



# **ASSOCIATION SUNDAY 2008 ORGANIZING AND WORSHIP RESOURCES**

*for use in Association Sunday Services*

## **Association Sunday Growing Our Spirit October 12, 2008**

By participating in Association Sunday, we will strengthen our connection and combine our resources, empowering us to *Grow Our Spirit*, because our religious values are needed to help heal a wounded world.

**We are better together!**

Dear Colleagues,

We are better together! Through Association Sunday last year, we strengthened the connection among our congregations and raised \$1.4 million to *Grow Our Faith*. We also raised consciousness about our mission as a liberal religion and about how much more effective we can be. We are more aware of the call to share our faith, more aware that when working collaboratively and combining our resources, we are able to offer to more people the opportunity to participate in our religious communities wherein they hear these words: *Nurture Your Spirit, Help Heal Our World*. Thanks to you, we are *Growing Our Faith* in one another and the good we can do for others.

Let us keep this momentum going by re-affirming our common bonds and purposes through participating in Association Sunday 2008. This year, our focus is on *Growth in Spirit*. Funds raised will be used for new programs for lay theological education and excellence in ministry. The materials in this packet are designed to assist you in organizing Association Sunday 2008 in your congregation. Included are background information, suggestions for organizing, announcements for your newsletter and order of service, and resources for the worship service. These materials are also available online at <http://www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/>.

Please let us know if you will be celebrating Association Sunday 2008 by registering your participation, if you have not yet done so, at the above web address, or by sending an email to [AssociationSunday@uua.org](mailto:AssociationSunday@uua.org). For further information, or to request a paper copy of these resources, email us at the above address, or call **Devin Letzer**, the Campaign Assistant for Association Sunday, at (617) 948-6544.

Best Wishes,



***Stephan Papa***  
***Special Assistant to the President for Growth Funding***  
***Unitarian Universalist Association***

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## Checklist for Organizing Your Service

- Put up the Association Sunday Posters;
- Consider doing a pulpit exchange with neighboring congregations;
- Organize the service to include lay participation;
- Publicize the service and special collection in your newsletter and on your website;
- In your newsletter, ask those who will be unable to attend to mail in their contributions (envelopes provided);
- Enclose envelopes in your newsletter a week before the service, or provide the <http://www.uua.org/giving> link in your electronic newsletter;
- Contact members of the congregation about making lead gifts;
- Consider making a lead gift yourself, perhaps by donating one wedding fee;
- Put information about Association Sunday funds in your order of service (publicity materials are available online or as a PDF document upon request);
- Enclose envelopes in your order of service;
- At the service, announce your gift, and ask that each member consider a gift of \$50 or more. Remind them that this Sunday's collection is a special opportunity to connect and combine our resources for the future of our faith; ask them to give generously to help us reach our goal of raising \$1 million;
- Indicate that all checks should be made out to the UUA;
- Have a check made out for all cash collected; send all donation envelopes directly to the UUA within one week of your service using the materials provided in the "After your Special Service" envelope included with the mailing of your envelopes;
- Send sermons, pictures and other materials you used to us to share with others.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Why do we need Association Sundays?

Unitarian Universalist congregations are self-governing entities whose connections to one another sometimes seem tenuous. We need Association Sundays to strengthen the bonds of common purpose among congregations. Even more importantly, we need to combine our resources in order to make Unitarian Universalism a stronger voice of liberal religious values in the world.

We need to bring our congregations together to pursue our mission of affirming the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." These Association Sundays will enable us to have more of an influence on our country. *Now Is the Time* for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective together, because our religious values are needed to help heal our wounded world.

### What are Association Sundays?

Association Sundays are a request by the UUA for all congregations to recognize and support, both spiritually and financially, the national work of the Association. We envision a day – an “Association Sunday” – during which thousands of UUs across the nation simultaneously celebrate our shared commitment to Unitarian Universalism.

Like Ministry Sunday in 1995, (which was a request to support the financial needs of ministers and seminary students) and Mind the Gap Sunday in 2002 (which was focused on supporting Youth and Young Adult Ministries), each Association Sunday will include a worship service based on a particular theme and congregations will be asked to host a special collection to support the work of the Association of Congregations.

### How is Association Sunday different from other UUA fundraising efforts?

Association Sunday is different from The Annual Program Fund (APF) and Friends of the UUA; those programs support the operating budget of the UUA. The purpose of Association Sunday is to help fund those leading-edge and innovative special projects that the operating budget does not have the capacity to support.

### How did the first Association Sunday do?

It was a phenomenal success! **626** participating congregations and other UU groups representing over **128,000** Unitarian Universalists from across the country joined together in an inspirational showing of fellowship with one another and generously contributed over **1.4 million dollars** to Association Sunday 2007. Check out your congregation's and district's participation and see some inspirational stories in our Annual Report at [www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/112319.shtml](http://www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/112319.shtml).

### How was the money raised by Association Sunday 2007 spent?

As promised, half of last year's total has helped to increase awareness of Unitarian Universalism through our national awareness campaign, which included the TIME magazine ads. Approximately one quarter of the funds will support our Diversity of Ministry Initiative. And approximately one quarter has been sent to our districts for projects that will help your congregation and others share our liberal religion with those who seek it. Because of some specific designated gifts, the actual breakdown of the dollar amounts are \$706,346.34 to the national awareness campaign, \$333,840.73 to districts, and \$372,505.62 to the Diversity of Ministry Initiative.

## What will be funded by Association Sunday 2008?

Our second Association Sunday scheduled for October 12, 2008 will raise funds to support projects focused on deepening our Shared Ministry. The theme is *Growing Our Spirit*. The following specific initiatives were chosen based on a survey of Unitarian Universalist leaders - to which over 1,828 responded - whose 1st and 2nd priorities are represented in this plan.

### 50% of the funds raised for Association Sunday 2008 will support Lay Theological Education programs:

- Congregations, districts, and seminaries will have the opportunity to apply for grants to create programs which focus on spiritual and theological deepening.
  - Preference will be given to programs which have a strong lay theological education component, that have built on an idea that has a proven track record of success, and that involve more than one UU congregation or entity.
  - Programs should be designed such that they can be replicated in other congregations; recipients of the grants will be asked to create resources and a case study that could be shared with others. The purpose of the grants is to support the creation and dissemination of materials, rather than to provide for new staff positions.
  - Grants will begin to be available in the spring of 2009. Rev. Harlan Limpert, Director of District Services, will convene a team in collaboration with the UUMA, LREDA, the UU Funding Panel, and lay leaders to determine the application process and criteria.
  - Grants will be for a maximum of \$100,000 each.

### 50% of the funds raised will be divided equally among the following Excellence in Ministry programs:

- The Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association's new initiatives for continuing education programs for ordained leaders through their [CENTER](#) programs.
- Scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry.
  - Students in candidate status are eligible to apply for a scholarship.
  - Scholarships will be in the amount of \$20,000 each (as many as funds make available).
  - Funds will be distributed in June of 2009 through the Ministerial and Professional Leadership Committee on Scholarships, which will include a UUMA representative.
  - The application process and criteria will be informed by a Summit on Excellence in Ministry, scheduled for December 2008.
- The [Diversity of Ministry Team's Initiative](#) to support our ministers of color.

***“My hope is that Association Sunday will become a regular part of every congregation's church year.”***

**-President Bill Sinkford**

Three subsequent Association Sundays (one per year) will be devoted to the following themes: *Growth in Diversity, Growth in Witness, and Growth in Leadership*.

## How will the money be raised?

We ask that each member and minister contribute individually as part of a special collection during services on Association Sunday. Some may even wish to inspire generosity in their congregation by making a large lead or matching gift and announcing it prior to their service.

The Association Sunday staff will provide each congregation with pledge envelopes, and return envelopes, as well as these organizing and worship materials to assist congregations.

Congregations that raise an average of \$50 per member will be listed as *Empowering Congregations* in our Annual Report on Giving and honored at General Assembly.

If you or a member of your congregation, wish to make a leadership contribution, matching gift, stock gift or bequest to benefit Association Sundays, please contact us.

## How do I sign up?

There are a number of simple ways that you can register your intent to participate in Association Sunday 2008 (All registrations should have the prior approval of your minister or board president, depending on your congregation's specific procedures for managing special services and collections).

- \* Register online at <http://www.uua.org/associationsunday>
- \* E-mail us at [associationsunday@uua.org](mailto:associationsunday@uua.org)
- \* Call us at (617) 948-6544.

## A Note about Scheduling

Affirming our common bonds and pooling our resources to *Grow Our Faith* is what is important. It is not necessary for us to schedule our Association Sunday on the exact same day for us to feel the power of that connection. If you live in New England and anticipate that a lot of people take off that weekend to see the changed leaves, or if you know many families are away because it is Columbus Day Weekend, or if you don't want to have a special collection during your stewardship campaign, or if you want to honor National Coming Out Day that week, please feel free to schedule another date. What is important is connecting intentionally.

**Participating in Association Sunday can be a spiritual and empowering experience any Sunday of the year.**

Resources for National Coming Out Day are available at  
<http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/leaderslibrary/47915.shtml>

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## More about the Money

### How was the money raised by prior campaigns' special collections used?

- Ministry Sunday in 1995 raised \$1 million for ministerial scholarships, reduction of student debt and support for retired ministers and for the families of deceased ministers;
- Mind the Gap Sunday in 2002 raised \$1 million for youth and young adult staffing, training and programming, such as campus ministries;
- Association Sunday 2007 raised over \$1.4 million to *Grow Our Faith and Our Numbers* through a national marketing campaign, support for our ministers of color and the congregations they serve and grants for growth outreach projects distributed through district boards. Our Annual Report is available at [www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/112319.shtml](http://www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/112319.shtml).

### What should I ask for?

Ask that each member give \$50 or more. As the goal is to raise an average of \$50 per member, some will need to give more because some will give less. Ask for an affirmation of our connection, purpose, and a spirit of generosity.

### How is this Sunday collection different from other collections?

Our Sunday offerings indicate what we care about and connect us with others. In most congregations, the offering is for the local church or fellowship, though many congregations now have special collections for outside groups. This special collection is for the other congregations in our Association and for our movement as a whole. Some of our congregations have greater needs than our own while some have greater opportunities – which can be supported through this collection. This Sunday is different because it gives us the chance as individuals to connect with and support other congregations and our common purpose.

### Why raise money for growth?

- We have the same number of members as we had at consolidation in 1961; the US population has increased exponentially; we have become insignificant;
  - More UUs are needed to help heal our wounded world;
  - Most people still don't know who we are, what we stand for, and how to find us; we have a responsibility to share our faith and to fulfill its promise by living it.
  - To do these things, we need new programs; we need to deepen our faith by *Growing Our Spirit*.
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## Talking Points for Association Sunday and the Annual Program Fund

- The Annual Program Fund (APF) supports the operating budget of the UUA. Our Association depends on these member congregations' annual contributions in order to carry out its mission. These funds support the budget for our ongoing programming and are a sign of our covenant. As these contributions are a matter of congregational responsibility, they are a part of the congregations' operating budget.
  - The funds raised through the special collection on Association Sunday (AS) are not for the operating budget of the UUA, but for new growth outreach projects as part of the *Now Is the Time!* Comprehensive Campaign.
  - It is anticipated there will be five such annual Sunday services with special collections. However, these offerings rise out of a specific need (to grow), opportunity, and time (*Now!*).
  - Congregations conduct annual stewardship campaigns for their operating budgets, and other fundraising activities such as special collections for special needs and visions. Experience shows that people set limits on what they will give to the operating budget, but will give something more for a special need or vision. (It is said, they find more money in their other pocket, where they were saving some.)
  - Funds raised on AS are not to come from operating budgets, but from individuals who are motivated to contribute for this particular purpose (from their other pocket).
  - We would not want a congregation to diminish its contribution to the APF because they give to AS. We know the success of the APF is essential to the ongoing work of our Association.
  - We honor the decisions of individual congregations, but want to be clear that we do not want to make contributing to one or the other into an either/or proposition. We encourage congregations to do both, and believe that a clear understanding of their different purposes and processes makes this possible; we believe that our congregations can successfully support both the APF and AS.
  - We believe that by affirming our common bonds and purposes, moving beyond a theology of scarcity, and continuing to develop a spirit of generosity, we lay a solid foundation for our faith for today and for tomorrow.
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## Announcement for Newsletters and Sundays

(1)

### Introduction to Association Sunday!

Plan now to be in church on Sunday, \_\_\_\_\_, when we join with thousands of Unitarian Universalists across the nation celebrating our shared commitment on *Association Sunday*. In this service, we will strengthen the bonds of our common purpose and combine our resources to make Unitarian Universalism a stronger voice for liberal religious values in our country. We are better together.

We increase our spirit and influence. We honor the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Our values are needed to help heal the wounded world. So, we will be taking a special collection for the growth and vitality of our congregations. Funds raised will be used for new lay theological education and excellence in ministry projects. We hope each person will contribute \$50. If you can’t attend, please send in a check - envelopes will be available at your church. To donate online for Association Sunday, please visit us at <http://www.uua.org/giving>.

Short: (2)

### Association Sunday is Coming!

Join together with thousands of Unitarian Universalists in affirming our common bonds and purposes on the second annual Association Sunday! Our liberal faith is needed to help heal our wounded world, and now is the time to pool our resources to help *Grow Our Spirit*, through new programs for lay theological education and excellence in ministry. Funds raised by this Sunday’s collection will be distributed by the Unitarian Universalist Association as part of President Sinkford’s 5 year plan to *Grow Our Faith*.

Fifty percent of the money raised will be used as grants to congregations, districts, and seminaries to create new programs for lay theological education and spiritual deepening. The other fifty percent of the money will be divided equally between 1. our ministers’ association’s new CENTER programs for continuing education to promote excellence in ministry, 2. scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry, and 3. the Diversity in Ministry Team’s initiative to support our ministers of color.

Come ready to give generously to help grow our spirit and faith; we are better together!

### **Longer: (3)** **Association Sunday is Coming!**

Join together with thousands of Unitarian Universalists in affirming our common bonds and purposes on the second annual Association Sunday! Our liberal faith is needed to help heal our wounded world, and now is the time to pool our resources to help *Grow Our Spirit*, through new programs for lay theological education and excellence in ministry. Funds raised by this Sunday's collection will be distributed by the Unitarian Universalist Association as part of President Sinkford's 5 year plan to *Grow Our Faith*.

Fifty percent of the money raised will be used as grants to congregations, districts, and seminaries to create new programs for lay theological education and spiritual deepening. The other fifty percent of the money will be divided equally between 1. our ministers' association's new CENTER programs for continuing education to promote excellence in ministry, 2. scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry, and 3. the Diversity in Ministry Team's initiative to support our ministers of color.

Come ready to give generously to help grow our spirit and faith!

*We are better together!* And nothing has shown this better than the successes of the first annual Association Sunday last fall. Over 620 congregations representing nearly 130,000 Unitarian Universalists joined with common purpose to contribute over 1.4 million dollars! This inspirational show of generosity has already done much to help stimulate our movement. By helping to fund the national marketing campaign, the Diversity of Ministry Initiative and grants through districts for growth projects, we have already taken a giant first step towards *Growing Our Faith*. Let us again celebrate our connections and work to continue this important progress through an even more successful Association Sunday 2008.

Your Association of Congregations is deeply grateful for your contributions to the Annual Program Fund each year, and truly couldn't function without them! But on this special day, we ask you to give generously in support of the visionary growth projects that will secure the future and vitality of our faith, and that cannot be funded by the operating budget alone. Come celebrate with us on Association Sunday, because we are better together!

### **Follow-Up: (4)** **(Follow-up post Association Sunday)**

Together, we're growing our spirit and our faith! Deepest gratitude to all who participated in our annual Association Sunday service! Your contributions will help to increase the vibrancy of our movement and make our increasingly relevant message of peace, justice, and religious inclusiveness more readily accessible to the world, at a time when it is sorely needed.

Fifty percent of the money raised will be used as grants to congregations, districts, and seminaries to create new programs for lay theological education and spiritual deepening. The other fifty percent of the money will be divided equally between 1. our ministers' association's new CENTER programs for continuing education to promote excellence in ministry, 2. scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry, and 3. the Diversity in Ministry Team's initiative to support our ministers of color.

Thank you again for your exceptional support. And even if you missed Association Sunday, you haven't missed your opportunity to be a part of it. *Now is the Time* to contribute! Visit [uua.org/giving](http://uua.org/giving) or call toll free (888) 792-5885, because we are better together.

More information about Association Sunday including our annual report can be found at:

<http://www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/index.shtml> or calling (617) 948-6544 or our toll free number, (888) 792-5885.



## For Your Association Sunday Order of Service

### Welcome to Association Sunday!

Today we are joining thousands of Unitarian Universalists in affirming our common bonds and purposes on the second annual Association Sunday!

Our liberal faith is needed to help heal our wounded world. Now is the time to connect, to pool our resources and *Grow Our Faith* by more effectively *Growing Our Spirit*. Funds raised by this Sunday's collection will be distributed by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Fifty percent of the money raised will be used as grants to congregations, districts, and seminaries to create new programs for lay theological education and spiritual deepening. The other fifty percent of the money will be divided equally between 1. our ministers' association's new CENTER programs for continuing education to promote excellence in ministry, 2. scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry, and 3. the Diversity in Ministry Team's initiative to support our ministers of color.

Welcome, and let us celebrate!

More information about Association Sunday can be found at:  
<http://www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/index.shtml> or  
calling (617) 948-6544 or our toll free number, (888) 792-5885

## Talking Points for Presentation on Association Sunday 2008

- Today we celebrate Association Sunday to affirm our common bonds and purposes with UU congregations across the continent and beyond. Honoring that connection and common vision can be a spiritually fulfilling, and empowering experience.
- In our liberal religious community, we help one another develop spiritually; our Association helps us do this more effectively. We are better together as an Association of Congregations, and together we can have more of an influence on our country, which dearly needs more inclusive, spiritual values.
- We need to develop our spirituality as well. The focus of Association Sunday this year is on *Growing Our Spirit*. We may not have a consensus on what spirituality means, but we agree on the need to be more clear, centered, and effective in our faith.
- We need to *Grow Our Faith* in one another, in Unitarian Universalism, and in the good we can and should do for others.
- We need to *Grow Our Spirit*: our group spirit, the human spirit, the holy spirit, the spirit of life, the spirit of love; it is calling us.
- Inside each and every one of us is that spirit; all around us is that spirit. We feel it; we know it; when we join together, we grow it.
- As President Sinkford has said, “*Now Is the Time.... to Grow Our Faith....* To let the world know we are here, and to welcome those who seek our community of peace, justice, and love. Now is the time for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective because our religious values are sorely needed to help heal a wounded world.”
- To do this effectively we need to connect, feel the power, affirm our common bonds and purposes, and combine our resources to *Grow Our Spirit* and *Grow Our Faith*.
- As a congregation, our goal is to contribute an average of \$50.00 per member.
- The goal of Association Sunday is to raise \$1 million for projects supporting lay theological education and excellence in ministry.
- Fifty percent of the money raised will be used as grants to congregations, districts, and seminaries to create new programs for lay theological education and spiritual deepening. The other fifty percent of the money will be divided equally between 1. our ministers’ association’s new CENTER programs for continuing education to promote excellence in ministry, 2. scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry, and 3. the Diversity in Ministry Team’s initiative to support our ministers of color.
- Today as part of the UUA’s comprehensive campaign, we have an opportunity to shape the future of our faith. Please give generously.

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## **Hymns and Readings from *Singing the Living Tradition* and *Singing the Journey***

### **Hymns:      *Singing the Living Tradition***

- 8:      *Mother Spirit, Father Spirit*
- 10:     *Immortal Love*
- 22:     *Dear Weaver of Our Lives Design*
- 86:     *Blessed Spirit of My Life*
- 88:     *Calm Soul of All Things*
- 90:     *From All the Fret and Fever of the Day*
- 123:    *Spirit of Life*
- 126:    *Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing*
- 188:    *Come, Come, Whoever You Are*
- 208:    *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*
- 209:    *O Come, You Longing Thirsty Souls*
- 300:    *With Heart and Mind*
- 347:    *Gather the Spirit*
- 352:    *Find a Stillness*
- 389:    *Gathered Here*

### **Hymns:      *Singing the Journey***

- 1003:   *Where Do We Come From?*
- 1009:   *Meditation on Breathing*
- 1014:   *Standing on the Side of Love*
- 1020:   *Woyaya*
- 1024:   *When the Spirit Says Do*
- 1028:   *The Fire of Commitment*
- 1046:   *Shall We Gather at the River*

### ***Suggestions for Association Sunday Worship Services from *Singing the Living Tradition****

#### **Opening Words**

- 429:    *Come into this place of peace*
- 434:    *May we be reminded*
- 442:    *We Bid You Welcome*
- 580:    *The Task of the Religious Community*

#### **Chalice Lightings/Affirmations**

- 453:    *May the light we now kindle*
- 459:    *This is the mission of our faith*
- 471:    *Love is the doctrine of this church*
- 473:    *Love is the spirit of this church*

### Prayers/Meditations

- 481: *It is our quiet time*  
484: *To live content with small means*  
497: *Prayer invites God to be present*  
499: *And I have felt a presence*  
723: *Flower Communion Prayer*

### Responsive Readings

- 440: *From the Fragmented World*  
512: *We Give Thanks This Day*  
531: *The Oversoul*  
571: *Universal Ministry*  
576: *A Litany of Restoration*  
591: *I Call That Church Free*  
592: *The Free Mind*  
611: *Brahman*  
645: *Song of the Open Road*  
664: *Give Us the Spirit of the Child*  
728: *Blessed Are Those*

### Words at the Offering

- 656: *A Harvest of Gratitude*  
673: *Freely we have received*

### Closing Words

- 456: *Extinguishing the Chalice*  
502: *Now Is the Time*  
569: *Stand By This Faith*  
580: *The Task of Religious Community*  
687: *Go your ways*  
691: *Help us to be the always hopeful*  
692: *If, here, you have found freedom*  
701: *We receive fragments of holiness*

*Some readings function in more than one category.*

**Note: Worship resources from the 2007 packet including the music for *Now Is the Time* by Jason Shelton and Connie Florance are available at <http://www.uua.org/giving/associationsunday/16307.shtml>.**

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## Quotations for Association Sunday

☞ ...Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations...

**From the Principles of the UUA**

☞ Anything that brings us together—inspiring us to open our hearts, hands, or minds, to forget our differences for a moment and remember we are one—is a sacrament.

**Forrest Church**

☞ No matter what words they use, people come to congregations—traditional, mainstream, liberal, evangelical, fundamentalist—seeking to gain energy for the life of the spirit... They come for a sense of individuality, a sense of community, a sense of meaning, and a sense of hope.

**Roy Phillips**

☞ Give me beauty in the inward soul, and may the outward and the inward me be at one.

**Socrates**

☞ The mystery does not get clearer by repeating the question, nor is it bought with going to amazing places. Work in the invisible world at least as hard as you do in the visible.

**Jelauddin Rumi**

☞ Throughout all Creation, just beneath the surface, joining each person to every other person and to every other thing in a luminous organism of sacred responsibility, we discover invisible lines of connection.

**Lawrence Kushner**

☞ In every life there are certain moments which partake of another, higher order of experience—peculiarly precious moments which offer serenity, hope, and strength and which allow us to return to the demands of daily life with renewed vitality and confidence. The growth of a spiritual dimension in each of us as individuals seems to result in a multiplication and a deepening of such moments both in ourselves and in the world.

**Elizabeth M. Jones**

☞ ...Religious life—spirituality itself—is really all about connections; my connection with other individuals, with a religious community, with the cosmos. So when I talk about growing our faith, I'm talking about building and strengthening all those connections that foster the values that I hold dear: love, compassion, justice, cooperation and service, to name a few.

**Mark Hayes**

☞ And now let us do what we can to rekindle the smoldering, nigh quenched fire on the altar. The evils of the church that now is are manifest. The question returns: What shall we do? ...Let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The remedy to their deformity is first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

☞ Is there an image for the church community which includes the sense of family but also helps us make sense of conflict and diversity—an image that will allow community to educate us (that is, lead us out) into the public realm? I have been helped by thinking of the church as 'a school of the Spirit,' a place where God is continually drawing me out of myself into larger life.

**Parker Palmer**





## Opening Words

We gather here to seek unity of spirit.  
 We gather here to seek unity of spirit in the midst of diversity,  
 to heal the wounded and confront the oppressor,  
 to instill joy and confidence in our children,  
 to grow in mind, body, and spirit ourselves,  
 and to bear witness to the transforming power of love  
 beyond which not a single atom nor soul is lost forever.  
 Thus do we covenant with each other  
 in the presence of that which is holy.

**John C. Morgan**

Our prophets died for the freedom of faith;  
 We are here in their spirit,  
 We are here to practice and sustain our living tradition;  
 To light a chalice,  
 Claiming for justice  
 The heat and power of fire.  
 In our free faith,  
 We are here,  
 Seeking freedom from despair,  
 The freedom to be loved as ourselves,  
 And the freedom to grow beyond imagination,  
 We are here.  
 Gathered in the name of all that we find holy.  
 Let us give thanks for the gift of gathering here.

**Heather K. Janules**

At a time of so much rancor and personal animosity, we need an institution where "active" toleration is practiced. It is not enough grudgingly to put up with our differences. True toleration means celebrating those differences for the opportunity they provide for broadening our perspective.

At a time when old and young people have become preoccupied with the affairs of their own peers, while those in the middle are consumed with careers, we need an institution that will draw the generations together and re-invent the spirit of community.

At a time when the word "spirituality" has been cheapened and degraded, and people desperate for meaning are either retreating to old platitudes or grasping at New Age straws, we need an institution which challenges us to question and reconsider the quality of our religious lives.

At a time when provincial boundaries and parochial attitudes are being resurrected, we need an institution that will keep us connected with a more global consciousness.

Clearly, we need an institution like... [this one.]

**Michael Schuler**



## Chalice Lightings

### *Growing in Spirit*

Lighting our chalice brings warmth to the room, as does remembering that others share our principles and values.

Lighting our chalice brings light and hope to this sacred place, as does affirming the importance and power of the spirit.

Lighting our chalice brings more love into our lives as we connect through space and time with the sacred, the divine, with all that is holy, which cares for us, and calls us to grow stronger in its spirit.

We light this chalice feeling the spirit, strength, love, hope, and the warmth of the Unitarian Universalist community.

**Stephan Papa**

At this hour, in small towns and big cities, in single rooms and ornate sanctuaries, many of our sister Unitarian Universalist congregations are also lighting a flaming chalice. As we light our chalice today, let us remember that we are part of a great community of faith. May this dancing flame inspire us to fill our lives with the Unitarian Universalist ideals of love, justice and truth.

**Judith Quarles**

We light the flame of knowledge; may understanding be with us.

We light the flame of love; may caring be among us.

We light the flame of holiness; may the unifying spirit be within us.

**Edwin C. Lynn**

Glory be to the earth and the wind.

Glory be to the sun and the rain.

Glory be to animals and children and women and men.

Glory be to our holy flame, which calls us together as one.

**Bettye A. Doty**



## Stories for All Ages

### Higgins: A Drop with a Dream

By Christopher Buice ([www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/authors/4973.shtml](http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/authors/4973.shtml))

Once upon a time there was a drop of water named Higgins.

Higgins was no ordinary drop of water. He was a drop with a dream.

Higgins lived in a valley where it had not rained in a very long time, so all the lovely green grass was turning brown, all the beautiful flowers were wilting, and all the trees were starting to droop.

Higgins had a dream that one day the valley would be a beautiful place again. But what could he do? After all, he was only a drop of water.

One day Higgins decided to travel and tell others about his dream. All the other drops listened very politely, but no one believed that his dream would come true. "Higgins," said one, "get your head out of the clouds. You can't spend your whole life dreaming."

Higgins decided that he had to do something to make his dream come true. So he began to think and think and think. One day, as he was walking by a rusty old bucket, he got an idea.

"If enough of us drops of water got together in this bucket," Higgins thought, "there would be enough water to sprinkle on a few flowers to help them grow and become beautiful again!"

Eagerly, Higgins told everyone his great idea. But everyone thought he was being foolish. "That Higgins is nothing but a dreamer," they said.

Higgins decided he had to do something to convince the others that he was right. So he said to them, "I don't know about you, but I'm getting into the bucket! I hope some of you will join me. Then there might be enough water to help at least some flowers grow beautiful again."

So Higgins ran as hard as he could, hopped way up in the air, and landed with a kerplunk in the bottom of the bucket.

And there he sat . . . JUST A DROP IN THE BUCKET.

For a long time Higgins was very lonely. It seemed like no one else was going to join him. But after awhile some of the other drops could see that the grass was dying and the flowers were wilting and the trees were drooping. They all agreed that something must be done.

Suddenly, one drop shouted, "I'm going in the bucket with Higgins!" And he leaped through the air and landed—kerplunk—in the bucket.

Then two other drops yelled, "Wait for us!" And they hopped through the air and landed in the bucket. Then ten drops jumped through the air into the bucket. Then thirty. Then fifty! And then hundreds of drops came from all around just to hop in the bucket!

Soon, the bucket was completely full of water. But there were still more drops that wanted to join, so they found another bucket and hopped in. Before long, there were two buckets of water—then three—then four—then ten—and then hundreds—and then thousands of buckets of water!

Along came a powerful breeze that blew over all the buckets, and all the water flowed together to make a mighty stream. Everywhere the water flowed, the grass turned green again and the flowers bloomed and the trees stood tall and straight once more.

All this happened because Higgins had a dream and his dream came true. Because he knew that although he was just a drop in the bucket, enough drops in the bucket make a bucketful, and when there are enough buckets with the wind behind them, then justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

**Source:** from the storybook, *Bucketful of Dreams: Contemporary Parables for All Ages* by Christopher Buice (Skinner House Books, 1995).

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### A Lamp in Every Corner

An excerpt from *A Lamp in Every Corner: A Unitarian Universalist Storybook* by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer  
Available from the UUA bookstore. (<http://www.uuabookstore.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=707>)

Many years ago in the land of Transylvania, in a mountain valley watered by quick rushing streams and shadowed by great forests of beech trees, there was a village of small wooden houses with dark-shingled roofs. The people in the village were of the Unitarian religion, and they wanted a church of their own. A church set on the hillside, they decided, looking down upon the village as a mother looks down upon her sleeping child.

So all the people of the village labored long and hard to build themselves a church. The stonemasons hammered sharp chisels to cut great blocks of gray stone, then set the stones into stout and sturdy walls. The glaziers made tiny glass panes and fitted them neatly into the windows with leaded lines. The foresters sawed tall beech trees into enormous beams and laid the trusses for the ceiling, then covered the roof with close-fitting wooden shingles that wouldn't leak a drop of rain. The carpenters carved wood for the pair of wide-opening doors, setting them on strong pegs so that the doors hung straight and square. A bell was brought from a faraway city, then hoisted by ropes with a heave and a ho to the top of the tower. The weavers wove fine cloths for the altar table, cloths embroidered with flowers and edged with lace. The smiths hammered black iron into tall lamp stands and hammered thin bronze into shining oil lamps.

Finally, when the building of the church was done, the painting of the church could begin. The painters mixed bright colors: royal red and shimmering gold and brilliant blue, and everyone in the village—old and young, women and men, boys and girls—came to decorate their church. They painted flowers. They painted trees. They painted designs around the windows and different designs around the doors.

And at the end of the day, when it was finished—when their church was finally done—all the people of the village stood back to admire it . . . and then to sing, a song of happiness and praise. Their village had a church now, a church set on the hillside, looking down upon the village as a mother looks down upon her sleeping child.

“We will eat now!” announced an elder of the village, because everyone was hungry after their long day's work. “And later tonight, we will come back to pray.”

So the people of the village went down the hillside to their homes and their suppers, all except one little girl named Zora and her father, who stayed behind. They had brought their own bread and cheese. They ate their food slowly, sitting on the grass on the hillside and admiring their new church with its strong stone walls, its tall tower, and its magnificent bell.

After they had eaten, they went back inside, opening those carved wooden doors to go into the gloriously painted sanctuary inside. “Oh, look, Father!” Zora cried, running from picture to picture, with her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. “See how pretty the church is!” She stopped in the center of church and twirled slowly around. “See how grand!”

“Yes, it is,” said her father, looking around and nodding with pride. “Yes, it is.”

“But, Father,” she said suddenly, “we have not finished!”

“What do you mean?”

“There are tall iron lamp stands all along the walls, but there are no lamps! The church will be dark when the people come back.”

“Ah no, little one,” said her father. “The light of the church comes from its people. You shall see!” He rang the bell to call the people to worship, then took his daughter by the hand and led her back outside. They waited on the grassy hillside, next to their beautiful church of strong gray stone.

The sun had set behind the mountains, and night was coming soon. Yet in the growing darkness, tiny points of light came from many directions and moved steadily up the hill.

“Each family is entrusted with a lamp, little one,” her father explained. “Each family lights its own way here.”

“Where is our family’s lamp?”

“Your mother is carrying it. She will be here soon.”

The many lights moved closer together, gathering into one moving stream, all headed the same way, growing larger and brighter all the time. Zora’s mother arrived, bearing a burning oil lamp in her hands. The father lifted Zora so she could set their family’s lamp high in its tall iron stand. All around the church, other families were doing the same. Soon the church was ablaze with light in every corner, for all the people of the village had gathered to pray and to sing.

All through the worship service, Zora watched the lights flicker and glow. She watched her family’s lamp most of all. When the service was over, her father lifted her high. She took the shining bronze lamp from the lamp stand. Its curved sides were warm and smooth in her hands. Her mother carried the lamp home, with the flame lighting the way.

The lamp flame lit their house when they returned home. Zora washed her face and got ready for bed by the light of that flame. “Mother,” Zora began, as she climbed into bed and lay down.

“Yes, little one?” her mother asked, tucking the red wool blanket around Zora’s shoulders.

“Father said the light of the church comes from its people.”

“Yes.”

“But also, the people take their light from the church!” Over on the table by the fireplace, the shiny bronze lamp was still burning. “And we have that light every day.”

“Yes, indeed,” said her mother. “And even when we are not in church, even when the lamp is not lit, we carry the light of truth in our minds and the flame of love in our hearts to show us the right way to be. That light—the light from truth and love—will never go out.”

“Never?” asked Zora.

“Never,” said her mother. “And this bronze lamp will last for many, many years. When you are grown, we will give the bronze lamp to you, and when your children are grown, you will give the lamp to them, and all of you will carry it back and forth to church every time.”

“But there is only one lamp,” Zora said.

“So make another, and let the light grow. And someday, tell your children to make more lamps, too. And now goodnight,” her mother said and kissed Zora once on this cheek and once on that cheek and once on the forehead. Zora closed her eyes and drifted into dreams, while her mother looked down upon her sleeping child.

The years passed; Zora grew. The bronze lamp came into her care. She kept it polished and clean, and when the bell rang out across the valley to call the people to worship, she carried the lamp back and forth to the church on the hillside, the flame always lighting her way. When the time came, she made more lamps and gave them to her children, who made more lamps and gave them to their children, and so it went, on through the years, even until today.

And always, the light of truth and the flame of love from that Unitarian church on the hillside continued to grow and show them—and us—the way.

### **Magic Wanda's Travel Emporium**

From the book by the same title by Joshua Searle-White

Available at the UUA Bookstore at <http://www.uuabookstore.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=666>

Not too long ago, in a small town not far from here, two young people dreamed of taking a journey together. They sat for hours and talked about the exciting things they would see—lakes and rivers, mountains and deserts, volcanoes and islands, flowers and fish. They'd heard all about the journeys other people had taken, and they finally decided it was time to experience their own.

So one afternoon they started to pack. At first, it went fine. They got out their backpacks and started collecting all the really important things they might need. There was chocolate, of course (because you can never have too much chocolate), and socks and flashlights and rope; and then hiking boots and raincoats and winter hats and water skis; and snowshoes and sunscreen and parachutes and passports and lots and lots of extra underwear. But as they looked at the growing pile, they realized that they had forgotten one thing. They were prepared for anything that might happen—but they didn't have a map. How would they know where they were going?

They went out into their town to look for the right kind of map. They walked for a while, up and down the streets, and finally, down one side street, they caught sight of a sign that looked interesting. It said "Magic Wanda's Travel Emporium— Everything You Need for the Journey of Your Life." All across the front of the store there were pictures—pictures of waterfalls and coral reefs and castles and canals and all kinds of exotic people and animals and amazing food. It looked like just the place, so they pulled open the door and walked in. It took them a minute to adjust to the darkness inside, and once they did, they found something very strange. Despite the colorful sign and all the pictures out front, inside, the store was completely empty. There were no shelves, no drawers, no tents or snorkels or guidebooks or anything! And most importantly, there were no maps. The only thing in the store was a single bare counter way in the back. Behind the counter sat an old woman, watching them peacefully as they stared at the blank walls.

The two young people looked around.

"There's nothing here," said the first one. "Let's go."

And they were about to leave, but something about the way the old woman looked at them made them turn back.

"Let's at least talk to her," said the second one. "Maybe we can find out why there's nothing here."

So they walked past the bare walls to the counter at the back of the store.

"Hello," one of them said. "We've decided to go on a long journey, and we need some help. We came in because your sign says you have everything for the journey of your life, but there's nothing here at all! We're leaving tomorrow, Monday, so we need to get ready very quickly. Can you help us?"

"Ah, yes," said Magic Wanda (because that was who the old woman was, of course) in a high, thin voice. "You're leaving on a great journey on Tuesday, and you need advice."

"No, Monday is when we are leaving," came the answer. "Monday. And that's why . . ."

"And then you are leaving for a great journey on Wednesday," Wanda continued. "I'm beginning to understand."

The young people looked at each other. "No," said the other one, "I don't think you understand at all. It's tomorrow, Monday, that we are leaving. That's why we're here to get some help!"

"Yes, of course, of course," said Wanda. "You are leaving Monday. But on a journey like this, you don't just leave once and then be done with it Oh, no. No, on this kind of journey, every day you set off all over again. Every day you get up and decide: Am I going on this journey, with my traveling companion, or am I staying here? And then, if you are ready for adventure, only then do you set off once again. So yes, you are leaving tomorrow. And you are leaving Tuesday. And you are leaving Wednesday. And every day after that, and every day after that."

The young people looked at each other and nodded. "Okay, then," said one. "But we still have a problem. Even though we have lots of stuff we can take, we don't have what we really need: a map to tell us where to go. Do you have one?"

"Ah, yes, a map." said Wanda, "A map to tell you which direction you should go. Well, you know, there's a funny thing about maps. You have to be careful of them. You see, a map is someone's idea of what the world looks like. It's not the actual world. Do you know that some people make maps of places where they have never actually been? And other people make maps of places like rain forests and flower gardens that change from day to day, so a map made last week won't help you today. And sometimes the route one person would take is completely the wrong route for someone else. There is no one way that works for everyone, and no one has ever taken the exact journey you're going to take. So get a bunch of maps and read them, but then make your own decisions about where to go."

The young people thought for a minute, and then one replied, "I suppose you could be right. But there are so many things we want to see. Shouldn't we have a map that tells us where all the most interesting things are?" "Yes, oh, yes!" Wanda answered. "There are lots of interesting things in the world. But some of the most interesting and exciting things won't show up on any map at all. Let's say that you are walking in a very narrow gorge, with steep cliffs rising on each side, and suddenly you come across a rock blocking your path. It's a huge rock, and there doesn't seem to be any way around it. You could sit there for years, thinking that it is nothing but a rock. And yet, there might be all kinds of interesting things that you could learn about the rock. How did it get there? What does it feel like if you lay your cheek on it? Is it hot or cold? If you put your back to it and push, does it move? What if you sit in front of it and sing to it? You never know what might happen. You see, even a rock blocking your path has a story. You can always find something new and exciting to learn—if you look for it. Everything is an adventure."

"Well, okay," said the other. "Maybe that's true. But what if a storm comes up, or we get chased by tigers or something. Shouldn't we have a map that tells us where the safe places are so we can run and hide if we need to?"

"I suppose so," Wanda answered. "If you're being chased by tigers or a storm comes up that's so strong it could blow you off a mountain—well, then, I would recommend taking shelter. But be careful. The thing about safe, comfortable places is that they are fun to enjoy for a while, but you can get kind of used to them. Some people even find a safe, beautiful place, like a warm cave, and they think that their journey is over. But it's not like that. Warm caves are great, but if you run to them whenever some danger threatens ... well, then, you'll never know the joy of standing in the wind, and feeling the pelting of the rain, and hearing the rumbling of the thunder. And most importantly, if you stay in the safe places, you'll never find out what is behind the next hill. So, sure, find the safest and most beautiful places, and see what they are like. And then go see what adventures you can find."

"Well, if all this is true," the young people said, "is there anything you think we absolutely need for our journey?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" said Wanda. "Of course! There is one thing that people always forget on this kind of journey, and it's really important."

She reached under the counter and brought out some paper and a pen. "You see, people often leave on this kind of journey, and they figure they should do it totally on their own. But it doesn't work that way. Yes, the path you take is up to the two of you, but you can't do it alone. No journey is complete without company, and no matter how much fun your traveling companion is, you need to let others be a part of your journey too. Talk to people, help them through their difficult mountain passes, and let them help you through yours. We're all on our own journeys, after all."

Wanda paused and looked at the couple. "Take the paper and pen as my present," she said. "Write letters. Keep in touch." Then she stood up. "I think you are ready for your trip. Don't you?"

The young people looked at Wanda and then back at each other. "I guess we are," one said, as the other took the paper and pen from Wanda's hand. "Thank you."

"Happy travels," said Wanda, and the young people walked out of the store, and down the street, and back to where they were packing to leave.

And the very next day, with their pen and paper and just a few necessary things, they set off on their journey. The next day after that they set off again, and the next day after that, and the next day after that.

Through storms and mountains, tigers and crystal-sand beaches, through every kind of beauty and every kind of challenge, every day was a new adventure. And as far as anyone knows, the young people are still out there somewhere, together on their journey.

### **The Tale of the Sands**

By Idries Shah in *Tales of the Dervishes* (Dutton, 1970)

A STREAM, from its source in far-off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: 'The Wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.'

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

'By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.'

But how could this happen? 'By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind.'

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that-it could ever be regained?

'The wind', said the sand, 'performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a river.'

'How can I know that this is true?'

'It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream.'

'But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?'

'You cannot in either case remain so,' the whisper said. 'Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one.'

When he heard this, certain echoes began to arise in the thought of the stream. Dimly, he remembered a state in which he - or some part of him, was it?—had been held in the arms of a wind. He also remembered—or did he?—that this was the real thing, not necessarily the obvious thing, to do.

And the stream raised his vapor into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away. And because he had had his doubts, the stream was able to remember and record more strongly in his mind the details of the experience. He reflected, 'Yes, now I have learned my true identity.'

The stream was learning. But the sands whispered: 'We know, because we see it happen day after day: and because we, the sands, extend from the riverside all the way to the mountain.'

And that is why it is said that the way in which the Stream of Life is to continue on its journey is written in the Sands.

#### **Other Resources:**

- ☉ *Hide-and-Seek with God* by Mary Ann Moore at [www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/authors/5134.shtml](http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/authors/5134.shtml).
- ☉ Stories for All Ages that are part of the Tapestry curricula can be found at <http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/30341.shtml>.

Especially relevant are:

*Mind Meets Body*, *The Mystic and the Scientist*, *The Shape of the Spirit*, and *She'd Had Enough* by Erik Walker Wikstrom;

*Answer Mountain* by Sarah Skwire;

*The Better Offer* (an Islamic story) and *Flame of Learning* by Janeen Grohsmeyer.





## Prayers/Meditations

Eternal God, Mother and Father, Spirit of Life,

We are grateful for the companionship of hearts and minds seeking to speak the truth in love.

We are grateful for our heritage, for the women and men before us whose prophetic words and deeds make possible our dreams and our insight.

We are grateful for the gift of life itself; mindful that to respect life means both to celebrate what it is and to insist on what it can become.

May we always rejoice in life and work to cultivate a sense of its giftedness, but may we also heed the call to transformation and growth.

May we find in ourselves the strength to face our adversities, the integrity to name them, and the vision to overcome them.

May we honor in pride the heroines and heroes of our past, but may we also keep company with the fallen, the broken, and the oppressed, for in the dazzling of noonday's heat, and in the star-studded shimmering of night's rich blackness, we are them.

**M. Susan Milnor**

Let us be quiet, without and within.

Let the stillness be in us.

Let the silence hold us.

May we find the deep places of the soul and begin to let go of the distractions which plague us.

May we let go of irritation, calm the confusion which inhibits us, let go of fear.

The quiet is within us.

The stillness is in us.

The silence will hold us.

There are deep places in the soul.

Here, may we find peace.

**Harold E. Babcock**

I have this living image in my mind of the moonlight over the water—a broad highway of the most delicate iridescent light fluidly inviting my participation. It calls and I almost follow; nothing matters but the pull of the moon, and my spirit stretches out for it. Mana, let my spirit soar; for once let my soul go free so I may kiss the moon and become the clouds and roll over the ocean.

But the earth clings to my feet with an insistence that cannot be denied. All I can do is sigh and lean into the music of the moon, and imagine my spirit ghostly and gossamer sliding into the silver night. Then I notice on the edge of the cliff in front of me a single tall blade of grass, leaning likewise and dancing to the same call. We are the earthbound ones, left to keep our adventurous spirits longing and leaning, looking for the light. Keep us poised thus, dear spirit, entrusted to the earth and moving to the poetry of the stars.

**Elizabeth Tarbox**

There is a strength, a power, a spirit, we would seek that comes to us when we are most fully in touch with one another. Its creative source is our community in which we come together to find answers to what we can never fully explain.

We seek this spirit to help us face a world of confusion, hoping for courage to face those predicaments which require resolution and decision.

We seek this spirit to offer forgiveness, to make amends, to find the good, the healing beyond hurt, and in the hope that we may be forgiven.

We seek this spirit in our common strength, knowing that it is our connectedness that empowers us to share the fullness of life and to live with the unanswerable questions.

We seek this spirit, feeling the pull of all others who have found their faith renewed, their lives restored, and their minds filled with a vision of what life truly may be.

**Ralph Helverson; adapted**

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## Readings

We have all become shabby hunters at spiritual bargain counters to find life's blessings at reduced prices. True worship stimulates the almost extinguished spark of idealism. The world has thrown ashes on the flame, but worship fans the dying embers lest they become utterly and forever cold. I fear more than any other thing the "terrible freezing up of the deep wells" of my spiritual life.

**Clarence Russell Skinner**

What is spirituality? To have the answer is to have misunderstood the question. Truth, wisdom, goodness, beauty, the fragrance of a rose—all resemble spirituality in that they are intangible, ineffable realities. We may know them, but we can never grasp them with our hands or with our words... And yet they exist; they *are*. Love exists, evil exists, beauty exists, spirituality exists. These are the realities that have always been recognized as defining human existence. We do not define them, they define us. When we attempt to "define" spirituality, we discover not its limits, but our own.

**Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham**

...Any activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage, and which significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond you. This is what I call everyday spiritual practice.

...I am often asked, "What makes an everyday spiritual *practice* different from a casual spiritual *hobby*, something worthwhile that one simply dabbles in when one feels like it?" The answer is intentionality, regularity, and depth. Whether it is sitting Zen, doing charitable giving, working with a spiritual director, or tending to your relationships with loved ones, what shapes your efforts into an everyday spiritual practice is your commitment to making the activity a regular and significant part of your life.

**Scott Alexander**

It seems to me, I say to myself, that we live in an age in which the spirit is being depleted, left languishing as we move onward (we think) toward definition which is more manageable, more mechanistic, more in keeping with the technology of our era.

The emerging model for the human being depresses me. It seems to be less human and to have less to do with "being." I'll be the first to admit—well, maybe the second or third—that "spirit" is a term that needs a lot of work. Still, I'm convinced that we have an aspect to our nature which qualifies us for humanness and that "spirit" serves as a useful metaphor. I won't vouch for my methodology, but I'm quite sure that, if I haven't been able to verify the spirit with precision, I have been able to note its absence.

The spirit manifests itself as human-as human what? The word escapes me—it manifests itself as desire, hope, love, will, joy, the sense of wonder, sense of awe: all of which participate in the nature of the religious and, not coincidentally, in the nature of humanness.

The spirit must be fed, must be, nurtured. It can starve. It can wither. It can be buried in the darkest corner of our being like a pretender to the throne we haven't the nerve to kill outright. Surely, then, if religion has to do with the fulfillment of humanness, it must have to do with the nurturing of the spirit.

**Edward Frost**

When I was in high school, I ran track for a season or two to meet my athletic obligation. I did not do this because I liked running. Even in high school I was greatly enamored of Queen Victoria's famous advice to "never stand when you can sit; never run when you can walk; and never pass up a chance to go to the bathroom." No, I ran track because it required less skill than basketball and less ferocity than wrestling.

Frankly, I remember virtually nothing about my track career and neither does anyone else. But I do recall what I liked best about the sport. Whereas the coach and all the stars of the team would wax poetic about the "thrill of the run," what I liked best about running was that, once you were finished, you had to take at least ten minutes to catch your breath. It was during those ten minutes that life seemed most worth living, that I was most swept up in gratitude: "Thank God I've got a ten-minute break from all this running!"

I cite all this in an essay about spirituality because spirituality is not unlike catching one's breath and being grateful for it. Indeed, in Hebrew the word "spirit" originally meant "breath" or "wind." In recent years many Unitarian Universalists have expressed a renewed interest in something called "spirituality." It is as if we as a religious movement had been running, running, and are finally taking a break from the dash.

For much of our history we have busied ourselves with distinguishing right beliefs from wrong. We have debated questions like, "Was Jesus God or human?"; "Is the Bible fact or myth?"; "Is prayer useful or illusory?" Our favorite self-description has been "seekers after truth." We have, in other words, been caught up in the thrill of the run.

Obviously, a claim's truth or falsity is critical. But religion is not solely a matter of true or false beliefs. Religion is also a matter of practice and praise, feelings and faith. It is, that is to say, not just about the running itself; it is also about the catching of breath and the feel of the wind.

I want to admit quickly, however, that this notion of "spirituality" is a frustrating one. What does it mean anyway? Just like the wind, the Spirit resists being caught; it defies definition; it winces at words. And that means that it can be misappropriated, misused, corrupted, much of what passes for spirituality is, in my judgment, a sham.

Nonetheless, just like our breath, we can try to ignore the Spirit but we can't do without it. It yearns to be felt and it begs to be lived, his is the supreme paradox of spirituality: it can almost never be captured but can almost always be seen. It can be seen in any person whose presence offers healing. It can be seen in any incident which calls forth a blessing on Creation. It can be seen in any place which evokes a terrible enchantment.

Is there any one of us who has not at one time or another been caught short by the grandeur of existence? Is there any one of us who has never known a touch of love or shed a simple tear beyond that which can be entirely explained? Is there any one of us so dulled to the mystery which is Being, so immune to the measures of the heart, that we find life little more than calculation?

If there be such a person, then she or he—I quite agree—is without a spiritual sensibility. But I have rarely, if ever, met such a one, though I know many, beginning with myself, who when confronted with the Spirit's call, are tempted to flee.

I live every day in intimate acquaintance with my own fragility and with the fragility of those whose lives touch mine and with the fragility of the very earth itself. I want that which I love to live forever and so I am forever tempted to be a runner from life's uncertainties, to bury my head in the distractions of the everyday.

But occasionally I stop my running and catch my breath. Or perhaps it is my breath which catches me.

Occasionally, the splendor of the world—some one, some thing—intrudes into my life in such a way that I cannot help but notice. Occasionally, the glory of the stars explodes before me so that I simply cannot turn away. And when that happens, tears will stain my face in simple gratitude for the fact that I and all I love are given one more day.

The proper response to an appearance of the Spirit is not a retreat from the world but an ever heartier engagement. Spirituality is the inspiration for all politics which redeems; for once I have looked on the abundance of Creation, I cannot rest while others, caught up in its flaws, are deprived of the view.

Whatever discloses that abundance, whatever reminds us of the best we can be, whatever summons us to transform the world into ever wider channels of justice and of love—this is spirituality.

But finally and always it remains a puzzle. The best way to experience spirituality is not to chase it—and surely not to run as if we're being chased. The best way, I suspect, is to pause and ponder in silence. In silence we can feel our breath return. And occasionally, if we are very, very quiet, even the wind itself may speak.

**William F. Schulz**

In beginning a genuine spiritual journey...Don Juan, in his teachings to Carlos Castaneda, put it this way...ask yourself and yourself alone one question...Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good. If it doesn't, it is of no use.

...Finding such a path with heart...undertaking a path that transforms and touches us in the center of our being. To do so is to find a way of practice that allows us to live in the world wholly and fully from our heart.

When we ask, "Am I following a path with heart?" we discover that no one can define for us exactly what our path should be. Instead, we must allow the mystery and beauty of this question to resonate within

our being. Then somewhere within us an answer will come and understanding will arise. If we are still and listen deeply, even for a moment, we will know if we are following a path with heart.

**Jack Kornfield**

Letting go is a central theme in spiritual practice, as we see the preciousness and brevity of life. When letting go is called for, if we have not learned to do so, we suffer greatly, and when we get to the end of our life, we may have what is called a crash course. Sooner or later we have to learn to let go and allow the changing mystery of life to move through us without our fearing it, without holding and grasping.

I knew a young woman who sat with her mother during an extended bout of cancer. Part of this time her mother was in the hospital hooked up to dozens of tubes and machines. Mother and daughter agreed that the mother did not want to die this way, and when the illness progressed she was finally removed from all of the medical paraphernalia and allowed to go home. Her cancer progressed further. Still the mother had a hard time accepting her illness. She tried to run the household from her bed, to pay bills and oversee all the usual affairs of her life. She struggled with her physical pain, but she struggled more with her inability to let go. One day in the midst of this struggle, much sicker now and a bit confused, she called her daughter to her and said, "Daughter, please now pull the plug," and her daughter gently pointed out, "Mother, you are not plugged in." Some of us have a lot to learn about letting go.

Letting go and moving through life from one change to another brings the maturing of our spiritual being.

**Jack Kornfield**

...I decided to go on the program called Outward Bound....

One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist—a rope that looked ill-kempt to me and seemed to be starting to unravel—and told me to start "rappelling" down that cliff.

"Do what?" I said.

"Just go!" the instructor explained, in typical Outward Bound fashion.

So I went—and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring, brain-jarring force.

The instructor looked down at me: "I don't think you've quite got it."

"Right," said I, being in no position to disagree. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"The only way to do this," he said, "is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight will be on your feet. It's counterintuitive, but it's the only way that works."

I knew that he was wrong, of course. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried it again, my way—and slammed into the next ledge, another four feet down.

"You still don't have it," the instructor said helpfully.

"OK," I said, "tell me again what I am supposed to do."

"Lean way back," said he, "and take the next step."

In a high, squeaky voice, I said, "I don't want to...."

"Then," said the second instructor, "it's time that you learned the Outward Bound motto."

"Oh, keen," I thought, "I'm about to die, and she's going to give me a motto!"

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: "If you can't get out of it, get into it!"

I had long believed in the concept of "the word become flesh," but until that moment, I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out of my dilemma except to get into it—so my feet started to move, and in a few minutes I made it safely down.

Why would anyone want to embark on the daunting inner journey...? Because there is no way out of one's inner life, so one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through.

**Parker Palmer**

For spirit is first of all power, the power that drives the human spirit above itself towards what it cannot attain by itself, the love that is greater than all other gifts, the truth in which the depth of being opens itself to us, the holy that is the manifestation of the presence of the ultimate.

You may say again—"I do not know this power. I have never had such an experience. I am not religious or, at least, not Christian and certainly not a bearer of the Spirit. What I hear from you sounds like ecstasy; and I want to stay sober. It sounds like mystery, and I try to illuminate what is dark. It sounds like self-sacrifice and I want to fulfill my human possibilities." To this I answer—Certainly, the Spiritual power can thrust some people into an ecstasy that most of us have never experienced. It can drive some towards a kind of self-sacrifice of which most of us are not capable. It can inspire some insights into the depth of being that remain unapproachable to most of us. But this does not justify our denial that the Spirit is also working in us. Without doubt, wherever it works, there is an element, possibly very small, of self-surrender, and an element, however weak, of ecstasy, and an element, perhaps fleeting, of awareness of the mystery of existence. Yet these small effects of the Spiritual power are enough to prove its presence.

**Paul Tillich**

When Jesus was baptized, the spirit descended upon him like a dove and God said, "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased." It must have been a great feeling, but it didn't last long. The next thing Jesus knew, the spirit that had descended like a dove became aggressive and *drove* him into the wilderness. There he spent forty days of deprivation, self-examination, and confrontation with the devil. This was no Sierra Club hike through the Qumran National Forest. He suffered; he struggled; he was tested. Jesus' solitary struggles to remain true to his covenant and calling echo those of his ancestors, who spent forty years in the wilderness establishing a religious community.

Wilderness is a part of every person's soul-journey, and part of our journey together as human beings who seek to live in community. Time in the wilderness is always a time of struggle. It is also a time of transformation and renewal. In traditional terms, it is a time of purification. The journey into wilderness reminds us that we are alone and not alone. We are neither where we have been nor where we are going. There is danger and possibility, risk and promise. In the wilderness, the spirit may descend like a dove and lift us on its wings of hope, then drive us into the depths of despair; it may affirm us with a gift of grace, then challenge us to change. In the stories and rituals of Eastern as well as Western religions, a journey into the wilderness represents a time when we both pursue and resist the Holy.

We may choose to enter the wilderness like the people of Yahweh, to escape bondage, or, like Henry David Thoreau, to "live deliberately." Or we may, like Jesus, be driven there without much choice. Once there, even our markers of time and space collapse, for this wilderness is not in space or time, but is the boundless territory of the soul.

**Sarah York**

I love the description of Jesus' fishing lesson to his friends after the resurrection... Jesus has already shown himself to his disciples indoors. Then, on another occasion, he has even allowed the doubtful Thomas to stick his hand through his body. John claims Jesus showed himself over and over again to his skeptical disciples; so many times in fact, that they are not even written down.

Then Simon Peter says, "Ok, time to go fishing." After a night of unsuccessful fishing, Jesus appears to them again and speaks to them from close to the shore directly asking, "Have you caught anything?" And the disciples (who like all disciples, are as dumb as posts) are reported to have come to this conclusion: "The disciples knew not that it was Jesus."

Now, I guess at this point, Jesus could have preached a sermon to them, or scolded them, or pointed in a vigorous manner at himself. Instead, he asked for them to do something differently, to lower their nets on a new

side of the boat. Now you can just hear the rational arguments: Why change? (Same water on the left as on the right; same Sea of Tiberius; the fish didn't bite last night, or this morning—why would they bite over there, when nothing is going on over here.) We human beings have strong convictions that we know exactly how the universe operates, and if we only keep doing what we have been doing, eventually things will improve. But Jesus says, “No, do something new.” Change your orientation; imagine that a stranger on the shore might know something that you don't. And when the disciples moved to the other side, it wasn't only their nets that became full of fish; their eyes opened, and their hearts awoke and they understood that there were miracles in every direction.

[This] is a story, an important story, about how all of us can see things we've never seen before, how we can move past the old, imprisoning assumptions and beliefs. How the world keeps getting larger, if you pay attention.

**Barbara Merritt**

One great challenge for Unitarian Universalism is the issue of depth versus breadth. As we become ever more inclusive, as the circle widens ever more broadly, we court the danger of becoming “a mile wide and an inch deep.” UUs have been charged with this on more than one occasion.

Unitarian Universalists love variety. And yet, if spiritual development—whatever that means—requires discipline, attention, and time, then it also requires focus. In this way it is comparable to academics: one can be an expert in one area and have a general idea about many others, but to know a subject thoroughly is to become specialized. Spirituality is not academics, but something similar is true of it. It is not possible to walk all paths at once.

Religion scholar Huston Smith makes exactly this point: “The problem with cafeteria-style spirituality is that Saint Ego is often the one making the choices at the salad bar. What tastes good is not always the same as what you need, and an undeveloped ego can make unwise choices. I believe that it is most helpful for people to choose one main meal, to commit and focus on that tradition, and then to add to it if the need arises. I am a firm believer in vitamin supplements.”

Without rejecting the respectful borrowing of elements from other traditions, there is merit to Smith's suggestion that they should be supplements and spices and not the main course. Other traditions should not be used as distractions from Unitarian Universalism's own path. Pieces from other traditions can illuminate and enrich the UU tradition, but they cannot in themselves make up that tradition. Too often, it seems, UUs try to achieve just that.

But what about those for whom their “other” discipline is their primary religious path? Perhaps if we had more to offer within Unitarian Universalism, they might not feel such a need to go elsewhere.

This is not to say that it is wrong to be a UU and pursue a discipline from another tradition. The numbers indicate that it is certainly possible to be a “hyphenated UU,” and to follow a particular spiritual discipline within the community and values of Unitarian Universalism. Nor does this mean there should be an orthodox UU path that is imposed from outside or that is supposed to fit for everyone. However, perhaps it would be beneficial if UUs had their own distinctly UU spiritual path, something we could use to explore our own depths and increase our depth of spiritual exploration, without having to go outside the UU faith.

***From Engaging Our Theological Diversity by The Commission on Appraisal***

Deep in our innermost core we yearn to be connected with the mystery we call god, or nature, or the spirit. We yearn for that sense of oneness with each other and all creation, to know our place and our value. And, often, we yearn for someone to show us how to get there, to direct us to the right path that will lead us on the way to a deeper spirituality.

The problem is, finding the right path is like standing in front of a candy counter and trying to decide which piece is the right piece, the best piece. You know that it all depends on your tastes, and you need to know what you like in order to choose the best piece for you. That means that you have to have tried at least some of them to know which ones you like. Even then, it's important to acknowledge that others may find different pieces more to their liking.

There is no one right path to a deeper spirituality. There are many right paths, and the one you choose may serve for a while, and then need to be changed over time. Like the Buddha who left everything to go off in search of enlightenment, you may find yourself coming back to yourself in the end, as did he, to your own home and people, to a greater understanding of the value of the mundane alongside the spiritual, and the importance of learning to balance your life.

My daily spiritual practice is to balance. A major part of that practice involves balancing the busy, taking-for-granted moments of the day with moments to pause and appreciate what is before me in my life...

Spiritual practices are aimed at helping us understand...connectedness, to sense our oneness, to the end that our yearning is appeased in actuality. For whether you call it God/Goddess, Nature, Spirit, or Oneness (or some other word), the feeling of presence is very real for many of us. It is a feeling which sustains me, and fills me with appreciation for all that is my life....

**Susan Manker-Seale**

I have come to realize that my spiritual practice can best be described as "eclectic." I have been fed through diverse and what may seem to be conflicting ways. I have gained spiritual knowledge in places as different as a college classroom and a New Age support group. I have journaled, prayed, meditated, danced, and sung to nurture my spirit. I have worshipped alone on a mountainside and in a ballroom filled with thousands. I have gone months without doing anything that looks remotely spiritual and have prayed every day for weeks at a time. That variety has been extraordinarily fulfilling and good for my soul.

Eclectic spiritual practice goes against the prevailing view that spiritual practice is like exercise: It must be a consistent, daily regimen, or your spirit will wither and die. Because this belief is so common, I have on occasion been called to task for not being "spiritual enough." But I believe there is no one-size-fits-all spirituality. Each person's spiritual practice will look different from everyone else's. For many, the ideal is a regular practice that springs from one tradition and follows one path. But for others, broader boundaries along which to explore our spirits are what we need.

Comfort and spiritual peaks are wonderful, but spiritual practice is ultimately designed for something more: to make us better people and to bring our gifts into the world. The most important spiritual task we have as human beings is to make this planet kinder, more humane, and more just. My eclectic spiritual practice works for me because it helps me stay centered on who I am, why I'm here, and what I am to do. I believe I am a better person because of the unique path I have chosen.

If you want to practice eclectic spirituality, simply start walking on your own individual path. Find something you enjoy doing...that allows you to reflect on your life and to open yourself to all that is holy. Look for a teacher you trust, perhaps a counselor, minister, or fellow church member who has wisdom to share. Get yourself to a religious community and throw yourself into its worship life. Be there whenever you can, and strive to let it nurture you even as it challenges you.

**Barbara Wells**

The middle way is a comprehensive approach to being in the world, and it is the path I have chosen. It has a place in other religious traditions as well. Balance, harmony, and equilibrium are concepts critical to Taoism and occupy a...central place in the teachings of the *Tao Te Ching*....

Walking the middle way means bringing a certain attitude and awareness to the everyday business of living. It is "spiritual practice" in the fullest sense because it involves the recognition that everything a person does has spiritual ramifications; everything factors into one's spiritual fulfillment. But the middle way best serves as a guiding principle, not as an inviolable rule. Paradoxically, if we are too scrupulous, the middle way can become just another obsession—a distraction and a diversion from the greater task.

The middle way offers a useful approach to some of the everyday issues of modern American life. With regard to food, for example, practicing the middle way means thinking about what I eat and making choices that are consistent with my values and that keep me feeling fit and healthy. Above all, I want to keep enough flexibility in my diet that when situations arise (and they often do) when the foods I prefer aren't readily available, I won't find myself becoming upset, angry, disappointed, or depressed. I refuse to agonize over my diet. "It isn't what goes into our mouths that defiles us," Jesus said, "but what comes



out or our mouths that is defiling." Our eventual goal should be to develop a comfortable relationship with food in general.

Following the middle way isn't easy. Most people are pretty inconsistent and unsteady about managing their own lives. We settle upon a goal, develop an appropriate strategy, and for several weeks or months pursue our aim with considerable energy and diligence. But then our resolve begins to falter, our efforts slacken, old habits reassert themselves, and pretty soon we are right back where we started. A year later we may convince ourselves to try again, and the full cycle repeats itself. Eating and drinking sensibly, staying moderately active, reserving time regularly for friends and family, maintaining an active prayer life, and reconnecting daily with the energies of Nature are disciplines we do not perform well. Rather, we eat either a lot of food or none, catch up on sleep rather than awaken each morning feeling rested, overwork ourselves at the gym one day and cope with sore muscles the rest of the week. Ours is a feast-or-famine mentality, swinging wildly (and often miserably) between self-indulgence and self-denial. It takes considerable discipline to live according to the middle way.

I know of no shortcuts, no alternative curriculum. Achievement in spirituality—as in science, athletics, or the arts—requires clear focus and steady application. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh makes the point much more eloquently when he says, "The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and *beauty that are available now*. It is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of practice."

**Michael Schuler**

...I have come to understand that if I am to recover from violence, live in love, and contribute to healing and transformation, I need to engage in spiritual practices that preserve knowledge beyond what the dominant culture tells me about who I am.

I find two spiritual practices especially helpful as pathways to doing this. These practices are simple and ancient, but they ask a great deal of those who follow them. I recommend them to you.

The first religious practice is keeping the Sabbath. To keep the Sabbath means, once every seven days, to step outside the dominating culture and enter another space. On a regular basis, stop participating in life as it is defined for us. Choose one day out of seven to not go shopping. To not do any work. To not bring any work home. Instead, give yourself and your family the space to feel what it is hard to feel when you spend all your time, as the poet says, "getting and spending and laying waste your powers." Give yourself time to notice. Walk in the woods and see how the leaves of the willows are coming out, the azaleas are budding, there is a sweetness in the air and the tulips are bending in the wind. Give yourself time to sit at the table with friends, to welcome the friendless into your home, to talk with one another. Give yourself time to read, think, and reflect. Gather with a religious community to pray and give thanks. Open yourself to the wisdom of religious tradition, rituals of reconciliation and hope, liturgies of joy, acts of remembrance and sorrow. Stop the madness and rest. Open yourself to the beauty and the meaning of life, to all those tender capacities in yourself and all those dear relationships with others that are to be cherished. Find a way to know the things that the marketplace can neither give nor take away.

To keep the Sabbath is a radical act of resistance to a culture that has lost track of the meaning of life. From this place of Sabbath keeping, I become more capable of entering into sustained engagement with the culture of which we are all part and which needs our active creative witness and our work for change.

The second spiritual practice that I find helpful is just as simple, just as ancient, and perhaps even more unfamiliar. This spiritual practice is tithing. To tithe is to give ten percent of your income for the common good. When I comment tithing to you, I am not suggesting tithing in spirit, tithing in principle, or tithing as metaphor. I am suggesting giving away ten percent of your income. It can be difficult, but it can be learned. In fact, I don't think that anyone who tithes has come to it by anything other than learning it. If you've never done it, start with one percent, then move to two, then to three. Work your way to ten percent, step by step. You don't have to give it all to one place. You can give part of it to your church and part of it to people and places that work for the healing and transformation of life.

By tithing and keeping the Sabbath, I open myself up to what the old theologians called the means of grace. I keep myself open to remembering who I am and what life is, what is precious and what it is to feel,

what it is to be connected intimately to earth, to history, to other human beings and what it is to live justly. When I remember this, I know what to do with all the beauty.

**Rebecca Parker**

It's easy to develop an attitude problem when it comes to the question of spiritual discipline, especially for those of us leading lives characterized by relentlessly over laden days. Through most of my life I've understood the notion of spiritual discipline with the emphasis on the word *discipline*. It was something to strive for, an ideal with mingled connotations of asceticism and serenity regardless of the particular practice that might be chosen...

There is an old folk tale from the Christian tradition about the saintly Brother Bruno, who was at prayer one night when he found his concentration interrupted by the loud croaking of a bullfrog. He kept trying to ignore the noise, but the harder he tried to concentrate the more annoying the sound became. Finally he leaned out of his window and shouted, "Quiet! I'm at my prayers!" Instantly there was complete silence, as the bullfrog and every other creature obeyed his command. Brother Bruno settled back into prayer, but now he found himself even more deeply disturbed by a nagging doubt: Why would God create the bullfrog and its rasping voice unless there was something pleasing in the sound? Could it be that Bruno's own prayer sounded, to God's ears, like the arrogant croaking of another sort of frog?

Bruno could not push away this uneasiness, and so he finally leaned out his window again and gave the command, "Sing!" The throaty croak of the bullfrog again filled the air, along with all the other creatures that had fallen silent. Brother Bruno listened carefully to the sound, and to his amazement he discovered that it was beautiful. Once he no longer resisted it as noise, the joyful concert actually enriched the peacefulness of the night. With that discovery, Bruno understood for the first time in his life what it really meant to pray.

Ancient though it is, this story is an excellent illustration of the modern therapeutic term "reframing." To reframe a problem or issue means exactly that: We recognize that what we're contemplating is shaped by the perspective or "frame" we're used to, and we try a different frame or angle in order to see the problem differently. When reframing works well, it can even make a problem disappear: It changes our perspective so radically that what once troubled us just doesn't seem to matter anymore... What does it mean to see our lives in a frame oriented toward process rather than productivity? Every spiritual discipline is designed to help us listen more deeply to our lives. If the recognizable disciplines such as prayer and meditation are sporadic and fleeting at best, then is there some other way to grab hold of what they try to teach us? In other words, is there a way for us to hear not the muddle of voices that keeps us from our prayer, but the prayer within even that muddle of voices?

I don't lose sight of the need and the hope for a more concentrated prayer life and more quiet, meditative time, but in its absence I have discovered a short and simple practice at night in the brief, peaceful moments between turning out the light and falling asleep. It's a practice that inevitably helps me listen more deeply to the life I really lead, to avoid the trap of longing for some illusory growth that might come in the contemplative life I have not chosen.

My spiritual practice consists of this: I think back on the events of the day and ask the question, "Where was God in this day?" It's a question that can be asked in a dozen different theological voices, and if God language fails to resonate, then we might ask merely, "Where today did I really hear the language of my life?" The question puts a sheen of attentiveness and care on even the most mundane dimensions of the day. It gives us a way to cradle the moments of a day just lived and see them again before they're too far away, to notice the regrets and failings as well as the joys.

Then we see that even lacking the contemplative silence, the voice of our lives that we need to hear is whispering. I find it in my child's question or in the walk that I squeezed in at twilight; it was there when the sales clerk suddenly spoke with tears about her husband's death and there when I tasted the sweetness of a perfect pear and ate it slowly, carefully, paying attention. It's there in the work done well and with pleasure and also there in the lessons learned in failings, large and small...

...The calm eye of attention, the deeper wisdom of mindfulness, begins to seep in, as they do with any spiritual discipline faithfully practiced.

For many of us, our daily prayer will never arise out of silence, but from the thrumming heart of things right where we live. So it will be there, at the heart that never stops beating, which we can most clearly listen to our lives and discern the path that is ours to walk.

**Kathleen McTigue**

Our whole lives are gifts received, unwarranted and not of our making alone. I cannot take full credit for my life anymore than I caused my own birth. I am blessed and fortunate in large part because scores of people contributed to my growing up, to the formation of my values and character, to building the free society in which I live and the institutions which support my efforts to grow my soul and create peace. I am indebted to my family who love me and ancestors I never knew. I cannot claim as mine and mine alone any of the gifts that enrich my life. And the flow of love—for that's what it is—this flow of life energy into me does not end with me. I am called by Life Itself, to pass along to others the blessings and the gifts I have received. I will not be the stagnant pool at the end of the stream, a swamp, stale and so turned in on itself and independent of the rest of creation that I produce nothing sweet or soothing or true or kind. As the saying goes: Recycle, Reuse, Re-gift.

But I did not always think this way—even though I was raised a Unitarian Universalist. One December Saturday when I was 11 or 12, as my Mom was packing up the Christmas box to send to my aunt's family, she decided that the gift we were sending to my cousin Billy was insufficient. She came and asked what toy or toys I had that I'd be willing to part with. "Why?" "Because we need something else to give to your cousin." "I need everything I have." "Oh come on, Peter," she said. "Surely there's something that you don't use that you could let your cousin have." "I don't want to give him any of my stuff." (I wasn't particularly fond of my cousin whom I saw for a day or two every other year.)

My mother told me that I had to give him something. I suggested a few broken and shabby items, which I correctly guessed didn't pass muster. Then my mother began suggesting things. No. No. No. "But you never use it/play with it/read it/look at it!" Didn't matter. I was holding on to my stuff, even the bad stuff. Eventually she wrestled from me a stuffed animal that had been quietly guarding the back corner of my closet for several years. Looking back, I'm not sure if I learned that generosity is a good thing, or that powerful people will steal your stuff if you're not careful.

If your religion or your spiritual growth has become more concerned with accumulation than with distribution, it is a sure sign that it has lost its proper goal. In our anxiety to be saved, we can easily devote ourselves to storing up enough grace to buy our way into heaven, or enough coins to pay the ferryman Charon to pull us across the river Styx.

Faith and spirit are not about getting but giving. Among the great spiritual teachers of the world, Jesus was not alone in saying things like you have to lose your soul to gain your soul. He recognized that people easily identify their true selves, their precious beings, with the things they have accumulated. We can rely upon the ego, social status and economic trappings of success, things, to keep us happy, whole and safe. Jesus and Buddha and so many teachers have taught that spiritual growth is all about sharing, generosity, giving of yourself to others—which is a form of compassion. This kind of giving of oneself is worlds apart from self-abnegation in which one ignores and discounts one's own needs, feelings, desires, rights and surrenders her or his soul to another. That's abuse not compassion, not love

I believe that to be a whole and holy person, each of us must continually be giving away our gifts, re-gifting the blessings we have received, sharing with others our particular gifts and talents. Any religion worthy of my precious life energy is not about salvation and saving. But rather is itself devoted to teaching, modeling and practicing the disciplines of letting go and growing souls....

Stewardship is the moral employment of that which is given to us in trust. I think of it as re-gifting. Since Life is a gift, how we share our gifts with one another and the world reflects our values and faith. Stewardship, then, is a spiritual discipline. We do it because it nourishes our souls. It enlarges the embrace of our hearts and keeps us mindful of who we are and how we are connected each to all.

**Peter Luton**

UU minister Richard Kellaway recounts a ceremony he witnessed among the indigenous people of Chichicastenango, Guatemala. “I suppose most of us would judge these people’s ceremonies primitive and pagan,” he writes. “Clearly, they believe that there are powers working within life which are beyond everyday knowing or controlling. But also they believe that these powers can be touched and made accessible. For the traditional peoples of Guatemala, the candles, incense, flowers and herbs, and most of all the prayers, are a spiritual experience.

“We are skeptical. We are suspicious... But also, we are often envious. In hard times, we often complain that Unitarian Universalism doesn’t have enough answers to help us through the dark places. What we fail to understand is that answers aren’t what get people through the dark places. It’s finding a pathway to touch the sacred dimension of existence, discovering the spiritual fullness within ourselves.”

**Kathleen McTigue**

Transformative worship should be understood as the primary common spiritual practice of Unitarian Universalists, and as a critical engine that can drive Unitarian Universalist growth. This cannot happen unless this common spiritual practice also starts to affect the ways that Unitarian Universalists lead their lives outside of church. One way to think about a worship service is that each of its elements points toward spiritual practices in which we might engage throughout the week.

**Kathleen Rolenz and Wayne Arnason**

We do not go back—we cannot go back, it would be tragic to go back—to the days before the coming of the new knowledge; our approach not only *may* be but *must* be scientific and reasonable. This means, however, that we must push forward—forward to a new and deeper understanding of the spiritual, beginning with a full acceptance of it; the spiritual that demands that we deal justly in all our relationships, that we cast aside prejudice, and all escapes and all excuses; the spiritual that calls us from sloth to effort and endurance, and from easy purposes to difficult aims and high endeavors; the spiritual that speaks in conscience; the spiritual that says the soul can only grow by truth and love and righteousness . . .

**A. Powell Davies**

What is that true fulfillment of our UU heritage and principles? Let me first tell you what it is not. Remember the UU chalice reading? “Love is the spirit of this church and service its law?” Lately, I’ve been wondering what the difference is between our faith and other volunteer organizations seeking to do good in this world? What makes my work in the Rotary, whose motto is “Service Above Self” different from what I do as a member of this faith tradition? Is it “service” that defines who Unitarian Universalists are in this world? Believe it or not, I don’t think service is at the very root of who we are. Service is simply our faith put into action, important though that may be. But what’s at the core? What makes us different?

The difference is . . . we expect personal and spiritual transformation! The Rotary and various other miscellaneous volunteer organizations to which I belong do not define themselves as a place for personal and spiritual transformation. We, on the other hand, do! We seek to give to ourselves and others opportunities to grow as a nautilus grows, ring by ring, toward someone and something *beyond* who we are today.

We expect to grow intellectually and in doing so, better understand the needs and complexities of this fragile and beautiful world. Can I hear a Hallelujah!?!

We expect to grow in courage and in doing so, use our hands as tools that bring justice and compassion to this broken world. Can I hear a Hallelujah!?!

We expect to grow spiritually, to develop a deeper understanding of who we are and what brings purpose and meaning to our lives and souls. Can I hear a Hallelujah!?!

More than personal growth, we expect to provide our children and strangers we do not yet know, these same opportunities. Can I hear a Hallelujah!?!

And, while it may seem altruistic to want others to have these same opportunities, our real need is to have the company of others who also want to grow in spirit, heart, mind and deed, and by their growth, our opportunities for growth are enlarged and transformed. It is this type of shared growth that offers the human spirit . . . hope.

Friends, I believe that it is primarily in our relationships with each other that we can grow spirit, and offer others the opportunity to grow their spirits. I believe that...Unitarian Universalism...is the best hope there is for all souls, those known and unknown, to grow toward their greatest potential.

**Jeanne Lloyd**

Unitarian ethicist and theologian James Luther Adams said, “By these groups you shall know them.” So what is our group, our association, and our religion to be? Is it a drinking fountain in a private park in a gated community, where only we and our selected friends can refresh our selves at our leisure? Or is it an expansive, life affirming, ignorance busting, despair destroying, hope giving fountain of the waters of life, where justice rolls down and peace like an ever flowing stream that we have to paddle like mad to stay a float on and laugh with joy all the while? Do we take our faith to the streets, to the highways and by ways, by first taking it in to our hearts and asking the Spirit of Life to move in our hands, giving life the shape of justice? I chose the latter and say yes to this faith and our Association of congregations which have placed before us the loftiest of ideals, without counting the cost. Because what we are doing is nothing less than changing lives and saving the world.

**Patrick Price**

This is not a faith that floats around up in the clouds. It is found and forged in the places where we “live and struggle.” Perhaps one of those words hits closer to home for you today than the other—*live* and *struggle*. In this room there are folks in many different places in their hearts: there are those whose spirits are light today, and those who arrive bearing the sadness of the world. Some are on the edge of adventure, beaming with energy from a new job, a new loved one, new understanding, or a new peace while others gaze toward the past, and wonder where they will find the strength for another step. Some come today for communion. This may mean connecting through the rituals of worship, or it may be found in a simple conversation over coffee. *It doesn't have to be complex.* And there are others this morning who arrive in need of forgiveness, and wonder whether anyone could *really see* them and still invite them in. To all these seekers we hold out a shared vision. We say, yes. Come on in, and know you are not alone. We will not judge you for who you are, or tell you what we want God to want you to do. We will join in your celebrations, and help you in holding your sorrows. We will urge you toward wholeness, and ask only that you regard the sacred in others as we recognize it in you. Join us, everyone, because we are better together.

God is no remote entity but abides both within us and between us, the very spirit of life that moves us to reverence and humility, while at the same time requiring the honor not of one right creed but of beloved community: the way our lives speak, as we walk with one another. And this really is walking—as in a *path*, a spiritual discipline we have not perfected but which demands that each of us continue to ask, what are we called to do now? Who has been welcomed? And who has not? This is the task I lift up to you: to look at the person next to you, and the congregation next to yours, and the people outside of the congregations and ask: who has been welcomed? Then, we must open the doors.

**William Sinkford**

Who are the people of this church? Those who want to be part of a religious community where trust is in the potential which resides in individuals and in the process which works among people through honest sharing of perspectives. Those who want no more to do with a domineering, authoritarian style of religion. Those whose minds and hearts are opening to the deeper spiritual significance of the ancient symbols, stories and texts. Those who cannot be satisfied with either a simplistic literalism or a religion which simply fights against literalism. Those who feel that there are many paths into the depths of the mystery in which our lives are set, even as they seek the one path most personally significant for them. Those who resist the temptation toward exclusivity in religion. Those who are challenged by the idea that each person has within the potential to achieve the highest. Membership in this church is open to all those sensing the deeper longings of the spirit, who wish to walk in one company together—for mutual support and benefit and toward the greater glory.

**Roy Phillips**

In his earliest published essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson, asked the following question: “Why should not we have an original relation with the universe?” This is the key line in his essay *Nature*. Emerson raised in Unitarianism, in the Liberal Christian perspective of his day, was the eighth eldest son in a line to go into the ministry that had become liberal about two generations earlier. His predecessors all entered that circle at the story of Jesus. Emerson, influenced by the German nature philosophers, entered the circle at experience. One could say that this was a key moment in the shift in Unitarian Universalism from a definitively liberal Christian perspective to a world embracing perspective that recognized the universality of religious experience.

We, as Unitarian Universalist believe...as it is said, that we are here to grow our souls, and that from birth until death we are learning; we are growing; we are changing; we are open. We are moving through that cycle of meaning making.

That being said, life for us is not all about the journey.... There is such a thing as spiritual maturity. There is, if you will, a destination. And we can learn how best to proceed in that journey by asking ourselves what are the attributes that we experience that we can see in a spiritually mature human being.

**Rob Eller-Isaacs**

Slowly it may dawn upon the spirit that there is a special ministry of un-fulfillment. It may be that the persistent hunger is an angel of illumination. With the coming of this possibility into consideration, slowly, tensions are relaxed and the center of emphasis is shifted from the hunger itself to what it has meant to deal with it through all the years. Slowly at first, the words are shaped and the pattern of them shows itself. At last, we may say, “I know that there is present in my life a quality that is only mine because the hunger is mine. Thus, at last, I come to the door and seek entrance where is gathered the great community. I know the password: ‘Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.’”

**Howard Thurman**

Someone once defined spirituality as the practice of “awe-robics.” If we are aware and awake to wonder, then it becomes possible to cultivate what Einstein called “a holy curiosity.” We can avoid the pitfalls of arrogance and self-certainty and instead accept the mystery in which we live and move with serenity and trust. Our response to the unknown is not anxiety, but appreciation mixed with anticipation of discovery and enlightenment. Amazement and astonishment become everyday reactions to the world around us. We cease looking for marvels in faraway places or esoteric sources, for marvels are all around.

**Gary Kowalski**

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## Sermons/Essays

**Excerpts from *A Path of Spiritual Discipline: The Route to Work*  
*Paul Revere Road to Lexington Road; Concord, Massachusetts*  
*Nine Stations Along the Way*  
 By Gary E. Smith**

We've lived on Paul Revere Road, here in Concord, since early summer of 1988, and I've driven the way from there to here at First Parish thousands of times, three and a half miles each way, in all kinds of weather, in all kinds of personal moods and conditions. Over the years, I've become more and more aware of certain places along the way that trigger some fleeting moment of gratitude or awareness or peace, and so, early on in my sabbatical last winter, I spent a few days internalizing this familiar route, finding there nine stops, nine stations, that remind me of the blessings of life, remind me of the blessings of my life.

I wrote this because I wondered if you, too, might not have some familiar route you travel, and, if you ever might want to construct your own spiritual path, find markers along your way that remind you of blessings. Here is one route. You will have your own.

1. Paul Revere Road, east to Peter Bulkeley Road, south to Powdermill Road (mile 0.3); Willard School: my son Jonathan has taught here since 1997

*It has been true in recent years that I am known by some of the children at First Parish, not so much as their minister, but as "Mr. Smith's father." When I pass this school each day, so close to our home, I think of my son inside, and I give thanks for him and for all my family. Sometimes I leave him a sports page I know he'll like, sometimes some food I've cooked for his family, sometimes a gift.*

2. East on Powdermill Road (mile 0.5); Canopy of Trees, filter of morning light

*The road dips here, woods on both sides, a fire pond on the left, just before the stop sign for Sudbury Road. When the road begins to descend, I am aware in all seasons of the trees overhanging the road, like a canopy, and on some mornings, particularly on Sundays, when I am there a little earlier than most, the light can be so beautiful.*

*When I drive through this part of my route, I am aware of the beauty and give thanks for it, for the luminescence and transcendence of this world. I see those shafts of light on days they're not even there.*

3. North on Sudbury Road (mile 1.1); Conantum Neighborhood to the east

*Sudbury Road twists north from Nine Acre Corner to the south. The land to the east was, I am told, bought up by an M.I.T. professor, a hundred and ninety acres all told, at the end of World War II, and promoted for sale as house lots through M.I.T. contacts. These acres were the stuff of dreams, roads were imagined, house lots were laid out, some few trees were cut, ball fields were planned, common land was preserved.*

*...When I drive past it all, hidden down in the woods, near the river, I give thanks for people everywhere who have dreams and chase them.*

4. North on Sudbury Road (mile 1.6); Heath's Bridge, Sudbury River

*Heath's Bridge is where this whole project began. Many years ago, I found myself stopped on Heath's Bridge, over the Sudbury River, waiting for the traffic light at route 2, more than a half-mile away. I was impatient, probably running late; other cars were doing K-turns to go back and around by Emerson Hospital. My eyes were on the slow pace of traffic. My teeth were clenched. The coffee in my stomach was turning to acid.*

*I must have looked either up or down the river. Down the river is toward Emerson Hospital in the distance; up the river is toward Fairhaven Bay, with some of the Conantum homes tucked in down by the water, off Martha's Point. It is a stunning sight in either direction. People pay money to rent canoes to see these views.*

*I was suddenly aware of where I was, a sermon I preach but sometimes do not practice. What is your hurry, I asked myself. This was an epiphany for me, a slap upside the head. And then, just to drive the point home to me, the Public Works Department, nominally to help preserve a deteriorating bridge, but really as an angelic message to me, installed signs telling me to slow down.*

*Then, on the off chance that I had missed the message, they installed speed bumps. I wrote a note of thanks to the Director of Public Works. He told a parishioner a note like that would only come from a Unitarian. These days, while the bridge is being repaired, there is only a single lane over the bridge: traffic lights, speed bumps, jersey barriers, signs to slow down, sometimes a police officer.*

*When I cross this bridge each day, I am reminded to slow down, literally and metaphorically.*

5. Traffic light, Sudbury Road at Route 2 (mile 2.2); Bigelow Meadow to the west; cattle grazing

*This traffic light, this meadow, this smell, these sounds, they all teach me patience.*

6. North on Sudbury Road (mile 2.4); Parishioners' homes along the way

*Having now crossed Route 2 into Concord center, I am in neighborhoods where there are stories I carry with me, so many homes I've been in for one reason or another. Though I'm on this particular stretch of road, I am always aware as I drive around Concord, and Acton, and Carlisle, of the homes I've been privileged to enter, the beds by which I've sat, the graduation parties in which I've joined.*

*One of the great honors of the profession of ministry is to be invited to a seat in the front row of people's lives: births, coming of age, commencements, marriages, illnesses and accidents, deaths, all the events that life brings us. On this stretch of road, I am reminded of how grateful I am to be a minister and how grateful I am that people invite me into their lives.*

7. Sudbury Road at Thoreau Street (mile 2.9); Concord Depot

*At or near this intersection with the railroad tracks is our optician, our dentist, our dry cleaner, our florist, our pizza place, our picture framer, our gasoline station and one of two of the funeral homes in Concord. Here I am grateful for this town and for those in so many of the offices and businesses of Concord who know people by name, reminding me of belonging and how good home feels.*



8. Sudbury Road merging into Main Street at the Concord Library (mile 3.1); Main Street, Concord

*...When I merged into the Main Street traffic one morning long ago and looked down the almost-make believe street, I was aware that I would soon be with co-workers whom I loved. I counted them, named them, brought each of their faces into my mind at that moment, and, without speaking, marveled at how very fortunate I was to have them as colleagues.*

*These things are never permanent. People move on, move away, find other jobs, retire, but I knew in that moment how blessed I was. When the line of cars pull up tight on Main Street (God forbid they should let anyone from Sudbury Road merge in), I take the extra time to give thanks for these friends.*

9. Main Street to Lexington Road (mile 3.3); Flagpole circle, "We Walk for Peace" people on Friday mornings

*At the beginning of Main Street is Monument Square and a very weird double rotary. What is prominent at the intersection is the flagpole, rising high above a beautiful evergreen, a tree decorated with lights each holiday season. In this circle around the pole and the tree, there have been people walking on Friday mornings, ever since the first Gulf War in the early nineties. "We Walk for Peace," their sign says, and walk they do, in all weather, slowly, reverently, deliberately, silently, in all kinds of weather, witnesses for peace.*

*My office window is nearby, and I can tell you that these peaceful people are often met with contempt, abuse, and hatred, but they are implacable. They just keep walking, through horns of support and rejection, through waves of five fingers and one. I am grateful to them for their witness, and each day, not just Friday, I share in their prayers for peace.*

10. First Parish in Concord (mile 3.4); Sunday Morning

*We are here today on this first day of autumn, and I have traveled my route one more time: the school, the trees, the river, the library, the flagpole. It is a beautiful morning, and I am blessed.*

### **Spirituality: What Is It, and How Can I Get Some?**

**By Marilyn Sewell**

"Spirituality: What Is It, and How Can I Get Some?" is of course a facetious title—but such an American, such a consumerist approach. If spirituality is good for me, like a low-carb diet or green tea or aerobic exercise three times a week, I should probably work it into my schedule. I could get a plan—even get a coach. And there are a multitude of books to choose from. I mean, everything from the *Bible*—one of your basic texts—all the way to the other end of the continuum, to various self-help books. There seems to be something for everyone. There is a new book out called—would you believe this—*The Woman's Guide to Enlightenment Through Shopping*. Then I ran across a spirituality web site entitled "The Science of Thinking Yourself Rich," which suggested a three step process for solving your debt problems forever. It was signed by "Your prosperity consciousness coach, Darel."

What is it, and how can I get some? Trouble is, spiritual depth can't be ordered, or bought, or manipulated, or conjured up. It has to be invited, and it has to be invited from the place of our deepest longing. Furthermore, the invitation has got to be open-ended—we don't know what we're inviting, we don't know what we'll catch on the other end of our fishing line.

So what does it mean to explore the spiritual dimension of our lives, to develop spiritually? For many people, the word "spiritual" suggests something exotic or paranormal, something on the fringe, something a little woo-woo. It may be intriguing, kind of like Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster or weeping statues of the Virgin Mary, but not anything to be taken too seriously.

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Far from being something esoteric and otherworldly, spirituality is the very ground we come from, the “ground of our being,” as theologian Paul Tillich called it. Spirituality is not something optional. It is not some pious choice that women and soft men and priests and holy people make. Spirituality is the essence of what we are as human beings. We may ignore it, but we cannot escape it. Spirituality is not something aside and apart, not something we do for an hour on Sunday. It is not about reading devotional texts, or fasting, or traveling to some holy site or sitting at the feet of a revered teacher. We may do all these things, and they may help us along the way. But spirituality is much more basic than that. Spirituality has to do with your integrity, meaning integration of your values and your living. Spirituality has to do with right relationship, with others and with the earth. It has to do with living in thankfulness.

Spirituality has little to do with theology— my younger son-Madison thinks he pushes my buttons by saying he is an atheist. I really don't care. What I want to know is, how does my son treat the young women he dates? Does he love them and leave them — or does he treat them with respect? He is working as a public defender for the Federal Government, How much does he care about his clients — those accused of crimes, but who are too poor to afford a lawyer to represent them in court? The dregs of society, some would say — do they matter? Does he care? That's what's important. That's what his spirituality is about. As far as this atheist thing goes, I just tell him, "Of course, God is real, Madison. And God loves you. He's just not ready to make a commitment."

Ronald Rolheiser, author of a book called *The Holy Longing*,<sup>1</sup> says that our spirituality is what shapes our actions. Do we act in ways that leave us healthy or unhealthy, loving or bitter? The "longing" referred to in the title of the book is the erotic drive, the life force, in all of us. Everyone lives with desire, with life energy, that reaches out for fulfillment. We have physical energy; we have intellectual energy, creative energy, emotional energy, sexual energy. It is how we handle that energy that determines our spirituality, says Rolheiser. Where is that passion focused, how is it used? Our life energy can be dissipated. It can be spread too thin. Worst of all, it can be used destructively, to harm instead of to heal. How do we know if we are using our energy well, if we are spiritually integrated? We look at the fruits of our living. We look at what we touch. Does it grow? Does it flourish?

The opposite of being spiritual is not being a non-believer— the opposite of being spiritual is being dead to life—not wanting anything, not hoping anything, not enduring anything, just distracting ourselves in order to get through the day. We all go through times like this, of course. We all have our demons. This is suffering of the spirit.

Here is the secret, though—there is always something there to pull us back to life, back to this desire, this fire that bums within, no matter how damped down it may seem at times. This is the Divine spark that exists in each of us. And which may be rekindled by a touch, a kind word, a memory, and we come alive once again. The Norwegians have a lovely legend that each soul is kissed by God before being assigned to a living body and all during life, the individual retains this dark but very powerful memory of that kiss, and that every experience in that person's life is subconsciously measured by that remembered kiss. I think that it is so. There is some goodness that pulls at us that will not let us go.

What are the particular problems that Unitarian Universalists have with accessing the life energy, the passion, I've been speaking of? ...*Relinquishment* is a difficult word for us—relinquishment: "let go and let God," say those who attend Alcoholics Anonymous. "Oh, how trite, oh how simplistic!" many of us would say. "We have to make our own way in this world, using our wits, taking action." Oh, yes, that's true. And then somewhere along the way, we run into the proverbial brick wall. And we're fresh out of action, done with ideas, desperate, maybe, to change our ways. Then, then, we can say, "It's out of my hands. I'm given over." And only then can that holy desire join with its source and bring our longing to fruition.

Then there is the Unitarian Universalist desire to find the answer, to know the truth. To read books, to go to lectures by-learned people. To reduce Mystery to scientific rubble. Certainty is a distraction from things of the spirit, which dwell in paradox and irony. Many of us are philosophically inclined, and such a person is wont to ask, "What should I believe?" or "What is truth?" But the question of the spiritually inclined person is rather, "How-can I *experience* Spirit, how can I *become* Truth?" Certainty closes spiritual avenues. Not knowing invites the Mystery.

The poet Rilke advises, "Be patient to all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not seek the answers,

which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. Resolve to be always beginning—to be a beginner."

Let me tell you a story from the Buddhist tradition. "There was once a woman who was arrogant and proud. She decided she wanted to attain enlightenment, so she asked various spiritual advisors how to do that. One said, 'Well, if you climb to the top of this very high mountain, you'll find a cave there. Sitting inside that cave is a very wise old woman, and she will tell you. So this woman thought, 'Good, I'll do that. Nothing but the best.' Enduring great hardships, she finally found the cave, and sure enough, sitting there was this very gentle, spiritual-looking old woman in white garments, who smiled at her. Overcome with awe and respect, she prostrated herself at the feet of this woman and said, 'I want to attain enlightenment. Show me how.' The wise woman looked at her, smiling her beatific smile, and asked, 'Are you sure you want to attain enlightenment?' And the woman said, 'Of course, I'm sure.' Whereupon the smiling woman turned into a demon, stood up brandishing a big stick, and started chasing her, saying, 'Now! Now! Now!' For the rest of her life, that lady could never get away from the demon who was always saying, 'Now!'"<sup>2</sup>

So you want enlightenment? Are you sure? That's always the question. Because you see we don't know where we will be taken by the Spirit. We do know one thing—we will come to new life, to greater compassion, a greater ability to love. We'll be led to greater integration of person. Well, all that sounds good, you say. And you answer, along with the woman in the Buddhist story, "Of course, I want enlightenment." And then your demons arrive and begin chasing you. The demon of jealousy. Of lust. Of hatred. Of bitterness of heart. Of unwillingness to forgive. Oh, you mean, I have to face these demons? Oh, yes, I'm afraid we do.

Notice also that the spiritual teacher kept chanting, "Now! Now! Now!" The irony is that in order to be enlightened, the searcher did not have to go through great ordeals, climbing up to the top of a high mountain, to get to a holy woman in a cave. She was told, "Now! Just be present in the moment." So simple. Chop wood, carry water.

Let me tell you another story. This is a true story, and it happened just a couple of days ago to someone in our congregation—it happened to Lynne Bacon, who told me I could share it with you. This last Tuesday Lynne's husband Warren was preparing to go to the hospital for surgery for prostate cancer when the phone rang. Lynne could tell with her Caller ID that it was an 800#—probably a solicitor. But for some reason, she answered anyway. There was a pause, and then an unfamiliar woman's voice asked, "May I speak to Warren Bacon." Lynne told the woman that Warren was unable to come to the phone, *and then the caller* asked, "Well, when could be a good time to call him?" Lynne was beginning to get irritated. "Well, I can't really say," she answered. "He's going into the hospital tomorrow for cancer surgery and he's prepping for it right now and I can't say when he might be available."

There was silence for a few seconds. Then the woman said, "How are you?" Lynne, surprised at this question, turned silent herself. And then she realized that the woman was ministering to her.

"Thank you for asking," said Lynne. "I'm doing pretty well."

"Are you really?" she asked. "That's so awful. Both my Daddy and my sister died of cancer."

"I'm so sorry," Lynne said.

The caller sighed. "Yes, my sister died ten days before my birthday, about a year ago."

"That's so hard to lose a sister," Lynne said, and the caller agreed that it was.

"I'm going to be praying for you tomorrow," she said. "I called for a totally different reason, but I'm just going to let that go. I hope everything goes well for you tomorrow." Lynne thanked her, and they said their goodbyes.

After Lynne hung up she realized that she didn't know who the caller was or who she represented, or even where she was calling from. All day Wednesday as she waited for Warren to come out of the long operation, Lynne wondered if indeed there was a woman somewhere in this big old country of ours who was praying for a man and his wife whom she didn't even know. She thought that, yes, there was, and it was a great comfort. All through those long hours at the hospital, when Lynne didn't know how serious Warren's cancer might be, when she was just waiting and waiting, she had this strange feeling that maybe, just maybe, she had been touched by an angel.

Two women, able to be in the *now* with each other, each comforting the other. Two human beings joined by the compassion that is born of loss. The human spirit breaking through distance and commercial concerns and the constraint of roles, breaking through from one stranger to another, because hearts were open. This is spirituality. The invitation comes in the everyday, in the commonplace. Who would have thought? From a telephone solicitor. No mountain top necessary, just a willingness to be present.

What is spirituality? It is simply seeking God, seeking the Mystery. All such seeking awakens us to the part of us that cannot be touched by birth or by death, that is timeless, that shows us we are part of a Great Unity from whence we came and to whence we shall return. It takes our fear and gives us courage of living; it takes our grasping and turns it into giving. It enables us to stoke the fire within and to let it burn keenly, focused and bright, in love and in service. So be it. Amen.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Doubleday, 1999. Many of the concepts I have used in defining spirituality have been greatly influenced by Rolheiser's exceptionally fine first chapter, "What is Spirituality?"

<sup>2</sup> Told by Perna Chodron in *The Wisdom of No Escape*, Boston: Shavnbhala, 1991, p. 29.

### **Excerpts from *Free Association* By Jan Carlsson-Bull**

Why are we here? Why are you here? Our reasons are...myriad..., as deep as our hearts' yearning, as amazing as each of you who bring to this morning the gift of your presence and participation....

Some of you know that I first entered a Unitarian Universalist church at the invitation of my brother and sister-in-law. My young daughters and I had found refuge with them after fleeing a chaotic home front. I had already graduated from seminary. I was midpoint in a doctoral program. Spiritually I was on a suspension bridge. On the other side was the Mainline Unitarian Church of Devon, Pennsylvania. I entered and knew I had come home. This was where I belonged—not just in this church, but in this faith that I discovered as Unitarian Universalism. I had come home to what I had long sought and didn't know existed. Even though I had graduated from seminary in a city vibrant with Unitarian Universalism, it was unknown to me until I entered this church just outside of Philadelphia. I was hooked for life, and one of the great joys of my life 29 years later is to stand before you as your minister, your Unitarian Universalist minister.

Yet another great joy of my life is to hear your stories, how you came to this church and this faith. As I listen to your stories, sometimes in the form of chalice reflections from this pulpit, it becomes more and more evident how many pathways there are to these doors that open before us, often because someone simply invited us to be here. Each story of arrival qualifies as a full-blown adventure story. And why not? As Unitarian Universalists, we're adventurers, explorers, free spirits all. Now this occasionally makes it tough for us to be in community, so resolute are we in finding our own path and walking it our way. We're known, for example, for our lengthy courtships that mark the time between our first exposure to this faith and the date our signature hits a membership book.

How many of us this morning are hedging our bets on commitment to this faith, to this church? We wonder and ask, often in silence, "What will it mean? Will I be scooped up irretrievably?" How understandable it is to ask these questions; yet we make our commitments freely. Ours is a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Dogma, doctrine, and oppression of any kind don't fly well in this faith of the free.

Is it any surprise that it took a hundred years of conversations and conferences, all running late no doubt, for the American Unitarian Association, founded in 1825, and the Universalist Church of America, founded in 1793, to tie the knot and form our Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961? I'm not suggesting that any of you wait that long!

Even when we did get it together, we as individual Unitarian Universalists and as singular Unitarian Universalist congregations are inclined to be wary of "the UUA," the Unitarian Universalist Association, as if it's not us. We harbor this tendency to regard the five-story building at 25 Beacon as if it had also five formidable sides, the spitting image of another five-sided structure in our nation's capital. It doesn't. It contains

rather a spare staff of folks whose job it is to serve our Association, which is us and which they do! We're all in it together, and it's some kind of amazing grace that this is still so after 46 years of marriage as our Unitarian Universalist Association.

Give me an authoritarian hierarchy any day if what we're after are rules from on high, differences settled exclusively by leadership, and dogmas far easier to spit out than the stuff of liberally religious imagination and practice. As is the case with every aspiring democracy, ours is muddy. As is the case with any individual or any institution bent on honoring life's ambiguities, ours is a trip not for the faint of heart. As is the case with an extended family of far-flung congregations variable in the practices of worship and more, ours is a constant challenge to communicate a religious core. We are a motley crew of some who have grown from birth with this faith and most who have come through these doors as what I call "religious mutts!"

My opinion is that we need all the Association we can get to work it all out. We need one another. Lest some think that "the almighty UUA" is telling us what to do and calling way too many shots over what we out here in congregation-land know best, I ask: "Where would we be without our Unitarian Universalist Association? What would we miss?"

- ⊕ The chalice – We would miss our flaming chalice that comes to us through the courage and artistry of Hans Deutsch. It was 1940. Deutsch was an Austrian cartoonist who had used his talent to poke fun at Hitler. His life was threatened, and he fled to Portugal. There he met Reverend Charles Joy, who headed the then Unitarian Service Committee. Deutsch joined this upstart organization whose members risked their lives to save hundreds of Jewish lives from the horrors of Nazi oppression. Joy asked him to design a logo that would offer instant recognition to other Service Committee members during those perilous times. The flaming chalice was the result. The chalices that burn on altars and amid gatherings of Unitarian Universalists worldwide carry that early courage and the recognition of who we are as a body of faith and practice. How we would miss our flaming chalice!
- ⊕ OWL – From a flaming chalice we turn to a wise bird, actually an acronym for Our Whole Lives. OWL is a series of curricula that span kindergarten through adulthood and address whole and healthy relationships with a focus on healthy sexuality as we grow and change. This afternoon, several of our teens will gather at First Parish Old Ship in Hingham for their next session of OWL. Through our UUA, our adult facilitators are trained to lead these sessions, grounded in the written materials and videos that have been carefully field tested. As parents and children and supportive others, we're the beneficiaries of the wisdom of OWL. We're the beneficiaries likewise of so many other curricula through which our children and we as adults learn the values of deep caring, justice making, and interfaith exploration and the joys of religious imagination as we're encouraged to ask more readily than we answer. How we would miss OWL and the wisdom that rises from the vibrant curricula that we access through our Association!
- ⊕ Think Green. Think Green Sanctuary, and a meeting that will commence at 11:15 this morning, as our own congregation turns to the guidelines of this program that honors our earth home. It rises from our Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth. Hundreds of our congregations have moved through the workshops and suggested actions to become "Green Sanctuaries." We're taking steps to do that here and to realize what it means to honor our earth and revere all life. It was Albert Schweitzer, a member of our Church of the Larger Fellowship, who formulated the philosophy of reverence for life that underlies our principle of "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." It turns us green! And today it calls our 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> graders out of their Parish House classrooms into the classroom of the Brewster Woods. They're out there this morning with their teachers, tending what they began a few years ago as "keepers of the earth." We are a part of all life, not apart from it. In religious community, we honor that greater Association of all living things.
- ⊕ "We laugh we cry, we live, we die; we dance, we sing our song." Well, we sing most of them as we find them in our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* or in the new *Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition*. Both come to us through our Unitarian Universalist Association and hold the vibrancy of hymns familiar and melodies that challenge our comfort with the familiar. From "Spirit of Life" to that mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian peace carol, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," from the riveting verses of

“We are a gentle, angry people,” to the lilting lyricism of “Blue Boat Home,” we sing a tradition that lives. And when we falter, we learn.

We are in association, free association that lives and breathes through us. Sometimes I can’t imagine that we’re not out there vigorously inviting all our un-churched friends to join us, so riveting and transforming is this faith that can only be stronger and deeper through an association that is stronger and deeper.

Yes, I’m enthusiastic about this faith, but I can’t say that we’re divinely inspired, lest I invoke that precarious claim that “God is on our side,” and I don’t believe God takes sides. The God in whom I believe is the God of many names, the God of inclusion, who transcends our wonder and nudges along the reluctant love in our hearts. The God in whom I believe is “That Which Holds All,” in the words of Nancy Shaffer. From “Holy One” to “Spirit of Life” to “God of Sarah” to my favorite, “One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion,” this is one amazing spark! And if you say you don’t believe in any of these, that’s okay, because holy sparks ignite all of us if we stretch the limbs of our souls in a search for meaning and a stance of wonder and an inclusive embrace that puts the whole world in the hands of a Great Whoever, Whatever. Ours is the freedom of will to ask tough questions and beware of pat answers. We need each other to lend humility and perspective to this daunting prospect.

So much, so much there is that we would miss in the confines of our solitary parish, precious as it is in our lives. So much, so much there is that we would miss without the companionship and camaraderie and cross-fertilization of ideas and practices that we tap through the endless conduits made possible by being in Association.

We are, in sickness and health, in sorrow and in joy, in suffering and in celebration, in war and in peace, in association with one another. From congregation to congregation, we can grow and thrive through the living tradition embodied by these connections.

I treasure every member and friend of this amazing extended family that is you and all with whom I connect through our Unitarian Universalist Association. I celebrate it. I live for it! I love this faith! And I call upon all of us to support it, so that we might thrive in this connectedness that can only be sustained with our support.

In free association and in the spirit of life and love, may we care so deeply and act so generously that the cup of our faith will brim with promise and the flame of our chalice will burn for centuries to come.

### **Association Sunday**

**By Don Rollins**

The Unitarian Universalist Board of Trustees; The Commission on Social Witness; The Pacific Northwest District; The General Assembly Planning Committee; The Annual Program Fund; The Committee on Socially Responsible Investing.

Question: What do you think of when I say the words Unitarian Universalist Association? Straight up, now, what’s the first thing that comes to mind? (*Invite responses*)

For all the nooks and crannies of the UUA that I know at least something about, when that question is asked my mind still flashes back to a co-ed softball league circa spring, 1986. I’m chasing down a high fly ball in left-center. I lay out as the ball descends a few feet beyond my standing reach, somehow snaring the ball before it touches the green Central Ohio grass. It was the third out of the fifth inning. I had bailed out our best pitcher from a bases-loaded jam, evoking banshee war whoops from my otherwise suburban-bound, weekend-warrior, BMW-driving teammates.

Collecting myself, then jogging toward the dugout, I heard an opposing player ask her third base coach, “Who *are* these people?” Came the reply, “I don’t know. Their shirts say “Uno’s”, I think...you know, the pizza chain. I’m pretty sure that’s their sponsor”.

In reality, the team was made up of some members and staff of First Unitarian Universalist Church, Columbus, Ohio. Our T-shirts read: “FUUCO”. It was neither the first nor the last time someone was left scratching a puzzled head over the religious denomination that is alternately confused with the Moonies, New Agers, store-fronters and Unity Church. Fact is, Unitarian Universalism has a public relations problem second only to Jesus himself! So, who *are* these people?

The Accessibilities Committee; The Fund for Unitarian Universalist Social Responsibility; The Panel on Theological Education; The Ministerial Fellowship Committee; The Religious Education Credentialing Committee.

Last Sunday, October 14, thousands of Unitarian Universalists, in hundreds of UU congregations joined in a fundraising effort called “Association Sunday”. But the goal was not to raise money for operating expenses; rather, it was to establish a fund for *national* marketing and growth outreach projects. It was the first of four annual Association Sundays devoted to four themes:

- Growth in spirit
- Growth in diversity
- Growth in witness
- Growth in leadership

So if the big shindig was *last* Sunday, how’s come we’re just getting around to it? I could make a series of jokes, beginning with, “Because we’re so far back in the sticks that we don’t get Saturday night ‘til Sunday morning!”, but I’m going to spare you those for now. (The honest truth is that the second Sunday of each month is scheduled as a lay-led service, and I wanted to lead this service myself; I’m one of those ministers who actually *enjoy* talking about the UUA.) And so it is that we’re holding our Association Sunday today.

The Unitarian Universalist-United Nations Office; The Office of International Relations; The Prairie Star District; The Holdeen India Program; The Washington Office for Advocacy; The Office of Ethics and Safety in Congregational Life.

It’s one thing to hear folks outside our ranks try to figure out the who, what and when of the UUA, but it’s flat-out distressing to recognize how few *within* our congregations understand it. And while shaking you loose from some of your money is the primary goal of Association Sunday, education finishes a close second. We may not be raising money for the general fund, but neither are we calling this “Growth Sunday” or “Evangelism Sunday”; there’s an Association behind *Association* Sunday. So, who *is* the Association?

The Office of Growth Services; The Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian & Transgender Concerns; The Office of Racial and Ethnic Concerns; The Curriculum and Resource Development Office; The Youth Office/Young Religious Unitarian Universalists; The Office of Church Staff Finances.

Congregational polity then, by its very nature, means that the relationship among our churches and fellowships is one of *association*; we recognize similar rituals (The Flower Communion, lighting a chalice), share similar resources (our hymnbook, religious education curricula) and are served by ministers and field staff credentialed by, and accountable to, the UUA.

It’s not unusual for a Unitarian Universalist to cite the Seven Principles and Six Sources when asked what makes a UU a UU, but not so fast. Be sure to read the Preamble: We, *the member congregations* of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote... The covenant – the *association* – is between member congregations, not *members*. This is important stuff, folks! Useful and evocative as the Principles may be, they are not binding. They were not intended to be used as criteria for who is and is not a UU. Not when they were drafted, not now.

I beg your pardon if I’ve belabored the point about congregational and, by proxy, *personal* freedom, but there can be no true religious freedom if you and I have to get the theological version of the Good Housekeeping Seal to run our lives and our congregation. Bottom line: free religious denominations require free congregations, and free congregations require free individuals. The Principles and Purposes provide association between congregations, not de facto manifesto for membership within congregations.

The Clara Barton District; The Nominating Committee; The Social Justice Internship Program; The Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministry; The Office of Congregational Fundraising Services; The Office of Lay Leadership Development.

Enough about congregational polity for now, but keep in mind that it’s that style of governance that puts the Association in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Let’s turn to the strategy of mounting the first *national* campaign for UUism since the 1960s, titled simply, “Now is the Time”. This drive for growth did not come from “Boston” (where our headquarters were begun in the early 1800s and remain to this day). After conducting a process to find out what our local churches

and fellowships need from the UUA, the answer is clear: “Help us grow!” And the “Now is the Time” program is our national leadership’s response.

The Office of Professional Development; The Office of General Assembly and Conference Services; The Ohio-Meadville District; The Periodicals Office; The UUA Bookstore; Beacon Press.

In the interest of full disclosure, sometimes the UUA mystifies me with its priorities. We’ve spent the better part of four decades working on our internal racism, sexism and homophobia (with more work to be done). Meanwhile we’ve remained amazingly puzzled as to why working class folks aren’t taken by our music or intellect or latent superiority complex. Go figure.

And I’ve been known to get more than a little riled when I think about our Sixth Principle – the one about a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all – when so few of us seem to be bothered by the fact that our headquarters, for all its history and symbolism, sits on some of the most expensive real estate in North America. Is there a more blatant indictment of classism than that?

But, for all my whining, I’ve been a UU since 1985 and have no plans to jump ship. I figure it this way: I’m a highly imperfect human being connected to other highly imperfect human beings, and, together, we make up this highly imperfect but oh-so-precious Association. By my lights, our denominational leaders have it right when they urge us to go national with our name and message. Thus I’m absolutely shameless in asking you to help get the *Now is the Time* campaign off the drawing board and onto our televisions, radios, periodicals and computers. All of the offices and programs I quoted in this sermon are funded by the UUA’s general funds, but it’s up to rank-and-file folks like us to launch this new program. *Now is the time.*

Author, Sam Keen, used to tell about his regular conversations with his mentor, the writer, teacher and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman. During one such session (and after much philosophizing and single malt Scotch) the topic turned to what it means to be a man. Specifically, what it means to be a *happy* man. I’m paraphrasing, but as he looked over the rim of his glasses, the older man said something like this: “A man just needs to decide two things in order to be happy, Sam: where he wants to go, and who shall go with him.” After a pause, Thurman added, “And woe to any man who gets those decisions out of order.”

Now friends, the various offices and programs I’ve listed in this sermon are funded by the Association’s regular budget. At least for now; overall, our Annual Program Fund dollars and other funding sources cover their costs. But Bill Sinkford, our president, as well as UUA staff and volunteers, have decided where they want our movement to go. This morning you and I have the opportunity to go with them – to join the thousands of our sister and brother UUs who celebrated their Association Sunday a week ago. I say again, *now is the time!*

**An abridged version of the Josephine Gould Discourse for the Annual Assembly of the Saint Lawrence District: *Inherent Worth and Dignity: Speaking Well of our Congregations***  
By Joel Miller

I am deeply grateful for the religion of my childhood: the people of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, Ohio nurtured in me much of what I most cherish about myself and my life. My desire to minister was born from the spiritual nurturing I experienced in that congregation. That nurturing is why I dream of the day when there are least two Unitarian Universalist congregations on every street corner.

The Director of Religious Education lit a chalice during children’s worship. It was 1970, and being a typical 10-year old, I loved symbols, and the chalice especially. I still do. The symbol most of our congregations now use reminds me of all the good things that happened to me at church. But when I was ten, I was shocked to discover that our adults FORBADE lighting a chalice in their worship. I asked my Scientist Sunday School teacher why the adults forbade it. He explained to me that Unitarian Universalists had rejected dogma, so they didn’t need such rituals.

I was 10. I didn’t know what dogma meant. I could not figure out what DOGS had to do with lighting a chalice. My Sunday School teacher explained that dogmas were religious rules. I still didn’t get it -- UUs didn’t have any religious rules, so why was there a rule against lighting a chalice?

The adults who sustained that loving community knew from their own personal experiences how organized religion has a fearsome power. They were afraid of what a symbol can do, what a symbol and the language it represents can be used to do.



When I returned to the church as a young adult with an undergraduate degree, I joined the Worship Committee. The adults still did not light a chalice during worship. I had some leverage as a young adult with deep roots in that church, so I proposed at a meeting of the Worship Committee that we light a chalice as a part of worship.

One committee member, Eric, stared at me for a minute, then in outrage he burst out: “That’s a terrible idea – lighting candles in church... it’s popery!”

“Pot-pourri?” I said, confused. I couldn’t figure out what the funny little scent jars in my mother’s bathrooms had to do with lighting a chalice. “What does a jar of scents...”

“No, no, no!” said Eric. “If we light a Chalice we might as well be Catholic.”

I was still confused. “Catholic?” I asked. “I didn’t know Catholics lit chalices.” As I tried to make sense of the connection between UU’s lighting a chalice and the Catholic Church, the rest of the Committee began to giggle. They were seeing how bizarre the conversation seemed to me -- a product of their own RE programming. They took a big breath and decided to allow me to light a chalice on a trial basis.

It was a difficult “yes” for them, a people I very much loved and still love and still cherish. Their “yes” was not for themselves at that time. Their “yes” was to me. It took me many years to understand that to light a chalice in our worship was, for me, a way to say to them what no words could truly explain. I am thankful for how this congregation still sings in my soul every day and every time I light a chalice.

Not all language is spoken – some language is expressed through the way we position our bodies, some language is expressed in ritual -- like our ritual of lighting a chalice. Language conveys meaning, and meaning is the heart of our Living Tradition – we human animals require meaning, we see meaning in our actions and shape meaning in our words.

But as much as we Unitarian Universalist love words and wordiness, it was the meaning beyond the words that fed my spirit and shaped my faith. My response to that gift of meaning and community was gratitude – a desire to live my life as an affirmation in reply to what I received from my religious community. This spirituality of receiving and giving in return became its own cycle of life, and soon a couple of the church’s well-respected elder women suggested I might make a good minister. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I wanted more of what I had known, wanted to build more of our communities, to return to a spiritually-starved world the blessings of this Living Tradition. I come from a family of entrepreneurs and business people, so I used my business-skills and the religion I knew and loved and I helped to start two congregations. The first two congregations I served were congregations I helped to start – Mission Peak in California, then Columbine in Colorado.

One... example: A letter came to me as a Chalice-Lighter here in the Saint Lawrence District a few weeks ago. The letter came from the Saint Lawrence Growth Committee, and I was shocked just by the first sentence: “The SLD Growth Committee at its recent meeting discussed the concerns expressed by nine people about our last two Chalice Lighter grants being given to congregations that are large or mid-size.” The letter later explains that some of those who wrote in protesting the grants believe that larger churches should not be supported by Chalice Lighter grants.

I can’t find any logic in the reasons for refusing Chalice Lighter grants to large and midsize congregations. The most common reason I have heard personally and the reason the Growth Committee received as the reason to refuse grants is that larger congregations have more people and more success at raising money, thus larger congregations don’t need chalice-lighter grants. But the logic of this argument is, on the face of it, nonsense. The argument appears to be this: If a congregation is successful, it doesn’t need our support. Implied in this argument I find a belief that it should be “less successful” congregations that we support with grants.

The letter from Saint Lawrence District Growth Committee explains a clear and logical criterion for awarding Chalice-lighter grants: “Readiness for growth and its attendant change....” Success, as judged for awarding a Chalice Lighter grant, is described simply in the committee’s letter: Success is a good chance that the grant will help us serve more Unitarian Universalists more effectively. This limited and effectively focused criterion is appropriate for a project of a “Growth” Committee. It contains no judgment about a congregation’s style, theology, size, or even its previous success or lack of success as a criterion of awarding the grant. It appears to me that the Saint Lawrence Growth Committee is doing a good job, setting a healthy and fair

standard for awarding Chalice Lighter grants. It's a criterion abiding by a healthy application of the First Principle for congregations, as I see it.

But not all of us see it this way. We are, collectively, clearly upset about something: we are a movement that prides itself on the use of logic and reason... but these concerns about large churches as unworthy or "too successful" appear to me disconnected from reason or logic. And given the conflicted feelings between different sizes of congregations, it's shocking to me that there are no articles discussing it and there are no healthy, intellectually solid dialogues using logic and reason that appear in our theological or associational journals about it; there is no exploring the relationship of large, small, and midsize churches in our Living Tradition. Even among ministers there's no open discussion, but instead I see ministers of different-sized congregations harboring animosity toward one another.

These feelings, for me, say something about a sadness and anger that I experience in our movement. It's a depth of feeling that reminds me of the soul-sapping hostilities that erupted between Unitarian Humanists and Unitarian Christians in the 1930's. We still harbor the hurt and sorrow of those days.<sup>1</sup>

The animosity between our congregations is illogical. But even if I could preach you all senseless with impeccable logic and reason, logic and reason inform me that it wouldn't help: I can't change our thinking with logic and reason. If I tried, I'd just make you feel bad. I say this because this issue of large church versus small church feels to me like a huge emotional disconnect... the emotional content in this conflict between our churches does not feel appropriate to the actual issue. And our conflict is so illogical that I can only conclude our passions have deranged us. To me, our irrational behavior has an unhealthy feeling to it. Our behavior feels to me like the behavior of a deeply troubled member of a church who is resigning in fury because the church dared to paint the kitchen pink instead of green.

Most of us have seen this happen – a member of our congregation who invests an irrational amount of emotional energy in a trivial issue. The psychic truth about a member enraged about pink paint is, I suspect, also true for our movement: the issue isn't really the issue. If it were, someone else would already have written a beautifully-reasoned argument for or against a policy of supporting growth in large congregations. But no one has tried: it's like trying to argue the resigning member out of his rage about the pink paint – we could paint the kitchen green for him, but it really won't help anything: the green paint isn't why the member is enraged.

And I don't think that the different sizes of our congregations really matters, either. Our over-blown conflict over the size of congregations reveals something deeper about us.

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I've been giving extra attention to my spiritual practice this past year. I identify as a Unitarian Universalist, with two primary subsets of Theism and Humanism. So, using science and reason to get myself off to a good start, the most logical start I could think of was speaking to myself and to others in affirmation. The first word of my spiritual practice is gratitude.

...I propose to you that our First Principle, the principle that calls us to affirm an "inherent worth and dignity of every person" has a deficit: the principle must include more than us individuals. An affirmation of worth and dignity should apply to congregations. It should even apply to our Living Tradition, too.

But the extension of our principles is not enough. We are missing something even more essential than a principle. We don't even have a way to talk to each other in affirmation. We are possessed by the limitations of our present language and its spirit of loss and deficit. Deficit and deficiency is inherent in the religious language we speak. Speaking about one another and speaking about our congregations out of something as basic as gratitude is not easy for us.

We talk a lot about our First Principle – but in my experience we use it less as an affirmation and more like a bludgeon for our individual goals. Our language of deficit spins us into unending empty conflicts. If we want to shape the future of this world by our principles, we need a compelling way to describe it. As two scholars whose work is meant to affirm worth and dignity explain, "the theories we hold [and] our beliefs about social systems, have a powerful effect on the nature of social 'reality.' Not only do we see what we believe, but the very act of believing creates" what we believe in.<sup>ii</sup> The very act of speaking shapes what we see.

It is in search of good religious practices that we need that Language of Reverence; we must nurture among ourselves a way of speaking in affirmation of each other, of our congregations, and of our faith. And

there is a well-tested and practiced method of speaking and action just waiting for us: it's the process of Appreciative Inquiry.

This is a description of Appreciative Inquiry from an article by two of its scholar/practitioners:

Appreciative inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, the organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. [It] involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capability... [asking] an "unconditional positive question..." In Appreciative Inquiry, intervention gives way to imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis there is discovery, dream and design. Appreciative Inquiry assumes that every living system has untapped, rich, and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link this "positive change core" directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.<sup>iii</sup>

So in Appreciative Inquiry, the questions we have to ask one another require reverence. The conversations we need between our congregations sound like this: "What is going well for you?" "When do you feel gratitude for your congregation?" And "How can your congregation do that good work more often and for more people?" The language of loss and deficit sounds like this: "Why is it bad to support congregation 'X?'"

I am not an expert in Appreciative Inquiry, but I know we need it. And we need one another – more than words can say. I urge us to practice our faith more fully; to extend our principles in affirmation of our congregations as well as ourselves, and I urge us to use a well-tested and proven method as we put our faith into life-affirming action.

I'm being thankful lately, but very little in my life has changed at the same time. My experience is utterly different because of how I think and speak about the world around me: I've been practicing gratitude, and it's this spiritual practice that is changing how I feel and how I think. My life is filled with blessings: my family is healthy and lives a life filled with learning and meaningful work; I serve a historic church filled with activity and a longing for justice; I am here, with you, part of a small movement that continues to have a profoundly good effect on the world.

The world needs this faith nurtured in our congregations and our Living Tradition. Our congregations and this shared faith of ours, if they will thrive, must express this faith in emotionally healthy terms and words. Anything less is simply unreasonable and irrational.

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to Rev. Scott Tayler for this insight.

<sup>ii</sup> Lancaster, Cynthia M; Egan, Toby Marshall, [Comparing Appreciative Inquiry to Action Research: OD Practitioner Perspectives](#) from the *Organization Development Journal*, July 1, 2005

<sup>iii</sup> Lancaster, Cynthia M; Egan, Toby Marshall, [Comparing Appreciative Inquiry to Action Research: OD Practitioner Perspectives](#) from the *Organization Development Journal*, July 1, 2005

### **The Heart of Our Faith:**

#### **Gratitude Should be the Center of Unitarian Universalist Theology**

By Galen Guengerich at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/11144.shtml>

#### **Dancing into the Heart of God (With Poetry from Rumi)**

By Amy Zucker Morgenstern at [http://www.uucpa.org/sermons\\_05/sermon050417.html](http://www.uucpa.org/sermons_05/sermon050417.html)

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## **The Roots Of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism** by Barry Andrews

It is my impression that most Unitarian Universalists feel that their religious heritage, in spite of all its excellent qualities -- a rational approach to religion, an openness toward other religious faiths, a commitment to liberal values and social change -- is nevertheless not a particularly spiritual one. At the same time, it seems to me, ever-increasing numbers of Unitarian Universalists have expressed a desire for more spiritual depth in their lives and their churches. Accordingly, these people -- ministers and laity alike -- have gone to other religious traditions in search of spirituality: Zen Buddhism, Creation Spirituality, Taoism, goddess religion, paganism and Native American religions, to name only a few.

This phenomenon suggests three things to me. First of all, it is a testimonial to the inclusiveness of our own religious tradition. It affirms that part of our "Statement of Principles and Purposes" which speaks of drawing "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our...spiritual life." Secondly, both the impulse and the encouragement to draw spiritual inspiration from these traditions is historically an outgrowth of the religious movement I will be describing in this paper; namely, Transcendentalism. But -- and this is my third point -- this is done largely in ignorance of the fact that there exists a uniquely and authentically Unitarian Universalist spirituality. As Unitarian Universalist scholar David Robinson expressed it in the 1989 Henry Whitney Bellows lecture, "Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relatives whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, standing upon the richest theological legacy of any American denomination. Possessed of a deep and sustaining history of spiritual achievement and philosophical speculation, religious liberals have been, ironically, dispossessed of that heritage."

Robinson argues in another lecture that Unitarian Universalists today suffer from a disturbing malaise. On one hand, we are "troubled by a sense of the vagueness of our religious identity and hold an uneasy conception of ourselves as marginal perhaps among the established American denominations." On the other hand, he observes that Unitarian Universalists, like many other Americans, are looking for a greater sense of spirituality in their lives (and churches). In Robinson's words, this spirituality is a "feeling or hunger for a deeper inner life and a more profound experience of the world that we share. We're haunted by the spectre of our own superficiality, the uneasy feeling that life is sliding by and leaving no deep mark on us, that we're being cheated of some version of real experience that would add marrow to the dry bones of our daily routine. We've found ways of dealing with this hunger, of masking it, but we've found it has a curious persistence." Both of these conditions are linked in Robinson's mind with a collective amnesia or ignorance concerning our own very rich and compelling spiritual heritage.

The heritage of which Robinson speaks is, of course, that of American Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalists were a group of men and women, most of whom lived in New England during the first half of the 19th century and pursued vocations as writers, ministers, educators, and reformers. The nucleus of the group were members of an informal "club" that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Peabody, James Freeman Clarke, Frederick Henry Hedge, George Ripley, William Henry Channing, and a number of others. In spite of the diversity of interests represented in the group, almost all of them were Unitarians and most were ministers or former ministers. According to one count, of 26 who were closely associated with the group, 17 were Unitarian ministers -- all but four, that is, of the men. This was no coincidence, since the movement -- in spite of all its literary, philosophical, and political dimensions -- was essentially a religious one, an outgrowth of early 19th century Unitarianism.

In many respects, Transcendentalism was a generational revolt from Unitarianism, which itself had split off from Calvinism only a generation before. The liberals had broken with the Calvinists on largely rational grounds. And now the Transcendentalists were protesting a lack of religious feeling and enthusiasm among the Unitarians because of an exaggerated rationalism. As Theodore Parker expressed it, "I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling; to all their preaching seemed to relate too much to outward things, not enough to the inward pious life... Most powerfully preaching to the Understanding, the Conscience, and the Will, the cry was ever, 'Duty, Duty! Work, Work!' They failed to address with equal power

the Soul, and did not also shout, 'Joy, Joy! Delight, Delight!'" "Pale negations," "corpse-cold," "lifeless," added Emerson to a growing chorus of complaints among the Transcendentalist Unitarians.

Dissatisfaction with Unitarianism's lack of piety was part of a larger concern, however. The Transcendentalists rejected everything formalistic, authoritarian, or doctrinaire in religion, as well, preferring a first-hand experience of reality and the divine unmediated by church or clergy. As Emerson declared in the opening sentences of his Transcendentalist manifesto, *Nature*, "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight of not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?"

In spite of their disagreements with conservative Unitarians on these and other points, the Transcendentalists also inherited and built upon much of what "orthodox" Unitarianism had to offer. One key concept linking both generations of Unitarians was that of self-culture. Self-culture was an outgrowth of the liberal views of human nature that characterized the Unitarianism's parting of ways with Calvinism. More important, really, than their disavowal of the Trinity was the Unitarians' belief in the ability of human beings to contribute to their own salvation. Their essential optimism about human nature led them to believe that they could achieve salvation by living exemplary moral lives. However, this required an ongoing process of regeneration and the building up of moral character.

Articulated most eloquently by William Ellery Channing, the notion of self-culture held that the goal of the religious life was the culture or cultivation of one's inner spiritual nature. As Channing described it in his address on "self-culture," "To cultivate any thing, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make grow. Growth, expansion is the end. Nothing admits culture but that which has a principle of life, capable of being expanded. He, therefore, who does what he can to unfold all his powers of capacities, especially his nobler ones, so as to become a well-proportioned, vigorous, excellent, happy being, practices self-culture." Quite apart from the way the word is understood today, culture in Channing's time still had primarily horticultural associations, in keeping with an agrarian economy and outlook. And, in contrast to the more narrowly psychological concept of the self we have now, self was then essentially equated with one's spirit or soul. Very simply, self-culture mean spiritual growth.

Self-culture introduced a developmental or progressive view of the spiritual life, replacing the notion of conversion as a single, decisive event with that of religious growth as an ongoing process. However, just as the potential for spiritual growth is limitless, a correspondingly endless self-discipline is necessary to achieve it. Moreover, this self-discipline required that inward spiritual aspirations be manifested in outward ethical behavior. In other words, introspection was necessarily wedded to social action.

It was Channing's emphasis on the spiritual capacity of the soul and the necessity of cultivating the germ of divinity within each individual that had tremendous appeal to the Transcendentalists. Virtually all of them were engaged in one way or another with the pursuit of self-culture, and it accounted for everything from methods of spiritual discipline, to experiments with alternate lifestyles and efforts at social and religious reform. As Margaret Fuller noted in her *Memoirs*, "Very early I knew that the only object in life was to grow. I was often false to this knowledge, in idolatries of particular objects, or impatient longings for happiness, but I have never lost sight of it, have always been controlled by it, and this first gift of love has never been superseded by a later love." Bronson Alcott published a treatise on "The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture," in which he wrote: "Human Culture is the art of revealing to a Man the true Idea of his Being -- his endowments -- his possessions -- and of fitting him to use them for the growth, renewal, and perfection of his Spirit. It is the art of completing a man. It includes all those influences, and disciplines, by which his faculties are unfolded and perfected ... It seeks to realize in the Soul of the Image of the Creator -- Its end is a perfect man. Its aim, through every stage of influence and discipline, is self-renewal."

...spiritual disciplines -- excursions in nature, contemplation, reading, journal writing and conversations -- represented the means of cultivating the self or soul. But, in keeping with the doctrine of self-culture, these means were never ends in themselves. The Transcendentalists believed that spirituality required an outward manifestation of inward aspirations. In other words, the moral and the spiritual are necessarily interrelated. Accordingly, the Transcendentalists sought to achieve congruence between spiritual insights and ethical actions

in all areas of their lives. This was most notable in their experiments in simple living and their involvements in social and religious reforms.

...the Transcendentalists were singly and as a group more active in social and political reforms than their Unitarian opponents and critics. The ethical consequences of their Transcendentalist ideals impelled them into a wide variety of causes and reforms: the educational reforms of Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; the Christian socialism of William Henry Channing; Margaret Fuller's feminism and involvement in the Roman Revolution of 1848; Thoreau's civil disobedience; George Ripley's Brook Farm; abolitionism and women's rights. These were not accidents or deviations, but logical consequences of the Transcendentalist social ethic. They were the inevitable outcome of a belief in a common human nature and the desire to integrate spiritual aspirations and moral behavior. Transcendentalism, for all its emphasis on spirituality, led its adherents into the world more often than away from it.

The Transcendentalists have continued to appeal to all those who possess a reverential attitude towards nature, a strong ethical sensibility and a desire to live with greater spiritual intensity and depth.

There is a natural congruence between Unitarian Universalism and Transcendentalism. Indeed, contemporary Unitarian Universalism has been strongly influenced by Transcendentalist views. At the same time, large numbers of men and women, themselves inspired by Emerson and Thoreau, have found religious home in Unitarian Universalist churches, dimly aware, most of them, of the historical connection. There is in our Transcendentalist heritage the source of a uniquely and authentically Unitarian Universalist spirituality. By putting our congregations in touch with this heritage we can offer them at once the possibility of a richer, deeper inner life and a stronger sense of religious identity as Unitarian Universalists.

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Address of this page: <http://www.uua.org/re/other/andrews.html>*

**Excerpts from *The Way Home*  
The Berry Street Essay, 2005 by Burton D. Carley  
Full version at <http://www.uua.org/berrystreet/Essays/BSE2005.htm>**

It...occurs to me that we as a people of faith need a bridging ceremony to get us from here to there, from the places of our wandering in the wilderness, from the various journeys we are on, to arrive at a place called home together. I speak about gathering up the fragments of our scattered being where the hollow places dwell and creating out of the dust of them something whole and come alive with the quickening power of the Spirit that imparts the divine image. I speak about the way of the Spirit that engenders life, and how life is transformation. I speak about the way home and the bridge that takes us there over the valley of the shadows where our hyphenated and separated selves seek a way out, a bridge connecting our past to the future. I want to go home but not to that distant place backward as it used to be. I speak about a new creation that is our salvation, a new creation that brings forward the useable past and secures a future, a place called home. I speak from that hollow place that desires to be filled with something more than me, that only can be fulfilled with we and that connected to a larger reality that is not our own.....

I want to be counted among... [the] people, strangers in a strange land, seeking the way to a home not yet built, faithful to a vision of a better dwelling place, faithful to the power that comes from we know not where that gives us dreams to guide us home, faithful to the power that stirs our imagination to reveal the way home. Clearly such a journey, a journey that does not guarantee one's arrival, is strengthened if one can see the promise of home and greet it from afar. That is our need, to acknowledge that we are exiles and even strangers among ourselves and to take heart, to see the promise of home, to give out our lives to find the way there, to give in to the power that calls us there, and to give up the habits of distraction, abstraction, and preoccupation that keep us from being on our way.

The way home is not easy. We must first give account to how we have become lost along the way....

One symptom of losing our way is that we no longer feel that we are a people in need of grace. W. H. Auden put it perfectly when he wrote:

We would rather be ruined than changed  
 We would rather die in our dread  
 Than climb the cross of the moment  
 And see our illusions die.

We suffer under the illusion of our own self-sufficiency, that our souls can go it alone. We suffer under the illusion that to know us is to love us, and that we are not even God's gift to the world but our own gift to the world.

The way home requires a renewed sense of our dependence, of the shadow side of our inflated goodness, of the "given-ness" of all things we enjoy, the grace of things. This is a hard cross to climb because we are nothing else if not achievers...

It is true for most of us, the attitude that we earn what we have, deserve what we have and some things we don't. That's the problem with achieving a life: it is never quite good enough. Even if we owned everything our hearts desired chances are our hearts would desire something else. I wonder how our congregations might be different if they were places where people came to receive a spiritual life rather than to achieve a spiritual life. I wonder if there is any truth to my thought that stewards understand the grace of things and thus receive a life while consumers calculate earnings and thus achieve a life.

...We need to recover the true meaning of our one doctrine that revelation is not sealed. Its purpose is not to reject out of hand what lies behind us, nor to labor under the dictatorship of relativism..... The spiritual use of our one doctrine is that it calls us to practice humility. The corruption of our faith is clinging to any standard or ideological position which nurtures self-righteousness, a condition that always results in not being in right relationship with others.

The light shines upon the kneeling person who relinquishes the illusion of control and recognizes the need to be in right relationship with others, and how the abundant life is not a solitary and selfish life but is made abundant by the appreciative awareness of the gifts and resources not of one's own making that are a grace and a blessing. The way home is a journey toward that light which is a different light than this little light of mine.

Here is another way we get lost, how we tend to misconstrue or oversimplify the metaphor of the journey. There are all kinds of journeys. There is a journey that is a seeking and there is a journey that is a fleeing. There is a kind of journey that pilgrims go on and a kind of journey that tourists go on. There is a journey that is a homeless meandering and a journey that is a going toward and an arriving. The journey may be for the growing of a soul or for the collecting of new experiences like souvenirs. There is the journey that we are called upon and the journey that is the pleasure of our leisure. There is a journey that is for transformation and a journey for entertainment. There is a journey that causes us to bear witness to what is true and a journey that is an escape from the truth....

Dare I say it? Yes, I will. The journey is not all. The purpose of the journey is to arrive somewhere. Casting the religious life as constant journey is as debilitating to spiritual maturity as is an agoraphobia or fear of leaving home. The fugitive life is an exhausting one. Though it celebrates freedom, it is not truly free. The dynamic of spiritual formation is one that moves between home and journey. Some people need to leave home and take up the journey. Our need as lovers of leaving is to find the way home, to re-imagine what home might be.

I think it is only natural that we can be conflicted about home because that is the result of cutting ourselves off from the religions of our origin. It contributes to our constant wrestling with the theme of our identity, the search for our center, the discussions and struggles in each generation to find a theological consensus that necessarily involves limits. It confounds the strength of the bonds of belonging. When the journey is not to a particular place to be formed by it there is the tendency for the journey to take on the process of wandering. What happens on this wandering is the creation of an individualized faith system that freely borrows symbols and ideas from multiple faith traditions.

The recently elected junior U.S. senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, wrote a memoir in 1995 titled *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. In it he talks about his grandfather Stanley whose "only skirmish into organized religion" was when he took the family to the local Unitarian Universalist

congregation. The grandfather was attracted by the idea that any scriptures from the great religions might be called upon. Stanley would say, "It's like you get five religions in one." In the end Obama's grandfather gave up his new found religion giving in to his wife's protest: "For Christ's sake, Stanley, religion's not supposed to be like buying breakfast cereal!"

I sat next to a man at lunch during the monthly clergy gathering. He was a local radio talk show host. He confessed during our conversation that he had once been a Unitarian. When I asked him why he left he said, "It was like Chinese food. It tasted great but two hours later I was hungry."

Of course there are some of us who have gone deep into other traditions not just as an intellectual excursion but as a disciple who lives daily out of the spiritual insights and discipline of that tradition. But there is another type of journey that is a kind of walk down a cafeteria line sampling this and that. It leads to choosing the juicer and sweeter items that are appealing and leaving behind the more challenging aspects of living a particular kind of spiritual life. Such a journey that is not a pilgrimage is a relatively weak source of identity and religious confidence....

Another difficulty it presents is that the clergy may end up being the host or hostess of the salad bar, the server behind the cafeteria counter. In the end it is demoralizing to be continuously taking orders for lunch, serving customers, rather than living out our call to the ministry. We can catch that terrible and fatal disease: teleological dislocation. Its major symptom is the incapacity to move others beyond self-involvement. It's what happens when we end up being people's spiritual butlers, serving them without calling them to serve....

Central to biblical spirituality and our faith is religious experience. One area of religious experience is the encounter with the Holy. That experience manifests in times of awe, in times of encountering the Mystery that challenges the human ego boundaries. It breaks forth in visions of covenant and grace, and the urge to be in right relationship. It is discovered in expressions of hope, compassion and justice that draw us to stand with others in the struggle for human dignity.

Now this is the question: why don't we want to stay in the presence of the Holy Spirit? Why don't we cry agony when it is absent? Why aren't we doing everything in our power to catch it and keep it, to live in its glory, to be captured by it and to, yes, surrender to it? It is as if we have silenced the voice of the whirlwind and doused the flame of the burning bush, and we no longer can find that compelling voice that requires of us great things, that stirs us beyond ourselves. When we lose the capacity to speak in the metaphoric language of ultimate agency we exhibit a poverty of spirit.

.... If we only function by Robert's Rules of Order instead of a religious vision that calls us out from our ordered ways into the life of the Spirit the way home is lost. Some principles that we can agree on and that pleases us will not get us home. Remaining a dues paying service delivery Association will definitely not get us anywhere near home. Being cultured despisers of religion will lead us to hell not home. Indeed, our congregations should be alternatives to the celebrity worshiping and commodity oriented secular culture. The way home cannot be found if we pretend to be religious but actually don't think and act religiously.

.... We have deconstructed the miracles out of the biblical narratives and yet the human heart still seeks a sense of the miraculous, a sense of eternal possibility that offers hope beyond human cunning. We have shorn superstition away from the body of spiritual wisdom and yet we are in need of linguistic tools for interpreting the deep yearnings and discoveries of our inner lives. Science cannot do this. Psychology cannot do this. Surveys cannot do this. Committees cannot do this. We need symbols and narratives and the ferment of the poetic imagination to talk about the edges of human experience, to speak about the intersection between the temporal and the eternal, to express what is true beyond facts and to point to the Reality beyond the real.

The demystification of religion, the deconstruction of the supernatural, the sheering of the superstitious was a means and not an end. It is like we did an autopsy on a living, breathing thing, and in the process we learned a lot but the result is that something that was alive is now dead. Reductionism kills the spirit. It is like being next to the one you love and your heart going all a-flutter and thinking it is only a function of the brain. It reduces life to a sterile, one dimensional plane, and something worse. It turns people from subjects into objects. The purpose of stripping away the dross, the obsolete, the misconceptions, is not to destroy religion but to recover it, to reform it, to make it useful again for living whole lives.



The function of spiritual language is that it calls us out from ourselves. It invites us to deeper and wider connections. It takes sustaining narratives to inspire us beyond self-involvement..... The real question is about belonging, about how we belong to each other.

One of our greatest needs in order to go home is to be able to articulate our religious story and thus give definition to the theology that holds and blesses our pluralism. We already have stories about leaving home, and finding and choosing this faith. But it seems to me that these stories are only the beginning, the baptism so to speak. Where we are weakest is in telling the rest of the story, the stories about keeping our faith and deepening it.

The home I want to go to that we have yet to build is constructed broadly with a shared sense of mission, vision and ministry that allows us to live our faith together in ways we cannot do alone. This is the essential conversation for us and the people of our congregations, and at all levels of our Association.....

The challenge for us, the way home, is to develop a religious narrative that communicates our deepest convictions on matters of faith, the story that holds our diversity together, and to be more boldly creative in imagining new ways of walking and working together in the life of our Association.



## Closing Words/Extinguishing the Chalice

We are here to nurture our spirit, as we return again to help heal our world, and find some measure of wholeness for ourselves, who are of that world. Song and silence, word and wonder, come, and begin to liberate us, as we say: Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

**Mark Belletini**

Remembering that the universe is so much larger than our ability to comprehend, let us go forth from this time together with the resolve to stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible to our petty expectations; so that wonder, that sense of what is sacred, can open up our minds and light up our lives.

**Majorie Newlin Leaming**

Have you felt the spirit grow inside you? Did it rise up filling you with hope? Did you feel stronger? Are you more committed to this religious community, more committed to freedom, peace, and justice? Has the spirit of life that we experience as love transformed you into a more caring and aware individual? Will you think at least once this week about how you can act out your faith in the inherent worth and dignity of someone? Well then you have been blessed and will be a blessing unto others. Celebrate. Amen.

**Stephan Papa**

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