

Report From Rev. José Ballester
Liaison to the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee
March 17, 2008

On July 29th 2006 I was a relatively healthy 55 year old. Granted I was overweight, due to a sedentary lifestyle; being successfully treated for hypertension with medication; and managing Type 2 Diabetes through diet. However none of these conditions limited me in any way.

On July 30th 2006 I was assisting a homeless gentleman when I slipped and fell on the muddy church walkway and struck the back of my head on a flagstone. I don't remember seeing birds or stars circling overhead but I remember I had a headache. However since I was dealing with a critical situation, I stood-up, composed myself and completed my task with the homeless gentleman. Afterwards I drove home and had my spouse check to see if I had ruined my suit.

On August 24th 2006 I was admitted to a local hospital. For weeks following the fall I had been experiencing severe headaches. Unbeknownst to me the fall had caused what was described as an "intracranial injury with a cerebellar bleed." Or in non-medical terms, my brain was bleeding into my skull.

I spent one week in ICU, fighting for my life; one week in a hospital trying to make sense of what had happened; and two weeks in a Skilled Nursing Facility learning how to walk again and how to navigate my world.

On March 17th 2008, I find myself with a constant headache, impaired vision, impaired balance and taking 18 pills a day; I am no longer temporarily able-bodied.

Which brings me to the Journey Towards Wholeness Transformation Committee. In your packet you will find a report from the committee on their survey regarding cultural competency in our ministerial formation. I will have more to say on this later, but please study the report, I found the results disturbing but not shocking.

The other matter I wish to address is the issue of the committee adding Accessibility Concerns to its portfolio. During our recent meeting (3/13-15) we discussed the implications, challenges and opportunities this additional portfolio presented. We discussed the report *Annals of the UUA Accessibilities Committee* and participated in a conference call with former members of this sunsetted committee. With perhaps my new understanding of accessibilities issues I have begun to question how we, as a religious body, address accessibilities.

If we address the issue from a legal perspective we are safe since as a religious institution we are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. If we approach the situation from a moral perspective then we feel the need to provide scooters, places for wheelchairs, hearing assistance devices, large print publications and other mechanical, physical and architectural adjustments to assist our disabled sisters and brothers. The moral perspective takes us beyond the civil rights obligations and imparts a human rights obligation.

However we are a religious body and we have a theological imperative to be one with all our people; to live-out much referenced words about the inherent worth and dignity of all people in practical ways; with actual people. It is not enough to simply provide means but we must be ready to enter another person's world. To walk a mile... I mean to live an hour in another person's soul. This is not the responsibility of one committee but the challenge our faith gives us; to be one with another; to be a part of "the other".

What does that mean in practical terms? Whose job is it when a visually impaired person arrives at an airport or a GA site and they need assistance getting to their hotel room? Civil rights imply the airline and port must lend assistance. Moral obligations impel the Association to lend assistance. Theological imperatives demand that we all take responsibility. When a person is traveling with an assistant and that assistant is a Unitarian Universalist do they have to pay full registration? If an accommodation is made or an understanding is reached in such a matter, it is not sufficient to have this in a singular matter, but such understanding must be documented, and applied in other situations. Our faith does not simply inform us of the conditions of our sisters and brothers but it demands that we act with them as our sisters and brothers.

New Wine in Old Skins

The second part of this report concerns the latest study from the Journey Towards Wholeness Transformation Committee. For the past year we have been examining how cultural competency is addressed and evaluated in the formation of our ministers. Cultural imperialism or chauvinism is pervasive in our society. Increasingly educators, counselors and medical professionals have been delving into the complications of cultural competency and struggling with the means to incorporate these new understandings so as to enhance their professions and practice.

This has been and continues to be a daunting task. It is far easier to address differences in other cultures by comparing them to one's own. Our society depends on inference; what is normative in one culture is inferred to be the same in other cultures. Where there are differences these are too often seen as exotic or curious at best and deviant or wrong at worse.

Our challenge as a religious body is how do we prepare our ministers to effectively minister to a world whose demographics are rapidly changing. It is not enough to say we apply an anti-oppressive, anti-racist multicultural lens to our faith without recognizing that lens is multifaceted. Unfortunately our society and our faith tend to reduce interactions to the smallest number of differences. In terms of cultural competency it is not enough to state we understand other cultures because we have been a tourist; simply because our sibling has married someone of Korean ancestry does not necessarily translate into our understanding Japanese, Indonesian or Bengali culture. *The Jeffersons* and *Chico and the Man* must not be our points of understanding other cultures. And these are just the racial and ethnic cultural differences, please see the report for more classifications.

If we expect excellence in Ministry we must begin with excellence, both in terms of those to be prepared and those that are doing the preparing. My favorite Mary Poppins quote is "Well begun is half done."