

Postcards From General Assembly 2018
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks
July 1, 2018

Every year, the General Assembly is a microcosm of the lives of our congregations and communities of faith, a mirror reflecting what is happening in the world of Unitarian Universalism that year. You can find new ideas there that are stirring the minds and hearts of people in different parts of the country. You can find the public issues that are awakening our compassion and our passions. Any internal troubles around power and money, accountability and effectiveness that are swirling among us are guaranteed to make an appearance, as are any new ways of meeting those challenges faithfully and in good conscience.

We go to find inspiration; we go to enjoy the pleasure of being in each others' company in numbers far greater than could ever happen at home. We go to encounter old and new friends; we go to share experiences that have come to be an annual tradition. We go to do the practical work of a self-governing, democratic institution, giving guidance to the paid and volunteer leaders who are accountable to the General Assembly for their work. We go to learn from one another. We go for solace and comfort for the burdens of a year in a difficult world, and we go to be challenged to grow in our commitment, our courage, and our faith.

I always go with the needs of my congregation in mind, and I come home with materials and ideas for some things I hope we'll do together in the coming year. This year was no exception to that, although this year there were fewer workshop sessions on the practicalities of congregational life than usual, less emphasis on tools for the everyday work of building and sustaining our covenanted communities.

This year, as you might expect, there was a lot more emphasis on how our faith calls us to engage in the oppressive social, political, and economic climate in our country. "All Are Called" was the theme of the Assembly this year, and as you heard from our President Susan Frederick-Gray in the Sunday morning service, the call is for us both to resist the barbaric cruelty, corruption, and willful disregard for democratic values that are the hallmarks of our nation's political leadership, and to address the legacies and habits of white supremacy that affect our own community life at the same time. It was a tough message for a tough time, and the celebratory feel that is usually part of our annual gathering was pretty muted this year.

The issues were laid out fiercely by this year's Ware Lecturer, Brittany Packnett. The Ware Lecture was established in 1922 to bring important thinkers from the wider world to raise issues for our consideration, and we've had speakers from theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, Howard Thurman, and Elaine Pagels to poets like Mary Oliver, social leaders like Saul Alinsky and Martin Luther King, and public intellectuals like Sissela Bok and Cornel West.

Brittany Packnett serves as Teach For America's Vice President of National Community Alliances, where she leads partnerships and civil rights work with communities of color. She was

a Ferguson protestor, and an appointed member of the Ferguson Commission and President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. She is now a video columnist and writes for many publications.

Packnett spoke poignantly about the feeling she had as a woman of color speaking into a largely white space with high expectations that she needed to prove herself academically and intellectually worthy—but said she was released from that feeling by reading a poem written by a 17-year-old young man named Antwon Rose who was shot down, unarmed and running away, by a police officer in Pittsburgh two weeks ago. She said, “my research is 33 years of living black in America . . . my scholarship is generations of trauma and triumph . . . my knowing comes from my soul.”

From that place of knowing, she called us to recognize some critical realities that are confronting us, and that challenge us as mostly white, mostly privileged and comfortable people in a society built to sustain and support white supremacy. In particular, she wanted to challenge a phrase that she's heard from many people. She said, “All week, we have watched facism and white nationalism rear its ugly face to rip child from parent and to criminalize the natural migration that has been part of all human life since the dawn of time. And all week, I have watched well-intentioned people with good hearts and strong souls utter a simple phrase: this is not who we are.

“This is exactly who we are,” she told us. She said, “Those of us who society has pushed to the margins have been trying to tell you so for years. Criminalizing people and separating families has been American since America became America.”

Warning us against being seduced by the comfort of privilege, she called us to take up our power, to take up the work of creating the world in which we want to live, and to stand with the oppressed, not to save them but to save ourselves. Above all, she said, we need to take up the challenge to “Build something new. Our myopic vision of revolution is currently centered in destruction alone, destruction of systems and structures and outmoded status quos that were never meant to serve all people well. The tearing down is sexy,” she told us, “but the freedom comes in the building.”

That was the Saturday night challenge ringing in our ears when we came to the Sunday worship you shared last week, and you heard how our President Susan Frederick-Gray urged us to rise to meet the challenge. I won't rehash much of what so many of you heard, but there was a theme running through Susan's sermon that is important to me, and I think it's important to us. It was easy to miss in the focus of this GA, but I think it's critical to the success of anything the Association hopes to do in the future: The work we do to address both the hurts of the world and the hurts that our own history and habits have created depends on healthy, strong, compassionate, courageous, and spiritually nurturing communities of faith to sustain it.

A lot of the tone this year at GA was pretty somber, and rightly so. We are in hard times in the world, and we're looking hard at our own historic complicities in the very systems we're trying to fight against. How are we going to sustain our spirits, our commitment, our joy as we each and all together find the right ways for us to engage in the tearing down and the building up?

Here's how Susan said it Sunday morning, in case you didn't hear or remember: "We need communities that teach us how to love with this fullness, this boldness, this courage, unconditionally in the midst of propaganda and politics that tell our hearts to be afraid. We need communities where we can bring our heartbreak—and the fullness of our pain and be reminded that we are not alone in this. We need communities of both courage and compassion, of resilience and resistance. And we need to nurture in our children this faith and these values."

She said, "We may not all be able to be on the streets in places like Charlottesville and Ferguson, but we all have a vital role to play—and we can all make a stronger commitment to nurture healthy, vital, radically inclusive communities and the powerful practice of this faith that helps us build a courageous and fierce, embodied . . . love that fosters what is best in us as human beings."

When all is said and done, that's my work, and it's our work together: To build that kind of community right here, and to foster that kind of love, courage, and commitment. That's the ministry of my heart; it's what called me to ministry and what keeps me here no matter what might be happening in my life or in the world. A little ironically, in a GA that was mostly about our work outside the congregation, I was reminded how critical it is that our work inside the congregation be the best it can possibly be.

Susan said, "the circle has never been drawn wider from the center. It has always grown wider because of the vision, leadership and organizing of people living on the margins who truly understand the limits and costs of oppressive policies—and what liberation means." I agree with that strongly, and at the same time, I am reminded that the center still has to be strong and sustainable, or the circle can't hold.

My last postcard from General Assembly in Kansas City comes from one of my favorite events every year, the service on Wednesday morning at the end of Ministry Days, before GA proper begins. It's a service when we honor those who have completed 25 and 50 years of ministry, and each year the two "classes" each choose one of their number to preach. The 50-year speaker this year was Olav Nieuwejaar, who talked about beginning his ministry in 1968, another incredibly turbulent time not just in our country but in our congregations as well, many of which were torn apart over how to respond to the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, as well as by fallout from some of the darker eddies of the sexual revolution.

Olav talked about hope. Not the false hope of wishful thinking, or as he quoted Farley Wheelwright, "Piety in the Skiety," but a more practical, engaged kind of hope, a hope he called a quality of living. Quoting the great Universalist preacher and writer Clinton Lee Scott, he said

“. . . as [Scott] framed it from his place in our expansive theologies, [hope is] Jesus calling us to raise ourselves out of a sordid, stunned, and purposeless existence which is death, and into an awakened, conscious and expectant creativeness which is life.”

There are days when I can look at the struggles of our world and feel like “sordid, stunned, and purposeless” is about right. I know that at least some of you have felt this too. But we are called—all are called, as the GA theme said—to rise up from that attitude of death and into “an awakened, conscious, and expectant creativeness which is life.” Because, as yet another of Olav’s teachers said, we hold “the deep conviction that the future is not entirely settled.”

What Olav Nieuwejaar told his colleagues, from his 50 years of experience, is this: “Hope is our vocation. We are agents of hope.”

Hope is my vocation. Whether it’s speaking the truth as I understand it here in this pulpit, or out there marching to end family separation and detention, or sitting with someone in the darkest of life’s moments, or celebrating the joy and beauty life has to offer, or helping you to nurture our congregation into its second 30 years, hope is my vocation. That was my blessing from General Assembly this year. Let me offer it to you, as well: Hope is our vocation, our shared ministry to each other and to a world that needs it so much. The future is never entirely settled, and we are all agents of hope.

May we serve it well.