

Best Practices for Unitarian Universalist Blogging



From the Unitarian Universalist Blogging Resources Project

Edited by Shelby Meyerhoff

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In May of 2008, I surveyed leading Unitarian Universalist bloggers for their stories, insights and advice on blogging. The bloggers featured in this report write prominent blogs that focus on and promote Unitarian Universalism.

Contributors

Peter Bowden, “UUPlanet.tv”

<http://www.uuplanet.tv>

Peter Bowden is a television producer and a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, as well as a consultant, guest preacher, and workshop leader.

“UUPlanet.tv” is a video blog created to help newcomers discover Unitarian Universalism and provide resources for Unitarian Universalists to share with others. In each post, Bowden spotlights one or more videos related to Unitarian Universalism, allowing visitors to watch and learn about our religion. He culls videos from many different sources and sometimes introduces the videos with written commentary.

Rev. James Ford, “Monkey Mind”

<http://monkeymindonline.blogspot.com/>

James Ishmael Ford has been a Unitarian Universalist minister since graduating from seminary in 1991. He served congregations in Wisconsin, Arizona, and Massachusetts, before being called as the senior minister of the First Unitarian Church in Providence, Rhode Island. Ford is also an ordained Zen Buddhist priest and School Abbot of the Boundless Way Zen network of Zen communities. His most recent book is *Zen Master Who? A Guide to the People and Stories of Zen*. He started “Monkey Mind” as a sabbatical project in 2006.



Rev. Dan Harper, “Yet Another Unitarian Universalist”
<http://www.danielharper.org/blog/>

Dan Harper is the parish minister of First Unitarian in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Before becoming a minister, he had a checkered career as sculptor's apprentice, warehouse help, salesman, carpenter, retail clerk, and director of religious education.



Rev. Kit Ketcham, “Ms. Kitty’s Saloon and Road Show”
<http://mskittyssaloonandroadshow.blogspot.com>

Kit Ketcham was born a Baptist preacher's kid and became a Unitarian Universalist in 1976, when her son was born. She entered the Unitarian Universalist ministry in 1999 after receiving her M.Div. from Iliff School of Theology in Denver. The title of her blog comes from an old nickname from a former life and reveals a hidden desire to kick up her heels and be a torch singer. However, Ketcham recognizes that for many folks a saloon is as close as they get to a religious experience. So she sees her readers as a congregation of sorts.



Anna Belle Leiserson, “First Unitarian Universalist of Nashville Events Blog”
<http://www.firstuunashville.org/wp/>

Anna Belle Leiserson is a professional web coordinator and has served as "co-webmistress" for the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville for about ten years. After a couple of years of building and carefully nurturing the “First Unitarian Universalist of Nashville Events Blog” she no longer has to do much of anything. A host of other members tend to it now as editors and authors.



Terri Pahucki, “UU Intersections”
<http://uuintersctions.blogspot.com/>



Pahucki's blog, "UU Intersections," integrates meditation and religious commentary. She shares her thoughts on life and the religion she loves through personal story, poetry, reflection, and the occasional sermon.

Pahucki discovered Unitarian Universalism in 2004, and, within it, her call to ministry. She is a worship leader and social action chair at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Rock Tavern in Orange County, New York. Very recently, Pahucki joined the staff of the Garrison Institute, an interfaith retreat center in the Hudson Valley that explores the intersection of contemplation and engaged action in the world. Her passions include writing, eco-justice, and her two little girls, Camille and Elisa.

David Pyle, "Celestial Lands"

<http://celestiallands.org/wayside/>

David Pyle is a fourth year student at Meadville Lombard Theological School, the 2008 summer minister at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, and a second lieutenant and U.S. Army chaplain candidate. David is a Universalist Christian with a Zen Buddhist spiritual practice. These identities are reflective of the content on the "Celestial Lands" blog



"Celestial Lands" began in 2005 as an online archive of Pyle's writings, inspired by the journals that Ralph Waldo Emerson kept throughout his life. It exists in three parts: an archive/journal, an online collection of open source literature on liberal religion, and a blog. The blog is just under a year old, and is intended as the "public face" of "Celestial Lands." Keeping the blog has become a spiritual practice, and often serves as Pyle's pre-writing for sermons.

Tina Simson, "Wellspring"

<http://www.uuwellspring.org/>

Tina Simson, the "blog keeper" of "Wellspring," is a longtime member of The First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York. An attendee of the Wellspring program in 2007, Simson designs and promotes the blog. Simson is also a candidate for ministry at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary.



Wellspring is a spiritual deepening program based on the concept of a five-spoke wheel that keeps spiritual seekers in balance and spinning, with principles grounded in Unitarian Universalism traditions. The five spokes are: spiritual practice, spiritual direction, covenant groups,

Unitarian Universalist history and theology, and faith in action. The “Wellspring” blog is an outgrowth of the program, sharing the authors’ spiritual musings and insights with other seekers. It also makes available the program curriculum to anyone interested in starting a program at his or her own congregation.

Major contributors to the “Wellspring” blog include Rev. Jen Crow, Libby Moore and Joy Collins. This amazing trio has developed the Wellspring curriculum, facilitated groups at First Unitarian, presented the Wellspring program at General Assembly and other conferences, and fostered programs in other churches.

Jeff Wilson, “Transient and Permanent”

<http://transientandpermanent.wordpress.com/>

Jeff Wilson is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist and an academic in the field of religious studies. At "Transient and Permanent," he blogs about Unitarian Universalism and liberal religious history.



Survey Questions and Responses

For the first question, asking about each blogger’s goals, there are excerpts from all of the contributors. For the other questions, the report highlights several responses or provides aggregated data.

1. Why do you blog? What goals do you have for your blog?

“My primary goal is to share our faith with everyone on Earth who would be a Unitarian Universalist if they knew we existed...and to help them find or start a healthy Unitarian Universalist group or congregation to share their lives with.”

– *Peter Bowden*

“I started the blog when I started a sabbatical as a way to keep in touch with the congregation. I’ve come to feel it is an important part of my ministry.” – *James Ford*

“My main goal is to have fun. Fun for me includes bush-league theological and philosophical speculation (my undergrad degree is in philosophy), and writing about sense of place, arts, and culture.” – *Dan Harper*

“I now consider myself an online minister of sorts to a widely-divergent and far-flung congregation of sorts. My goal is to present the life of a minister to a group which may not understand that life very well and consequently may misjudge a minister’s actions

and opinions. I am not representing Unitarian Universalism as much as I am representing the life of a Unitarian Universalist minister.” – *Kit Ketcham*

“It began as an easy way to add content management capabilities to our church’s website [by] empowering committee chairs, board members and staff to be able to post their own announcements and have them show up on the home page as they wanted.” – *Anna Belle Leiserson*

“Primarily, I write as part of a personal spiritual practice. I also blog in order to communicate reflections on Unitarian Universalism – in order to spread the transformative religion I have encountered to others both within and without the Unitarian Universalist church.” – *Terri Pahucki*

“I began the blog section of “Celestial Lands” as a way to make public the pre-writing that I do for sermon and essay writing. Writing is an essential part of my spiritual practices, in many ways an opposite practice to my *Zazen* meditation.” – *David Pyle*

“We blog in order to expand the Unitarian Universalist discussion about spiritual searching. Our thoughts, insights, and musings may open doors for other Unitarian Universalists to know that our denomination is open enough to hold our spiritual selves. I personally write because it helps me make sense of this crazy life we all lead. It seems that what I write helps others make sense too.” – *Tina Simson*

“I blog as part of my educational responsibilities as a professor of religious studies whose research includes a focus on liberal religious history. I seek to educate the public about liberal religious history, especially Unitarian Universalist history, both for general knowledge and to provide context for current issues of import to the denomination. As such, I use the blog somewhat like a cross between my seminars, lectures, book reviews, and student office hours.

“Hopefully, readers will come away with more understanding of Unitarian Universalist history, or at least give some thought to important issues. I also seek to bridge the gap between professional historians and the people in the pews, so that historical knowledge and the tools of historical inquiry are made somewhat available to the average Unitarian Universalist.” – *Jeff Wilson*

2. Who is your intended audience?

“My primary audience is myself. I began the spiritual practice of writing years ago... My secondary audience are my colleagues... Third, I believe I am filling a ‘soft evangelism’ role, because many of the people who read the articles I write find them through Yahoo or Google, and not through Unitarian Universalist sites. Though they may not agree, they have at least read a message of love and possibility, and perhaps that seed may grow for them someday...” – *David Pyle*

“My main intended reader is a Unitarian Universalist interested in learning more about Unitarian Universalist history...Additionally, I try to overall provide information in a way that will be informative to anyone who reads the blog regardless of denominational affiliation.” – *Jeff Wilson*

“Other Unitarian Universalists – and anyone else asking life’s questions” – *Terri Pahucki*

3. Who owns your blog? Does it belong to you as individual or to your congregation or other organization?

Most of the bloggers reported that they were the sole owners of their blogs. Anna Belle Leiserson and Tina Simson, who run congregation-based blogs, were the exceptions.

Leiserson reported that the congregation’s Communications Committee manages the blog.

Simson elaborated, “I have the dubious honor of being the ‘Blog Keeper, a.k.a. the Blog Queen,’ but this year the money for the software subscription came from the church’s adult program budget. The church doesn’t censor or direct our comments.”

4. How frequently do you post?

Answers to this question varied from several posts per month to fifteen posts per week. The Wellspring group was at the low end, with several posts per month. In the middle of the spectrum, clustered around approximately 2-3 posts/week, were Terri Pahucki, Peter Bowden, Kit Ketcham, and David Pyle. Anna Belle Leiserson reported that new content is added to the “First Unitarian Universalist of Nashville Events Blog” about five times per week. Dan Harper and James Ford posted approximately seven times per week, and Jeff Wilson posted approximately fifteen times per week!

5. What is the tone of your blog?

“I use my writer's voice, slightly more casual than my minister's voice, but similarly by turns personal and philosophical. The ‘day book’ part allows me to throw quotes of interest up whenever I wish. I indulge my inner snark elsewhere.” – *James Ford*

“My blog is academic and educated in tone, written anonymously, without ‘I’ statements. But it also seeks to use light humor to engage the reader, rather than foisting too many statistics or dropping too many academic names.” – *Jeff Wilson*

“As a blogger feeding video content, I’m keeping posts short and sweet. I want people to watch, not read. [The tone is] casual, friendly and educational.” – *Peter Bowden*

6. What steps do you take to make sure that your blog is a safe space, both for you and for other participants? Do you have a code of conduct?

Anna Belle Leiserson and Dan Harper were the only bloggers who reported having explicit rules about site participation. In the case of the “First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville Events Blog” comments are not allowed. A majority of bloggers moderate comments on their blogs, and Peter Bowden mentioned that he requires users of “UUPlanet.tv” to register before commenting.

Here are some of the comments from bloggers about creating a safe space:

“I have to be very careful about what political content I place on the blog, as there are restrictions upon my freedom of speech as a military officer. For my safety, I do limit the discussion of events in my personal life to no more than I would be willing to discuss from the pulpit. I do not include any content that could come directly from counseling or my pastoral work.” – *David Pyle*

“I model acceptance and curiosity about other points of view, I thank people for the insights they offer, and when I disagree, I may say so but I don’t argue much ... And because I know my congregants may be reading, I am careful to be the kind of person on the blog that they know me to be in the pulpit.” – *Kit Ketcham*

7. What kinds of boundaries do you observe around confidentiality?

“I don’t write anonymously, I try to be kind, and I don’t say anything I think I’ll be embarrassed at being quoted as having said. It has been suggested I’m more reasonable and thoughtful on my blog than in ‘real life.’” – *James Ford*

“As an ordained minister and member of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, I’m bound by all the standards of confidentiality implied therein. When in doubt, I err on the side of keeping confidences.” – *Dan Harper*

“My name is not allowed to appear on my blog, and I would not allow someone’s contact information to appear without their permission. I do not post information that would be privileged in other contexts, such as confidential information about my students.” – *Jeff Wilson*

8. How do you respond to comments and e-mail from readers?

“We have comments turned off. They aren’t needed.” – *Anna Belle Leiserson*

“I try to respond to all comments. This is my new policy. In the past, I did not respond to ‘praise’ comments — but even these deserve a response, I think, even if just to say ‘glad

you liked it!’ ” – *Terri Pahucki*

“First, I consider e-mail confidential unless otherwise stated – therefore, it falls under the general heading of confidential communication. Responses to comments depend on the comment. I try to keep it positive and try to affirm the commenter's point of view. But I am also willing to say when I think commenters are in error or mean-spirited.” – *Dan Harper*

“The e-mail comes to me and I respond or forward it to the other posters: Libby Moore, Joy Collins, and Rev. Jen Crow. We all feel that responding personally and promptly is very important. As for comments, we will respond if it seems appropriate.” – *Tina Simson*

9. What are the most challenging aspects of blogging in your experience?

“Developing a blog that is in sync with your passions enough to be personally relevant and exciting so you can stick with it.” – *Peter Bowden*

“For this kind of blog, it was simply getting it off the ground. Even though committee chairs begged us to put their information on the home page, it turns out that secretly they wanted the webmasters to just take care of everything, even content, for them. So this blog was actually our third attempt. Being older and wiser by the third attempt, I got a lynch pin in place (the chair of our very active Social Concerns Committee). She became an events blog evangelist. Bless her.” – *Anna Belle Leiserson*

“I don’t like to write too much about myself. ‘Me, me, me’ isn’t very attractive, in my opinion. At the same time, readers like to know something about my personal life, so I share what seems to be common ground between me and my listeners...It’s challenging to know that among my readers are members of my congregation; I always want to present myself in the best possible light to them and it’s not always easy!” – *Kit Ketcham*

10. What are the most rewarding aspects of blogging in your experience?

“I *love* receiving comments! Knowing that my blog resonated with someone’s life, or helped someone think more deeply about an issue is very rewarding. I have also been moved, challenged, and comforted by commenters and treasure these gifts...I enjoy adding to the general blogging or Unitarian Universalist discussion. It helps me feel that I have a voice in our democratic denomination [and] allows me to put our fifth principle into practice.” – *Terri Pahucki*

“I have made so many friends across the nation this way. I may never meet them in person but I share my life with their lives. I find that I have encouraged non-Unitarian Universalists to investigate or at least consider visiting a local Unitarian Universalist congregation and that’s a thrill. As a minister, I am also warmed by the knowledge that I

am a mentor for some seminarians and that my posts about the real life of a minister are helpful to them (as well as scary, I've learned!)" – *Kit Ketcham*

"What I find rewarding is the opportunity to extend my role as an educator to an audience beyond my classroom. Especially when readers let me know that they enjoyed or learned something, I feel the blog is working correctly. I also enjoy the opportunity to participate in larger discussions about Unitarian Universalism, including contemporary denominational issues, and sometimes I learn new information from commenters. Although it is not part of the motivation for the blog itself, my blogging has led to a number of requests for lectures and book reviews, some with financial remuneration, so this must be viewed as an unintended reward of the blogging work." – *Jeff Wilson*

11. What advice would you give to Unitarian Universalists who are new to blogging and want to get started?

"I'd suggest that they start out by reading a number of blogs, 'favoriting' several that they might read every day, getting a screen name and entering comments to posts they find interesting, and then thinking about what they might have to offer to the blogosphere." – *Kit Ketcham*

"The usual advice to new bloggers: be honest about the time commitment (there are too many blogs that fold after half a dozen posts and you don't want to be one of those); pick a schedule and stick to it; have high standards for yourself and find opportunities to learn more about your chosen blogging medium (writing, audio, video, etc.); participate in the wider blogging community... There are plenty of good resources out there on how to become a better blogger, so buy a book, attend a workshop, or read online guides." – *Dan Harper*

"Learn your software capabilities and talk to other people who blog; that way you can envision what your message can look like. Remember that your design and your links and pages are as important as your posts. Also, learn how to link to social networking sites in order to expand your readership." – *Tina Simson*

"Try it. If I can do it, almost anyone can." – *James Ford*

12. How do you evaluate the success of your blog? What have been your most successful blog posts or series?

"The biggest success for us is getting new members to our church. For example, we have had posts about GLBT events, and that's brought us new members. The second biggest is happy church leaders." – *Anna Belle Leiserson*

"I don't try to evaluate. I did like winning a few awards." – *James Ford*

“I am very pleased with the success of my blog; I don’t have hundreds of readers most days, but I have regular readers. I feel I’m being helpful to several of my readers, judging from their comments...I’m not sure how to judge my ‘most successful’ blog posts—the one that has gotten the most hits consistently is a very old one about my experience with NeoVita shoes!” – *Kit Ketcham*

“Our church is growing quite a bit and people always cite our webpage as a reason they come to visit. Our blog is a ‘hot spot’ on the church’s webpage so we can see when people click through to our blog. I think it helps folks find Unitarian Universalism.”
– *Tina Simson*

13. What do you wish you had done differently in your blogging?

A majority of the bloggers wrote that there is nothing significant that they would have done differently, while a few offered cautionary notes.

“Just one little thing: used only my first name when I started. You just never know with the whole ‘employment search’ thing...” – *Terri Pahucki*

“I started tagging posts and videos without the term ‘Unitarian Universalism’ as the whole site is about that. It seemed silly to add that tag as it is pretty obvious when you are on the site. However I now realize that I need it in there to help search engines bring people to the site.” – *Peter Bowden*

“I deleted my blog and took an extended hiatus because I was concerned that it could hurt me professionally during my job search (the original version had my name on it and was written from an ‘I’ perspective). In retrospect I wish I’d just made it non-public and reworked it, since my old blog address was taken over by an unsavory new blogger and my new blog took some time to take off since the audience I’d originally built wasn’t aware of the new incarnation.”
– *Jeff Wilson*

14. What other online tools do you use to promote your blog? (i.e. social networking sites, Twitter, social bookmarking tools, etc.)

The majority of bloggers surveyed do not use any external online tools to promote their blog. David Pyle, Dan Harper and Kit Ketcham were the exceptions.

“I offer the ‘Share This’ button on each of my pages, as well as I am listed in StumbleUpon. Besides that, I participate in DiscoverUU.com and am listed on Philocrites’s ‘Guide to Unitarian Universalist Blogs.’” – *David Pyle*

“I played with social networking sites and bookmarking tools for a while, but got next to nothing out of it. So I do pretty standard search engine optimization: lots of fresh content,

tags, careful use of keywords, etc. I'm really at the stage where the most important thing for me is to make sure there's lots of good content up there – you can promote your site all you want, but if it's thin on content, people won't come back.” – *Dan Harper*

“I signed up for StumbleUpon but haven't gotten much out of it.” – *Kit Ketcham*

15. Do you use a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed? How many subscribers do you have?

Five out of nine bloggers use an RSS feed, but only Dan Harper and Tina Simson track the number of subscribers. The last time Dan Harper checked was eight months before this survey, and he had sixty subscribers at that time. Tina Simson reports that Wellspring's RSS feed has 286 subscribers.

16. Do you track site traffic? How many unique visitors do you have per day (on average)?

All but one blogger tracks and reviews their site traffic statistics. Among those bloggers who track number of visitors per day, responses varied from 8 to 100. Two bloggers reported their hits per day, with responses of 130 hits and 150-200 hits.

17. Do you find Unitarian Universalist Association resources helpful to you as a blogger? What additional resources could we provide to Unitarian Universalist bloggers?

“I have found the Unitarian Universalist biographical index very useful, as well as the online archive of *UU World* articles. I also have found both UUpdates.net and DiscoverUU.com invaluable. I use the old chalice clip art page a lot. I have a page specifically ‘evangelizing’ Unitarian Universalism on my blog, where I use both the videos produced by the UUA and the rotating banner ads. I also enjoy the ‘Interdependent Web’ blog that *UU World* produces.” – *David Pyle*

“I get lots of informal help by serving as a volunteer for UUA.org during General Assembly; I have learned a great deal from hanging out with the assorted geeks and content producers who make up the General Assembly web staff... The blogging resources that have been most useful to me in the past year have been non-Unitarian Universalist Association resources such as attending Podcamp Boston, reading a couple of books on blogging, and checking out online resources like ‘A List Apart.’ ” – *Dan Harper*

18. Please write any additional comments or suggestions.

“By 2012, it is projected that 80% of Internet bandwidth usage will be for online video. Unitarian Universalists are way behind the curve when it comes to online video. I'd rather see the Unitarian Universalist Association devote resources to promoting online video than supporting text-based bloggers; I suspect that the audience for text-based blogs is mostly middle-aged and older folks these days.” – *Dan Harper*

“Unitarian Universalist Association congregations, and Unitarian Universalism in general, have a massive resource of educated, thoughtful, and opinionated persons available to them. Unitarian Universalists are pretty much a natural blogging population, both as writers and readers, and could probably be harnessed in a wide variety of ways to promote the denomination to non-Unitarian Universalists or disseminate information about Unitarian Universalist matters to other members.” – *Jeff Wilson*