

Where the UUs Are
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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Kerry #1 Fort Lauderdale in June. Hot. Muggy. Expensive. Very expensive. Hotels with \$20 breakfast buffets. Others with free buffets and 45 minute lines. An unfortunate situation with the security perimeter – every time you enter the convention hall you have to show ID. For anyone who took a plane to get there, or who drove a car (legally) it's no more than a nuisance. But suppose you are a transgender person, whose picture ID doesn't match your current appearance. Suppose you are too young for a driver's license. Suppose you just have scruples about showing ID on the street. It's a problem. The romance and the wild parties of the "where the boys are" Fort Lauderdale are nowhere to be found. So you may wonder why Fort Lauderdale was in fact filled with Unitarian Universalists from all over the country, and indeed the world.

I think it's because the lure of General Assembly is so great that it overwhelms the barriers. Bill Sinkford, the president of our association of Unitarian Universalist congregations, has asked what is the purpose of General Assembly – to do the business of the Association or to be a great State Fair of Unitarian Universalism? You can tell from his expression and body language that the right answer is "to do the business of the Association," and yes, surely that is the important purpose of this yearly gathering. It takes a lot of energy, money, staff time and devotion of members to put on this great yearly gathering, and it had better be important. But I have to confess that I'm glad Dave has agreed to cover the "business of the Association" this morning, because I am drawn every year to the great State Fair.

First, I am always moved by the overwhelming sense of being in the same room with thousands of other Unitarian Universalists. It's hard to imagine in an isolated community like Fayetteville that there are thousands of us across the country – 160,000, if you count only those who are actually members of congregations, double or triple that if you count people who identify with us in vaguer ways. To be in the room with them, to see hundreds of congregational banners in the banner parade, to sing together in a great swelling ocean of sound – to be where the UU's are. . . it's a great moment, filled with excitement and challenge and nostalgia and friendship. I look forward to it every year, despite everything.

This year, the very first thing I did, sandwiched between ministerial events, was a quick trip to the exhibit hall. I wanted to buy a new stole, with a subtle GLBT design for the civil union ceremony I was doing in July in New Jersey. Until now I've felt that stoles should be a gift, not something you buy like a new outfit, but this was an important event. It turned out that this year the exhibits were a little smaller than usual – only about 85 booths, but I quickly found the perfect stole and put it aside while I checked all the other booths to see if there was any I might like better. No, I came back and bought it, before anyone else might beat me to it.

This wasn't my last trip to the exhibit hall, because that's where you can find all sorts of Unitarian Universalist books, literature, art, crafts, jewelry, information, stickers, buttons. . . . a real state fair. I've made a display for the foyer, with folders of information, flyers, posters.

It's a bit random, who was there this year, and what I acquired, but do look for what interests you, and let me know if you'd like copies of anything I brought back, or what else might be available on line or elsewhere. Oh, goodness, I've just shared the exhibits with you and it's time to give Dave a turn.

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Dave #1 For me, every year, the General Assembly experience is a great one, from start to finish. But what I look forward to the most, is the first day. Not the first day of General Assembly itself. GA is immediately preceded by two days of ministers' meetings and religious educators' meetings. But I don't mean the first day of ministers' meetings. The day *before* the ministers' meetings is the Clergy Couples meeting. A group of us ministers – there are usually around 30 – whose spouses or partners are also ministers – have a day of our own. We tell our stories; we listen to the stories of others. We try to solve problems we share. We may have an outside guest, like the church finance specialist or the settlement director – they're both on the staff of the department of ministry, at UUA headquarters in Boston.

Kerry and I first discovered the UU Clergy Couples Association in 1997. We arrived at the GA site the afternoon before the ministers' meetings, and there in the lobby of our hotel was a sign giving the meeting room for clergy couples. I was about to enter seminary in the fall, and Kerry had already been a member of the clergy for several years, so we boldly entered the meeting room, near the end of the day's gathering, and we were warmly welcomed. We've been faithful participants ever since.

Each year there are new faces. One of them this year is now the interim minister in the suburban Milwaukee congregation where my step-daughter Amanda is a member. And there are always departures – someone dies, or one of the partners leaves the ministry, or two people who had been a couple dissolve their relationship and split up.

For four years – two two-year terms – Kerry and I served as secretary/treasurer for the group. It was my job to maintain the mailing list, to encourage attendance at our annual meeting, to collect the money to pay for the meeting, and to persuade everyone to pay their dues. Our successors were elected in 2007, and this year's was meeting was the first since my retirement. I discovered that the new couple who had taken our place didn't do the job quite the same way that we had. And I managed not to mention it, not to complain, just to let it go. Change happens. A new generation takes the stage. It's OK.

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Kerry #2 A second element in the great GA State Fair for me is the show where everyone brings their best products to show off. Not livestock here or home canned tomatoes, but sermons and ideas and forums and lectures. Some years I've managed to attend the early morning worship services before the plenary sessions, and then somehow stayed up for the late night vespers before falling into bed. The sermons are that good. But this year the highlight was the Ware Lecture. In 1920, Harriet E. Ware, member of an old Unitarian dynasty going back to early 19th century New England, left unrestricted money which the Unitarians designated for an annual lecture. For a long time, this was the main event of the old Unitarian May Meetings. People would dress up in suits ties and mink stoles and white gloves. And the list of Ware Lecturers is very impressive – including Jane Addams and Martin Luther King Jr., Shirley Chisholm and Elaine Pagels, Holly Near and Reinhold Niebuhr. These days it's less dressy, but the Ware Lecture is just as impressive. Nevertheless, it has been a little obscured by the long list of workshops and worship services and meetings available. And I have to confess that I've been overcome on occasion by a desperate need for sleep. I've missed some important people, sitting right there in the front row.

But not this year. This year the speaker was Van Jones. I'd never heard of him. On the afternoon of the lecture, Dave and I met a beautiful and charming young man in the hallway of our hotel, looking for the Florida Suite. I wondered about him. He was too dressed up to be a UU at GA, but he was certainly sharp. "Oh," he said, in response to our directions, "I've gone too far. I often seem to do that." So we were not entirely surprised when the Ware lecturer that night turned out to be the very same young man.

President Bill Sinkford introduced him with great enthusiasm. Here's what the UUA website says:

Sinkford then listed the organizations that this year's lecturer [. . .], has founded or been part of, including the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, which promotes positive alternatives to violence and incarceration; the center's Books Not Bars campaign, which has helped reduce California's overall youth prison population by more than 30 percent; Color Of Change, the nation's biggest e-advocacy organization tackling Black issues; a "Green Jobs Corps" that will train youth for eco-friendly "green-collar" jobs; a project of the center working with the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) to create the country's first-ever Green Enterprise Zone to attract environmentally sound industry to Oakland; and, with the center, working with Congress to pass the Green Jobs Act of 2007.

Sinkford commented that Van Jones has "co-founded more organizations than many of us belong to," but that he was most enthusiastic that Jones "embodies hope, not despair."

I didn't miss a millisecond of his lecture. He was riveting. His message of hope evoked solutions for both the economic crisis and the ecological crisis at the same time, beginning by employing many people to make our poor urban neighborhoods into green oases,

sources of green energy. Lecture is a tepid word for the tremendous performance Van Jones gave. He sparked that huge roomful of staid, intellectual Unitarian Universalists, and at the end he came down from the stage to shake hands and was swarmed by the youth and young adults, who surrounded him hugging and jumping and dancing. It was stunning. You can see this for yourself on the web – I just Googled Ware Lecture and found it immediately. Or come when the Social Justice Committee shows the DVD here at church. Not only did I love the lecture and his message, but I found it profoundly reassuring that I had never even heard of Van Jones. If he's doing this great work, and his name was news to me, how many more people are out there doing the work that will lead us away from the brink, who will help us as a nation, as a species, and as a planet to become what we are meant to be. This year the Ware Lecture was surely the Best in Show.

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Dave #2 What a wonderful state fair is General Assembly – meals with old friends – and with new friends, too – worship services, and workshops, and shopping in the vast exhibit hall. But it's also where the business gets done. Congregations – like ours – elect and send delegates to GA to represent them on the various issues that come before the Assembly. But looked at from another angle, GA is part of a year round process.

Every two years, the Commission on Social Witness – that's a group of UUs elected by the General Assembly – receives proposals from congregations and districts for Congregational Study/Action Issues. Prior to General Assembly, congregations have the opportunity to vote on which of the submitted proposals will be considered by the GA delegates. And then at GA an issue is selected for study and action. The Study and Action Process was created to uphold our principles and to engage Unitarian Universalists on pressing social justice issues.

After an issue is selected, then the congregations and the Commission on Social Witness have three years of study and action on the issue. This leads to a vote at General Assembly to adopt a Statement of Conscience on the subject. If the Statement of Conscience is adopted, the next step is to work on implementation. During the year following adoption of a Statement of Conscience, congregations and UUA staff will work to bring about the changes called for in the Statement. Results are reported at the following General Assembly. Adopted Statements of Conscience serve to focus the efforts of congregations and other UU groups on the topic of the Statement; they help give shape to contemporary Unitarian Universalism, and they empower our UU Washington Office for Advocacy, working with other like-minded groups, to lobby for our positions. [from the UUA website, edited]

Issues for study and action are selected every other year, and 2008 was such a year. Chosen by the General Assembly delegates in June was Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice. We have three years to work on this issue before a vote is taken at the 2011 GA to adopt a Statement of Conscience. That GA, by the way, will be in Charlotte, North Carolina. We are encouraged to begin – or to continue – programs of education and reflection, service, community organizing, advocacy, and public witness. I suspect – and I certainly hope – that

there are those in this room who have passion and commitment around this issue, Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice. I've been gathering ideas for a sermon.

The current Study/Action Issue, selected at the 2006 General Assembly, in St. Louis, is peace making. If all goes according to schedule, there will be a vote on a Statement of Conscience with respect to Peace Making, at next year's General Assembly, in Salt Lake City. There are many ways that we here in Fayetteville can be involved on this topic and in this process.

By the way, the next new Study/Action Issue will be selected at the 2010 GA, in Minneapolis. The deadline for proposals is only 13 months off, October 1, 2009. The next proposal could be ours.

The Study/Action Issue and Statement of Conscience process is a lengthy one, lengthy but worthwhile, in my opinion. But we Unitarian Universalists like to have our voices heard on current issues. We like to be able to give a quick response as well as a well-developed but cumbersome response. To meet this need, General Assembly delegates adopt Actions of Immediate Witness. These are proposed at GA itself. Signatures are gathered, and two rounds of voting are held. The 2008 General Assembly adopted six Actions of Immediate Witness:

- We opposed the Florida and California marriage protection initiatives. I assume these initiatives are intended protect so-called traditional marriage from the "threat" posed by same-sex couples. I don't feel threatened.
- We voted to urge Congress to extend the tax credit for wind and solar power.
- We registered our support in favor of raising the federal minimum wage, to \$10 an hour in 2010.
- We voted for new legislation and better enforcement of existing laws to end present-day slavery in the fields. We were given examples from Florida of the systematic abuse that occurs in the agriculture industry, including sub-poverty wages, no right to overtime pay, and no right to organize. We don't have such abuse in Arkansas, do we?
- We let Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney know that we oppose a U.S. attack on Iran. Are they listening? Do they care?
- We took a stand in favor of a single payer national health care system.

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Kerry #3 Underlying everything else at the great GA state fair is the sense of connection. You run into old friends, and you find yourself sharing a table at the convention center concession stand with new acquaintances. The snacks may be overpriced and of dubious nutritional value, but at least they don't have deep fried Twinkies on a stick. And the sterile

ambience of the convention center is softened and enlivened by flyers and literature and the great decorations made by volunteers – see the bucket of paper flowers here. And the conversation – someone from Washington State and someone else from Washington, DC, and you discover that your congregations have the same challenges. It somehow always turns out that they have a great solution to one problem, and we have a great solution to another.

What touched me most this year was a talk by the Rev. Forrest Church, a colleague from New York City, who has written many valuable books for Unitarian Universalists. His latest – and probably last – book is about his final journey through the valley of the shadow as he faces his own coming mortality in the form of esophageal cancer. Perhaps you saw his article last spring in the *UU World*. His talk was personal and moving, though the room was large, and packed. He reminded us that he has always declared that religion is our response to being alive, and knowing that we must die. He told us that he is reconciled to death, and also confessed that his wife points out that that's all very well for him. But for her, for his adult children, as for all of us, there is unfinished business, embracing the richness of relationship, finding forgiveness, gratitude, and reconciliation. Few eyes were entirely dry.

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Dave #3 What I described a few minutes ago is all outward looking. But we have important internal matters before us, too. I'll mention three.

First, the General Assembly passed a resolution in favor of the empowerment of youth and young adults. Among other things, the resolution urges congregations–

- to provide greater ministerial support to youth and young adults through inclusive worship and intentional presence;
- to invest financial support in youth and young adult leadership bodies and programs;
- to provide support for youth and young adult staff and volunteers, to receive suitable training and resources; and
- to attend especially to the needs of youth and young adult constituents with marginalized identities.

How are we doing, located, as we are, on the fringe of the campus of a great state university?

Second, the Commission on Appraisal – that's another body with members elected at General Assembly – has been studying our UU Principles and Purposes. Some of you participated in a workshop on this a number of months ago, to enable us to provide input to their study. We took another look at them in this morning's class. The Commission in the next several months will propose revisions to our statement of Principles and Purposes. Their

proposed revisions will be voted on at the 2009 and 2010 General Assemblies. We will have our opportunity to influence this process, both in advance of GA and at GA itself.

Third, next year is election year for the UUA. Most importantly, we will elect a new president. Bill Sinkford is nearing the end of his second term, and delegates at next June's GA will elect his successor. There are, so far, two announced candidates. They are, in alphabetical order, the Rev. Laurel Hallman, senior minister of the First Unitarian Church in Dallas and the Rev. Peter Morales, minister of the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado.

I hope that Kerry and I will not be the only ones from this congregation at next June's General Assembly, in Salt Lake City.

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Kerry #4 So there's a taste of General Assembly. It's a great jumble – but it also makes a great whole. At a committee meeting in Boston last week, Laura Amabile – she's the staff person for the Annual Program Fund (the program by which congregations support the Unitarian Universalist Association) told us that the UUA has a better participation record than most denominations, despite the independence of our congregations. Our system of congregational association works to help us keep us connected and caring for one another, whether it is in response to tragedies like the recent Knoxville shootings, or in anticipation of difficulties like the coming hurricane, or in focusing our social justice action, or in the day to day workings of the whole. The great state fair of General Assembly is one of the important ways in which we stay connected to each other.

So, next June 24-28, General Assembly will be in Salt Lake City. Less distant, less expensive, less hot, no big security issue, plus the fun of practicing your elevator speech on Mormons. Put it on your calendar now. Start your detailed planning at the beginning of the year. You can come and learn a lot, whether or not you are a delegate. Come to GA in Salt Lake City – because next June, that's where the UU's will be.