

**Panel on Theological Education
Minutes of the Meeting
October 17-18, 2005**

Present: Barbara Merritt, chair; David Pettee; Gini Courter; Ned Wight; Bill Sinkford; Virginia Jarocho-Ernst; Tamara Payne-Alex. Guests: Lee Barker, President of Meadville Lombard; Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School; Dudley Rose; Dean for Ministry Studies, Harvard Divinity School.

**Open Conversation about UU Scholars
Included are all Panel members and guests**

There seems to be a general desire for a more active and robust roster of Unitarian Universalist scholars. How can we find ways to support and nurture people with potential, to continue the tradition of James Luther Adams?

There is a perceived tension between the larger perspective of practical ministry and that of academic scholarship, ie. the “learned ministry” vs. “active ministry.”

This is seen in AR/AO/MC work: the difference between scholarship and the recognized canon. We talk about scholars working within larger framework. The rhetorical question, “Where is our next JLA” tends to be the framework. Not where is our next William R. Jones, or Sharon Welch, or Thandeka? Our women and people of color have been doing excellent academic work, but the image of the “scholar” does not historically tend to look like a woman or person of color. There is an image of a scholar that risks being gender and race specific. We need to place our scholars carefully to achieve our best influence.

There seems to be an increasing number of Ph. D’s who come to Meadville/Lombard for the Master of Divinity degree, but the trend is not happening in reverse. They seem to come out of more secular institutions. They are not relating to us institutionally.

The liberal religion vs liberal Christianity tension seems to be something to hold carefully. Where does distinctive UU scholarship fit into this discussion? There are some people out there who would fit into a liberal religion mold.

Unitarian Universalism requires being open to on-going revelation, to poetry for instance, as an expression of distinctiveness. There is a sense of concern for interfaith dialogue that address the themes of liberal theology and process theology. Social ethics like James Luther Adams, actively engaged with ethics and the environment. These areas are not exclusive to Unitarian Universalist, but we tend to have a unique view.

The existing scholarship system is not as able to nurture purely academic scholarship as well as it did 20 years ago. We need to keep the broad view. How could these scholars impact our ministerial students? Maybe there is need to re-think the use of the money for

the UU Scholar's program in terms of bringing existing scholars to Unitarian Universalist students.

Maybe we should think in terms of congregational need for pedagogy and religious education. Of grounding our healthy church growth in a larger context of intellectually stimulating areas in which it would be good to encourage scholarly endeavor.

We are the most highly educated denomination in US, yet most of our congregants have never been asked to consider their religion in relationship to the work that they perform.

There is an existing virtual community of UU scientists. They could be approached, but carefully. The word "scholar" has some baggage attached for some people.

We are talking about two different things, where goals are different, and need to be separate, intellectual currency and innate value in scholarship. It is critical to recognize that UU's exist on the edges of intersections of many religions. Lacking scholarship our edges blunt and we lack the vocabulary to take us the next step. The passion of those who are pushing us to be our best selves risks being lost if we can't keep pushing those edges. To be a scholar is to be fully committed to this development.

The language of advance is critical. In our self-image, in our history, we point to those Unitarians and Universalists who have been leaders of society, in justice-making in all eras. This image is tied to our self-understanding. We don't see the intellectual leadership in religious studies, and many are worried.

Whether our sense of identity is preserved or not, is not the issue. If we can't conceptualize scholarship as something more elemental, then isn't going to happen. Creative intellectual work is not about status, prestige, admiration, or coverage in the New York Times. Polishing up our own egos is not the point. Being anxious is not helpful. We need to see where scholarship is happening, and support it.

The statistics in the UU Scholars report are disappointing. It is important to understand that the schools have a difficulty teaching UU history or anything else in depth. None of our students have time to take more than one or two history classes because of all requirements for credentialing. This dynamic needs to be kept in mind.

What are the issues day to day? We have some priority attention to increasing scholarly work, both for faculty and students. There is a culture shift from the educational model put in place in 1950's which considered faculty as mentors, allows lots of flexibility in the choices for courses. The vocation of the faculty person was integrated into the mission of the school. The focus for faculty has not been research and writing. We are not structured or resourced to develop faculty as scholars. The school has been looking at junior faculty, feeling the need to support them as scholars. There has to be room for faculty to write and publish, but we are not structured so that they are able to do so.

There is a lot of research and scholarship going on in the world of the parish. Think about the New York Time bestselling list from 1959 –it used to be more difficult to read than it is now. The current cultural trend mitigates against learnedness. If we were to take a look at the 1950's, what was important to congregations was a "learned ministry." If we were to ask the same question today, some might say learned ministry, but is this now counter-productive to congregational growth? Unitarian Universalist schools say that one of their goals is to prepare students for service in UU congregations. Over the last fifty years, we have seen a decline in the number of volunteer hours available, and a shift to a more corporate mode of church leadership. Learned competent laity used to do things that now fall to the professional ministry. This has profoundly changed the definition of ministry. If we then say we want to prepare ministers to be learned ministers, will the congregations still call them? There seems to be a systemic disconnection between our congregations and the training of our ministers.

There are many ministers serving congregations who would be happier being scholars. But they serve a parish to pay the bills. They would be better served as scholars. We seem to expect ministers to be bridge builders between congregation and scholarship. I hope that most of our ministers consider themselves at least mini-scholars.

The most effective parish ministers are integrated within their abilities. We are determined that our students will have a strong intellectual capacity, and an ability to articulate ideas in a learned fashion. Unitarian Universalist scholars should be the people who can help the students develop this ability.

Theological schools need to be is a community to support the development of scholars. This becomes a conversation about resources and how they are used. We need to isolate potential scholars, determine what is it that fosters their desire to pursue academic scholarship. We know that one variable is having the ability to get together and exchange ideas. But this kind of freedom involves tremendous resources.

The schools say to promising students that they should consider PhD work. If Emerson applied for a job today, would he get it, given that he was a person with such intellectual gifts?

There is a pressure in the academic community to be conservative. We hear, "We don't like what you are doing in faculty appointments." One appointment is brilliant, but not necessarily the kind of presence that the donors want. The Henry Luce Foundation is providing funding, fortunately. In order to grow, we have to take risks on people, but can we afford to? Scholars are mostly recognized in retrospect. How can we recognize them now and support them? Scholars are often quirky, and difficult to work with personally. Yet, there is also a kind of urbane and gracious scholar, like James Luther Adams. Not all fine scholars are weird! And not all weird people are thinking! Do we have an institutional capacity to welcome the quirky scholar?

Are we going to be able to accept someone who is so clearly a giant? A whole raft of people of this kind of character would be ideal! We have taken some risks that have paid

off, but it is not easy, nor cheap. It is not often that we are open to hearing criticism, and there is no tension to hold those folks. One of roles of the scholarly community is to determine how to frame questions, to have someone grounded in scholarly issues to bring a valid critique. Everything seems based on a consumer mentality now.

We don't even know the universe of scholarly activity going on in our congregations. The idea of a study group would seem meritorious. There is no recognition of community of scholarship. Institutional location is different from school atmosphere. There is a wish for institutional life to be more informed, reflective of our tradition and its interaction with the world. Is our conversation more about standing in our tradition theologically, or where our tradition stands in the need for healing in the world?

UU's have a deep desire for excellence. They continue to support theological education. We are desperate for someone to articulate new ideas for us. Whether there is a place for excellence remains another question. We are not alone as liberal religious people who scramble for a message. We will reconnect with some historical tradition, but we have run these traditions about as far as they are going to go. We need to find new ways to articulate our unique message.

When we talk about scholarship in these ways, we are speaking of a complex texture of UU scholarship. We need to remember the intersection of the realities. We may have run them out to the edge, with the need to re-define. We need to be creative and need to find those persons with the potential for articulation and encourage them! We may have run out of the things that Emerson provided us with, so what is next step?

There is an additional dimension. When you ask "how do you get an Emerson, or a Yo Yo Ma, we realize that they emerge out of a vast network. In baseball for instance, stars emerge out of all the little leagues. All of our congregations, our schools, our religious education programs, are the sea. Scholars do not emerge fully grown from the head of Zeus. UU scholarship program should be designed to lift those with potential out of the sea, to the top of the crest of the wave.

There have been students at many seminaries thinking about becoming career academics, who have been actively discouraged from making a long-term commitment to our ministry. Yes, we need to re-think the Unitarian Universalist Scholars Program. Bill Schulz envisioned that the Panel would fill the need to be investing in our faculty. This vision has lead to some broken hearts, people who were encouraged with someday having a job with our schools, but couldn't find a placement.