

**Postcards from General Assembly 2016**  
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**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
**July 17, 2016**

It always starts with a parade, and a celebration. To the sounds of loud and festive music, two long lines of colorful banners—hundreds of them representing some of the 1,000 Unitarian Universalist congregations and covenanted communities, snake into the cavernous convention center hall and weave in and out of the rows where 4,000 Unitarian Universalists have gathered for the General Assembly of our Association of Congregations. I like watching the banner parade, but this year after two years away from GA it was especially fun to crisscross the hall waving our beautiful lightweight beacon, catching the eye of friends and familiar faces from across the country and across 25 years as a U.U. and 20 years since I first felt called to ministry. It's a warm, welcoming, and joyous beginning, year after year.

Yet this year there's already a deeper tone under the celebrations, and it's one I hear again and again as the days of GA go by. The lead banner in this year's procession isn't the Columbus, Ohio church, taking the usual place of the host congregation at the front. Instead it's the First UU Church of Orlando, Florida. Before the celebratory procession begins, their delegates bring their banner to the stage, and they are recognized for their strong, heartfelt public work in the aftermath of the shootings at the Pulse nightclub. Only then does the band strike up its joyful tunes.

The theme is repeated in worship services, in many of the small-group workshops and sessions, in debates over business resolutions, in public witness events. Over and over, there's a sometimes unspoken, sometimes explicit undertone that says: We are gathered in the midst of a time of struggle and turmoil in our nation and our world. The moral landscape is in upheaval; people are suffering. We are not isolated from its effects, and we may not be as innocent as we want to believe. The times are calling for something from our faith, and it is not yet certain whether we will rise fully to the challenges of our time. Somebody's calling our name. What shall we do?

Why do we go to General Assembly, those of us who attend year after year? Of course there's a sense of responsibility, because we are a democratic faith and the General Assembly sets the course of the Association, chooses its leaders, guides and authorizes its financial life. But aside from that, what draws us there?

It's hard to go through four days of General Assembly (and the previous two and a half days of the UU Ministers' Association's annual gathering, as well) without being deeply touched or moved at least once. It might be what it's like to sing "Spirit of Life" or "The Fire of Commitment" with several thousand other enthusiastic people, or how nice it is to feel like you're part of something bigger than one isolated liberal congregation in an illiberal community. If you're a bit of a church enthusiast like me, it might be delight at how much interesting information there is out there about congregational life and all the many ways there are to be a Unitarian Universalist.

But if you're open to the deeper currents, if you're willing to look, and listen, and believe the experience of people who are different from you, something profound can happen. If you loosen your grip on whatever certainties you brought into the rooms and the giant halls, you never know what might touch your heart, shift your thinking, maybe even change your life.

Why do we go to GA? Let me offer you a few snapshots of my own.

Naturally, we go to GA for ideas, and I came away with a pocketful. Erika Hewitt, whose work some of you are familiar with, offered a lively session on the use of stories, rituals, and sensory activities in worship to create visceral experiences that help us find meaning, connection, comfort, and healing in our time together. There were some good thoughts from small-congregation consultant Mary Grigolia about how to focus our efforts and activities around what gives us joy and energy. A session during Ministry Days offered intriguing suggestions about how it's possible to engage in the Movement for Black Lives even if there's no visibly organized Black Lives Matter group in the area.

We go to GA for resonant words, and I came away echoing with language of power and beauty. You've already heard some of what caught my imagination in the reading Rosemary and Bryan shared. Nancy MacDonald Ladd, whose Sunday morning sermon you heard a bit of, also described long-term, challenging relationships in our congregations as the "holy abrasion" of a "sacred sandpaper" that wears down our barriers and forces us into more genuine, honest, compassionate connections.

In a session led by New Orleans justice organizers who'll be leading some of our work at next year's GA in the Big Easy, I learned about "Frontline Communities," defined as communities who are both affected by injustice and organizing to resist it, and I heard these words of Chief Darden, from the Native American Houma nation: "We have a choice: We learn from frontline communities, or we become one."

My first morning in Columbus, I heard United Church of Christ President John Dorhauer say: "Those who are called to ministry are ultimately drawn to serve the transformation of human community for the common good," and I thought: Yes, that's it! I need to put that on my wall in case I ever need to remind myself what I got into this work for. ". . . drawn to serve the transformation of human community for the common good."

We go to General Assembly for insights into the struggles and puzzles of our public and private lives, and I came home with some powerful new lenses. In that New Orleans based session, I was wondering as I so often do about whether anyone in our "frontline communities" is organizing around issues of inequality and injustice in the Outer Banks when one of the leaders said: "A community that has survived and resisted through centuries of inequality *is organized*; it just may not be organizing in a way I'm educated and predisposed to recognize from my place of privilege." Suddenly I have a new question to ask: Where is the organized resistance I'm not predisposed to see, that has helped people of color survive here for so long, and how can I—how can we—become allies and accomplices in that resistance?

We go to General Assembly for powerful experiences, and I came away with a heart full of them. I sang along as a drum circle of youth and young adults of color from a UUA leadership development program led “Where Do We Come From” in the opening celebration. I swayed and whispered names as a Black Lives Matter organizer, preacher, and musician named Rev. Osagyefu Sekou and his band The Holy Ghost sang the haunting anthem “Say Her Name” in honor of cis and transgender women who have died in police custody. I sang in that choir you heard singing “MLK” in our Prelude, a group made up of clergy and other religious professionals. We also sang a version of David Frazier’s “I Need You To Survive” in that choir, and let me tell you that by the fourth time through “I won’t harm you with words from my mouth” my hands were in the air and my face was wet.

I walked beside people wearing 10-foot angel wings sent to us from Orlando as we went into the streets to surround protestors from the Westboro Baptist Church with hundreds of gentle, loving people, singing for our lives and for theirs.

I watched in wonder on the last day of GA as dozens of youth and young adults and their adult mentors, all Unitarian Universalists who identify as people of color, accompanied by all three of the white women now running to be the next President of our Association, rose to say that all is not yet well with us. They said that even as we write checks and hang banners and lift our voices in support of Black Lives Matter, we have not risked our privilege for the sake of liberation and justice. They said that in our congregations we have not yet made a home for the life experience and spiritual needs and leadership of people of color.

They brought a resolution that instructs the Association to report on real progress in these matters over the next three years. When there was an impulsive call to adopt the resolution by acclamation, I watched the 89-year-old white former Moderator of our Association, Denny Davidoff, rise to tell the current Moderator that no, acclamation isn’t enough, that praise and cheering is not *listening*, and that we must take the time to listen. And we did.

That’s why I go to General Assembly. I come away challenged, strengthened, brokenhearted and openhearted, longing and joyful at the same time, knowing that I am part of a faith worth saving, a faith worth living for. And I come home knowing there is work to be done here, in this beautiful and beloved place, knowing we can find work that is the right size and shape for our hands and hearts and spirits.

Somebody’s calling our name. . . What shall we do?

In the face of everything that is hard in each of our lives and in the world around us, we have a shared tradition, a shared faith that is healing, and strengthening, and hopeful, and compelling.

In the face of Baton Rouge and St. Paul, of Ferguson and Baltimore and Chicago, of New York and Cleveland, and yes, of Asheville and of Raleigh and so many other places where young black men and women continue to die at the hands of those called to serve and protect—

In the face of Orlando, and of Charleston—

In the face of Dallas—

In the face of Nice, of Baghdad and Istanbul, of Paris and Brussels, of Dalori, Nigeria and too many cities all over the world to name—

In the face of the rise of a dangerous, power-hungry, demagogue out of the ashes of a once-great American political party—

In the face of all that threatens the well-being of our beautiful planet and the very life that it sustains—

In the face of all this, we can create right here a community of hope, healing and compassion for the needs of each and all our lives; we can create a community of truth unafraid to tell the whole story of how things are and how they came to be this way; we can create a community of resistance ready to make real connections outside our comfort zone.

We can do this right here, just as others are doing in Unitarian Universalist congregations all over the country. Like them, with them, we can take the risk of moving out, of reaching out to heal our nation and to build the world we dream about.

That's what I brought home from General Assembly. You should come with me next time.

## Voices from General Assembly

BRYAN: “What does your [Unitarian Universalism] provide that . . . religion cannot be whole without?”

*Rev. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, speaking to the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association*

ROSEMARY: “Worship is not a transitive verb. . . . Worship is an emotionally driven spiritual experience, not an intellectual exercise.”

*Rev. Erika Hewitt, in a session on “Sensory-Rich Worship”*

BRYAN: “The world right now needs the most vivid and transformative words that you and I can draw on. . . . Questions elicit answers in their own likeness. It is hard to transcend a combative question; it is hard to resist a generous question. . . . The most powerful question for intractable issues is: What hurts?”

*Krista Tippett, from the Ware Lecture*

ROSEMARY: “The less society says we should trust someone’s voice or experience, the more we need to listen to them.”

*Leslie Mac, Chair of the Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism Organizing Collective*

BRYAN: “Universalism means we are all being held in an infinite Grace. . . . It is not my job to extend that Grace, but it *is* my job to act as if it is real.”

*Rev. Cecilia Kingman, from a session on “Universalism and Difference”*

ROSEMARY: “The tragedy of Orlando calls us to demolish the walls around our vision and claim that fundamental Universalist truth that we are all children of God, each and every one of us. The vigils called us to stand in solidarity in our grief, and to stand as communities of resistance to the hate and the bigotry and the fear.

. . . perhaps . . . we need to begin to see ourselves as communities of resistance willing to build a more embracing dream together, because resistance is what love looks like in the face of hate, and resistance is what love looks like in the face of violence.

*Rev. Bill Sinkford, former UUA President, in his sermon for the Service of the Living Tradition*

BRYAN: “Hate desires that we react in hate, but tears are the order of the day. We need to engage in prophetic mourning. While we cry we must gather our composure; we must mourn and protest and vote. . . .

The call is upon us to be a visible sign of love, justice, freedom, and hope. We must rise from the crucifixion of hate to the resurrection of love and justice.”

*Rev. William J. Barber II, addressing a General Session of the Assembly*

ROSEMARY: “I was brought up in Parliamentary Procedure as a person of privilege to believe that a vote of acclamation is a way to say “let’s do this, we love you.” But it’s like a flyover when the folks are asking for conversation. . . . I think the system we all yearn for is not the system we’re working with, because we need to understand better what’s being said, and get beyond my white privilege rhetoric of support. . . . Acclamation is not satisfying, because it’s too easy for us.”

*--Denny Davidoff, former Moderator of the UUA, calling for further discussion on an unopposed Responsive Resolution entitled “Reaffirmation of Commitment to Racial Justice,” offered by people of color in the Youth and Young Adult Caucuses.*

BRYAN: “Just beneath the surface of the fake fight is the real abrasion of the Holy, the real encounter, hand to hand and soul to soul, in which change is possible.”

“The real conversation—about our identity, our history, our relevance, and our resistance—the real conversation beckons, and the world does not need another place for like-minded, liberal-leaning people to hang out together and fight about who’s in charge.”

What the world needs is a movement like ours to step more fully into our higher calling: To serve as an instrument for an encounter with one another, with the Holy, and with the world.”

*Rev. Nancy MacDonald Ladd, from her sermon in the Sunday Morning Worship Service*

ROSEMARY: “Tamir Rice would have been 14 years old today. . . . We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it’s won.”

*Opening Words from the General Assembly Closing Ceremonies, led by the Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective*