

**Unitarian Universalist by Association**  
**October 26, 2008**

I'm wondering: As I spoke with the children earlier about the histories and the union of the two faiths, Unitarianism and Universalism, how many of you, along with the children, learned at least one new thing?... Did any of you think to yourselves as you listened, "Hmm, I could use a brushing up on my Unitarian Universalist history"?.... Of course, there's no one right answer to that question. If your answer is no, perhaps you're one of the Unitarian Universalist historians that our congregation needs to help teach the rest of us. If your answer is yes, well, good for you for wanting to learn more. I know that for me, learning about our Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist history serves as a constant reminder of how deep our roots are, and of how varied are our branches.

Now, having said that, I'm not planning to launch into a history lesson this morning. Still, as a small, subtle hint to those who don't see a lot of value in learning about UU history, I would like to at least share with you this opening passage from Warren Ross's book, *The Premise and the Promise*, which we heard Debbie read from earlier. Ross states: "Unitarian Universalists may not believe, with Henry Ford, that history is bunk. But many probably do believe that history is for historians—not a matter that need concern the average member of a local congregation." Ross continues:

We tend to ignore the warning of George Santayana that those who forget their history may be condemned to repeat it, or the admonition of Rebecca Parker (president of Starr King School for the Ministry, our west coast seminary), that there is a shallowness that comes from each generation defining itself, assuming it can ignore whatever came before. Putting it positively, Alice Walker

said, “To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware we did not make ourselves.”

We did not make ourselves. Nor do we *sustain* ourselves to the exclusion of our ancestors. That’s why it’s important to affirm and promote not only the seven principles, but also the many sources from which our living tradition draws, which we read aloud together earlier. Here, in these sources, are our wellsprings. Here is what we can tap into again and again, to remember who we are. Let us not forget.... Or, if you do forget, ask the people at the membership table to order more of these wallet-sized cards where the principles and the sources are all written down; take one, and tape it to your refrigerator, or carry it with you wherever you go!

Speaking of the wallet-sized cards, and the reading we shared earlier, I want to point to that very first line on the card and in the reading—not even the whole sentence, just the first

clause: It says, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association....” Hear that? “We, the member *congregations* of the Unitarian Universalist Association....”

Just as our beloved Wildflower Church is made up, *microcosmically*, of individual members who come together to keep this living tradition alive and vital in South Austin, the Unitarian Universalist Association, *macrocosmically*, is made up of member congregations all across this continent. *I* am not a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association; *you* are not a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. But *we*, as a congregation, are. And just as we ask that all voting members of our congregation make identifiable contributions to Wildflower Church, we are asked, as a congregation, to make identifiable contributions each year to the Unitarian Universalist Association. As a paying member of the UUA, as

it's more commonly referred to, we then get to receive services from the UUA, and send delegates to General Assembly each year to vote on important issues that affect our entire association.

A little side note to make a plug: How many of you have ever attended General Assembly before? In what city was it held when you went?.... I myself have been to General Assembly five times, in five different cities: Boston, Fort Worth, St. Louis, Portland, Oregon, and Fort Lauderdale. Next June 24-29, General Assembly will be held in Salt Lake City, as it was in 1999. I plan on going, and I highly recommend you go, whether as a delegate or not. There will be workshops, panel discussions, plenary sessions, worship services, youth activities, musical performances, lectures, exhibits, and over 4,000 other Unitarian Universalists from around the world for you to meet. Attending General Assembly is one way for you to

actually see what the Unitarian Universalist Association looks like.

Of course, that's a little bit debatable. Some people's minds, when the UUA is mentioned, automatically go to 25 Beacon Street in Boston, where the Unitarian Universalist Association *headquarters* are. But truthfully, that's like thinking that Wildflower Church is located only at 1714 Fortview Drive, where our office is, because that's where the Board meets once a month. Truthfully, our congregation lives in every heart of every person who is a part of this community, and it is only when we congregate on Sunday mornings, as the UUA congregates once a year at General Assembly, that *this* particular place makes up our community.

Still, just as the office on Fortview is vital to our community, so is 25 Beacon Street to the UUA. For there sits the office of the UUA President, currently Rev. William

Sinkford, and there take place the meetings of the UUA Board. That Board consists of the President, the moderator, a financial advisor, four at-large trustees from around the country, a youth trustee at large, and one trustee for each of the twenty districts that make up the UUA.

I know... this isn't a history lesson, but it's sure beginning to sound like UU Governance 101... Hang in there. For the Unitarian Universalist Association serves a purpose that you need to be informed about, as part of this member congregation. That purpose, as Debbie read earlier, "is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions, and implement its principles." In other words, by devoting, quote, "its resources to and exercis[ing] its corporate powers for religious, educational, and humanitarian

purposes,” the UUA works to keep this living tradition alive and well.

And quite honestly, keeping our tradition, and before that, our traditions, alive and well since the early twentieth century hasn't been exceptionally easy. After all, the Unitarians and the Universalists didn't consolidate in 1961 because both movements were independently overflowing with health and prosperity. As Warren Ross writes, “by [the late 1930s], each denomination recognized the rationale and possible benefits of consolidation, but each also understood the cost in unique identity that such a union might bring.” Quoting Unitarian Universalist historian David Robinson, Ross continues, “In the troubled 1930s and during the war... a simple survival was often priority.”

In another passage, Ross notes that Phillip Giles, the last general superintendent of the Universalist Church of America,

“told the delegates to the Universalist General Assembly at one point that if they passed up this opportunity to join forces with the Unitarians they might as well die as a denomination.”

Well, I’m here to tell you as a Unitarian Universalist minister ordained in June 2007, consolidation did happen, and we are indeed alive and kicking. Somehow the grapes and the artichoke—to harken back to the reading Debbie shared earlier—somehow those loosely organized grapes of Universalism and the centralized, many layered artichoke of Unitarianism are creating and sustaining nourishment for this consolidated liberal faith.

Grapes. Artichokes. Those are organizational metaphors. And I’m not too sure how tasty such a combination really is. We do continue to struggle with how centralized our leadership in the UUA should be, and we do struggle with the complexities of congregational polity. But turning to

theological metaphors, the joining of Universalism and Unitarianism was and is, I believe, quite palatably, the joining of the heart and mind. Yes, there are those Unitarians among us who think the Universalist side is still much too “touchy feely.” And there are those of us leaning more toward Universalism who believe that some of us, namely those with Unitarian leanings, are far too stuck in our heads, and far too stuck *up* in our intellect. Still, we continue, Sunday after Sunday, committee meeting after committee meeting, to *associate* with each other. Our hearts and minds continue to associate with other hearts and minds, and we are transformed by what we create together.

So comes the *promise* part of the premise and the promise. The premise was that by uniting our two faiths as one—two faiths that complemented each other enough religiously to move beyond mutual social biases—the premise

was that they could survive *together* amidst economic and social challenges, as well as amidst wealthier, bigger, more mainstream religions in our country. The *promise* lies largely in the quote by Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, printed on the cover of your order of service. It reads, “If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation.”

How do we recognize the interdependence of all life? How do we in turn strive to build community? Or, in Warren Ross’ words at the end of his book, “What *is* the glue that binds us together?” Somewhat ironically, to uphold how Unitarian Universalists are bond to each other as a *living* tradition, Ross examines how we conduct memorial services. He states, and I quote here at some length:

It may well be not anything we do, but what we don’t do.

We don't offer false comfort with promises of reunion in a hereafter. We don't recite rote prayers or follow empty rituals. What we do, instead, is to strive, above all, to be honest—honest about the person we are commemorating, honest about our grief and our sense of loss, honest about our confusion in the face of death, honest about our yearning, in the words of Saul Bellow, “to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose and to seek grace,” without claiming to have a monopoly on the answers.

Ross continues:

And therein may lie the irreducible core that remains, after all the temporal fashions in terminology and practice are stripped away: our adamant refusal to believe—or pretend to believe—anything our reason, our experience, our communal search for truth tells us is not believable.

That last bit, about communal search for truth, I hope rings a bell. It is a reference to our commitment to the fifth principle, sometimes known as the keystone principle of our seven—the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

It was, after all, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning that lead our Universalist forefather Hosea Ballou to reject the notion of divine election, and proclaim universal salvation, thus paving the way for the Universalist faith; and it was after all the free and responsible search for truth and meaning that led William Ellery Channing to reject the notion of the trinity and an identity as a Trinitarian, and to proclaim, proudly, the unity of god and thus the name Unitarian.

Had it not been for these ancestors, and those who came both before and after them, in what pews would we be sitting—or staying away from—today? What light of our own

would we still be covering in deference to some authority other than our own and our collective hearts and minds? Our Universalist ancestor John Murray once said, “You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.”

May we learn from such an ancestor. May we continue to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of one another, and so may we continue to associate with each other and with other Unitarian Universalists, and with people of all faiths, across the continent and across the world, and so may we say amen.

Please rise as you are willing and able and join in singing hymn # 118 This Little Light of Mine.