

COMMUNITY

For our opening Sunday, how could I preach on anything but Community? You didn't show up here today, whether in person or on Zoom, because you want to learn about propagating zinnias or repairing cars. That's why YouTube was invented. You came for an experience of openness to each other, a reaffirmation of why we are here and what it feels like and how it is good for the world. That's what you will get.

First, General Assembly. My wife, Sarita, and I attended the annual Unitarian Universalist Ministry Days and the Unitarian Universalist Association's or UUA, General Assembly, or G.A., in person, although it is possible to see them virtually. Thank you to this congregation for funding our attendance in person, which is far more informative than attending virtually. We flew to Pittsburgh, in part because I was being honored for having the tenacity to serve 50 years in our ministry. Ministry Days take place in two days before G. A., during which there are social gatherings, workshops, and lectures by and for ministers and their significant others.

The five clergy being honored for 50 years of ministry appeared in a video montage composed of segments taken from lengthier, previously recorded recollections and descriptions of each ministry. I was the only one of the five honorees for fifty years' experience still in full-time ministry—half-time doing pastoral psychotherapy and half-time parish ministry-- and the only one who was present. I ordinarily do not relish being honored publicly, but the director of collegial ministerial services convinced me it was for the larger movement to feel reassured and empowered, so I went. The video in which I expressed what I do and how I do it also commended this congregation's participatory and democratic nature. I expressed gratitude

for this specific congregation supporting my ministry and living out an example of what it means to respect each other in the search for truth and meaning. When they called my name, to my ears, the applause was tremendous but it was not just for me, it was for you too. The full presentations, each one introduced by Leslie Takahashi, the president of the UU Minister's Association will be Zoomed later, and my presentation is on the FUSW website.

In some ways, I felt very much "at home" at General Assembly, because (as my granddaughter would say): "These are my peeps." UU jargon has changed some but attitudes of acceptance are still prevalent and assertively inclusive. Our values were strongly correlated. It was a pleasure to meet with our Rev. Viola Abbitt (who sends her love), the Rev. Kate Wilkinson for the Universalist Meeting House in Provincetown, MA (where Sarita and I attend on summer vacation), and Kathy McGowan (a former member here) who is working for the UUA in South Carolina.

The UUA lived out its values of democracy and participation at General Assembly by entertaining numerous small changes to Article II of the Unitarian Universalist bylaws, which will include a slightly different set of principles than the seven previously adopted in 1985, plus the core of the proposed eighth principle (anti-racism and anti-oppression of all kinds). During the three-hour sessions in which wording of our UUA bylaws was debated, there were various quibbles over wording. At the extreme, the difference between "worth" and "worthiness" in possibly changing "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" was debated for fifteen minutes. The debate was something like *worth* connoting "commodity" vs. *worthiness* connoting "essential value." The effort was conceptualizing our

beliefs, which are always changing, in terms the general population (which is always changing a little) could understand. Despite what sometimes appeared to be fruitlessly building a boat in quicksand, the predominant mood of General Assembly delegates was committed to debate that favored “action words” over feelings. The vast majority of the nearly 2,000 delegates wanted to move assertively on our beliefs. Although there were passionate assertions during debates, the disagreements were respectful and orderly.

The seven principles will be updated eventually by a simple list and graphic that is not greatly changed. The new set of principles does not replace any previous list so much as market UU’s to a more contemporary audience.

More substantively, the UUA is countering racist and prejudicial attitudes by having staff show up at racial peace demonstrations, with forthright acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, and staffing UU agencies with people of many different skin hues, sexual orientations, and ethnicities. Some of this change felt clumsy, but the intention is honorable. America is generally becoming more racially and ethnically inclusive, so many Unitarian Universalists are attempting to speak to that increasingly obvious variety.

The emotional tone of General Assembly delegates verged on a frantic desperation to oppose structural oppression in America. Remember, these are the highly committed members from nationwide congregations, many of whom focus on policy issues as centrally important. It often seemed to me that efforts at devising anti-racist and disability or LGBTQ+ inclusive policies were awkward or poorly phrased. We are in new

conceptual territory, so we will fail often but earnestly. This is not a fault; the UUA is so small and powerless that effective moves toward lessening racism and oppression are largely very local and grass-roots, and therefore difficult to translate to a national policy discussion.

We attended two presentations by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and were very favorably impressed with the work that it is doing. I had wondered why there were no projects that UUSC itself sponsored, but we are convinced that the preferable way to promote democracy and equality across the globe is to explore the grassroots social change organizations already active in their home communities and partner with them. UUSC supports, for example, Indigenous Peoples facing severe climate change impacts in Alaska, Louisiana, and the Pacific, Central Americans fleeing violence and corruption, Rohingya Muslims facing genocide in Burma (since 1995) and those affected by disasters in Ukraine, Haiti, and the Philippines. After UUSC does intensive research, sometimes at great risk, they commit financial support for the long haul. The vast majority of UUSC's partner organizations are led by women, immigrants, Indigenous Peoples, people of color, people identifying as LGBTQ+ and/or people living with disabilities. UUSC can furnish a speaker to a service here (The Rev. Laura Randall) to tell us about the work that is being done, and we—as a congregation—could be a sponsor, supporting their efforts.

You have probably already realized where I am going with this, so I will lay it out explicitly. We, here, have a pretty reliably common set of assumptions about what supports democratic deliberation. We discuss things passionately but try to respect the right of everyone to express an opinion. Those seven principles we spoke of before will not disappear if a

new list is agreed upon at a General Assembly that is somewhat different. Nobody will ever say the present list must be thrown out. Our identification is with the larger search for truth and meaning. We are here to strengthen trust with each other that we have a common purpose with the goal of understanding more, learning more, and becoming wiser in the ways of the spirit. We accomplish this by establishing mutual respect. We may not readily agree about what constitutes an application of those principles. That is good. We need a variety of viewpoints. We gather together because we need each other to pull us back when we wander off the highway of reason and into the weeds of thought, which can happen to anyone. We must focus on making an inclusive community strong. We gather together so that our different viewpoints enrich our wisdom. This is an uphill struggle.

I recently talked with someone who attends no congregation and militantly disbelieves in God and religion. I attempted to put forward the idea that religious community is not necessarily about God or gods, but about binding people together in the pursuit of transcendent values. I suggested that having a community for their children to learn about religions, values, and making ethical choices is helpful. I suggested it is reassuring and supportive of continued adult growth for people to have a community where they are accepted, trusted, valued, and put to work on behalf of the community. Not only did that person interrupt me at every turn about how they did not believe in God, they could not understand that reflecting on values and choices is helpful. This is the difficulty we face when we interface with those who have very little community—it may simply be beyond their comprehension. What they heard was so foreign, or so identified with what had previously been obnoxious, that they could not

hear about community. Perhaps they had not experienced dialogue as it can be peacefully practiced or perhaps they were hearing something they considered in their experience to be so remotely foreign that they could not tolerate considering it.

Those who check off the “no religious affiliation box” on surveys have increased greatly over the past 30 years. If this person is representative, the unaffiliated simply may not have experienced an accepting dialogue and therefore do not see much value in dialogue with other people. They probably don’t value what they haven’t felt as accepting, growth-inspiring, and comforting. Here, at FUSW, we have found that a multigenerational, long-term, values centered interaction is a way to develop wisdom.

Therefore, our task must be to live out our values imaginatively. We need to explore with one another how we can demonstrate to others that this community is beneficial. Much in our world is against imagination, against trying something new that might work better than the usual. We make mistakes, we misconstrue what we need and want, but with failure comes learning and probably more wisdom. We need to be observably different, more peaceful, and more constructive. We need to listen more, try new things more, and dare more. We will need to become as differentiated as the Mennonites or the Quakers in our pursuit of truth and meaning. It is hard, but we can do it.

Our first step is to come back together, in-person. I get it, that if you cannot physically make it here, Zoom is a good link to us, and I am grateful it exists. I like it that we have a hybrid service and Matthew. But in-person attendance facilitates the informal, casual discussion that builds

community. You are encouraged to wear a mask currently, but that does not rule out conversing with each other in a fluid, considerate manner.

Another step is for us to root ourselves someplace. Either here, or elsewhere, we need to decide where we will call home. We need the identification with a community that produces visibility. When people observe that we are one of them, wherever that is, then they are more likely to seek out a deeper involvement.

Another step is hiring an outreach worker. I can only give half-time attention to this community, but you also need someone younger, who also knows us. This is hardly new; other congregations are trying it too. We are IN but not OF the community. This outreach effort is part of looking ahead to the future, to our thriving within our walls as a viable alternative to a violent, often racist and sexist society. We must be recognized as especially respectful of various identities. We must be recognized as something especially respectful of dialogue. We must be recognized as a people devoted to learning, real learning, that leads to wisdom. It is our warm and loving interactions that harmonize what we believe with what we do. It is our gentle dialogue with those who appear to be a little different that expands our reach. It is how we sensitively respond to questions with hard-won truths and deep feeling that illustrates our unique appeal. So be it.