

# Owning Your Religious Past



by Bonnie (Stauffacher) Withers

## *25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Web Edition*

Originally published in August 1981 as  
*Owning Your Religious Past: The Haunting Church*

This edition edited by Sarah Gibb, Adult Programs Director  
Unitarian Universalist Association

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## Preface to the 2006 Web Edition

This new edition of *Owning Your Religious Past* updates a classic Unitarian Universalist adult program for a new era. Originally published in 1981, *Owning Your Religious Past* met a need of Unitarian Universalist adults that continues in 2006: the need to reckon with their religious upbringings and integrate them into their current religious lives. *Owning Your Religious Past* continues to be used in our congregations because its activities and discussions help Unitarian Universalists grow in their faith, moving from a space of discomfort and awkwardness to a space of affirmation and wholeness. The program's exercises invite participants to revisit religious spaces and people from childhood in a way that promotes greater self-understanding and personal peace.

Little is changed in this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition—the integrity of the original activities is preserved. However a few changes are worth noting. The subtitle of the original program, “The Haunting Church” is now gone. Though in 2006 some congregations still use the *Haunting House* children's curriculum that inspired the original name, “church” no longer reflects the reality of many Unitarian Universalists' religious pasts. Increasing numbers of our congregations' members grew up worshipping in mosques, synagogues, or temples, or didn't grow up participating in a house of worship at all. As a reflection of cultural changes and the growing diversity of our religious pasts, participants are now invited to reflect not only on the house of worship they grew up in but also on any school or club that had a shaping role in their spirituality.

Further, the new edition includes more specific ground rules. Cultural changes and media coverage have made us all too aware of the abuse inflicted by some religious communities and clergypersons. Program leaders are called to be mindful of the possibility that the self-reflective exercises in *Owning Your Religious Past* can put

participants in touch with traumatic experiences. Additional wording is included to help participants take care of themselves in the context of the course. Leaders are also advised to familiarize themselves with resources that participants can turn to if disturbing memories get triggered.

Finally, the closing workshop's resources for worship are current. Since 1981 the Unitarian Universalist Association has published a new hymnal and a new hymnal supplement. It has also created WorshipWeb ([www.uua.org/worshipweb](http://www.uua.org/worshipweb)) to provide online resources for worship materials. This new edition takes advantage of these new publications.

May these workshops continue to assist Unitarian Universalists in reckoning with their religious pasts and moving, with faith and love, into their religious futures.

—Rev. Sarah Gibb, Adult Programs Director, Unitarian Universalist Association.

## Preface to the 1981 Edition

The Unitarian Universalist Association has made a commitment to grow. Growth programs and services sponsored by the Association have been designed for the denomination to grow numerically. Our goal: 100,000 new members by the year 1990.

One of the most important components of a growth campaign is programs which enable new people who come to Unitarian Universalist societies for the first time to have an opportunity to explore:

- who they are religiously,
- what their past religious perspectives and experiences have been, and
- who they hope to become, as Unitarian Universalists.

Bonnie Stauffacher's course, *Owning Your Religious Past: the Haunting Church*,

provides the opportunity to connect past religious experiences to present dreams and realities. Long-time Unitarian Universalists, as well as newcomers, will find it an enriching experience.

—Rev. Leslie A. Westbrook, Consultant for Adult Programs, 1976-1981.

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## **A Note from the Author (2006 Edition)**

I only need to remember typing out the first draft of this curriculum on a Smith-Corona Portable to start a stream of thoughts on how the world has changed over 25 years. From manual typewriter to web-based publication, something which would have been simply incomprehensible to me in 1981 — wow!

And yet, when I reviewed my original “note from the author,” I realized that I wouldn’t want to change a word. All the observations that caused me to develop this workshop remain both valid and, I believe, under-addressed in our congregations. Many of our members, both new and “tenured,” continue to find value in a workshop dedicated to helping them examine their religious past, sorting out what to leave, what to bring into the present, and what to redefine. This continued need is verified by the fact that this curriculum, although out of print for several years, has continued to be sought out, shared, and used throughout Unitarian Universalism by ministers and lay leaders.

I am grateful to all my partners in the Unitarian Universalist family who have supported this project and those who have lobbied for reprinting. Special thanks to Sarah Gibb and the UUA Lifespan Faith Development Staff Group for tracking me down and giving *Owning Your Religious Past* new life in a new century.

—Bonnie (Stauffacher) Withers

## **A Note from the Author (1981 Edition)**

After almost fifteen years of active involvement in Unitarian Universalist workshops at summer institutes, religious training weekends, and district conferences, it is impossible to remember where I first came upon an exercise or idea that later became adapted to this workshop plan.

There is, however, one notable exception. It was at a “trainer’s training” seminar in Chicago for the then just published *Haunting House* curriculum that I first came upon the idea of houses as storehouses of memories, places for solitude and places that protect our intimacy with others.

The exercise where we drew floor plans of our childhood homes remains a vivid, nourishing memory.

It is with gratitude to Barbara Hollerorth, author of *Haunting House*, that I borrow the title for this workshop and the idea for its central exercise.

—Bonnie H. Stauffacher

## ***Why Owning Your Religious Past?***

The majority of Unitarian Universalists come into the denomination from other religions; often there have been several stops along the path into our congregations. Some bring with them angry and unresolved feelings about experiences in other religious institutions, others have warm memories. Some move easily into an identity as a Unitarian Universalist; others experience a traumatic estrangement from family and from the center of their culture.

Our churches and fellowships have frequently neglected to understand and acknowledge the widely varying needs of members regarding this process. We can be most fully and completely present in our religious identity when we see our path as a continuum rather than a series of unrelated episodes. People who feel whole in this identity are more likely to make solid, healthy commitments to religious communities. Because we are usually more certain of what we left in another religion than what we bring forward from it, some tools are needed by which people may establish connections, bridges, and resonances between past and present. Such activity also provides clues about the possible future direction of those paths.

This workshop is not just for “converts.” Longtime and life-long Unitarian Universalists also experience change, sometimes profoundly, in their religious identity. This workshop is enriched by the participation of people of varying tenure as Unitarian Universalists.

## **DESCRIPTION**

This workshop provides some simple tools through which people may re-examine and retrieve positive aspects of past religious connections. It addresses the affective elements of these connections, rather than dogma. The workshop is designed to provide both group sharing and private exploration, using journal writing exercises. It consists of five separate sessions, which can be conducted individually or grouped in a retreat.

## **PLANNING THE PROGRAM**

### *Schedule*

*Owning Your Religious Past* should run for five consecutive weekly meetings, one and one-half to two hours in length. The space should be comfortable and adaptable since sometimes you will be in a circle, sometimes in small groups, sometimes alone. There should be plenty of wall space where you can tack up large sheets of paper. The meeting space should be the same each time—it will come to have special meaning to the group. *Owning Your Religious Past* may also be presented on a weekend. A suggested schedule is included at the end of this manual.

### *Leadership*

It is preferable to have co-leaders for *Owning Your Religious Past*. Along with good facilitation skills and all the harmony appropriate to successful co-leadership, it is

essential that the co-leaders are comfortable with their own religious pasts. They should do all the exercises together before they present them to the group.

Leaders must be able to respect and affirm whatever kinds of religious experiences may be encountered; their attitude will in turn elicit appropriate responses to one another among the group participants.

### *Size*

The group should be large enough to provide an interesting range of experience—five people would be a minimum. With one leader, ten participants is a comfortable number; with two, fifteen would be a maximum.

Stringent time guidelines for exercises have not, except in a few instances, been stated. Leaders are assured that each session fits comfortably within the one and one-half to two hour time frame—they are encouraged to exercise flexibility in apportioning time within the session.

### *Promotion*

Begin advertising at least one month in advance. Use the description of the workshop as an announcement or revise as you see fit. Avoid revealing the exercises themselves. Be clear about the time and attendance requirements involved.

### *Resources*

A good assortment of Unitarian Universalist pamphlets should be available for browsing.

# Workshop One: Personal Religious Timeline

## *Materials needed*

- marking pens
- ballpoint and felt-tip pens
- loose-leaf notebook cover
- large newsprint paper

## *Beginning exercises*

Any simple exercise may be used which helps people to become acquainted with one another and begins to focus on the theme.

Example: Ask the group to form dyads. They will spend ten minutes together discussing the following two questions, then will introduce their partner to the group.

1. What are all the formal religious labels which have ever applied to you?
2. What brought you to this workshop? (Leaders should take note of expectations revealed through this question.)

You can keep this exercise brief by reminding people that they will have ample opportunities to expand on their histories as the group develops. Even if your group is small, it is preferable to use this method rather than have each person introduce themselves in a large circle because it inhibits lengthy autobiographical statements and promotes listening.

This exercise of introduction should be used even if all group members know one another.

After the introduction, leaders briefly introduce themselves (or each other), and describe the workshop.

1. Repeat the purpose of the sessions (see Description).

2. Suggest that the exercises are tools for exploration, starting points.
3. Emphasize the desirability of attendance at all sessions.
4. Remind the group of the need for confidentiality. Personal and private information may be heard during the workshop.
5. Explain that many of the exercises in *Owning Your Religious Past* involve reflection on people, places, and experiences that have had formative roles in our religious development. Sometimes, these reflections can lead to strong emotions, even recollections of traumatic experiences such as abuse or death of a loved one. Explain that in this course, you want participants to take responsibility for their own well-being. This means that they can excuse themselves from any activity, no questions asked, and they can limit “how deep” they go in any given exercise. Emphasize to the group that it is important to respect our own—and one another’s—boundaries.
6. Ask participants if there are other ground rules they would like to see the group agree to. Write these on newsprint, along with the two listed above, and ask the group if they can affirm these guidelines for the program. You can post these ground rules at each subsequent meeting.
7. Explain journal writing.
  - A. Each person should have available some writing materials with which they feel especially comfortable. (Ever notice how your thoughts flow differently and your handwriting changes with different pens? Ever get stymied writing a letter because you can’t find the “right” stationery?) If people have not brought materials to this session, substitutes are available.
  - B. Journal writing is a private activity. Sharing what one has written will be entirely optional. If someone chooses to read an entry to the group, there is no discussion other than the leader’s inquiry of how it felt to read the selection. That response is recorded. (The journal writing activities will be

introduced more successfully by leaders who have experienced a journal writing workshop. Groups vary a great deal in how involved they become with their journals.)

8. Describe use of mementos. A memento of past religious affiliation is requested for the last session. Some people may already have something; others may wish to devise something. It can be as simple as a word or symbol on a slip of paper. If someone is uncertain what to use, reassure them that they will probably have an idea by the last session.

### *Major Exercise—Timeline*

Distribute a large (about 12" x 18") sheet of newsprint, a pen, and a marker to each person. Then give the following instructions:

"Using a colored marker, draw a line through the middle of the paper, lengthwise. Mark off five to ten year segments from birth to your present age. Then, with a pen, place along the line the major events in your formal and informal religious life. These could include baptism, confirmation, bar mitzvah, a youth retreat, summer camp, a book, a conversation, etc. You may wish to include events or causes to which you committed yourself to a degree one might identify as religious—a political movement, for example. You may use any personal shorthand since the time line will be read only by you."

After people are well into the exercise, say, "If you feel there is one point or more on your timeline where a sharp change, breaking away, or turning point occurs, please mark that clearly with another color."

If you have more than seven people, divide into small groups of three to five people. Ask each person to choose one item from the timeline to relate to the group. If there is time, this session ends with a journal writing exercise: "Choose one item to enlarge upon in your journal, beginning with the phrase, 'It was a time when...'"

If time is short, offer the journal writing as an exercise to do at home. The timeline is a rich tool for self-examination. Suggest these possibilities:

1. Keep adding to it as memories beget memories.
2. Look at the areas of break and change.
  - What else was happening in your life at the time?
  - Do you see a pattern?
  - What might you learn about how and why future change points might occur?  
(Change has brought us from other places to this one. We have no reason to assume these processes will not continue.)
3. Did you mark changes and turning points on your line since you became a Unitarian Universalist? (Many do not think to do this.)

Ask that the timeline be brought along to the remaining sessions as a resource. The leaders may decide to have an informal time with refreshments following the session. Remember if you serve wine to offer an attractive non-alcoholic alternative. Remind everyone of the time of the next meeting, and ask them to bring journal materials and their timelines.

## Workshop Two: The Haunting House of Worship

### *Materials needed*

- marking pens
- crayons
- masking tape
- large newsprint
- large manila paper

### *Beginning*

Referring to the timelines, ask whether anyone has had a further insight or reflection from the first session's activities. It is important to offer this opportunity, even though responses must be kept brief.

Next, ask if anyone has a journal entry they would like to read to the group.

### *Major Exercise: The Haunting House of Worship*

Everyone is asked to get very comfortable and to close their eyes.

Then make the following suggestions, allowing time in between each question for people to explore their imaginations.

"Think of the religious organization with which you were most involved before age sixteen. This could be a house of worship like a church, a synagogue, a mosque, or a temple. If you weren't involved in a house of worship, you might choose to reflect on a school or a club that formed you religiously or spiritually. Take some time to choose one particular house of worship or organization to reflect on.

First, think of the neighborhood it is in; approach it slowly. Move all around it and let its presence impress itself upon you. Imagine walking around the outside. Are there flowers? Trees? A sidewalk all around? A sign? What does it say? How many entrances are there? Choose one and enter the building. Now I will give you time to

walk all through the building. As you do, be aware of all your senses. Are there special smells in certain places? Special sounds? Pay attention to dark and light, and to temperature. Where do people gather? Do you have a favorite place? Are there places in the building where you are not allowed—that are off limits? How do you feel about them? Sit in a seat. Where are your eyes drawn? What do you hear?”

Now, when you are ready, without speaking or losing your mood, I would like you to take a large sheet of paper and whichever of the available pens/crayons you prefer and draw a floor plan of the church, marking in the places you have been remembering—drawing them in will enhance your memories. Be as simple or as detailed as you wish. Include the outside grounds if they have meaning for you.”

Maintain a quiet atmosphere until everyone has had ample time to work on the floor plans. Then ask that they gather in small groups (four or five people) and share the floor plans with one another. Allow five minutes per person and remind them of the time periodically so no one is shortchanged. Next, gather back into the large circle and introduce a period of contemplation in which the group may reflect on any learnings this experience produced.

Post a large sheet of newsprint and write across the top, “I learned...” and record any offered statements. Suggest that these statements may be expanded in the journal.

End the session by inviting the participants to display their floor plans on the walls (provide masking tape).

## **Workshop Three: An Exercise of Reconciliation**

### *Materials needed*

- newsprint
- masking tape
- paper and pens for those who forget journal materials

### *Beginnings*

Have the “Haunting Houses of Worship” and the “I Learned...” lists posted when the workshop begins. Ask if anyone would like to add any more statements to “I Learned...”

Ask if anyone would like to read a journal entry to the group. As always, these are heard without discussion.

The last session focused on buildings, recognizing how physical spaces store memories. This session focuses on people: people who have been present along our religious paths.

Ask each person to take out the timeline and look it over with this idea in mind, seeing particular faces linked to the recorded episodes.

### *Major Exercise— Dialogue— An Exercise of Reconciliation*

Ask everyone to get into a comfortable position, eyes closed, journal materials nearby. Then give the following directions:

“Choose someone from your timeline, before one of the ‘break’ or ‘change’ marks, who is or would be still back there, someone who was or is important to you. The person may be living or dead. You are going to have a dialogue with that person regarding the break point, that line that separates the two of you. Both sides of the dialogue exist within yourself.

“I will give you a moment to choose that person. Note how they are dressed, their movements. When you are ready, greet the person and hear the response. Then you may have a question you wish to ask. Proceed with your dialogue, and when you feel ready, record that dialogue in your journal.”

If someone has difficulty choosing a dialogue subject, leaders may suggest a Sunday School teacher, friend, relative, clergy figure, or historical personage. If someone inquires, it is perfectly alright to recall and record a conversation one has actually had. The leader’s role is always to help the participant use the exercise tool in whatever way is most useful to them. (If someone asks if they “can” do something, it’s probably because that is what they need and want to do.)

Complete quiet is required until everyone is finished. If all but one or two people seem to be ready to move on, gently suggest that those who are still working find a temporary stopping place and continue the exercise later.

Anyone who wishes may read their dialogues to the group. Most will probably do so, though they may be reluctant at first. The leaders create an atmosphere that encourages willing participants to read journal entries and affirms the decision of others not to do so. Such an atmosphere is developed as much with body language and sensitive use of silence as with words.

Ask after each reading how it felt to hear oneself read it aloud. Listen very carefully. It may be appropriate to ask if the dialogue might actually take place in the future.

### ***End of Session***

As the group members learn about one another’s experiences, they begin to see how they may be resources to one another. There is time in sessions four and five to deal with some questions generated by the group. Post a large sheet of newsprint and ask for any topics, related to the workshop theme, that the group hopes to touch upon

by the time the program ends. You cannot promise that all will be covered, but some surely will. Furthermore, simply making the list helps weave some of the items into the remaining sessions. It is up to the leaders to continue referring to the list and adding to it.

## Workshop Four: Claiming the Positives

### *Materials needed*

- marking pens (three colors)
- masking tape
- several large sheets of paper

### *Beginning*

Post the “Concerns We Hope to Address” list. Ask if anyone would like to add to this list.

Ask if anyone has a journal entry they wish to read. (Some may have continued working at their dialogues.)

### *Major Exercise: Positives Lists*

Up to now, our focus has been on the past. This exercise brings together what we have discovered and then moves us forward into the present.

Tape up a large sheet of paper. Be ready to add another quickly. Write at the top with a wide-tip marking pen, “Positive Aspects—Past Religion” and ask for people to simply call out in words or phrases anything they wish to list. Group agreement is not sought; the list is a compilation of individual opinions. It is generally best to list something exactly as worded by the person offering it. If you need to distill or clarify, make sure your revision is completely acceptable to the group. Even if an idea seems quite similar to one already listed, write it—it may be important for someone to see it expressed in a certain way. Move to a second sheet if you need to and allow time for the group to check to see if anything is missing.

When everyone is satisfied that the list is complete, take it down and put it out of sight. Using a fresh sheet and a different color marker, write “Positive Aspects—

Present Religion” and repeat the process. Try to keep the group from getting involved in comparisons until this list is complete.

When the group has completed the second list, put the first list up again and invite observations (this word is much better than “comparisons.” After the discussion has gone on for about ten to fifteen minutes, post another sheet of paper and write at the top, “Still Seeking...” and record anything anyone in the group wants to list under this category. This activity will probably lead you quite naturally to some items on the “Concerns We Hope to Address” list.

For a journal writing activity at home, suggest that one item from the “Still Seeking” list be chosen and explored. What do I seek? How might I get it? What changes would have to occur in my Unitarian Universalist society for me to find what I need? What changes in myself?

At the end of the session, remind everyone to bring a memento to the last session to use in a simple closing celebration.

## Workshop Five: Conclusion and Worship

### *Materials Needed*

- newsprint paper
- marking pens
- chalice, candle, and matches
- altar cloth to place under chalice
- *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal
- mementos (participants bring)

### *Exercise*

Have the “Positives” and “Still Seeking” lists posted when the group assembles. Invite any further additions or observations and record them.

Ask if anyone would like to read a journal entry.

Spend the next forty-five minutes addressing the items on the “Concerns” list. Then break for ten minutes to prepare for the closing worship. Announce that you will invite each person in the group to show and say something about the memento, related perhaps to what it once meant and what it means now. Participation beyond joining the group in the circle is completely optional.

The goal of the closing worship is to provide closure for the group’s life together, and to affirm the growing edge of each person’s religious quest, grounded in the whole of all that has come before. It is short and simple, and finds its power in individual participation, which leaders may trust will indeed occur.

### *Closing Worship*

Leaders are encouraged to create a worship which responds to the unique life of the group. The following suggestions for readings and activities may assist you in that

planning.

### Preparation

Prepare a worship center with room for everyone to gather around it. A small low table works well, or simply mark an area on the floor with a piece of cloth. In the center place a chalice, candle, and matches. When you are ready, invite everyone to gather.

#### *Opening Words and Chalice Lighting*

We have come along many different paths to this moment, and we will go from here to other places. I light this chalice to celebrate the community of this group, to symbolize the diversity among us and the unity which binds us here, together, in this moment. [*Light the chalice.*]

#### *Reading*

Relevant readings include the following, some of which can be read responsively or as litanies:

- From *Singing the Living Tradition*: 443, 444, 466, 580, 591, 654, or 657.
- Selections from WorshipWeb ([www.uua.org/worshipweb](http://www.uua.org/worshipweb)).
- Or this adaptation of a reading by Samuel McChord Crothers (from *Prayers*, 1928):

We commemorate the places and faces which have  
been recalled during our time together.

Let the horizon of our minds include all people:

The great family here on earth with us;

Those who have gone before and left to us

the heritage of their memory and of their work;

And those whose lives will be shaped by what we do or leave undone.

### *Sharing*

Leader indicates silently that it is now time for someone to share the memento, placing it near the candle. All are left visible until the end of the service. Leaders are encouraged to participate in this activity with participants.

### *Closing Words*

When everyone who wishes to has spoken, the leader offers closing words or a benediction.

- Appropriate readings from *Singing the Living Tradition* include 680, 682, 687, 692, and 706.
- You may also consult WorshipWeb ([www.uua.org/worshipweb](http://www.uua.org/worshipweb)).

### *Closing Song*

Relevant closing songs include the following:

- "Where Do We Come From?" 1003 in *Singing the Journey*
- "Woyaya," 1020 in *Singing the Journey*
- "Lean on Me," 1021 in *Singing the Journey*
- "Simple Gifts," 16 in *Singing the Living Tradition*
- "Shalom, Havayreem!" in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

## WEEKEND WORKSHOP OUTLINE

With this format, there is little time for journal writing beyond the Dialogue exercise. Nevertheless, the ideas should be offered for independent exploration.

### *Friday Evening*

8:00-10:00 — Workshop One: Personal Religions Timeline. End with “Concerns” list exercise from the end of Workshop Three: An Exercise of Reconciliation.

### *Saturday*

9:30-11:00 — Workshop Two: The Haunting House of Worship

11:00-11:15 — Break

11:15-12:30 — Workshop Three: An Exercise of Reconciliation

12:30-1:30 — Shared Brown Bag Lunch

1:30 - 3:30 — Workshop Four: Claiming the Positives

3:30 - 3:45 — Break

3:45 - 4:15 — Discussion of group-generated concerns (from Workshop Five)

4:30 - 5:00 — Closing Worship (from Workshop Five)

### *Implementation notes:*

It is important to observe all the breaks. In addition to coffee, provide a bowl of fruit and some lemonade or cider for refreshment throughout the day.