FOR ONE BRIEF SHINING MOMENT
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
November 11, 2012
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

If you don’t know where you’ve come from,
How can you know where you are going?
—Anonymous

What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
—T.S. Eliot

THE MORNING READING

The History of Unitarian Universalism in Just 923 Words
by Rev. Tim Kutzmark

Unitarian Universalism is an ancient faith—growing from two separate and long-standing traditions: the Unitarian tradition and the Universalist tradition.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism reach back 2000 years to Judaism, and to the teachings and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our Unitarian forebears looked at Jesus as a human being and great teacher. They believed Jesus called us to become fully realized and loving human beings. These Unitarian roots are anchored in the radical belief that human beings have within themselves not original sin, but original blessing. If that blessing within us is nurtured, we have the potential to create much good in the world.

Our Universalist roots are anchored in the radical belief that all human beings are worthy of love: that if there is a God, then that God is a Loving God who would never condemn anyone to eternal damnation. Universalism calls us to live not in fear but through love. Throughout our long history, our Unitarian and Universalist faith has reached beyond traditional religious thought.

Our roots weave through the history of Europe in the 1400s and 1500s, in freethinking individuals and communities. We are rooted in Poland, where a group of free-thinkers, the Socinians, dared to teach that the religious life is lived through deeds and not creeds, and that non-violence is the hallmark of a community of faith. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is also rooted in Transylvania, where, in 1568, King John Sigismund, history’s only Unitarian King, issued the Edict of Torda, the world’s first declaration of religious tolerance.
We were part of the Great Reformation, which re-examined the teachings of religion and challenged the authority of one person or one group to speak for all people of faith.

We helped fuel the 18th century’s Age of Enlightenment, when great minds affirmed the role of reason in discerning truth, when optimism about human nature began to spread, when greater rights were extended to the common people, and when science was moved to the center of responsible inquiry. We claim as our own, among others, scientist Isaac Newton and philosopher John Locke.

Our roots took firm hold in the New World with the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1620, and its fierce belief that each congregation should be independent and self-governing. 150 years later, the United States of America was founded, in part, on Unitarian and Universalist ideals of human worth and dignity, and the right to personal freedom of thought and religious belief. The framers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution include Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, and Benjamin Rush, all who worshipped in Unitarian or Universalist churches. Three of the first six presidents of the United States were Unitarians. Two more Unitarian presidents would follow after them.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is rooted in New England, where, in the early 1800’s, liberal ministers preached that every human being has the capacity to cultivate and nurture their innate moral goodness. They called no one a sinner, but encouraged everyone to live out their inherent worth and dignity.

Our faith took on new life through the Transcendentalist flowering of Boston in the 1800s. Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Walt Whitman were all Unitarians. They taught us that divinity was alive in nature, and that the Great Mystery of Life could be perceived in all things. They looked beyond the bible and Christianity to seek the Universal truth in all religion. They opened up America to the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and other world religions.

Still later, Unitarian Humanists pioneered the notion that one did not need to believe in God in order to believe that we are called to live a good and responsible life. Belief in the Divine is not necessary to be a religious person. We need not believe alike to love alike.

Members of our faith transformed the social conscience of this country. Universalists spoke out against slavery as early as 1740. Unitarians Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the movement to extend full citizenship to women, securing for them the right to vote. Universalists were the first denomination in the nation to ordain women to the ministry, in the 1800s. Members of our faith were pioneers in the kindergarten movement, prison reform, and the compassionate care of the mentally ill.

The Red Cross grew out of Unitarian work during the Civil War, as did the modern nursing movement pioneered by Unitarian Florence Nightengale. Our Unitarian Service
Committee rescued Jews from the Nazis during World War II. We sent more ministers to Selma to march with Dr Martin Luther King than any other denomination in the country. Our faith tradition was the first to ordain openly gay, lesbian, and transgender ministers, and is now an active voice in advocating for immigration rights and reform.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is rooted here, in us: the members of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading. It is rooted in this growing congregation of young and old. We will help determine the future and the promise of what Unitarian Universalism will offer to a world that aches to become whole.

We will embody the defeats and the triumphs of this ancient faith, this faith of diverse and divergent spirituality, this faith in action, this faith of affirmation and uplift, this faith that cannot be silenced, this faith of and for the future.

THE SERMON
“For One Brief Shining Moment”
by Rev. Tim Kutzmark

How important is it for us to know where we come from? I’m not just talking in a religious sense. The same question is worth asking in our personal lives: How important is it to know where we come from? How important is it to claim our roots as part of our identity?

Take my own family for instance—the people and place that I come from. My Dad’s side of the family emigrated from Poland in the late 1880s, booking passage on those great ships that brought a swelling tide of Eastern Europeans to America’s shores. My Dad’s people settled in the Polish section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and became the sweating and poorly paid backbone of its burgeoning steel industry. My Dad was raised in a home where his grandmother spoke only Polish. He attended a Polish language Catholic Church and ate poor Polish people foods like cabbage and kielbasa. But even as he was steeped in all things Polish, a family ashamed of their heritage raised him. My Dad’s father changed his last name from the Polish “Kaczmarek” to the more German sounding “Kutzmark.” Grandpa didn’t want to be seen as (and I quote him) “a dumb Pollack.” I grew up ashamed of being Polish, ashamed of sharing a bloodline with what I was told were ignorant, lumbering Neanderthals. Polish was bad heritage.

When I went to seminary and began to study the history of Unitarian Universalism, I learned how wrong I was. Poland, among other things, was the place of one of the greatest moments in our faith’s history.

This moment of Polish renaissance actually began in Italy, in 1547, when a guy by the name of Laelius Socinus fled Venice to avoid the Italian Inquisition. A lawyer by trade, Laelius Socinus prized reason—that ability to think for ourselves. He believed that reason must be part of the religious life. Laelius Socinus studied the Bible and became
convinced that the teachings of the Catholic Church “were in fundamental conflict with scripture and with reason.” (Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, Rev. David E. Bumbaugh, p. 19) Needless to say, this didn’t go over well with the Vatican. For the next 15 years Laelius Socinus kept moving and teaching his radical religious perspective, till he finally died in 1562, at the age of 37. Before he died, Laelius Socinus bequeathed his trunk of writings to his nephew Faustus Socinus. Faustus opened the trunk and studied “his uncle’s legacy with care, and discovered there the insistence that human reason is equal to scripture in authority.” (ibid, adapted) The human mind could discern what was true.

Convinced, converted and enthused, Faustus Socinus left Italy and arrived in Poland in 1580.

It was a time of real religious upheaval. Protestant and Catholic congregations were battling over who practiced the true teachings of Christ. A smaller group of Protestants—The Minor Reform Church of Poland—had actually broken away from the main church and was teaching “Unitarianism”—the belief that Jesus was human and not divine, and that the concept of the Holy Trinity (three persons in one God) was not in the Bible but was a human-created concept. Further, these Unitarians taught that God was All Loving and that eternal damnation was simply untrue. Faustus Socinus arrived in Poland, took leadership of the struggling Minor Reform Church, and helped transform it. Its members were soon called Socinians (after Faustus Socinus’ last name), and their center was in a place called Rakow.

The Polish town of Rakow was founded in 1567. It was an intentionally created community, a place that offered religious tolerance and acceptance of differences. This idea came from a woman named Jadwiga Sienienska, who convinced her wealthy husband to use his fortune to build a religious and social Utopia. A few days’ carriage ride from the capital city, Rakow was isolated enough to be safe, but close enough to allow commerce and communication. Rakow became the center of the Minor Reform Church, a Unitarian safe haven. Rakow was one woman’s grand experiment, an attempt to reform the world through radical religious ideals. All wealth was shared, and the social order was leveled—nobles and ministers were equal to farmers and craftsmen. The people were pro-peace pacifists, and would do nothing that would endanger the life of another. They refused military service and outlawed the death penalty. After stopping in Rakow, a visitor reported: “[I] felt as though [I] was transported into another world; for whereas elsewhere all was full of wars and tumult, there was all quiet, [all] were calm and modest in their behavior, so that you might think them angels.” (Charles A. Howe, For Faith and Freedom, p. 68)

When Faustus Socinus arrived some thirteen years after its founding, the town was struggling in fulfilling its ideals. But under his leadership, Rakow experienced a renaissance. By 1602, Rakow was the center of an international intellectual movement. The town’s “Unitarian” academy was attracting minds from all over Europe, wanting to study in this unique, interfaith town. Rakow became the Unitarian Capital of the world!
Here, Faustus Socinus began to write religious pamphlets profusely, codifying his teachings.

It was these writings that brought the wrath of the Catholic Church. According to historian Charles A. Howe, “the Catholic [priest] order of Jesuits established a center in [nearby] Krakow from which they began mounting an assault on the” Unitarians, (ibid., p. 72) charging that, among other things, they were devil worshippers. Socinus “was attacked . . . by a group of . . . soldiers under the command of a Catholic noble. Excrement was spread over his face and into his mouth.” (p. 73) Throughout Poland, Socinian churches were attacked by angry mobs. Historian Howe reports, “A much more serious assault [on Socinus] took place a few days later when a mob of students, celebrating the [Catholic Holy Day of the] Ascension . . . broke into the house where Socinus lay sick in bed [recovering from the earlier attack], dragged him to the marketplace, burned his books and papers . . . and threatened to burn him as well if he did not recant [his Unitarian beliefs]. He refused . . . and the mob decided to take him to the river and drown him instead.” (ibid.) He was saved only by the efforts of someone who convinced “the mob to turn the heretic over to him.” Socinus was spirited away and spent the next four years in hiding.

His writing continued—the pinnacle of which was the Rakovian Catechism, a comprehensive explanation of Unitarian belief and a celebration of the power of reason. It is one of the most important documents in our religious history. The printing press at Rakow circulated copies of the Catechism, and over 500 other titles, all over Europe.

Persecution of Socinians continued. One member of the church was “beheaded in the great marketplace of Warsaw . . . prior to his execution his tongue had been cut out as a punishment for blasphemy.” (p. 79) Once beheaded, his body was burnt as a heretic.

The final destruction of Rakow came from a schoolboy prank. A Catholic crucifix had been stuck in the ground on a piece of disputed land. Two Socinian students knocked it down with stones. “The Racovians apologized and tried to make amends” (Bum, 32) but this was the Catholic Church’s chance: the Academy was ordered closed, the printing press destroyed, and all Socinians were banished from Rakow.

The Jesuits continued to persecute the peace-loving Socinians throughout Poland, and 22 years later the King ordered the Unitarians to either convert to Catholicism or leave Poland. If they refused both options, they would be killed. Those who fled Poland scattered the seeds of Unitarianism across the continent. Many children, women, and men died in the forced migration out of Poland.

Two years ago, my Dad and I travelled to Poland. Dad wanted to see the villages where the Kaczmarek clan had begun. It was, for him, an ancestral homecoming.

One day while we were there, I hired a translator, and set out to find Rakow. It took a while, and a few wrong turns, but find it I did. The town was small and unremarkable. But for me, it was a religious homecoming. I searched and located the foundation of the
Unitarian church that had been torn down by the Jesuits in 1638. Using journal entries from that time, I was able to find the spot on the river where the Rakow Academy once stood. The giant mound in that location looked like it could be covering the torn down bricks of that institution of Unitarian learning. I even found the location where the printing press probably stood, that powerful piece of technology that brought the Unitarian message to Europe, to the colonies, and by extension, to us, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading.

(A side note to the longtime members of this church. Rev. Jane Rzepka, whose beloved 15 years ministry is a highlight of this congregation’s history, also made the trip to Rakow during her ministry here. When I returned from Poland, Jane and I talked together about our pilgrimages, and noted that we are probably two of only a handful of Unitarian Universalist ministers who actually saw, who actually stood in the place that made our modern faith possible.)

Today, I am proud to be Polish. Today, I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist. Today, I am proud that Poland helped shape our remarkable religion.

Where do you come from? What are your cultural origins? I suggest that for many of you, your countries of familial origin also hold moments of Unitarian Universalist history, also hold the story of courageous pioneers of the Unitarian and Universalist spirit. You, too, can be proud and claim your heritage, our living tradition.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

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