her mammalian best, when her brain was flooded with oxytocin

and all the good hormones that allow a mother to meet her infant as a *Thou*. Perhaps her brain was shaped in that moment to engage with Turks as kin, as family.

Whatever the cause, Queen Isabella was able to learn and develop in her relationship with the foreign invaders. Historian, Susan Ritchie, tells us that Queen Isabella's *Edict of Toleration*, which foreshadowed her son's advisor, Francis David's *Edict of Toleration* some years later, was not original to her. She did not wake up one morning knowing how to be tolerant and trusting in the grace of God. The so-called first European Unitarian idea of tolerance of Francis David did not simply emerge out of nothing from one person standing alone.

Ritchie believes that the Unitarian articulation of religious tolerance was the result of cultural enmeshment between the Ottoman Empire and the Europeans. The Ottoman East did more than simply protect the little slice of Transylvania from the forces of the Counter Reformation. Rather, the Ottoman East was in a transformational relationship with the people of Transylvania and Hungary. They not only brought coffee, paprika, Turkish baths, and tomatoes, but also the practice of religious tolerance and the theology of the unity of God.

This is a threatening idea to modern Hungarian Unitarians of Transylvania. The nationalist pride in the belief that the *Edict of Toleration* is unique and fresh and wholly Hungarian is strong. Despite the coffee, the paprika, the thermal baths, and the tomatoes, the Turks are in a thingified/*it* category of *enemy*. And especially when modern Unitarians are under threat and thingified by fellow Catholics and Protestants, as *Other-* as *not* Christian, we can understand their fear of being seen as sourced in Islamic theology. As I said before, fear has a way of rigidifying identity.

Susan Richie convinced me, though not the Hungarian Unitarians, of the enmeshment of Ottoman culture with her discovery of an earlier edict of toleration issued by the *Pasha of Buda*. This edict was issued nine years before Queen Isabella's and 20 years before John Sigismund's minister declared his *Edict of Toleration*. It reads: "*preachers of the faith invented by Luther should be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere to everybody, whoever wants to hear, freely and without fear, and all Hungarians and Slavs should be able to listen to and receive the word of God without any danger. Because — this is the true Christian faith and religion.*"

Perhaps the *Pasha* was simply being a shrewd invader, or maybe he was bribed to issue an edict of tolerance for a particular Lutheran, but still, he chose words that were resonant with his religion, Islam. The *Koran*, in chapter 29: 46 reads:

*Be courteous when you argue with the People of the Book, (that is Jews and Christians who share Abraham as ancestor) except with those among them who do evil. Say: "We believe in that which is revealed to us and which was revealed to you. Our God and your God is one. To (God) we surrender ourselves."*

Twenty years later, in 1578, Francis David declared: *“faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.”* The resonance between the Pasha’s edict, Isabella’s edict, and David’s edict is clear. Out of the reality that God is One, comes the possibility of an *I/Thou* relationship in which others are known to be unique, mysterious, creative expressions of that one God. We are called to surrender to rather than to categorize and resist our differences.

Our reading from my friend and colleague Marjorie Bowens Wheatley calls each of us, no matter the category, to know ourselves to be part of one interdependent creation. She echoes the sentiments of our ancestor Francis David.

Would you share his words of tolerance and challenge with me in a responsive reading?

**In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation.**

*You need not think alike to love alike.*

**There must be knowledge in faith also.**

*Sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.*

**Religious reform can never be all at once, but gradually, step by step.**

*If they offer something better, I will gladly learn.*

**The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness.**

*Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice.*

**We must accept God's truth in this lifetime. Salvation must be accomplished here on earth.**

*God is indivisible.*

**Egy Az Isten.** (Hungarian)

*God is one.*

- Francis David adapted by Richard Fewkes