

What does the word innovation mean to you?

To me, innovation means we never stop learning, and we never stop changing based off what we learn. Some of the children might remember when we had the chapel on pilgrimage, and we learned about the Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion and the first was “We’re Always Learning.” That’s what innovation means to me.

In fact, to me, innovation goes to the very heart of who we are as Unitarian Universalists, although not everyone has always believed in the power of innovation. How many of you knew that Unitarians have been talking about and debating how important Innovation is for the past 500 years!

In the mid 1500s, Unitarianism was still a new idea, but two people soon rose up to help lead the new movement in Transylvania– Francis David and Biandrata. Biandrata was the royal court’s chief counsel and Francis David was a preacher who would become the spiritual leader of the Unitarian movement. Biandrata was so impressed with David that Biandrata persuaded King John Sigismund to appoint David as the royal court preacher.

In 1568, David preached at the Diet of Torda. This was a big meeting for all of the different religions in the kingdom, and this led to the King issuing the first proclamation in the history of the world that guaranteed every person the right to worship whatever religion they wanted to. David’s sermon became so famous, pictures of him preaching at this meeting are up in many Unitarian churches in Transylvania, and it’s even up in our own library. And eventually, through David’s efforts, in 1571 Unitarianism was lifted up to be one of the four “received religions” of the kingdom, alongside Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. This was the first time Unitarianism had ever been given a royal seal of approval.

The day after the King issued this proclamation, he got into a carriage wreck, and never recovered, dying soon after. He had no heir, and the next person who was chosen as King didn’t really share the King’s liberal stance towards Unitarianism. They closed the Unitarian press and schools and fired all the Unitarians from the government, other than Biandrata. And soon a law was passed that forbade any religion from “innovation.”

Unitarianism was still new and developing, and David wanted to keep developing Unitarian beliefs. He believed strongly in innovation. Biandrata heard what David was doing and warned David against asking too many questions. Biandrata knew that David might be charged with the crime theological innovation. David didn’t take his advice, and soon the two men, former friends, became bitter rivals. Biandrata told the new crown prince of David’s innovation, and recommended that David be put under house arrest.

Eventually there was a trial in early June of 1579. Biandrata, as the chief lawyer for the prince, was the prosecutor. Biandrata said he was sorry, but he had warned David to stop

innovating. David didn't make any apologies for what he was doing, and the outcome of the trial was obvious – David was guilty of innovation and was condemned to life in prison. He died in the royal dungeon on November 12, 1579.

Controversy over the trial began immediately and has continued down through the years. On the one hand, David was convinced that Unitarians needed to reform and innovate. David believed it was important to always innovate, to always learn, to always change. On the other hand, Biandrata was worried that if they kept innovating against the law, it would destroy the young Unitarian movement and the government would crack down. Biandrata believed it was important to stay true to who you were, and to follow the law of the land.

In the end, it was an argument between two sides of Unitarianism – one side that wanted innovation so we can keep evolving, and one side that wanted to keep to tradition to save our faith.

Throughout the past 500 years, many have found inspiration from David's story to continue innovating within Unitarian Universalism. And we still see this argument today, 500 years later. There are people who think right now in Unitarian Universalism that we need to keep on innovating, to keep on learning, to keep on changing, and there are some who think that we need to stick to tradition. What do you think?

I'm not sure about you, but you can count me in the camp that believes we always need to innovate, and that we need to never stop learning. In the spirit of Francis David, may we never stop working to improve ourselves and to explore our own personal Unitarian Universalist faith.