

We the Member Congregations of the UUA, Covenant to Affirm and Promote. . .

August 26, 2007

The Reverend Heather Janules and Cedar Lane Delegates
to General Assembly
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland

Chalice Lighting

Words by the Rev. Bill Sinkford, UUA President

What does it mean to be a faithful Unitarian Universalist today?...

Without a vision, this faith will perish...

I see a Unitarian Universalism whose congregations are warm, vital communities,

Where spiritual development is nurtured,

Where individuals and families can't wait for the next time they go to church.

I see a Unitarian Universalism whose congregations are growing,

Because they have opened their doors to those who yearn for a religious liberal home,

Where welcoming the stranger is part of our daily religious practice.

I see a Unitarian Universalism where we are no longer afraid to tell people

What church we belong to,

Where we look forward to opportunities to talk about what our faith means in our lives.

I see a Unitarian Universalism which is a powerful voice for liberal religious values,

Working to realize the ideal of the Beloved Community.

I see a Unitarian Universalism whose congregations are committed to ending oppression,

Within their sanctuaries and in the world,

Where the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" is not merely a principle we affirm, but the way that we live...

I see a Unitarian Universalism built on between relationships between and among our congregations,

Where we know that we are better together than we could ever be alone...

Reflection

"General Assembly, 2007" by Heather Janules

Perhaps you are wondering, "What the heck is 'General Assembly?'"

Unitarian Universalism is a faith governed by "congregational polity," meaning that the ultimate authority of each religious community rests with the community itself. By way of "the democratic process," each congregation chooses its own leaders, by-laws and ministers, manages its own resources and affirms its own values and beliefs about what constitutes the sacred in human life.

But part of congregational polity is not only governing one's own faith community but staying in active, accountable relationship to other communities who claim the same religious tradition. This responsibility derives from the text of the Cambridge Platform, the original document that outlined the tenets of congregational polity in colonial New England. Under congregational polity, our faith communities have an obligation to offer "care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation and relief" to one another.

The most concrete way we engage in this institutional interdependence is through membership in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). This Association functions through one central office in Boston and a number of regional offices, called Districts. Through this centralized affiliation, we give and receive financial and educational resources and provide and receive leadership, all towards the greater health of our denomination. As an Association of many communities, we can take bolder steps and have a louder voice in the public sphere. Or, drawing

from President Sinkford's words, through our Association "we are better together than we could ever be alone."

As we have an Annual Meeting here at Cedar Lane, the Unitarian Universalist Association has an Annual Meeting, called General Assembly. At General Assembly, or GA, elected delegates from the member congregations learn about the health of the institution and the denomination and make decisions on a number of political and theological questions. You will hear more about the current issues that have faced and will face the Assembly later in our service.

But General Assembly is so much more than a week-long annual meeting. I do not know much about the history of General Assembly, but I imagine the story goes something like this: "As we have all these delegates coming to the annual meeting, why don't we offer some workshops for people to share information and ideas? And since we will have many of our ministers, religious educators and other religious professionals together, why don't they come a couple days early for continuing education programs? And, if the paid religious professionals are meeting, why don't we offer classes to lay leaders at "UU University." And, with so many projects and causes demanding attention, why don't we organize an exhibit hall so groups and institutions may share information, gain members and sell t-shirts with chalice logos?..."

All together, General Assembly is many things, what some call "a state fair for religious liberals," what others call "Summer camp for church geeks." For those of us who have been Unitarian Universalist for awhile or have lived in different parts of the country, General Assembly is also a perpetual reunion with old friends, in the midst of all these meetings, workshops and sometimes-aimless searches for a place to buy lunch before we have to be some place else.

When I asked our delegates to describe their experience at this most-recent General Assembly, they used words like "informative" and "inspiring," citing presentations like a lecture by author and environmentalist Frances Moore Lappé, workshops by an organization called Freedom First and a presentation on near-death experiences, workshops about the political issues of the day, addressing the current

environmental crisis and anti-racist initiatives, and some of GA's regular traditions, the Banner Parade of congregations and affiliates kicking off the Opening Plenary and a worship service honoring ministers entering various stages of their ministries called "The Service of the Living Tradition."

And, of course, there are the plenary sessions, led by the ever-dynamic UUA Moderator, Gini Courter. Between these tightly-run business discussions, delegates were also invited to learn about a number of "Breakthrough Congregations," communities who have grown significantly in number, in diversity or both. This year, one of these celebrated congregations was our neighbor, Davies Memorial in Camp Springs.

Our representatives used other words as well, such as "expensive," "dysfunctional" and "overwhelming." One delegate calculated that GA 2007 offered 830 events, addressing 310 subjects over four days. This breaks down to 207 events per day, meaning if you attended everything you could, it would only be possible to attend 4% of what was offered. And, this intense, multi-day gathering of Unitarian Universalists often revealed not only our triumphs as a religious movement but also the ways in which we fall short of our ideals. Someone from another faith might say that our continental meeting reveals the way that we are sinners, treating one another with racist, sexist, ageist and ablest attitudes and behavior. Out of past incidents at General Assemblies, this GA featured a "Right Relations Team" that served as a clearinghouse for community conflicts and "process observers" for how we engage with one another.

And the experience of General Assembly was shaped by our meeting place, Portland, Oregon, the "Rose City." Along with serving as the host for the world's largest, week-long Unitarian Universalist mega-church, Portland is also home to its famous Chinese and Japanese Gardens, Powell's Books, a lively nightlife and mountain landscapes. One delegate wrote: "Approaching dramatically-located Portland, Oregon from Reno Nevada I looked down from a 25,000 foot altitude into the sparkling sapphire blue Crater Lake, snow- and road-rimmed. Nearer Portland we saw snow-covered Mt.Hood, [Mt.] St Helens and Mt. Rainier."

Introduction by Pat Karlsen, “Now is the Time”

At GA, the UUA launched its new campaign to “Grow Our Faith”. Its name, “Now is the Time”, suggests immediacy. This five year campaign intends to generate \$20 million in immediate resources and \$30 million in legacy covenants

Growth of our faith rests on the strength of each of these five areas: diversity, leadership, numbers, spirit, and witness. The urgency of “Now is the Time” brings to mind Albert Einstein’s caution: “The world is too dangerous to live in—not because of the people who do evil, but because of the people who sit and let it happen.”

Prayer by Howard Thurman, from the Service of the Living Tradition

“In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading Presence of God, my heart whispers: Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in fair weather or in foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may not forget that to which my life is committed.

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.”

Reflection “Peacemaking” by Bob McClusky

Good Morning. As a first timer at GA, I was surprised to find that acronyms are omnipresent. They are so key there’s even a page in the program defining them. My objective this morning, however, is to brief you on only one: SOC! Statement of Conscience.

SOCs are initiated as Congregational “study/action issues” to be studied over a three year period—allowing congregations to explore the issue, develop programs and make input.

In essence SOC’s shape the meaning of contemporary Unitarian Universalism, they also empower the lobbying efforts of the Washington Advocacy Office, and serve members, ministers, congregations and other UU groups in local initiatives.

Last year the GA voted to study the question of peacemaking potentially leading to a SOC in 09.

The opening paragraph of last year’s resolution reads: “Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?”

In short, the resolution argues that historically we have agreed with the theory and practice of “just war.” At the same time, we have supported peace and disarmament in over eighty resolutions since 1961. Thus on the one hand our principles are models for peacemaking yet we may act as if violence is more effective than nonviolence in certain situations. In essence the resolution asks: Do we need to clarify our position so as to improve our effectiveness in peace making.

The UUA has framed the topic not on whether one is pacifist or supports “just wars”, but essentially on the question of how to achieve peace whatever the context. The objective is to engage individuals and congregations in generating a comprehensive Statement of Conscience and new programs that will increase UU effectiveness in peacemaking at all levels.

Cedar Lane’s next opportunity for input is the regular annual UUA congregational survey due in March 2008. Thus we have this fall and winter as an opportunity for discussion, consideration and the framing of initial input through whatever processes or forums we choose—should we so desire. Input received in 2008 will be used in planning the 08 GA and later in drafting the actual SOC that is then circulated next fall to all congregations.

If by March of 2009, 25% of all UU Congregations [that’s about 265] support placing the SOC on the agenda—it goes before the 09 GA.

Mike Benefiel has thus far taken the lead here at Cedar Lane with his recent Spring “B” dialogue focused on Jimmy Carter’s recent book: *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*. Additionally, The UUA website contains excellent resource material. But essentially, for us, the question is how we wish to engage on this topic.

Report “The Pentagon Papers: Then and Now”

Introduced by Mike Benefiel

As Heather explained, at GA information pours out from a fire hose, not a drinking fountain. Senator Mike Gravel spoke for about 26 minutes. In the first 22 minutes, we in the audience laughed frequently. Mike told how he got the actual papers. He then used his power as the chairman of the Senate’s Buildings and Grounds Committee. He held a hearing, in the middle of the night. At that hearing, he ordered the full text of the Pentagon Papers entered into the Congressional Record.

Mike explained the legal consequences for him and for Beacon Press. He chose to turn over to our UUA publisher— the only one in the country willing to take the risk—his copies of the papers.

The U.S. Attorney in Boston got the Federal grand jury there to indict Beacon Press and the President of the UUA. Armed with a subpoena, the FBI seized bank records for the UUA, and for Beacon Press, and began recording the names of every individual who had written a check to the UUA. President Nixon himself made a personal call to ask that the UUA stop.

Mike insisted that Beacon Press was acting at his direction. The case was tried in Boston, appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals, and then the U.S. Supreme Court.

Reflection

“Best Practices in Unitarian Universalist Leadership” by Mike Harris

One reason I go to General Assembly is to learn what effective congregations are or could be doing. This year for one and a half days before GA our association put on the second annual UU-University focusing on leadership

I knew of the keynote speaker Gil Rendle - a long-time church consultant at the Alban Institute.

He said that a generation or two ago, we had a “convergent environment,” in which the questions and the answers were the same for

everyone. Everyone agreed about what church was supposed to be and organized around that understanding. Now we live in a “divergent environment” in which we still have many of the same questions, but have widely varying answers.

He pointed out that not everyone will agree in our congregations, although we think agreement is necessary for harmony. Rendle reminded the audience that “singing with a single voice is not harmony, it is monotony.”

Rendle suggested that three basic questions need to be posed to our congregations:

Who are we?—a question of identity

What are we called to do—a question of purpose

Who are our neighbors?—a question of context, in particular, the communities we are in.

At GA itself I went to a session Linking Governance and Emotional Systems, subtitled Peter Steinke meets John Carver. You need to know that Peter Steinke is a psychologist and minister who developed a body of work on congregational dynamics based on systems theory, post traumatic stress, and family systems. John Carver is a psychologist and management consultant that developed a model for non-profit governance called “policy governance”.

The presenter was Stefan Jonasson, UUA Director for Large Congregations. He described several church governance models, emphasizing that there is no universal model and that any model can work when used with common-sense wisdom, or can fail without that wisdom.

He advocated the Policy-Making Board Model for large churches - sometimes referred to as the Carver model, which emphasizes visioning and policy-making as the primary functions of the Board. He stressed the need to adapt it for UU use. Locally, the All Souls Church, Unitarian in DC and the UU Church of Arlington are using it.

More than models, he said, competence matters and emotions matter.

And from another session “Why Liberal Churches Are Growing,” UU minister Teresa Cooley reported on a study of the characteristics of growing congregations based on a national survey, the so-called “FACT” study, an acronym for Faith Communities Today.

Here’s some of what she said: “Congregations grow because they believe in the mission of their congregation. And, personal growth leads to congregational growth.”

The most conservative churches are growing and the most liberal churches are growing. “Churches that try to please everyone are losing membership,”

“People loosely affiliate,” they care about getting good preaching and good programs.” Churches and congregations that are growing typically do not have the denomination as part of their name.

She asked: “What are we communicating to the public when we say ‘Unitarian Universalist Congregation of ...’?” “Does it say ‘we are this UU church that only serves this group’. Is it all about us?”

Personal growth equals congregational growth. “We’re not talking about growth in numbers. We are talking about growth in spirit, growth in our souls” she said. “It’s not important that we grew 12.2 percent, but it is important that everyone who comes to our congregation finds a source of spiritual sustenance. And when we do that, we will grow.”

Report “Reviewing the Principles and Purposes” by the UUA Commission on Appraisal, Introduction by Sara Deshler

Unitarian Universalism is defined, not by a creed, but a list of Principles, Purposes and sources of inspiration. These Principles, Purposes and sources can be found at the front of your hymnal anytime you want to read them.

It is sometimes said that the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism would not inspire or comfort a person if they heard them on their deathbed. This is, perhaps, because they are religious affirmations written by committee and then edited and confirmed by a delegate body

of thousands at General Assembly. You may have heard the expression, ‘a camel is a horse designed by committee.’ In my opinion, rather than a camel, we ended up with a golden horse.

The UUA by-laws dictate that our Principles undergo regular review to determine if they are an accurate reflection of our contemporary religious values. The committee charged with leading a review of the Principles and Purposes is the UUA’s Commission on Appraisal, an elected committee that regularly studies current issues in church life and reports back to the denomination-at-large with their recommendations...

Reflection “What in God’s Name Am I Doing?” by Lyn Peters

Perhaps the most famous Unitarian Universalist in the world—although his readers may not know it—is the writer Robert Fulghum. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, It Was On Fire When I Lay Down on It* and his five other books have been read by millions of people, translated into 27 languages in 103 countries. (I learned this little tidbit from his web site: robertfulghum.com.)

In a remarkable lecture attended by 1600 people, Robert Fulghum gave us a brief summary of his life story, using an imaginary PowerPoint presentation and a real laser pointer. He is an active, card-carrying, seminary-washed Unitarian Universalist minister. For the past twenty years, he has been what he calls a “stealth missionary for the Unitarians.” What he writes about is important because it’s about making sense of the everyday experiences people have. What he does is write a column for UUs week after week after week. That it gets published elsewhere should say to us Unitarian Universalists that there are more of us than we ever imagined.

One of his major life experiences, after he was rejected as an IBM management trainee, was attending the Starr King School for the Ministry. While a student, he worked in a bar. The dean of Starr King, Josiah Bartlett, said to him, “This is wonderful news...what we need to teach you, you cannot learn in a classroom. You need to be in the world. Jesus didn’t go to seminary, he wasn’t a Christian. He was a guy of his time, in the world, involved with the world, trying to be useful. Keep your mind, your eyes, your ears open, be in the world.”

For a number of years, Fulghum worked part time at the Bellingham and Edmonds UU fellowships. He started writing once a week about what is going on in the world. And then a strange thing happened. The columns he wrote for the Edmonds newsletter were collected and published as a book. On the NYT Best Seller List for two years, the ideas he expressed in story form, about what UUs believe and care about and stand for, have had a remarkable reception not only in this country but all over the world.

His latest book, *What on Earth Have I Done?*, will be published in September. Fulghum believes the world is still interested in the liberal religious point of view. The title comes from the four great mother questions:

What on earth have you done?
What in the name of God (all you hold holy and sacred) are you doing?
And what will you think of next?
Who the hell do you think you are?

These are questions of accountability, says the Reverend Fulghum.

The last slides of Fulghum's imaginary Power Point presentation were pictures that he took of us at the beginning of his talk. "Think of what you know about these people: the capacity for their being active in the world. All you have to do is walk around and see the incredible causes that people are contributing to and think about everybody you know who is busy. These people are not just in church on Sunday, they are in the world."

"In this room are people who meet Josiah Bartlett's criteria for ministry:
in the world,
eyes and ears and hearts and minds open,
trying to be useful"

Fulghum ended by saying, "I know you came to see me, but I have come to see you. We come to this place—General Assembly— because we need each other, we need to see each other, we need to touch each other, we need to smell each other, we need to hug each other. We need each other. So we come to this place. We come to work, to talk, to sing, to laugh, to dance. We call this a religious community, not because this convention center is holy ground, but because what we do here, what we say here together, and what we are here, makes it a sacred gathering."