

Bagels and Chalice: Reflections on the Unitarian Universalist
General Assembly
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The UU General Assembly: GA. This year it was held in Ft. Worth, Texas, June 23-27. I attended as a delegate from my own congregation, but just as much on behalf of the congregation I serve. My roommate was Rev. Shirley Ranck from Williamsburg; our hotel was about 7 blocks from the convention center. Almost every morning Shirley and I walked down to the center together, and we made sure to leave in plenty of time to stand in line at the Corner Bakery, a coffee shop that we passed on the way, for our morning coffee and bagels.

The line was always quite long, and of course, always made up of other Unitarian Universalists. The employees were obliged to work harder than normal, I expect, for the week that we were there. One day as I paid for my breakfast, I said to the stressed-looking young man at the register, "We've really been enjoying your hospitality this week, we appreciate it." He looked up, and his face relaxed and opened into a smile. "You all are so nice," he said. "You're the nicest group we've ever had here." I thanked him for telling me that, and said I would spread the good news.

His comment made me realize the importance of being aware that when we attend any kind of gathering in our identity as UUs, our interactions teach other people about Unitarian Universalism, whether we intend that or not. If people were impolite, abrupt, or unfriendly...and surely some were, there were a lot of us there ... that would not necessarily be experienced as individual behavior. The perception would be that those UUs are a surly bunch. So, given the long lines every morning (and at lunch time as well) and the increased level of stress on the employees, I'm proud that we left The Corner Bakery with such a good reputation.

GA programs were mailed to registrants ahead of time, and I spent hours combing through mine before I ever got to Ft. Worth. I prioritized the workshops I wanted for every morning, afternoon, and evening session, planned an efficient schedule fitting them all into appropriate time slots, and then realized that I had neglected to allow for the plenary sessions. That wouldn't work. Start all over.

Then I realized that I had planned a workshop during Pete Seeger's Saturday morning concert. That wasn't about to work! Rearrange some more. I would eventually get a reasonable schedule figured out, then go back another day and read the program again and discover a workshop description I hadn't noticed before. I really would like to go to that workshop. Rearrange schedule.

There are always multiple activities going on all at the same time, and I wanted to be organized before I ever arrived in Ft. Worth. As I prepared for

today's service, I looked back at the workshop choices I'd circled in my program before GA. I attended two. This is not to say I didn't go to workshops; I went to thousands. I just didn't go to the ones I planned to go to ahead of time.

One day, for example, I met with my UUCC friends for lunch, and we realized we were overlapping on some of our choices, so we looked at some topics of interest to UUCC and each of us took one workshop to attend. So my advance planning for that afternoon didn't happen. Another time, I ran into a friend walking to the convention center. She was at GA for the first time, and her circuits were a little overloaded.

As we walked along, we decided to skip the workshops we were headed for and go instead to her nearby hotel and get a cup of coffee, sit down, and take a break. It was a good decision. GA is like that, there's an organic quality to it. It takes on its own shape; it evolves out of its own energy.

Besides workshops, there are worship services every day, large and small, plenary sessions, and don't forget the exhibit hall, where some of the best conversations and connections take place. I ran into other religious educators, curriculum writers, people I'd met at past UU events, old friends and colleagues, while I was wandering in the exhibit hall. I also met and spent time with the young adults who were there to launch Church of the Younger Fellowship: CYF. This is an online congregation, similar to Church of the Larger Fellowship, only CYF is designed specifically for young adults. For me, talking to these young adults and hearing about their vision was one of the highlights of GA.

Another highlight for me was that I got to preach at GA, in one of the small worship services I mentioned earlier. There's an organization called MSUU: Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalists, established in the 70s to advocate for the rights of women ministers. My colleague Rev. Shirley was their newsletter editor for years, and would share their newsletters with me. MSUU sponsors an annual sermon contest, which offers a cash prize and an invitation to preach at GA. When I asked Shirley about it, she encouraged me to enter, which I did. And I won. And I got to preach at GA. Not one of the big worship services; this was a Monday morning worship where about 30 people attended. Even so, it was exhilarating. The whole front row was lined with faces dear to me, women ministers from my past, my present, and my future, including a member of UUCC who is now on the path to ordination, and who became a UU (I always like to declare) when I converted her in seminary, in summer Greek school.

Of course there were others there as well, and their responses following the sermon were inspiring. MSUU had brought a young woman from Hungary over to attend GA, and after the service, I was moved by her gratitude and strength of heart. "I work in a hospital," she told me, and people say, 'How can you be a pastor. You are a woman.' " It was difficult to imagine. She didn't need any

particular sermon to make her glad. She was just happy to see a woman preaching. Definitely a GA highlight.

As I mentioned earlier, with everything else that's going on, it's important to remember that if you're a delegate, you'll spend a lot of time in plenary sessions, where we enact our principle of belief in the democratic process. There are Study/Action Issues to decide, Statements of Conscience to study, and Actions of Immediate Witness to discuss. There are mini-assemblies held before plenary sessions, so that delegates can ask their questions and engage in more intensive discussions than would be practical on the floor of plenary sessions. The Study/Action Issue that got the largest number of votes this year was Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society. UU congregations will be invited to study this issue, in whatever ways suit them best, in the year ahead.

There has been criticism from within the denomination about our approach in general, and this year's Study/Action Issue exemplifies the concern. What can UUs actually do, given the size of our denomination, about the issues we choose as needing our attention? As a denomination, and often as individual congregations, we tend to be good at the study part of Study/Action Issues, not as good at the Action part. Speaking of study and action, this brings up a fascinating example of self-examination that emerged from this year's GA: the Commission on Appraisal's report, called Engaging Our Theological Diversity. After a four year study, this commission, made up of nine people elected by the UUA, wrote about our need to understand and name our UU identity. Some of the questions their report addresses are

- What Holds Us Together?
- Where Do We Come From?
- Who Are We?
- To What Do We Aspire?
- How Shall We Serve?

As a denomination, we don't have clear answers to these questions, and perhaps more importantly, as individual congregations, we aren't asking them. In order for us to be effective in the world, we have to stand for something, and too often in our congregations we tend to turn away from making declarative statements about what we stand for. It's not unusual to hear something like, "There are so many of us, we believe so many things, how can we say THIS is what we stand for?" On the other hand, say many UUs, how can we be useful in this stricken world if we can't say that? What does it MEAN to be a Unitarian Universalist? It has to mean something.

Here's a specific, personal, microcosmic example of what I'm talking about. A while ago, I agreed to facilitate a particular group at my own congregation. There were two others facilitating similar groups; we all worked together with our minister over the summer for training, reading background information, and organizing. When we began our groups in the fall, we had a clear idea of the purpose of what we were doing. My level of frustration grew

every week as people came to my group saying here's what I want to do, why do we have to do that, I don't think that's going to meet my needs, I prefer to do it another way. There seemed to be no understanding that the groups had a meaning, purpose, and identity already established, before the first meeting ever took place. I told my story of frustration to a minister friend of mine, and she offered me this metaphor, that has been so useful to me ever since.

"It sounds like when you get on the plane," she said, "and somebody from the crew makes that announcement: this plane is going to Atlanta. If Atlanta is not your destination, you're on the wrong plane." You don't have to get off the plane. You are welcome to fly with us, put your seat back in the resting position, put your luggage in the overhead compartment, and eat the free peanuts. But here's what you need to understand: when we land, we're going to be in Atlanta. If you don't want to be in Atlanta, *you* need to figure out what *you* want to do. But THIS plane is going to Atlanta.

As a denomination, as individual congregations, where is our plane going? Do we know? Do we know how to figure it out? Do we know how important it is that we DO figure it out? Can we really say, come on, get on the plane, we aren't going anywhere in particular, just tell us where you want to go? Being among thousands of UUs at GA, listening to the stories of their congregations' struggles and triumphs, listening to the individuals' own stories, makes it clear that we have the potential to be a powerful force for good in this world. How will we BE that force? How will we make the best use of our potential, rather than re-inventing the wheel over and over again in our own inward-focused circles?

As usual, I have no answers, only questions. I urge you to go to GA...next year it will be in St. Louis. Send as many people as you can, no matter how many delegates you're allotted. Being in the company of so many UUs day and night, working side by side with people you don't know but who are so like-minded, drinking coffee with strangers who aren't really strangers at all...it gives you a sense of the enormous impact we could have if we could figure out how to be one large instead of many small...beings. Our denomination holds tremendous hope. We have to figure out how to send it forth. And so may it be.