

Historic Dilemmas of Unitarians: Transylvania's Halloween Story

A Sermon by Dr. Judit Gellérd in Chatham, MA, November 1, 2009

Five years have passed since my previous privilege of in this great pulpit. It is an unspeakable joy to be in the presence of Helen and Gene Pickett and Dick Fewkes' – Ellis, too, is present in my minds' eyes. Thank you, Rev. Robinson, thank you Edmund, for your precious invitation.

Please, allow me a few words of gratitude toward Helen and Gene. My husband, George Williams, considers Gene Pickett the greatest President of our denomination – and not only because he had mentored us and eventually enabled us to organize the Partner Church movement – with Dick Fewkes, our other hero as its President – but Gene enabled our entire denomination to be truly international, open, interact with Asia, especially India and Japan. No words can express our highest admiration and deepest gratitude toward this history-making couple as Helen and Gene have been.

Today is the Day of the Dead, one of the most important observances in our Eastern European tradition. We visit the graves of our loved ones as an annual pilgrimage of remembrance. We bring flowers and light candles and whole families gather there, people travel from far places. We say that during this season of Halloween the village of the living move into the village of the dead.

This year the Transylvanian Unitarian church observes the 430th anniversary of the death of Francis Dávid, the founder and the first martyr of our church. My father was its last martyr, a martyr of Communist persecution, and he died 30 years ago on his sixtieth birthday.

During my last circuit ride in Boston, a visiting Transylvanian friend brought me a bulky package of the freshly released Secret Police files on my father – 1,400-pages! Searching it nervously, nowhere I could find my father's name on the cover. Was he a mere number, I wondered? Then, among seals of *Top Secret* and countless signatures, I suddenly discovered my father's Secret Police identifier, his code name: THE PROPHET. This was madly, ironically inspiring.

The Prophet! Secret Police or not, the poetic quality and fascinating irony in the naming moved me to tears. How could they get it so right!? So, all along, since my childhood, I have been a prophet's daughter! And a graduate of "The School of Prophets", Boston University! This coincidence forcefully reframed my whole life story and eventually compelled me to write my memoirs – which I have just finished. Its organizing theme is the nature and role of existential dilemmas. And today I wish to reflect on some historic existential dilemmas of Unitarianism.

Life is no continuous line of narrative, like a melody; it rather appears to me as a series of dramatic chords, conglomerating around major dilemmas. Each arises as a crisis, a challenge, an opportunity. Then, sometimes, when survival is at stake, dilemmas turn into tyranny. If the sequence of the chords and the resolution of their dissonances give the character of music, we too, compose our lives by ways of resolving each of its dilemmas. Our survival depends on choosing the right solutions that launch us on a higher plane. I can testify that the possibility of breaking upward is inherent in the most agonizing challenge.

I was ten years old when I had to face my first moral dilemma with truly existential dimension. I was forced to deny my father whom I adored, but who was now a political prisoner in Communist Romania. My three Jewish teachers in the posh music conservatory were hiding and protecting me, the daughter of the Christian minister. Had I revealed the identity of my father, it would have cost them their jobs and even their freedom, and would have cost me my career. Betraying my father was the price of my survival. That was my "choice" in a totalitarian system.

Now living in freedom, I really detest the tyranny of small choices at each moment: what brand we buy, what salad dressing we order, what media we trust... It seems to keep us so busy, we dismiss fundamental, existential choices that seem less immediate and less personal. The

other day I was lamenting over how tragic to openly and continuously witness the Tibetan genocide and do nothing about it. My friend kindly reminded me that she was left with no energy to worry about Tibet when she had a more immediate dilemma: whether to give pink slips or furloughs to her employees. She no longer could afford paying for their health insurance in her multilingual, ethnic radio station.

We are left with no energy to worry about Tibet. We often don't even want to see reality, for it is painful, and any attempt to make a real change demands our personal effort. This dilemma requires much energy, but still the best cure against the spirit-erosion is to be involved. George, my husband, for instance, is volunteering on behalf of native Hawaiians in their struggle for cultural survival.

I am impatient with our sluggish social awakening from the hypnosis of the deliberate tactics of distraction. [I hope Michael Moore's new movie will help] In today's world of interconnectedness all great dilemmas of humankind land on our doorstep. If Tibet is geographically too far away, well, the next generation of Americans can surely not be neglected. And the next American generation will be less healthy and less educated, unless we solve the hard dilemmas on their behalf today – [while we still have the institution of democracy].

It seems to me that in this moment of our history there is a great need for the prophetic voice – and in Max Weber's understanding: the “prophetic” in opposition to the “institutional.” Our institutions, envied by the world, no longer seem to live up to those ideals of integrity. Not in Hubert Humphrey's expectation anyway, who said: “The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped” – the vulnerable members of the society.

Aren't we all candidates of vulnerability? Shouldn't we therefore activate the prophet in us and shout truth into the face of these institutions – fiercely, in the prophet's style. Social-political forces seem to work against us, for they tend to guarantee the survival of the institution – sometimes through sacrificing the prophetic individual. But what about the *institution of freedom*? – freedom not only FOR choices, but freedom FROM poverty, insecurity, ignorance, ill-health?

For us Unitarian Universalists, this prophetic call comes naturally; as an institution and as individual churches, we ARE the prophets in our larger society, our vision and our voice are prophetic. We only need to be heard!

The Unitarian story began with a dramatic existential dilemma solved with a shocking sacrifice in order that our faith and our institution could survive. This is our untold story – until just recently, when the renowned Hungarian scholar, Professor Mihaly Balázs of the University of Szeged, Hungary, has finally summed up his lifelong research and fascinating revelations on early Unitarian history. This book was published a year ago by the University of Strasbourg, France and it is on the shelves of all major libraries of the world. **It is in my English translation.** And the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has just awarded us the “Book of the Year” Award.

I must make a remark here again about Gene Pickett who had written and published the very first, impressive short history of Transylvanian Unitarianism in the journal of the Larger Fellowship in 1989. With this new work, I now wish to bow before him.

The author's radical discoveries somewhat shocked the Transylvanian Unitarian Church. Some of the romantic myths about Ferenc Dávid collapsed. For instance, Francis Dávid was not Hungarian as claimed before. He was of Saxon parentage and naturally multilingual, but he ministered to both Saxons and Hungarians in Kolozsvár. It was, however, the Hungarian population that embraced each phase of Reformation, and called Dávid as their bishop. For Francis Dávid, the restless genius, the dreamer, seeker, the charismatic leader created not one, but consecutive movements around him – from Roman Catholic to Lutheran to Calvinist, and finally, to Unitarian.

At each discovery of yet a more perfect theological truth, his followers instantly solidified and institutionalized that truth – always trying to put an end to the fluidity of the Reformation.

However, David, once the institution refused to follow his evolving vision, his perfecting, continuously reforming instinct, he turned his prophetic opposition against it. Unitarianism, the final stage, was no exception. The story promises a happy end though, for we have survived 430 years of overt and covert persecution. But wait&see the price we had to pay, what compromises we were forced to make!

I often contemplate some of President Obama's pragmatic political stances in the light of the stunning pragmatism of our Unitarian forebears, Transylvania's Prince, John Sigismund and his court physician, Biandrata. The Prince and his mother, Queen Isabella's *realpolitik* that secured Unitarianism's survival seems almost treasonous: The Queen agreed that Medieval Transylvania would become a taxpaying vassal of the Turks; in exchange for this policy of submission, Transylvania received freedom to handle its internal matters, including religion. This was a very expensive freedom! But their true calculation was to oust the Turks as soon as Transylvania consolidates its power in Europe as an independent kingdom. Champions of the compromise were eager to see this new country Protestant, thus they never wanted to politically limit the free evolution of the Reformation. And this was lucky for Unitarians and a blessing for Francis David. Except, he experienced living in a country allied with the aggressors a "sad and painful slavery". But he kept his ambivalence private.

The *bishop* Francis Dávid, attributed a special historic role to Transylvania and its king, John Sigismund, who shied away from propagating religion with fire and sword. And for David, this religious tolerance became a legitimating argument for political power. He often asserted that their gentle and tolerant attitude served as additional proof for their being right doctrinally as well. This highpoint of religious freedom began to associate with a vision that Transylvania had a divinely elected role in European Protestantism. And indeed, it soon became a safe haven for persecuted Protestants everywhere.

This new sense of identity became so fundamental, that after John Sigismund's tragic death in 1571 – a hunting accident! – Transylvania elected a Roman Catholic king, István Báthory. With this they actually meant to emphasize the total triumph of Protestantism, their invulnerability in religious matters settled once and for all. They did not foresee any risk in this choice. Of course, Pandora's box was now open and the king began to deconstruct the Protestant foundation. Unitarians became under attack and they looked at Ferenc Dávid for guidance. But while he was carrying his already radical theology even further, inside he was tormented by personal dilemmas.

He attracted so many foreign radical thinkers that he turned Kolozsvár into one of the most important centers of religious dissenters, refugees from all over Europe. Among them was *Jacobus Palaeologus*, who played a key role in the last phase of David's life. Palaeologus proposed a novel version of Antitrinitarianism to David. It was an attempt to unify the Jewish, Muslim and Christian religions. At the same time, another famous heretic-friend, *Glirius*, through his famous work *Mattanjah*, tempted David for further radicalization. Which unleashed the powers of persecution. His opponents first used Dávid's 1576 divorce to destroy the bishop's reputation. He was denied being heard by a secular court, instead he was tried by a Calvinist court. His power as a Unitarian bishop was drastically curtailed.

Once his closest ally, Biandrata, failed to silence the bishop's innovative fervor, he invited Fausto Sozzini [Faustus Socinus] from Poland to help him. Socinus lived in David's house for six months in 1579. But Dávid remained defiant and unstoppable. He convoked his ministers for a synod in February 24, 1579, and driven by the passion of a seeker for truth, he presented his lofty new theses. Scholarly opinion is divided concerning the real nature of these theses, but it seems that had much to do with *Mattanjah*, the "bible" of the Sabbatarian movement. As a result, his former friends now turned into opponents and even enemies, accusing him of stepping on the dangerous path toward Sabbatarianism. (Sabbatarianism is the

most radical wing of Reformation in which Protestantism looped back into Judaism. Their argument was that since Jesus made no modification of the Old Testament laws, therefore one can correctly understand God's laws through the Old Testament alone. Therefore they adopted the Mosaic laws and the observance of the Sabbath.)

The Calvinist Trinitarian opposition, of course, gladly used these new theses – falsified or David's own, we don't really know – to demonstrate how limitless rationalism unavoidably leads to sectarianism – in this case, to the despised Sabbatarianism.

So the desperate Biandrata put the bishop under strict house arrest before an expedited trial by the Diet in June 1579. Francis Dávid was gravely ill by then, unable to move or speak – yet the Diet pronounced its verdict anyway: for having broken the ban on religious innovation, Dávid was sentenced for life in prison.

The trial provoked violent reactions all over Transylvania, showing David's enormous prestige. His community tried to alleviate his situation. One time they even attempted to financially bribe Biandrata, so he would allow David at least to come home to die. Not even this was granted to him. There was no way out from the dungeon of the Déva fortress-prison. Jesuit sources claim that during his last days he was wrestling with demons. But they did not last too long for he died on November 15, 1579.

A troubling mystery has remained to us: Why the best friend and closest Unitarian ally, Dr. Biandrata, turned into such a violent, deadly enemy?

The answer comes as a bombshell from this new historical account: The Diet of Transylvania sentenced Dávid to death not because of his radical Antitrinitarian dogmatic stance; rather Biandrata, the political realist, the *Judas*, **imprisoned his restless friend in order to prevent turning Unitarianism into a mere religious sect, unacceptable for contemporary society. And I don't doubt that Unitarianism could have disappeared, as did Sabbatarianism, which was later hunted into extinction.**

What an irony that Biandrata meant to protect Unitarianism from its very prophetic founder! His institutional instinct judged that Reformation needed a cut-off point, and the great Dávid threatened the new treasure by his zeal of further "perfecting" it. So the founder of our institution became the first martyr of the new faith. Although the Roman Catholic king and the Calvinist majority were too happy to get rid of Ferenc Dávid, it was the friend, the representative of the Unitarian institution who sacrificed the charismatic leader of the movement. This happens over and over, in politics as well as in the church. (In the light of the secret police files, it happened to my father as well)

And we are left with the ever-ambiguous choice: whether to take the side of idealism or realism? Who carries history forward: the passionate seeker-innovator or the political realist compromiser? The prophetic liberal or the conservative institutional? And where is the cut-off point in our will to compromise? These remain questions for our time. But also remain the audacious hope for us Unitarians, that these are not antagonistic extremes but a reconcilable obligation.

Amen