

The Salem Witch Trials
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
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Reading

From the 1831 [Lectures on Witchcraft: Comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem in 1692](#) by Unitarian minister, Charles Upham, junior pastor of the First Church in Salem:

The leading features and most striking aspects of the witchcraft delusion have been repeated in places, where witches and the interference of supernatural beings are never thought of; whenever a community gives way to its passions and spurns the admonitions and casts off the restraints of reason, there is a delusion that can hardly be described in any other phrase. We cannot glance our eye over the face of our country without beholding such scenes; and so long as they are exhibited...so long as we yield to the impulse of passion, and plunge into excitement, and take counsel of our feelings rather than our judgment, we are following in the footsteps of our fanatical ancestors. It would be wiser to direct our ridicule and reproaches to the delusions of our own times, rather than to those of a previous age, and it becomes us to treat with charity and mercy the failings of our predecessors, at least until we have ceased to imitate and repeat them.

If the citizens of this place are instructed by the example of their fathers to imitate their virtues, while they avoid their errors, and if by meditating upon the tremendous tragedy that has now been related, they are led to avoid the evils that result from the unrestrained dominion of the passions and imagination, to an independent exercise of their reason and judgment on all occasions and to a careful self-control; if by contemplating the superstitions of their fathers, they are rendered more grateful in the possession of their own privileges for the acquisition of knowledge and science, and more zealous in their improvement, the lesson which providence caused to be inscribed on that page of their history which I have sought to capture in these speeches will not have been given in vain.

Sermon

The Salem witch trials. A mystery from history, indeed. What was going on with those people? They seem so distant from us; more than a mere 300+ years can explain. Convicting people of supernatural crimes; trying them without granting representation; relying on the ravings of hysterical children as evidence; imprisoning, mistreating, *killing* people based on this fantastical evidence... It is as if they came from a whole other world. It is as if they come, not from our history, but from the pages of a work of fiction, a dark, twisted, tragic fantasy.

But they do, after all, come from our history, from American history, and more specifically, in a very real way, from *our* history, from *Unitarian* history.

If you go to the web site of the First Church in Salem, Unitarian and look at [their Frequently Asked Questions](#), you will find this question at the top:

Was your church involved in the witch hysteria of Salem Village in 1692?

Short answer? Yes.

It was not the church where the witch hysteria first began. That was nearby in Salem Village, a town now called Danvers. But the hysteria soon spread to First Church in Salem, with two of its members being tried, convicted, and executed.

And, no, there were no *Unitarian* congregations in America in 1692. These were *Puritan* churches. But the Puritan churches provided the basic congregational structure that we practice today. Congregational polity, it is called: the idea that the congregation should be the final authority on matters pertaining to the congregation. Puritans joined together around covenant rather than creed. Though we find ourselves quite distant from the Puritans in doctrinal theology (what they believed about God, the Bible, heaven and hell, sin), we have built upon their relational theology (how we join together in community, how we make decisions, how we encourage and support one another). Congregationalist. And you will find that many Puritan congregations, like the one in Salem, became Unitarian congregations.

There's a lot of fascinating history that we don't have time to talk about today...but this is progress, right? At least from our point of view. As author Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose grandfather had been a judge at the Salem witch trials, [wrote of the Puritans](#), "Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages." A congregation that was swept up in the hysteria of the witch trials finds its way to affirming and promoting the values of human reason, religious freedom and tolerance, and a dedication to compassion as the final measure of any religion or religious endeavor. Sounds like a happy ending to me.

...not so fast.

As you may have guessed, I think there's more on which we might choose to reflect concerning the Salem witch trials. As Charles Upham writes: "it becomes us to treat with charity and mercy the failings of our predecessors, at least until we have ceased to imitate and repeat them." If we are *not* to imitate and repeat their failings, we must try to identify those failings, admittedly from our own distant and necessarily biased view.

First of all, we have to understand the context. The sort of witchcraft that so worried these people was not some odd belief of a fringe group. Though the Salem witch trials have a high profile, many witch hunts and witch trials took place across Europe in that time period, too.

Which makes me wonder: what are the things that we believe in now, those things that are sewn into our culture so seamlessly that we don't even bother to question them, but which future generations will puzzle over, saying, "How could they *believe* that?"

Secondly, once we've recognized context, we should guard against oversimplifying motivation. When we look back at the past, we think of things in these sweeping generalizations. "People *did this*, because they *believed this*." And that may even be accurate—in part. But it's never that simple, is it? The ongoing mystery of history is that there is no single cause for the effect that we see. There are many factors to consider.

Some of the charges that were leveled against "witches" back in 1692 had to do with personal relationships, business dealings, and societal status. As pointed out in the story earlier, some say that adults "suggested" names of witches to the children, to settle personal scores, to grab their land or property, simply to control others (always a powerful temptation, it seems).

It is possible that the children were seeking attention and the circumstances swiftly spun out of their control.

It has been noted that the minister at Salem Village was under extreme fire from members of the congregation over the details of his “compensation package.” The first people to be “bewitched” were members of his household...though I hesitate to make any direct accusations from this vantage point, it was certainly a convenient distraction from the problems he faced, and he became one of the leaders propelling the trials and convictions.

A minister who had served the congregation briefly years earlier, leaving amidst dissension and upheaval in the congregation, was named as the leader of the witches, his “spirit” or “spectre” said to have visited the girls, inviting them to join him. He was arrested at his new home in Maine, brought to Salem, tried and convicted. The famous Puritan minister, Cotton Mather, a primary supporter of the witch trials, had long suspected Burroughs of heresy (of being a Baptist rather than a Puritan). He presided over Burroughs’ execution, defending the act against those who were having second thoughts about killing their former minister.

And we may look at all of these things and cry, “Hypocrisy!” It wasn’t really about superstition at all; it was about greed and power and selfishness. These people didn’t *believe* in witches; they *said they believed in witches* in order to get what they wanted.

But if we go there, I think we are escaping the complexity of human history and human nature. We are underestimating the ingenious (and diabolical) ways in which humans try (against all odds) to correlate beliefs and reason and desires; the contortions we can find ourselves in as we seek to justify the unjustifiable.

Cotton Mather may not have been disingenuous when he called Burroughs a witch; he may have genuinely suspected him as a witch because he knew him as a heretic. In other words, Mather may have considered that Burroughs’ heresy was *evidence* of witchery; he may have reasoned that the devil could find no better tool than a minister that would spread his heresies among the faithful.

People who suggested names of their enemies to the girls may not have been doing so cynically; they may have thought back to circumstances, in which these people had acted particularly mean, remembered an evil glint in their eye or some suspicious activity and a misfortune that occurred directly thereafter. They may have convinced themselves that they were doing a public service, protecting others from this potential evil. They may have convinced themselves that they were only suggesting the name as a possibility, and that it was up to the girls to confirm the person as a witch, a test that their very courts, after all, were willing to accept.

And this is not, in any way, to be taken as justification for what was done. But it *is* to say that evil is very rarely carried out by evil people doing evil things. It is most often carried out by people doing evil things for what they have convinced themselves are very good reasons. It is to say that the evil things are not recognized as such until the whole elaborate justification system is challenged. Religion, ideally, can supply the questions that challenge the system; at its worst, it supplies the justifications that lead us to evil.

The question becomes: how does religion address our inevitable fears? Does it help us to make peace with our fears, or does it provide an illusory target by which we might rid ourselves of fear?

In the case of the Puritans, they had many real things to fear, as was pointed out in the story:

The uncertainty surrounding property laws, the struggle to make a living, widespread disease, troubles within the congregation that was meant to be their haven, threats from the native population in retaliation for egregious actions by the settlers...

And Puritan theology held that God was in control; human will and actions played no part. God's sovereign will reigned over all things so that the faithful could not question; only humbly accept. UNLESS...

Unless *some* of the bad things that were happening to them were actually the result of evil agents; witches, and not God.

You see, it is possible that the witches were not the *source* of this community's fears, but the tragically misguided *answer* to fears that already existed. Rather than quietly accepting the will of God, they could suddenly fight against the forces of evil. Rather than resigning themselves to the inherent insecurity of their existence, they could create security by attacking the newly identified cause. It even seemed to work...for a short time.

But the numbers of accused kept growing and soon it was not just the unconventional and the outcasts, but respected members of the congregations, friends and neighbors who were imprisoned. And the declarations of innocence before the executions, when these individuals had nothing to gain thereby, seemed to ring true. And all the supposed evidence seemed weak, and the many trials seemed like a bad dream, and the problems that they had before were still there, and the desperately dramatic attempts on behalf of these Puritans to rescue themselves from evil had only drawn them deeply *into* evil.

And the fear was still with them, because there is a fear that is a natural companion to existence, the fear of all that is, and will continue to be, outside our control.

Are there things for us to learn here? How are we dealing with fear today?

We, like the Puritans, have some reasonable fears with which to grapple: hunger, climate change, undeclared wars with no foreseeable endpoint, vanishing resources, economic devastation, unemployment, home foreclosures, health care reform (or the lack thereof), ongoing human rights abuses...and, of course, that underlying anxiety about all that lies outside our control.

And I think that we in this country may be in a particularly vulnerable place when it comes to dealing with fears. I think that the relative isolation and insulation of this society has led to the illusion of complete security. I think that advances in technology and science and weaponry have led to the illusion of complete control. "Our war on terror will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated," [President Bush said](#). We'll attack them today so they don't attack us tomorrow. "We'll fight them over there, so we don't have to fight them here." [The White House web site proclaims that](#) President Obama's "highest priority is to keep the American people safe." That has the ring of an absolute. Safe from what? From everything? And at what price?

Whatever you think of the "war on terror," my guess is that it's not "a new kind of war" at all; it's as old as the witch trials; it's as old as human consciousness.

Increase Mather, Puritan minister and father of Cotton Mather, sensing the tide of public opinion turning against the trials, wrote a document that recommended the same rules of evidence in prosecuting witches that were used for any other capital crime. [He wrote](#), "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned." Justice and compassion, in other words, must take precedence over security. Are we willing to commit to that?

We may look back and shake our heads at the shoddy legal standards set at the Salem witch trials, but listen to this:

In the November 2009 issue of Harper's Magazine, [Petra Bartosiewicz quotes](#) an FBI affidavit defending their detention of questionable suspects, saying, "*that even the possessors of [important] intelligence might not be aware of the significance of what they knew, and so they could be detained simply because the agency was "unable to rule out" their value.*"

So not only is the United States detaining people who have no charges brought against them on the suspicion that they might be dangerous, we are holding people because they might know something they don't even know they know, and though we don't yet know what it is, we can't prove it's not there, so we'll keep them in detention.

We may bemoan the twenty innocent people that were executed in 1692 for no good reason, but listen to this:

In the Oct. 26, 2009 issue of the New Yorker, [Jane Mayer writes](#), "*[T]he recent campaign to kill Baitullah Mehsud [leader of the Taliban and one of the most wanted terrorists in Pakistan] offers a sobering case study of the hazards of robotic warfare. It appears to have taken sixteen missile strikes, and fourteen months, before the C.I.A. succeeded in killing him. During this hunt, between 207 and 321 additional people were killed, depending on which news accounts you rely upon. It's all but impossible to get a complete picture of whom the C.I.A. killed during this campaign...*"

Presently, this administration [has re-branded](#) the grandly provocative "war on terror" to the seemingly innocuous "overseas contingency operation," but have any of the strategies changed? Are our stated goals reasonable? Are our tactics acceptable? Are our processes just? Or will we come to the end of this "terror hysteria" with the tragic understanding that we have become participants in the evil we are desperately guarding ourselves against.

We may shudder at the thoughts of the public executions that were carried out during the witch trials, but that may also be key to why they ended. What price do we pay for having the deaths carried out by men and machines a world away, safely hidden away from our collective conscience?

Have we learned from the failings of our predecessors so that we will not imitate or repeat them?

As we wave goodbye to this Halloween, it is worth remembering that the scariest things we face are the extreme measures that humans sometimes take to alleviate fear and anxiety, most especially that fear and anxiety that is an inescapable component of existence. And the greatest hopes lie in our ability to

expose our own justifications for evil and put our energies toward extending the breadth and depth of our compassion.

That is, undoubtedly, a risky endeavor, but a risk worth taking.