

# UUA General Assembly 98 Report of the President

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Twenty-five years ago we both may have been younger in body, but I at least was rather too old in spirit. The life-long challenge of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation has been a gift to me from this religious movement. It's one I'll never be able fully to repay. It is also the challenge that I want to discuss today.

## Acknowledging Makaanah Morris

But first I would like to ask the Assembly to join me in recognizing and welcoming to the platform one of the best exemplars and teachers I know of life-long renewal, learning, and ministry to folks of every age. For the last eight years she has served the UUA, first as Dean of the Independent Study Program for religious educators, then the last six years directing the whole Department of Religious Education. Makaanah Morriss has helped us to re-energize our youth programs, to update our commitment to comprehensive sexuality education, to renew our ministry to families, and to train both educators as ministers and ministers as educators -- putting a compassionate heart and a incisive mind behind each consultation and curriculum, each training and team she has helped to bring to the service of our movement.

What Makaanah and her husband Bob have long yearned for, however, is a chance to do coministry, to go riding, and to grow a church together. So as they ride off to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to do just that, I have an announcement to make: This winter, when we renovate and expand our guest and meeting facilities on Beacon Hill, the largest room -- like all the rooms, made newly accessible to people of all ages and abilities -- will be dedicated to leadership training, and called The Living Tradition Room. Fifty ministers and fifty lay leaders will have their names inscribed on a special plaque, honored by contributions made for the renovations, given in recognition of their contributions to renewing this living tradition. The very first name on that plaque will be "Makaanah Morriss," the gifts in her honor having come from literally dozens of fellow staffers at the UUA who will miss her deeply. Please join me in thanking and blessing Makaanah!

## Introducing the Rev. Cynthia Breen

I should also announce that we called, from the West, from Seattle, the Rev. Cynthia Breen, as Makaanah's successor. Please stand up, Cynthia, and wave hello to the big community of religious learning you start serving later this summer!

And now to my report. I've promised Denny to keep this short.

"I thought the minister's sermon was far too long," said the church-shopper to a member who called the following week asking about her visit. "Well," said the member, "how did you like what came after the sermon? Hm? What was that like?" Replied the visitor, "It was, like, Tuesday."

## On Interfaith Cooperation

There's a desire to have the President report each year on what's been done to implement GA resolutions. If I were to really do that, I would have the floor until Tuesday. But let me begin with last year's Statement of Conscience on the need for interfaith cooperation. What I've been doing is spending more time than ever meeting with leaders of other faith groups. Internationally, I've met with the four major religious leaders from Bosnia, who have finally formed an inter-religious council for reconciliation and peace, thanks to an organization called the World Conference on Religion and Peace, whose founder was Dana Greeley and whose first Secretary General, Homer Jack, came from Rochester. I'll be sending out a video about that in the fall, to all congregations. I've also been to Japan, to help the Rissho Kosei-kai, whose Founder Niwano co-founded the WCRP with Dana.

Here in the US, I've joined with former Sen. Paul Simon and leaders of over twenty denominations, including Pat Robertson, to call on both church and state to recognize the moral issue of continuing, deep poverty for many -- including over 20% of our nation's children -- in this time of prosperity for so many. I've visited and hosted the General Secretary of the Progressive National Baptists, Dr. King's denomination, and worked out some cooperative projects. And I've become part of an ongoing, twice-yearly seminar for the heads of a dozen denominations and major agencies concerned about religious leadership for justice and community.

This is good for me. It provides perspective. When I was introduced at the seminar by Bill McKinney, President of Pacific School of Religion and one of America's leading sociologists of religion, he remarked, "The rest of you, whose memberships are declining, will want to ask John why the UUA has been growing for sixteen years in a row now, and why, as I've seen in studying them, they are perhaps the most cohesive progressive religious movement in America today." Imagine: other's see us as 'cohesive'!!

Perhaps with justification.

## A peek at the Fulfilling the Promise Survey

This year we took a survey, with responses from nearly ten thousand UUs. Others will unpack the details tomorrow, and analyze the good news, the bad, and the implications. What I believe the survey shows most clearly is that despite our hyper-awareness of differences in gender, race, class, ethnicity geography, and theology, we are remarkably united in our basic spiritual and moral values. Far more than we know. So that if we could find the maturity to move beyond what Freud so aptly called "the narcissism of small differences," we might actually become leaders. As my friend Diana Eck says, "Sure religion is sometimes part of the problem; that's why it has to be part of the solution." And what we're called to do is to show the world the uniting power of its most universal values.

I've now visited over 500 of our congregations. Nearly a hundred of those visits have been to help dedicate new or expanded church buildings. If there is a message I've carried consistently, it has been this: We're all just being human in this movement, religiously, together. Humanistic in our values, varied in our theologies. Scientific humanists, Christian humanists, Jewish humanists, eco-humanists, Buddhist humanists. Different spiritual disciplines; one community life. Which is why the world needs us -- to show that, as David Ferencz put it, "We need not think alike to love alike."

## Leading spiritual and moral renewal in our culture

Interfaith cooperation means shared leadership in our whole culture's spiritual and moral renewal. And let's face it: Our culture needs it, and we don't have all the answers. As Mary Pipher, the UU psychologist who will be, our Ware Lecturer next year, puts it, "If you let this culture just wash over you, you will end up stressed, addicted, fat and broke." A line which should lead to a personal inventory: Let's see broke, often; stressed, definitely; addicted, variously; and, fat, well...

A few weeks ago I was at a gathering of interfaith poobahs that Joan Brown Campbell arranged at the National Council of Churches for the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Dr. John Hamre. We were to discuss things like landmines, China policy, the efficacy of economic sanctions, humanitarian interventions that require the use of force, etc. But when Joan had to introduce an archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, which has members in Iraq, she couldn't remember whether in his his tradition he's to be called "Your Grace ... .. Your Eminence ... .. Your Beatitude ... .. Your Holiness." Until Dr. Hamre interjected, "I'm thinking of assuming the title "Your Heaviness" myself "

## The spiritual disciplines of democratic living

One friend I've made is Cliff Kirkpatrick, my counterpart with the Presbyterian Church, which is painfully polarized over sexuality and the so-called "culture wars." Cliff worked his way through seminary as a baseball umpire. Which, of course, causes people to ask: "Well, Cliff, that must have taught you to call 'em like you see 'em." He replies: "Oh no! In umpire school, we were very carefully trained: Call 'em, whether you see 'em or not!"

Which I regard as basic to leadership, especially religious leadership. And which leads me to reflections about what it will really take for us to fulfill the promise inherent in our faith and really develop its leadership potential and transformative power.

I really don't think it's just better attitudes toward leadership, though that would help. Above all else, it's a deeper appreciation of what I've come to call "the spiritual disciplines of democratic living." The first principle of which is this: In a democracy, you do not always get what you want. [But if you try some time, you just might find, you get what you need.]

Democracy, after all, is a faith exercise. Churchill called it the worst of all forms of governance - except for all the other methods. Yet in our culture of entitlement, we not only take it for granted, we even act, in the church whose calling, to paraphrase Martin Marty, is to give ecclesial form to democratic experiment, is that what we really deserve is what we WANT! What our democratic faith should require of us is not only more of us running for public office, or becoming otherwise politically involved, but also more of us learning, starting in the church, learning that democracy doesn't promise perfect leaders, or perfect outcomes; rather it requires that we promise to stay in the process, to listen to other voices, to speak our own truth, but with as much humility as passion, and to learn from others, and grow, renewing our own souls, because that's what counts, in the end, as ultimately 'character counts.'

This frankly, it seems to me, is our great failing. For if we are to preach, as our forebears did, what amounts to "salvation by character," then we need to develop and renew in our midst the spiritual disciplines which make for integrity, forbearance, patience, compassion, truth-telling, forgiveness, and that form of love which yearns to embody justice. Yet it does require that we break with a toxic culture, to which we too often cater.

We need personal disciplines that make time for reflection, meditation and prayer, by turning off the TV; that make time for family, for friends, and for a wider compassion; that help us sort out what we can usefully do from the abstracted idealism that, foisted on others, may only make things worse. Speaking for myself, I can only say that I could not survive without measurable disciplines like daily soul time, weekly worship and reflection on my service to community, some effort at least once a month to make society not just more civil, but actually good; and a yearly personal financial inventory, asking, "Have I been generous enough? Have I given at least 5% of what I have earned to express my spiritual values? 5% more to the moral causes that most claim my conscience?"

Martin Buber was right: to be human is to be one of the promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing animals. This is our destiny, our promise, as humans. We need to renew, continually, our capacity to make and keep promises. Otherwise, we keep our spiritual potential under the bushel of our own endless and insatiable desires.

## Renewing our promises

This year, we are asking each congregation to build on the survey of UU aspirations and needs by helping its members renew some promises -- to themselves, to families and community, and to one another. What I want to say to you most clearly today is that this is not about the words

you use to express your mission/covenant in the world. It's about how you act and really behave in relation to your own expressed ideals. Not in relation to the rather grand ideals that are the principles of the Association as a whole, but in relation to YOUR aspirations, your ideals, personally and congregationally.

For, you see, the real shame is not that we are relatively few who are willing to profess such high principles. There may be twice as many people who identify with us as we have as official members. But there's not even any shame in that, except as a challenge to reach out to those who already want to be with us. The real shame is that we are so self-involved that we really do behave as though our religion were something that the minister, or other UU's, or 'Boston,' could live for us. It isn't. No vicarious atonement.

In other words, if we want to espouse economic justice, we had better begin with fair compensation for those who work for our own congregations! We're doing better for some ministers, especially in larger congregations. But we have a long way to go for others -especially for religious educators and part-time employees. To which end, I'm pleased to announce that the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock has voted to give to the Liberal Religious Education Directors Association a multi-year grant totalling \$800,000 -- to help some 50 congregations create full-time positions in RE, with both fair pay and full benefits.

No congregation has done more for help with the institutional renewal of liberal religion than Shelter Rock. But in their help is also a challenge. To raise our own level of commitment. To expect more, not of them, or of "Boston," but of ourselves, first of all.

One last pitch, if I may. Something else that Shelter Rock has funded almost without other help, has been our progress toward becoming a more anti-racist, multi-cultural religious movement: our "Journey Toward Wholeness." Last year, the UUA Presidents' Council, the group that helped me raise over \$ 10 million in a capital campaign, partly to prove that all of us could help fund the growth of our movement, and the training and nurture of its future leaders, the Presidents' Council recommended to me and then to the UUA Board a plan to challenge congregations to do a "Journey Toward Wholeness" Sunday this coming winter, partly modeled on the effort called "Ministry Sunday," but this time with two-thirds of the funds raised staying with the congregation, to make anti-racism a more explicit part of renewing each congregation's covenant and mission.

Tomorrow afternoon you'll have an opportunity to do some leadership training on the tough work that every congregation or non-profit of any sort must undertake if it is to fulfill its promise: the work of asking, Who exactly are we? Whom do we seek to serve? with what shared hopes and goals? What are we will to promise one another to realize those objectives? What disciplines and resources shall we bring to bear to renew ourselves along the journey?

My prayer is that our spiritual renewal will begin, but not end, here, at this Assembly. May it begin with me, and you, and you, and all of us together. Let us begin by renewing our covenantal commitment to the ground of our own spiritual being. Then to those to whom we owe the most. Then to this constantly challenging democratic, humanistic faith tradition. Let us promise to renew and deepen our discipline as shared leaders in its service. Let us strive to open ourselves to

the gifts and graces that come from one another, even those that most challenge us to new ways of being in (but not of) the world together. But for the sake of the promise that is in us, untapped and too often unspoken, let it begin. Let it begin -- but not end -- here and now!

It's a privilege to serve you. God bless. Amen!