

What Are We Afraid Of?

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Last month, a small group from this church attended the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Portland, Oregon. Our in-person delegation consisted of Suzanne Perry, Paul and Nancy Pinson, Richard Speck and Janet Tillman, Rev. Michelle Collins, and me. Elizabeth Siftar followed many of the activities of General Assembly online as a “remote delegate.” Five of us are here today to share our experiences with you.

For those who are wondering, UU General Assembly—known as “GA”—is an annual, five-day, morning-to-night banquet of information, emotion, music, sermons, celebration, sadness, spirit, remembrance, and joy.

There are dozens of speakers and workshops where policy wonks can learn about church governance, justice activists can plot the overthrow of the system, and seekers can find spiritual sustenance.

GA has three full-length worship services, three shorter morning devotionals, and six “general sessions” during which our Unitarian Universalist Association’s most important business gets done. We adopted a wide-ranging Statement of Conscience on reproductive justice and three Actions of Immediate Witness.

Let me briefly describe these important resolutions.

Statements of Conscience are developed as part of a three-year study/action process by congregations and the UU Commission on Social Witness.

- The Statement of Conscience in support of reproductive justice “espouses the human right to have children, not to have children, to parent the children one has in healthy environments, and to safeguard bodily

autonomy and to express one's sexuality freely." It concludes: "We work toward reproductive justice, and commit to replacing insecurity with safety, fear with acceptance, judgment with love, and shame with compassion." The statement explicitly acknowledges "reproductive justice" as a concept developed by women of color.

Actions of Immediate Witness (AIWs) are resolutions introduced by petition at GA. They represent the immediate concerns of the General Assembly. In 2015:

- Our first AIW calls for the closure of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) family detention centers.
- Our second AIW urges UU support for local, national, and international climate justice campaigns, including the Lummi Nation's opposition to the Gateway Pacific Coal Terminal in Washington State, the Moral March for Climate Justice during Pope Francis's upcoming visit to the United States, and the United Nations Climate Agreement Talks in December.
- The third AIW urges UU support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Recognizing that "the fight for civil rights and equality is as real today as it was decades ago," it urges member congregations to "take initiative in collaboration with local and national organizations fighting for racial justice against the harsh racist practices to which many black people are exposed." I'll say more about this resolution later in this talk.

Perhaps the most joyous moment at GA was on Friday, June 26, when we received word that the Supreme Court had made marriage equality the law of the land.

At the beginning of that morning's general session, Peter Morales, president of the UUA, draped a rainbow banner on the lectern and invited all of the same-sex

couples in the hall to come up on stage. We cheered and danced and sang Standing on the Side of Love in celebration.

I can think of no better place to be on that morning than to be with Unitarian Universalists who had worked long and hard for marriage equality. Have you had a chance to celebrate publicly our historic human rights victory? C'mon, stand and cheer.

For many of us, the best parts of GA are the worship services—which feature an all-star lineup of the best voices of our movement. In today's reading, you heard some of what Rev. Marlin Lavanhar of Tulsa, Oklahoma, had to say at the Service of the Living Tradition.

On Sunday worship, we heard from Rev. Allison Miller of Morristown, New Jersey, who urged us to tell a new story about being UUs. I've asked Janet Tillman to deliver a short excerpt from that outstanding sermon, which Rev. Miller began (of course) by telling a story

[To be read by Janet Tillman]

On a flight from Boston to New York, I wound up in conversation with the teenager seated next to me. She was bubbly and filled with a spark. She shared the story of how she just spent the week with some fellow youth in Boston at a church conference focused on social justice.

My ears perked up. Boston... social justice... I wondered to myself, is she a Unitarian Universalist?

Other religions care about making a difference in the world, and not wanting to be narrow minded about it, I said, "It sounds like you've just had a powerful experience. Tell me, what church are you a part of?"

She responded, "Oh, the normal kind."

"What's the normal kind?" I asked her.

She said a bit apprehensively, "Well, you could say it's one of the Protestant traditions."

Now, I knew she was UU, and I just wanted her to be able to say it to a stranger out loud.

"Oh, which one?" I asked.

“You’ve never heard of it,” she said.

I finally said, “You’re a Unitarian Universalist, right?”

Her eyes widened and she exclaimed, “How did you know?!”

“So am I.”

This experience and others like it have me wondering: *How do we tell our story?*

Is the story, “No one will understand our religion. I can’t talk about it with a stranger, especially on a plane!”

Is the story, “We are small. No one has heard of us. This person wouldn’t be interested.”

What if the story changed into, “This is a chance to share how my faith has made a difference in my life.”

What if it is, “People are hungry to know a religion like ours exists—a religion that honors many paths to wisdom and sees the divine imprint of love on every human being.”

How do we tell our stories? How are we equipping one another to share the stories of our lives and our faith? For that matter, what are the stories we choose to tell? Who and what do we include—and who and what do we leave out? Ultimately, what meaning do we draw from the way we tell our stories, and can that meaning change? Can the story change?”

So what do you think? Can our UU story change? What about the story of this congregation? When you tell someone about your UU religion or this church, what kinds of adjectives do you use? Think about it and call out a few. PAUSE. LISTEN.

When the opportunity presents itself, as it did for that young woman on the plane, do you actually talk about what you do on Sunday mornings and how it affects your life? Can you have a substantive conversation with a stranger on an airplane about your faith? And if not, what are you afraid of? What are we afraid of, my friends?

One of the most powerful personal experiences at GA this year was the annual Berry Street Essay, delivered by the Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, who serves the UU fellowship in McHenry, Illinois. The Berry Street Essay dates back to 1824, when Boston Unitarian ministers formed a study group in someone's home so that they could read and discuss theological essays with one another.

These days, the Berry Street Essay is an invited honor among UU ministers. It's the culmination—and the only public event—of the UU Ministers Association's meeting in the days before GA officially begins. I attended with Michelle Collins.

[By the way, all of these talks and sermons are online, both in written and video format. Try Googling "UUA GA 2015" and clicking on "multimedia coverage." The Berry Street Essay is at the Minister's Association website: uuma.org.]

The title of Rev. Dennison's essay is "Mission Impossible: Why Failure Is Not an Option."

Rev. Sean characterized his title as "a play on words, an attempt to be clever." But, he immediately explained, "What I mean by 'failure is not an option' is not that ministers, Unitarian Universalists, or human beings, cannot or should not fail. When I say, 'failure is not an option,' I mean that we cannot help but fail. And if our mission is big enough we will fail."

Thus, the reason that failure is not an option is that failure is inevitable.

SKIP?

[What Sean Dennison wants us to address is our fear of failure—and our socially constructed, culturally ingrained need to exhibit "hyper-competence." To be the expert. To think that we either know or can figure out the solution to every problem, every ill, because we're so smart.

[Think about it: If we weren't really smart, we wouldn't have become Unitarian Universalists in the first place. We might still be speaking in tongues or believing in God or stuck in any number of secret spiritual silos—and we would be afraid to “fail” at Unitarian Universalism by revealing our deepest feelings and longings.]

In his essay, Sean Dennison wrote: “As long as we are frozen in our tracks by the fear that we might fail—or more accurately, that others might find out we fail—we are stuck thinking small, making only the safest of plans that we already know will succeed.”

But, he said, “I am here to tell you: You might as well go ahead and plan to fail, because you're going to do it anyway. You already are.”

So, what else are we afraid of?

Some of us may be afraid, like Marlin Lavanhar's Pentecostal humanist, to openly name our deepest beliefs or spiritual practices. This affects our personal relationship with this community. Many have come to Unitarian Universalism seeking the spiritual freedom that we promise, only to find that certain ways of believing or certain spiritual practices are unwelcome.

Still others who come to Unitarian Universalist churches find a class and social structure that makes them uncomfortable. None of us would intentionally assert class or social privilege, and in most cases, what visitors experience isn't aimed at them.

But a larger system is at work—and Unitarian Universalism is a system with its own inherited traditions and culture. Here's a story that highlights one aspect of our system—one that I think we're very, very afraid to acknowledge or address.

I've asked Richard to tell us Sean Dennison's story about a friend who was known as Real Live Preacher. Richard ...

[RICHARD]

Once upon a time, when the Internet was still shiny and new and there were no blogs, but only LiveJournals and UseNet groups, an independent Baptist minister who called himself “Real Live Preacher” (imagine a carnival barker yelling, “I got your Real Live Preacher right here...”) began writing about ministry and theology and life. I found him online and was fascinated as I watched his fame and community grow. He moved his writing to its own blog domain, signed a book contract and added a chatroom where a motley interfaith crew began hanging out. He was, by all accounts, an Internet success.

Eventually, this Real Live Preacher and I became friends. Not just “oh-hi-I-know-you-on-the-Internet” friends, but “I-call-you-when-my-son-is-in-jail-or-my-teenage-daughter-is-pregnant” friends.

We became the kind of friends who understand the whirlwind life of being a minister in a rascally, independent, congregation; the kind of friends who don’t get upset when long silences fall between them and distance keeps them from meeting face-to-face.

And then, about three years ago, Real Live Preacher left the ministry. Even though I knew he’d been struggling for a while, I was shocked. I read all his explanations, even picked up the phone and called to hear him say the words himself, but I was still confused and truthfully, scared. This friend and colleague who meant so much to me—whose stories and encouragement and support got me through some of the hardest times of my life—he just ... quit. And he was happy about it; or at least, relieved.

I didn’t have a chance to ask him about his decision in person until this past November, when I went to Texas over Thanksgiving for some self-care and healing time with a dear colleague. My host graciously allowed me to invite Real Live Preacher to join us at the family *tamalada*, where we would all get our hands and shirts dirty and our bellies full while stocking the freezer with tamales for Christmas. It was then, after hours of rolling and steaming and packing up tamales, that I finally had the chance to ask. “Tell me, Preacher, why did you leave the ministry? I mean the *real* reason. The one you don’t tell just everybody. I need to know.”

As I remember it, he was silent for a minute—the kind of silence that happens when you know you’re going to say something so true that it could change everything. And then he told me. And what he told me has been like an arrow in my heart and a weight on my chest ever since. His answer is a sore spot in my heart, and I’ve been probing it like a broken tooth ever since, alternately repelled and fascinated by the pain.

His answer: “I had to leave the ministry *because I could no longer serve the over-served...*”

Wow. Are we the “over-served?”

Are we the over-served that Real Live Preacher is no longer able to serve?

This made me wonder about First Unitarian. During my 14 years in this congregation, we’ve been through seven assistant, associate, interim, and senior ministers.

Have we been asking our professional ministers to serve our needs rather than helping us serve the needs of the world?

Is our vision of ministry so small that all we require are the amenities of church—intellectual stimulation, personal care, and conflict-free management?

The over-served become consumers of church who, like the consumers on TripAdvisor or Yelp, award stars for good service—for well-made sermons, beautiful music, and a pleasant ambience. (Don’t get me wrong—these things are important.) But as a result, do we make “only the safest of plans that we already know will succeed?”

It’s time for us to look beyond what Sean Dennison calls “the myth of perfection” and take on a “big enough mission that failure will be inevitable.” And, because we are already failing, will always be failing, we need not be afraid of such a mission for ourselves, our congregation, and our religion.

We might start by recognizing how Unitarian Universalism’s inherited traditions and culture have aligned our denomination—and this congregation—with “the over-served, the privileged, and the powerful.” To have a mission so big that failure is inevitable, we need to examine ourselves first, both individually and collectively.

This can be a really sensitive subject. When talking about privilege and power, it's really important to acknowledge that some among us are neither privileged nor powerful—and for others, it is only true in certain ways or at certain times.

But as UUs, we are part of a system that is steeped in patterns of privilege, which many of us internalize and replicate without conscious thought. This is difficult for many of us to see, because privilege becomes the lens through which we see the world—and it prevents certain kinds of awareness and closes off certain kinds of relationships.

And it's not just Unitarian Universalism. Unchallenged notions of privilege, power, and perfection permeate our entire society. In our culture, Sean Dennison writes, "Perfection is young. It is white. It is male. It is healthy. It is able-bodied. It is thin. It is athletic. It is heterosexual. It is Christian. It is economically 'comfortable.'" Each and every one of us is measured against this ideal. And we are all taught to measure each other as well. And when any one of us is judged to be lacking, it is never the fault of the system or the standards, but the fault of the individual, who just didn't measure up."

In his essay, Sean Dennison describes the basis of this privilege as the notion that some people are more worthy than others—that their ideas, needs, and very existence is more important.

It's easy for us to reject this analysis. Most of us would say that this isn't true—that we see everyone as equally worthy. After all, we're UUs!

But think about the notion of perfection and the meaning of failure, and ask yourself—ask your neighbor—what does that mean for our professions of equality, worth, and dignity?

A mission big enough that failure is inevitable.

Let me close with a final story from General Assembly that illustrates what I mean by such a mission.

On Sunday afternoon, the final debate at GA had to do with an Action of Immediate Witness calling on UUs to support the Black Lives Matter movement. This resolution had been brought to the Assembly by the Youth Caucus, who had gathered the required signatures and, on Friday, convinced the delegates that it deserved to be among the three AIWs that reached a floor vote on the final afternoon of the gathering.

The other two, as I mentioned earlier, called for the closure of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) family detention centers and support for local, national, and international climate justice campaigns. Each of these passed within minutes, but the Black Lives Matter resolution got so bogged down in a parliamentary debate over language that it took well over an hour to get to a final vote. [I had to leave for the airport at noon that day, so I was not there. But I have read the reports in UU World and watched the entire thing on video online.]

Debate at General Assembly is conducted with three microphones, with each speakers recognized in turn by the moderator. There's a "Pro" mic for the proponents, a "Con" mic for the opponents, and a "Procedural" mic for questions about process and points of order. The moderator alternates between the Pro and Con mics, and each speaker is strictly limited to two minutes. But the rules require that speakers at the Procedural mic be recognized immediately, and their questions must be addressed before debate can continue and a final vote can be taken.

In fact, there appeared to be little or no opposition to the Black Lives Matter resolution, but some in the resolution that was questioned on a point of order at the Procedural microphone.

The language in question called for member congregations and all Unitarian Universalists to "work toward police reform and prison abolition." It was "prison abolition"—a relatively new term in the current conversation on mass incarceration—that hung up the Assembly for more than an hour. What does it mean: "prison abolition?"

The hour-long parliamentary wrangle over this term, I suppose, showed UUs at their best—questioning everything. But it was also UUs at their worst—failing to think about what their quibbling over words meant not only to black UUs, but to the hundreds of young people of all races who brought forth the resolution in support of Black Lives Matter. Eventually, the resolution was amended to define prison abolition as “replacing the current prison system with a system that is more just and equitable.” But was this necessary?

The AIW passed with overwhelming support, but in the process, deep hurts were uncovered. At one point, the pain that became so obvious as the vote was delayed caused the GA chaplains to stop the process for prayer and reflection.

Are we in favor of “prison abolition?” Is that a big enough goal for a church with a big enough mission that makes failure inevitable? Of course, abolishing prisons in 2015 is impractical, and, some would say, impossible. But could we dream of—and work toward—a society that has no need for prisons? Where laws are just and we take care of our violators in ways that keep them in the beloved community rather than discarding them?

Now that’s the kind of super-sized mission that—if we are no longer afraid of failure—we can embrace.

May it be so. And may we be the ones that make it so.