

CHILDREN'S WORD

The beginnings of Halloween go back very far, the ancient people called the Celts. The Celts lived in the British Isles during ancient times. They were pagans. They believed in the gods of nature.

There was an important festival on the Celtic calendar: it was called Samhain. It marked the end of the growing season, on October 31st. Samhain was also the last day of the year on the Celtic calendar.

During Samhain, the earth goddess, grown old and tired, bids farewell to her lover, the Sun, and spends a few months in mourning while his soul travels through the underworld. At Yule, what we call Christmas, the Sun is reborn, small and weak, but over the spring, he becomes big and strong. The earth mother also changes and becomes young again by in Spring. They live together, laughing and growing all through the year, until, at Samhain, they are old and it is time for the Sun to make his journey again.

On October 31st, the Druids, Celtic priests and teachers, predicted the future. The Celtic people dressed in scary costumes to frighten the evil spirits, and to confuse good ghosts who might want to become friends and take you back home with them. They also played games to bring good luck in the new year. The Celtic believed that on the night of October 31st, spirits of the dead returned to earth and would seek out their loved ones. And that is where Halloween, its costumes, games and traditions started.

BRIDGE OF LOVE *"This Little Light of Mine"*

COMMUNITY MINUTE ?

PART I: Better Beautiful than Perfect: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus

The title of this story begins with the title of one of my favorite songs by Roger Clyne: Better Beautiful than Perfect. In that song, Clyne juxtaposes the crosses we see at crash sites on the roadside, with the desert thornbush in “blazing bloom.” He compares other incongruous images of death and beauty throughout, and I thought it seemed fitting, at this time of Halloween and Dia de los Muertos to examine the concept of beauty and horror, and conjecture whether or not our continual search for perfection might not be in error. Instead, might not the meaning of life be better centered around the concept of Beauty? After all, perfection is not possible, but as Clyne ends his song, “Beauty is Everywhere.”

To begin this discussion I have to admit, I love Horror stories. It all started back when I was in the 3rd grade, and they came out with those great “*Dark Shadows*” fangs. You know, the kind that go *over* your teeth? Much better than the ones I used to cut out of white plastic bottles. They *did* give you cold sores, and we *did* share them without disinfectant. I guess that was the most horrifying thing about them, but my friends and I thought we were *Nosferatu* incarnate.

I imagine it drove my mother to distraction, what with all the booby traps set in the basement to trap unsuspecting ghouls, 9-year old boys running around in capes screaming, “I want to suck your blood,” and various instruments of torture in various stages of perfection in various stages of testing on my younger sister and her friends.

As I grew up, I discovered Stephen King and Clive Barker and especially Anne Rice: Authors of the horror/goth genre. It took a while, but I finally came to the conclusion that the literary works of these authors had little to do with the supernatural, but had everything to do with human beings at their best and worst. The foil of the macabre, like Poe’s *Cask of Amontillado* or Stoker’s *Dracula* serves as a mirror to the darkness of our own souls—to the evils that human beings do to one another. It was then that I came to understand horror for what it truly is: A safe way to explore life and death, meaning and consciousness, being and nothingness.

Unfortunately, this road has another turn. It is not well marked, and it is easy to lose your way, but if you look closely at these concepts, horror can take you down a much darker path, where evil is altogether real, where the good guys don’t always come out alive, and where we, the sojourners are the real monsters.

Such is the story of one of the true heroes of religious liberalism, humanistic thought, and the use of reason over dogma: Michael Servetus. Yes, I know. Some of you are cringing at my pronunciation. I have been told that among UU circles, the last name is generally pronounced SERVEET-US. Now, my Latin is pretty dismal, but since I read about the man before anybody told me the UU pronunciation, I have to fall back on my Latin grammar book and my own habits and

continue to pronounce the name Sair-vai-toos. To solve this problem, I ask all UU first language speakers to please say “Serveetus” under your breath every time I mention my protagonist’s name if you just can’t stand what your hear.

To begin, Miguel Serveto Conesa y Reves was born September 29, 1511 in Villanueva de Sijena, in the province of Huesca, Aragon, in the northeast corner of Spain, right on the French border. The eldest of three sons, Miguel was a linguistic prodigy--teaching himself to read and write French, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew fluently, in addition to his native Spanish—by age *thirteen*.

His family was moderately well to do, so his father enrolled him in the University of Toulouse—at that time, one of the most liberal faculties situated in one of the most conservative cities in all the Continent (Sounds a lot like ASU...). Like most students at University, Miguel learned much liberal philosophy, rhetoric, and methods—most notably (and most heretically), *humanism*. It was through *humanists* that Miguel obtained a copy of the newly published *Complutensian Polyglot Bible*: A publication of the bible with cross-referenced translations in the original Hebrew and Greek as well as Latin, all languages that Miguel, perhaps of all the students or faculty for that matter, in the University could read like a native.

For such a person, the obvious distortions of the original texts into the officially sanctioned Latin vulgate were obvious: Distortions stressing the sovereignty of the pope on earth, and stressing a curious belief (or so Miguel concluded) that God existed simultaneously as three separate-but-equal beings (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) *and* as One—the God of Israel. In fact, Miguel at age eighteen, came to the conclusion that there wasn’t a single bit of biblical evidence for the Trinity. Not content with this *seeming* inconsistency, Miguel taught himself Arabic and began an exhaustive study of the Koran. You can guess the result for yourself. Miguel began to write...

Now, the concept of the Trinity was not always present in Christianity. In fact, it was introduced during the Nicene Council in 325 CE, and was pushed stridently by a young bishop named Augustine whose notions of a hierarchical ordering of authority from God through Kings to people just happened to be favored by the current Emperor Constantine.

In the face of heated debate and reticence of many of the assembled bishops, the Augustinian faction prevailed, and the Trinity, the three-in-one conception of God, became official dogma. Any other belief was anathematized officially through the establishment of the Nicene Creed, the basis for all mainstream Christianity since. Though time has softened the attitude of the Church towards those who believe differently or who accept slightly different interpretations of scripture, at that time in the world, to believe differently than official dogma regardless of its Biblical or intellectual basis, meant excommunication at best. For someone to publish a document that directly challenged official dogma meant not only death, but death in the most excruciating and protracted means conceived by the prevailing experts of the day on pain and torture.

The book that Servetus published—yes, he Latinized his name to Michael Servetus in the style of the *intellegencia* of the day—the book in which the concept of the Trinity was laid bare and found without substance, was an instant bestseller. In that volume, he portrayed the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as facets of the same jewel—as dispositions of God—as manifestations of God through which the true nature of God could be discerned. Hardly revolutionary material to us today. But at that time and in that place, it was damnable and punishable by the stake. He was instantly excommunicated and burned in *abstentia* by the Inquisition. I say “in *abstentia*” because he fled Toulouse and assumed a new identity as Michel Villaneuve at the University of Paris where he studied mathematics and medicine.

He was 22.

Over the next twenty years, Servetus, in hiding, continued to write. He wrote the first (correct) treatise on the circulation of blood in the body (heresy), he published a less strident version of his earlier book, where he proposed a gentler, more personal Christianity (heresy), and he produced a final book where he proposed the restitution of Christianity to its primary goal of personal relationship with God (Heresy, Heresy, Heresy). These actions made him one of the most wanted men in all Europe—Protestant or Catholic—the “Ace of Spades” in the deck at that time.

The final chapter in the life of Servetus begins in Paris, where he passes time with an ambitious classmate enrolled in the Law school: Jean Chauvin—John Calvin.

Now Calvin at that time fancied himself the next great humanist scholar of the world. He was brilliant, ambitious, learned, and had a steady income to support his studies. What he *didn't* count on in his plans for preeminence, was the appearance of a person whose intellect and abilities were so vastly superior to anyone he came in contact with, that Calvin's own mental faculties seemed at best meager in comparison. That Michel Villaneuve was a better scientist, a better mathematician, and a better theologian, grated Calvin like cheese.

Calvin hated him. It would be ironic that the exposure and condemnation of Miguel Serveto, Michel Villaneuve, Michael Servetus, would come from a classmate, a humanist, a theologian who himself barely escaped burning at least twice in his lifetime.

To make a long story short, I will fast-forward twenty years, in which Calvin's hatred of Servetus only increased as Servetus wrote him letter upon letter in which he, with surgical precision, cut apart nearly every argument Calvin had published concerning election (the choice of God to save an elite few), and particularly the separation of *religion* from *law*—the very cornerstone of Calvin's Geneva.

Michael Servetus, escaping yet again from France, walked into Geneva August 12, 1553. Why the most wanted man in France at the time would go straight to the

town of his most strident Protestant enemy no one really knows. It may be that Servetus was drawn to Calvin as a kindred intellect—like the moth to the flame. It may be that Servetus believed that logic and reason would win out in the end against Calvin's strict dogma. Whatever the reason, Calvin spotted him, in *church* no less, and immediately put him into prison.

The trial that followed was protracted, taking several weeks, even though the verdict was generally known beforehand. Calvin argued from his book, the *Institutes*, Servetus, without benefit of pen or paper, tore his arguments apart one by one. If religion were separate from law, Servetus would most certainly have been acquitted. But remember earlier when I mentioned that Servetus was better than Calvin at everything he attempted? Servetus never attempted law...Calvin used the law, loopholes, procedure, influence and precedent, things that are established by convention, *not* logic, to garner the guilty verdict and the ultimate penalty: Burning at the stake, using green wood, with the last known copy of Servetus' book chained to his leg.

No legacy. No appeal. No family at his side. Only one act could save him now. Calling on Jesus, the *Eternal* son of God and admitting the Trinity was literal. Instead, as the flames rose about him, he exclaimed in his last scream of agony, "O Jesus, Son of the *Eternal God*, have pity on me!"

He was 42.

READING*“Oh Captain, My Captain!” Walt Whitman*

O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won.
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! Heart! Heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! My Captain! Rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you the bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! Dear father!
 This arm beneath your head!
 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor'd save and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
 Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
 But I with mournful tread,
 Walk the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

SPECIAL MUSIC *“Knocking’ on Heaven’s Door”* *Clark Edwards—Vocals*
Phil Perry—Guitar
Mike McBeath--Harmonica

READING *from Ecclesiastes* *Attributed to Solomon*

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever.

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly...For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

OFFERING *“Dust in the Wind”* *Hugh McHutcheon—Vocals*
Jim Middleton—Guitar
Ryan Marvel—Piano

Part II: The Lesson: A Life Well Lived

So now Michel Servetus is dead--A pile of ashes where once a beautiful baby boy once stood--Bones that housed that child of thirteen proudly announcing his mastery of Hebrew.--Scholar, doctor, theologian, Martyr.

John and Bobby Kennedy are dead. Martin Luther King is dead. James Reeb, a Unitarian minister who died for civil rights, Alabama is dead. Anwar Sadat is dead. Hypatia is dead. Hundreds of women practicing earth-centered beliefs are dead. Lincoln is dead. Shot, hanged, burned, beaten and flayed alive, and by whom? Monsters? The Undead? Alien Abductors? No.

6 million Jews are dead. 800,000 Rwandans dead. Tens of thousands of Liberians dead. Iraqi dead. Israeli dead. Palestinian dead. Colombian dead. Men, women, children all dead. All killed, maimed, tortured by people just like you and me. There's a horror story for you. Where in all this reckless hate, can one make any claim for "Beauty?"

HYMN

#95 "*There is More Love Somewhere*"

In the coming centuries up through the enlightenment, countless men, women and children from Transylvania to England would live and die for spirited away a copy of Servetus book on Christian Restitution, and forming a new faith which they called, "Unitarianism." Yes, the land of Dracula and countless gothic tales is our spiritual motherland. From a persecuted Spaniard to Romanian heretics, to English enlightenment scholars to New England to Arizona, the message that God is unfathomable, but knowable. That there is a wideness in God's mercy. That a personal search for truth and meaning can lead to ethical and moral action. That logic and reason can form the basis of mystic understanding. These tenets and more rose out of the flames of Michael Servetus' body and remain our legacy today.

So, I ask the question of each of you, "Does the Death Negate the Life?"

Does the fact that Abraham Lincoln was shot dead negate the emancipation? Does the blood flowing from the breast of Martin Luther King *deny* the glorious revolution in civil and human rights? Does the death of a loved one delete all of those moments of tenderness, exasperation, passion and laughter? My own answer to these questions has to be **no**. As I examine the lives of these and other true martyrs, I must conclude that the beauty of each life remains *inviolable* and *separate* from the death. None of us is perfect, but each of us has the capacity for exquisite beauty in the *living* of our lives.

Like Schubert's unfinished symphony, or Mozart's own requiem, it is the composition played that matters, not the silence at the end. But also, like the echoes of Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D-minor*, the force of the life well lived transcends the life itself and reverberates throughout those who remain, and *those will listen*.

And so, to conclude my story, the simple strains of Servetus' anthem, nearly 500 years later can be taken up by you and by me, and like the fire of his spirit our spirits can join together in a mighty conflagration of tolerance, justice, compassion, mercy and of love. This body is but a shell. We are the flame.

Blessed Be.

HYMN *“We Are the Flame” Jim Middleton*

CLOSING WORDS #292 *“If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking” Emily Dickenson*

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain.
If I can ease one life the aching
or cool one pain,
or help one fainting robin unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

POSTLUDE *“This Little Light of Mine” reprise*