

The Ghost Pepper Papers
June 12, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Before Queen Gertrude drank the fatal drink, I wish I could have shared these words with her.

Teach me the Golden Rule and make me a lovesick fool
In the light of day, let sorrow drift away
Crown of thorns has many jewels

Songs of glory sung in hate only destroy what love has made
And if the Kingdom comes, you don't wanna be the one
That is standing in the way

All the stories I have heard, enlightened ones who walked the earth
They bring me sweet relief, rid me of human grief
I am free from every hurt

Sheryl Crow once sang them and they've stayed with me through the years.

The best part of the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare is not the "To be or not to be," speech, the famous soliloquy that the young and living Prince Hamlet muses, muttering to himself. And the best part Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is not the explanation of the orchard fratricide, the famous passage for which the old and ghostly King Hamlet comes back from death to life to explain to his noble son. No. The best part of Hamlet is terrible. It's the part in where Prince Hamlet and vengeful Laertes are fencing and Claudius is egging them on—Claudius, the murderous uncle-turned-father to young Hamlet, the new king who has secretly killed his brother, married his brother's wife and ascended to his brother's throne. The caustic scoundrel, the relentless wretch who wantonly tore up treaties protecting peace in the region. Murderous New 'King' Claudius. Fratricidal brother to betrayal.

Claudius was scheming. He needed Laertes to win. Through such a victory, Claudius could rid himself of his greatest threat. So, Claudius poisoned the tip of Laertes sword without his knowledge and Claudius poisoned Hamlet's wine. By one path or another, he'd have his way. Young Hamlet was going to die...until Queen Gertrude finally came to her senses.

She had been blinded by sorrow. She had been overwhelmed by grief, crushed by the loss of her dear husband, the King, young Prince Hamlet's father. My God, how the royal couple had loved each other so. As their son had put it, his father was...

...so loving to my mother [he said]
That he might [argue that] the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly...
[how] she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on:

Their love was like a wildfire that burned nothing in its path, that burned up not even time but left them breathless in the stopping of it. Suspended were all the worries of the day for their good fortune. Claudius put an end to all of that. So it was that good Queen Gertrude was overcome with such great grief. She remarried far too quickly—Claudius saw to that—within a month of her dear one's death, leading the reeling, son to cry out, "Frailty, thy name is woman."

Hamlet found his mother's actions deplorable, unforgiveable. He and his mother, the Queen, they could not see eye to eye. So, he dismissed her and she endured him. She endured his brooding. She endured his petulance. She endured his depressive indulgences...until she finally realized the he might be right. She thought that Claudius might be mad or evil or some combination of the two. She thought that Laertes' sword might be envenomed and that Hamlet's wine might just be poisoned...the wine that she was holding in her hands at the time. And so, she tested out her theory. She looked Claudius in the eye and she placed the wine to her lips to force his reaction. With the gesture of a toast, she offers these words: "The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet."

Claudius tries to stop her but is unable to do so. He says, "Gertrude, do not drink." What this, she realizes how deeply she's been betrayed...and she drinks. Like I said, the best part of Hamlet is terrible.

Ugh! That moment!!! What an incredible experience that artist was able to create—the terror of the envenomed swordplay against the backdrop of the poisoned wine. I know that every family has issues but OMG!! This family was terrible. The drama of it all just destroys me every time. What a moment that artist was able to describe!! Yet, Shakespeare could not have succeeded he had failed to capture the human-ness in all of this. Despite the unmitigated catastrophe of the storyline, we see ourselves reflected in lesser ways. This is the very purpose of tragedy...and by the end of the play, we realize this. There is such consequential treachery and treason, so much violence and loss. As Hamlet, himself, approaches his end, he implores his dear friend, Horatio,

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

For without Prince Hamlet's perspective on the unfolding story, civil war would rage without meaning. Here, the final curtain falls as the war gets underway. What eases this kind of terrible suffering? What provides some modicum of relief from such distress?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, June 12th and the title of this morning's reflection is rather spicy. It's called The Ghost Pepper Papers. How will this mighty flock, this hearty stock of Vermonters handle it?

This reflection was inspired by two seemingly unrelated events—a media press release regarding General Assembly, the upcoming national gathering of Unitarian Universalists and my recent choice to grow Ghost Peppers in the garden this year.

Honestly, I honestly don't know what I was thinking... when I was planning out my garden, when I was purchasing my starts. I bought a set of Ghost Pepper plants...not really knowing what they were. I was drawn to make the purchase because I was drawn to the name. Ghost Peppers sounded more exciting than cucumbers to me...but probably, it's wise to grow them both.

I did a Google search about these particularly potent peppers and I found out that they are also known as bhut jolokia.

[It's a] chili pepper cultivated in Northeast India. It is a hybrid.... In 2007, Guinness World Records certified that the ghost pepper was the world's hottest chili pepper, 170 times hotter than Tabasco sauce.¹

Now, I should say that only recently have I become able to handle Tabasco sauce. I finally find it delicious but it used to burn my tongue and turn my stomach and make me gasp for air.

Honestly, I honestly don't know what I was thinking. I will let you know how things turn out.

Ghost Peppers are really spicy but they do not deeply concern me. I am much more concerned about the media press release about General Assembly. It read, in part, as follows:

For immediate release

June 2022 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)
in Portland, Oregon to be Met with Protestors from its Own Ranks

PORTLAND, OR—For the first time in its 61-year history, the national meeting of America's most liberal religious body—the UUA—will face demonstrations from some of its own members and clergy. They are alarmed [he means, “we’ are alarmed”] at the radical, authoritarian, and anti-liberal turn of the Association's leadership in recent years. [Jay] Kiskel and [Todd] Eklof, along with many other concerned Unitarian Universalists will be outside the Oregon Convention Center (777 NE Martin Luther King Blvd)...

Unitarian Universalism was born out of The Radical Reformation. This book, so titled was written by George Hunston Williams, dear friend to James Luther Adams, a ground-breaking Unitarian theologian of the 20th century. They were pretty radical in their pursuit of liberal ideals. They stood radically against violence, radically against prejudice and anti-Semitism, radically against Hitler and his rise to power in the 1930s. They were there at the time. Who we are now grows directly out of who we were then. The idea that Unitarian Universalists are “alarmed” by that which is radical is [...] let's just say ‘historically inaccurate.’ On the other hand, it is media friendly. As they used to say in the newspaper business, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Presumably, this is the goal of the author's choice of language.

If you read further into the press release, the personal core of the protests and the press release begin to clarify. The press release reads, Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof was censured and stripped of his professional credentials after writing a book critical of the UUA in 2019, *The Gadfly Papers*. Eklof says, “I became a Unitarian because commitment to freedom of conscience is kind of my thing. I thought it was our thing too and I am certain it was, until recently.

The content of the press release—which I assume is also its author—is deeply committed to freedom of conscience. He says, it’s “kind of my thing...” I’m sorry but this reads more like an online dating profile than a statement of theology.

Todd Eklof is a smart man. His grasp of history is impressive. In fact, many of those who criticize him are not always as knowledgeable. Unfortunately, and here, I speak only for myself, my former colleague’s spiritual maturity is not as impressive as his intellect. He has positioned himself as the “gadfly” of liberal faith, calling it out on what he perceives as its rejection of reason and tolerance, its categorical resistance to systemic racism, its silencing of dissent and its subversion of democracy. If I cared more, this would be heart-breaking to me—not if I cared more about Unitarian Universalism but if I cared more about the position being taken by my former colleague. I say, “my former colleague” because Todd Eklof has been removed from fellowship. On June 8th of 2020, the Executive Secretary of the ministerial credentialing body issued a letter that read

Dear UUA Religious Professionals and Lay Leaders –

I write to inform you that the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) voted on June 5th to remove the Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof from fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association. The decision was made based on the Rev. Dr. Eklof’s refusal to engage with the fellowship review process after a complaint of ethical misconduct was filed [against him]. After the Rev. Dr. Eklof refused to engage with the initial investigation, the MFC moved to create an independent three-person investigative team to undertake a full fellowship review. Participation would have allowed the Rev. Dr. Eklof to present his perspective and any concerns he had with the process, but again he [refused to engage].

Todd Ekloff self-published his book called *The Gadfly Paper* in May of 2019. In June of 2019, without the consent of his congregation, as I understand it, he distributed copies of his publication to the General Assembly in Spokane. Todd was then and is now serving as the minister to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane, a church that has now split. Those who could follow his leadership have stayed with him and those who could not follow him have resigned their membership.

Now, you might not appreciate this, but when this conflict began, I reached out to Todd. I offered a tiny gesture of support for him even though I radically disagree with him. My reaching out was intended as a collegial olive branch. I figured, if he pursued it, I would be willing to work with him. I would be willing to try to find a more elegant solution than the one he is choosing. As ministers in

fellowship with one another, Todd and I were bound by a sacred covenant—the cherishing the religious authority of the congregations that we are called to serve. In the language of Installation, language that we used here at North Chapel when I was installed,

No right is more precious to a free congregation than the right of choosing its own minister. Neither is any right more precious to a minister than that of choosing the congregation that he or she will serve.

The congregational freedom that is described here is powerful. It is the flower of a great deal of nurturing and growth as a community. We are radically free. No one on earth can tell us what to believe...and I don't have the power and don't want the power to tell you what to think or how to pray or who to love or where to live or when to die or be reborn. No one has that power in our faith. Part of the call to ministry is to prepare the ground upon which we might make our individual choices—each to our gift.

Yesterday morning, at David Doolittle's memorial service, David's older brother, Bob described the many divergent aspects of faith among the brothers of the family and the extended family. Together, they are Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, mystical, eclectic Unitarian Universalists. There is that song by Hozier,

When my time comes around
Lay me gently in the cold dark earth
No grave can hold my body down
I'll crawl home to her

In faith, we are stronger than death. In healthy community, we bring meaning to life. No naïve rules can hold the spirit. We cleave to that...and at the same, are bound and limited. As the saying goes, we hold defensively, "Your freedom to flail about your arms stops at my nose." We must respect one another. We all must matter. We must keep learning to live together.

Surely, we cherish freedom in our movement but as James Baldwin reminded us, "Freedom requires the most rigid discipline." Kant called it the categorical imperative. Jesus called it the Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." For we exist in one another. We can be foolish and dangerous to imagine otherwise.

As a person, Todd Eklof is free to believe whatever he wants to believe...within a set of obvious limitations. He is free to believe that the Ghost Peppers that I am growing are his—I could hardly stop him and I don't take issue with this—but if he come to my house and picks them, he and I will have a serious problem. I already have groundhog issues. I don't need another thief in the garden.

As a minister, Todd is still free to believe whatever he wants to believe but his actions must be governed by the needs of the congregation. If he were to steal Ghost Peppers in the name of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane or if he were to lead his followers to do so, there would be problems. One of the problems with his book, *The Gadfly Papers*, is that it sometimes feels like he's stealing from the garden.

In his book, Eklof reflects on the merging of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1961. He writes,

I...propose, since Unitarians and Universalists have been unable to accomplish our primary purpose for joining together, establishing a universal religion of humanity for liberal religions around the world, that it might be time to break up.

There are a couple of issues with this statement. Firstly, I know a lot ministers at this point. I don't know many (or anyone, really) who has devoted real time and energy to "establishing a universal religion of humanity." I don't know what he means. What he seems to be suggesting is antithetical to my faith practice. So, that's curious. Secondly, merger (or consolidation) took a long time. The National Conference of Unitarian Churches was established in 1865. That was the year that the Civil War ended. North Chapel was 31 years old. The National Conference was looking to merge with the Universalists way back then.

In the 1890s, the Universalist General Convention meetings twice tabled motions calling for greater Unitarian Universalist cooperation. In 1931, a joint commission was created to consider methods of union. [] By 1953, the two denominations had established the Council of Liberal Churches (CLC) to work together on education and publications. Finally, a Joint Interim Committee recommended in 1955 that the two religious movements determine a step-by-step process for union. In 1956, the Joint Interim Committee was appointed with William B. Rice as it's chairman. It became the facilitator of a dialogue within the two groups and its work led directly to merger.

...which took place in 1961. Merger (or consolidation) took place slowly over the course of 96 years. Todd Eklof's perceptions of failure only date back three years—to 2019. Before the Gadfly Papers controversy, I had never heard of Todd Eklof from Spokane. He claims [and this, I quote],

Universalism has died and been replaced by a grotesque imposter in its place. Unitarianism, though muted, still lives, but must break freed from the bonds that now restrain it if it is going to survive.

I simply do not witness this in real life.

Todd strength is not in the power of his ideas. His strength lay in his ability and his willingness to make things hot and spicy. I went through a spectacularly difficult ministry before coming to Vermont. In keeping with our best practices, I wrote a letter of complaint. I did not call the newspapers. I did not issue a press release. I did not organize a protest of the General Assembly. I didn't make things ultra-hot and spicy...and I really could have. Quite easily. Instead, I entered into the processes that we've established in our faith for dealing with our differences. It wasn't easy but it strengthens us over time and it brings real peace to our lives.

If yourself embroiled in controversy or suddenly awash in grief and sorrow, beware the gestures too-eager men and their quick-fix "solutions.' Cleave to the wildfire love that animates life and burns nothing, scorches nothing along the way.

All the stories I have heard, enlightened ones who walked the earth
They bring me sweet relief, rid me of human grief
I am free from every hurt

Sure as the wind blows
Sure as the river flows
We will meet again on the long road home

Sometimes, ghost peppers come along to spicy up life a bit and other times, they come along and burn us. Murderous King Claudius stood in the way of the coming kingdom. I don't think my former colleague is particularly fratricidal but if he were here right now, I would say without pretense or irony, "You're killing me, brother." Like him, I believe that being free from every hurt does not mean weeding ghost peppers from the garden. It means knowing how to use them properly.

If you should find yourself in the Ghost Pepper pages of life, don't freak out. Don't get all hot and spicy if you don't enjoy it. Share what you love and stay in community, inviting that which calls us to our best.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_pepper