

# Plenary II

*Planning Committee*

Remarks on the future of Beacon Press

*Helen Atwan*

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak today, and thank you Bill and Larry for your comments.

It's hard for me to stand before you and talk about numbers instead of books, authors and activists, but the three year plan is essentially a financial plan, so please bear with me while I talk about how we propose to control costs and increase our profits while doing the mission work of the press.

Our objectives are to raise our profile as a publisher of important and influential books while committing, over the next three years not to exceed an average of \$200K in deficits, and not to exceed \$300K in deficits in any year, laying a solid foundation for a more stable and sustainable publishing program.

But why do we have to talk about Deficits at all, you may be asking? In the words of Samuel Eliot, in calling for the Unitarian Association to develop "new Powers of Public service" through Beacon Press back in 1898, "the publication of books that appeal to the higher instincts do not command as a rule a higher circulation and cannot, therefore, be handled by houses that are primarily commercial." In contemporary terms, to survive as a nonprofit, mission oriented press that does not reap profits from Thin Thigh books, or military thrillers, or low-cal cookbooks, we need support. But to put it in perspective, for the fiscal year just about to end, we expect to net about 4.6 million in sales of our books, another 200K in other income, bringing our net to 4.8, against a cost of about 2.2 million to physically produce them and another 2.9 million in all operating expenses. We're left with a deficit of about \$275,000, but we've published 67 books, each of which addresses one or more of the principles and purposes of the UUA.

And yes, As Larry Ladd points out, we are not a separate organization, we are in fact a department of the UUA, working every day on the public witness agenda of the UU movement.

Although the books we have published over the last decade have been important and influential titles--I think you all know many of our books--we have been subject to the general turmoil of the economy and the publishing industry turmoil in particular, which makes it all that much harder to predict and reliably reduce our deficits. We've also had some good years, including FY00, in which our sales reached a record high of almost 6 million . The profits from that year, combined with significant profits in 1994 and 95, have allowed Beacon to save enough money to cover deficits throughout the last decade. That cash reserve has almost run out, however, and we have created this plan to insure our survival in the coming years. We believe we can control the amount of support we need annually and we are committed to controlling that cost, but it won't be easy.

The strategies that we have outlined, with a great deal of help from our board of advisors, should help us to achieve our objectives while continuing to fulfill our mission.

To begin with, we have reduced our overhead by reducing our staff, and cutting our nonessential expenses. We have trimmed our cost of sales and raised our profit margins by using digital technology, increasing our percentage of sales flowing through more "efficient" and profitable channels, such as special sales and house sales, and raising our prices. These are tough measures, and it's a credit to our hardworking and loyal staff that we've been able to accomplish them.

We have been adjusting our editorial focus over the past few years to add books that have built in "special" and organizational sales potential. So in the last year or so we have published wonderful books that have a general readership, but also have significant organizational sales, like Robert Moses's groundbreaking book on civil rights and math literacy, *RADICAL EQUATIONS*, Bill Schulz's dramatic book on human rights, *IN OUR OWN BEST INTEREST*, Linda Lantieri's wonderful book about kids and conflict, *WAGING PEACE IN OUR SCHOOLS*, John Bryant's new book about economic literacy as an essential part of economic justice, *BANKING ON THE FUTURE*. Each of these books came with a dowry--organizations that committed to buying copies from us in advance of publication. We have also begun partnering with progressive foundations on books that come with financial support, both in terms of production subsidies and promotional support. We have just published *WHAT KIDS NEED: Today's Best Ideas for Nurturing, Teaching, and*

Protecting Young Children, with significant support from the Carnegie Corporation, who have also committed to buying several thousand copies of the book from us. We have just agreed to publish a new book on small schools funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, who have committed to buying 11,000 copies of the book, as well as giving us significant subsidies for producing and promoting the book. The Gates Foundation has also given us a healthy subsidy to promote other education titles, including Debbie Meier's new IN SCHOOLS WE TRUST, and we are partnering with Chuck Collins' United for a Fair Economy on his book (coauthored by none other than Bill Gates!) on an economic justice title, WEALTH AND OUR COMMONWEALTH.

Our associate publisher, Tom Hallock, has worked hard in the past few years especially to identify new sales channels for our books, organizations that will buy them directly from us, rather than our trade distributor, Houghton Mifflin, increasing our margin of profit. These groups include the Methodist's women's Global Ministries book club, which has purchased xx books from us in the past two years alone, Working Assets, the nonprofit credit card/phone company, which has adopted xx of our books for their programs, and many others. Our good friend Denny Davidoff put us together with the Carver Center in Connecticut to do a fundraiser around Roger Wilkins' JEFFERSON'S PILLOW.

Tom has also been working very closely with Houghton Mifflin to control the number of copies of books shipping to chains and wholesalers, who typically return books at astronomical rates. This has resulted in a significant reduction in our returns this year.

We've also adopted some more technical new policies around our pricing formulas, new policies about changing the discount on some of our sales to be more favorable for us, and some new initiatives in production which should further reduce our cost of goods. The net result should be that all of our sales will be more profitable.

I'm limited to 5 minutes, but you can learn much more about the press and our work at our booth or any of our workshops. And please, if you haven't already, do screen the brief history of Beacon on our web site.

The UU Funding Panel recently gave us a grant to work on a full history of the press, which we hope to have ready for the launch of our 150th anniversary at GA next year. Our historian, Susan Wilson, unearthed a wonderful document, "Beacon Press: Publishing Adventure," dating from the late 60s. In it, the anonymous editor writes:

"Still evident is a strong tradition for excellence, strengthened and directed now by a commitment grounded in Unitarian Universalist ideals: A nonprofit publishing house dedicated to a responsible exploration of the human condition through books....assuring a forum for bold points of view often neglected by the commercial press."

I believe we still provide that forum, that, in the words of the Task Force on Strategic Options for The Beacon Press, we are "active every day, directly and indirectly, in affirming and promoting all seven of the principles and purposes of Unitarian Universalism."

Thank you.