

The Unitarian Universalist Religious Education Credentialing Committee

Spring 2014 Credentialed Observer's Report

Michele Townsend Grove, MCRE

Authors note:

I am a huge fan of technology. I am also a huge fan of the fading art of letter writing. While I served as the Spring 2014 Credentialed Observer with the Religious Education Credentialing Committee, I found myself more connected to the process when I had paper and pencil in hand. Therefore, I am writing my credentialed observer report in the form of a letter. It is a fictional letter to a historical education figure who finished his tenure at Cambridge University 500 years ago (1500-1514 CE): Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus. Even though Erasmus died almost 500 years ago (1536 CE), it was rewarding to engage him through letter writing as a creative way to know him better. If the reader is intrigued, it is my hope that you will research this brave and wise educator and learn more about how he stood up for what he believed in the midst of a changing religious world.

To further engage history, the Religious Education Credentialing Committee 2014 Spring meeting was held at the Eliot and Pickett House which has housed many Unitarian Universalist meetings (and therefore many great UU moments). In a few weeks, Unitarian Universalist headquarters will move from 25 Beacon Street to 24 Farnsworth and with this move, the hospitality and central hospitality of the Eliot and Pickett House will morph to new locations. This letter was begun at the Elliot and Pickett house and was inspired by the depth of history that surrounded the work of this committee.

This letter serves as my official Credentialed Observer's report for the 2014 RECC Spring Meeting in Boston, MA. Thanks to all for including me in a model of authentic Unitarian Universalist community.

May 6, 2014

To: Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus

From: Michele Townsend Grove, Master Credentialed Religious Educator of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

My dear Erasmus,

It has been 500 years since you completed your career as a professor of Divinity at Cambridge. Since then, education and theology have traveled many roads. I am totally unprepared to fill you in on the entire journey but I thought you may be interested in how education and theology is intertwined within the religious institution of Unitarian Universalism. After all, your ideals have been one of many inspirations to our movement. Thank you for your willingness to stand solidly and wisely in-between the Catholic and Protestant movements during the Reformation. Thank you for modeling the confidence it takes to stand up for your ideals under the tremendous pressure.

Even though you may not be familiar with the work of the Unitarian Universalist movement, please know that this is a religious association which highly values learning. This religious denomination has progressively changed over its centuries and has been intentional in its identity. With change, there have been great opportunities for deep reflection and community input. Today; even though there has been a great deal of change, learning is valued highly.

Education is valued so highly that professional religious educators are hired within many of our congregations. These educators organize learning for all ages and effectively model the importance of learning by paying attention to their own education. Ten years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association restored a credentialing process for religious educators. Now, Unitarian Universalist religious educators have a way to be recognized across the denomination for their learning, experience and skill.

My dear Erasmus, this program is dear to me for I received my credentialing in 2009. After 3 years of study, reflection and guidance from a tremendous mentor; I was able to prove my competency for the Master Level credentialing. One of the most nerve-wracking and valuable parts of this process was at the end when candidates appear before the religious education credentialing committee (RECC). The appearance is more than a time for the committee to test the candidate. It is a time to ceremoniously honor the work of the candidate and lovingly look at the great gifts this religious educator brings to the profession. It felt like a rite of passage.

One of the revolving members on the RECC is called a credentialed observer. This person sits with the committee for the entire week the committee engages in its work and interviews candidates. The observer serves as fresh eyes to the process and then gives a report as to what was seen. It helps the committee do the best work possible. I must say that when asked to be the observer, I was honored and impressed. Do you not think, my dear Erasmus; that it is a good sign when a committee wants a pair of fresh eyes to honor their work and challenge any difficulties? Yes, this was my first clue that I was working with a fine group of people.

And I was not let down! You would have been proud of the work of this committee! They honored each other by listening carefully and speaking honestly. Every action was intentional. Every thought was thorough. And most importantly, everyone who worked with the RECC was honest about the challenges and barriers which arose. The important thing to note here is that this group of people are truly special leaders within our denomination. But it would not be fair to say that their work stands alone. The RECC is strong because of the people and ideals who serve it today as well as all of those who served it in the past. It was almost as if I could feel the spirit of all those people who came before them.

One of the competencies credentialed religious educators embrace is abbreviated AR/AO/MC. This stands for anti-racism/anti-oppression/multi-culturalism. It may take too long, my dear Erasmus, to go into the long and difficult history of our country's struggle with racism and oppression but suffice it to say for this letter that our country's past is not a pretty one. Our denomination struggles to embrace issues of past and current oppression and racism. Sometimes we do it well. Often times we do not. It is good and difficult work. The RECC not only challenges those in the credentialing program to deal with these issues – they also raise the challenges in the midst of their work. It was wondrous to watch this committee wrestle. One important tenet that was raised early in the meetings was the concept that people of privilege find it easier to deal with the oppressions focused on gender identity, sexual identity and oppressions to those with disabilities than they are able to focus on issues of race. But anti-racism is important work and all need to keep this before us. The RECC kept this lifted up this concept over and over again. Through my observations, I was able to do my own deep reflection on this message - for the

denomination as well as my own journey. Now that I have come home, I am spending a lot of time reflecting on how I need to be involved in awareness and education around racism. I am scared but I am also motivated because I see it as such important work. I believe that the Unitarian Universalists and the religious educators of our denomination do as well.

Five years ago, the Religious Education Credentialing Committee revised the religious education credentialing program and for the importance of consistency, vowed not to make further changes for five years. The wait gave everyone a chance to live into the changes and make detailed observations. Well, now it had been five years and I was able to watch this committee work on revisions that will make the religious education credentialing program even better. Again, the same healthy group dynamics emerged. It was evident that this committee put a great deal of thought, research and reflection into the updates. So I guess it would be good for all of my Unitarian Universalist peers to watch for updates! There is still some work to be done but a fresh face will be put on the credentialing program and everyone can be confident that every change is at the best interest of the religious education professional and the goals of the denomination.

Well my dear Erasmus, I believe I have rambled on long enough on this topic. Thank you for listening. You come from an important story and it seemed only proper that I share another inspiring story of dedication. As I end, I wish good fortune to all of those who view education as one of the great values within the world. I also wish good fortune to those who model and stand-up for learning. Thank you and blessings,

Fondly,

Michele Townsend Grove