

3300 UUs, on Their Feet, Singing & Dancing  
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Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg  
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I. Dave

I was first inspired to attend General Assembly back somewhere in the 1980s, attending a service like this, in which our GA delegation – this was at the Arlington, Virginia, UU Church – gave their report on GA in Atlanta, Georgia. I decided that I would like to be a delegate next year. And Kerry and I went to Rochester, New York, the following June. All I remember of their report on the Atlanta GA was how slow the hotel elevators were, with everyone trying to leave for the next plenary session at the same time.

There are so many events at General Assembly, that just to list everything, without description or commentary, would take the rest of the morning, and some of the afternoon, too, I'm sure.

This was election year. Duly authorized delegates from member congregations of the UUA elect our national leaders. For president, the Rev. Peter Morales, the incumbent, was reelected without opposition. But for moderator, two candidates sought to replace Gini Courter, who had been moderator for so long – ten years – that many of those in attendance had never known another one.

Jim Key is about 70 years old; he lives in North Carolina. Tamara Payne-Alex, much younger, is a 1986 graduate of Swarthmore College; she lives in California. Not being an official delegate and thus not having a vote, I did not try to decide who I favored between these two apparently quite well qualified but, superficially, at least, quite different candidates. Jim won by about 40 votes, receiving 51.1 percent of the vote. He will be the first man to serve as moderator since I started paying attention.

Here is the concluding paragraph of Gini Courter's final Moderator's report:

If we are to fulfill our promise, if we are to be the religion for our time and for all time, you will have to learn to love in a way you have not yet learned. You will have to vision in a way you have grown unaccustomed to, and you will have to preach and demand accountability in a way that is uncomfortable. But if you can do all those things, my friends, in addition to what you do today, there is no power between the atom and the stars that will slow us down. Go well and go loved.

And, looking to the future, here is Jim Key's vision for Unitarian Universalism:

**Imagine: A faith community** of vibrant and agile congregations and communities who practice radical hospitality and whose only creed is love and compassion.

**Imagine: Our numbers growing** by reaching all those who share our values and, thus, reflecting the changing demographics of the nation.

**Imagine: Influencing public policy** on issues of human and civil rights through unbridled energy, strengthened interfaith connections, and true partnering with secular groups working toward common goals.

**Imagine: Using our historic emphasis** on the inherent worth of each individual and on covenantal communities to leverage our strength as we model and build a world where we all flourish together – no exceptions.

**Imagine: Our UUA leadership** modeling beloved community.

## II. Kerry

For many years, the annual ministerial cycle has been the same for me: the high in September, when the congregations regathers, followed by holiday highlights of Thanksgiving and Christmas, Solstice, New Year, Martin Luther King Day, Easter, whatever the congregation celebrates, all bracketed by the annual gathering of the waters and the flower communion. Somewhere in April or May begins the long slow slide to exhaustion and that final sprint to General Assembly, where thousands of Unitarian Universalists come together to do the business of the denomination, to worship together, to share ideas, see old friends. It is exhilarating.

This year was different for me. General Assembly snuck up on me. I wasn't prepared. Perhaps because the September high lasted all year, with this lovely congregation. Perhaps because the rigors of sharing a 1/4 time job didn't leave me totally wiped out. Perhaps because we weren't actually delegates, and were not subject to the usual constraints of voting and deciding. Usually I study the catalog and make an elaborate schedule, with two or three choices in each time slot, knowing I will have to make last minute decisions – sometimes based on where a workshop is being offered, or whether it is overfull, or actually because some new idea begins to color all my thinking. This time, I barely had time to glance at the catalog. Usually I plan to attend all the plenary sessions, to take in all the reports and vote on all the resolutions. And those things are well worth doing. Some say they are the only really valuable things at GA.

But since we weren't delegates, and since getting around the huge spaces has become increasingly difficult for me, I decided to do just what appealed to me most about General Assembly. First came a lot of on-line discussion about how this GA would be different. The main topic of discussion was – restrooms. The plan was for the restrooms nearest to the big events – the plenary sessions and the Exhibit Hall, to all be labeled as gender neutral. This occasioned some anxiety, as you can imagine. But actually, it all made sense, if you knew the back story. The sort of thing that most of us, in our unconscious privilege as unambiguous men and women never have to think about.

But for a few people, the label on the rest room is a big issue. People who are transgendered, whose body types don't quite match their internal gender identity, are often in a

difficult position. Maybe they are in the process of surgical and hormonal alteration, or they may simply dress in a way more suitable for their internal identity, people who are genetically or physically intersex, people whose identity is ambiguous, these folks are all faced with what restroom to use. And if the other users of that room are startled or annoyed by their presence, it can lead to unpleasant interactions.

This year, GA was meant to make life better for these people. The rule is, just assume that people know what bathroom they should use, and be polite. Despite all the anxious discussion, it worked out pretty well in practice. The paper signs read “This restroom is for everybody” but you could still see the permanent labels, and I never saw anyone unusual and as far as I know, there were no incidents. Of course, I confess didn’t go to plenaries where I would have heard the reports of the Right Relations Team.

There is one bit of language that I learned from this discussion, which may be useful for you to know. People whose bodies don’t exactly match their understanding of themselves are called Trans. A trans man is one who may have been believed to be female as a child, but who identifies now as male. Those whose bodies and identities are less complicated are called Cis, C-I-S, as in “I am a cis woman.” It’s from Latin, and I think there is a flaw in the metaphor, but I’m just a persnickety former Latin teacher so what do you expect? For now that’s what they are called if you want to be polite.

In any case, GA isn’t all just discussions of bathrooms and justice for the oppressed among us. I also went to a great workshop, but I’ll tell you about that a bit later.

### III. Dave

Would I still attend General Assembly if I were unable to sing in the choir there? I don’t know. It hasn’t happened yet. For the first several years of my GA attendance, I sang in the GA choir. It rehearses daily during GA and then, back then, it would do a concert near the end of GA. Some years ago, I started singing in the ministers’ choir, which sings at a special service during the pre-GA ministers conference and also at the Service of the Living Tradition. I’ve actually done both choirs the same year, but it doesn’t leave you much time for other activities. The ministers’ choirs are usually led by music professionals serving our churches.

Our leaders this year were David Smith and Rick Fortner, both of the whom serve All Souls Church, Tulsa. The first rehearsal, Monday evening, was a shock. They expected us to learn much of the music that we would perform, in about 36 hours, by ear, without any notes to look at. Hear it, repeat it, memorize it, remember it tomorrow. First the sopranos, then the altos, then sopranos and altos together, then tenors, then the three parts together, then basses, then all four parts together. “Why couldn’t we have the music?” I asked myself. With the music we could learn in 5 minutes what would take a half hour doing it by their slow procedure. And would the result be any better? I don’t think so. And would I remember my part tomorrow? I don’t think so.

I should note that for the music that we were learning without the benefit of ink on paper – actually, for some we were given the words, but not the notes – for that music, our leaders didn't have any music either. David had the music in his head, or possibly he was creating the harmonies on the spot.

Now, it occurred to me that some of the singers would decide not to come back for the next rehearsal, that they would drop out. I decided, I realized, that I could not, I would not do this. I would stick with the program. But I didn't like it.

I also realized that if I was unhappy about what David and Rick were doing – who should I talk to? Yes, I should talk to them, not just complain to a fellow choir member or to Kerry. And I realized that when I talked to them I should do it in a gentle, constructive way. I should tell them how much I liked the music – which I did, very much. And then I should mention that for me – I'm only speaking from my own experience – that I find it much easier to learn new music if I have the score in front of me.

But when the rehearsal ended, our leaders were busy talking to others and planning for the next day, and I had a dinner engagement waiting.

And despite knowing that I should share my concerns directly with David and Rick, I permitted myself to mention my preference for written music with Gretchen Wood, a minister I've known for many years – and a minister who's a musician as well. If I expected agreement or even sympathy from her, I should have known better. A brief summary of her response would be "Dave, get over it." She reminded me that Pentecostals and African Americans sometimes do music differently from what I'm accustomed to, and I should go along with the program. Which, of course, I did.

We sang at the Wednesday morning worship service honoring ministers who had completed 25 and 50 years of service, with one from each group giving a sermon. The class representatives preached well, and we sang well, as I was confident we would.

Lunch that day, for ministers who paid the extra fee, was in one of the ballrooms of the hotel in which we were meeting, and by chance, I ended up sitting next to David, one of our choir directors.

But let me fill you in with some background on All Souls Church in Tulsa. Several years ago, the minister of a large African American Pentecostal Church decided or realized that he was a universalist – that's with a small "u". That is, he rejected the idea of hell and took the position that everyone goes to heaven, the God rejects no one. His preaching universalism caused a split in his congregation, and the pastor and a minority of his flock sought refuge at All Souls. Among those making the migration was David, their music director. The pastor has since moved on, but David has been leading choirs at All Souls in making a joyful noise to the Lord, or whoever, ever since.

At lunch, David told me that he had recognized me, and reminded me that he had brought the youth choir from Tulsa to sing in a worship service in Fayetteville, Arkansas, while Kerry and I were the ministers there. The youth choir was great, and I don't believe that they were holding any music.

I told David that I enjoyed singing with him and Rick, and that I thought the morning's service went well and expected that Saturday evening's service would go just as well. I thanked him for the experience of learning music in a new way but acknowledged that I still felt more comfortable with the traditional approach, that is, what for me was the traditional approach.

Rick, by the way, the other half of the All Souls musical duo, was equally talented and versatile, though his musical journey appears to have been quite different. He has, he told us, from time to time earned his living, or at least supplemented his income, as a hotel lounge pianist, playing requests, with a tip jar on top of the piano. He mentioned how he could play one piece with his left hand, while shaking hands with an admirer with his right and discussing what he might play next.

What I did not object to were the words that we were asked to sing. A lot of God language. My simplistic approach is, whatever my theological stance, if you're *singing* the words, it's OK. Especially if it's in Latin, which this wasn't. Beyond that, think metaphor; appreciate the beauty of the music, the tradition, the commitment that it represents.

We sang "Ishe Oluwa," not in Latin, but in Yoruba. The words, in English, are "The works of God can never be destroyed." And we sang Bobby McFerrin's setting of the 23rd Psalm. You'll find that in our hymnal supplement, *Singing the Journey*, #1038. With the proper music, as well as words, before us, we sang Natsha Bedingfield's "Unwritten." At the end of the Service of the Living Tradition, we sang "O Lord, Give Us Power," second verse "Freedom," third verse, "Singing." I wish I could remember the tune. I Googled it without success.

We sang "Spirit of the Living God." But not with the normal harmony you'll find in the hymnal – not our hymnal – but with the beautiful, surprising, enchanting harmony that David taught. This is not a hymn from my Presbyterian childhood. But from when I first learned it, probably in seminary, I have found it irresistible, though I have serious reservations about its theology. This is our request to God: "move me, mold me, fill me, use me" – God's actually doing this would appear to compromise our autonomy and responsibility, giving God too much control over our lives. On the other hand, if we view God as embodied in the beloved community, or in our highest moral principles, or in our ultimate concern, then maybe it's OK. Let's sing it now. Originally, it was a single verse; I've added several more. Don't worry, we won't do all of them. Let's do verses 1, 2, 7, and 8.

(1) Spirit of the Living God,  
 Fall afresh on me. (2x)  
 Move me, mold me,  
 Fill me, use me.  
 Spirit of the Living God,  
 Fall afresh on me.

words & music: Daniel Iverson (1926)

(2) Spirit of our living faith,  
 Come and dwell in us. (2x)  
 Prove us, scold us,  
 Test us, bless us.  
 Spirit of our living faith,  
 Come and dwell in us.

(7) Spirit of the song of life,  
 May I join your voice? (2x)  
 I will sing in  
 Your choir ever.  
 Spirit of the song of life,  
 May I join your voice?

(8) Spirit of community,  
 Let us be your hands. (2x)  
 Side by side we  
 Work together  
 Spirit of community,  
 Let us be your hands.

#### IV. Kerry

One of the big ideas buzzing around the denomination is about big changes coming to Unitarian Universalism in the next generation. It's not just about Unitarian Universalism. The institutional nature of religion is changing, in ways we do not yet fathom. Let me say that not everyone agrees on this idea. Dave is a detail-oriented person, and he will ask very thoughtful and pointed questions about how you might get from here to there, and who will fund it all anyway. I am a big picture person, and I say, yes, something is happening, I wonder how it will be. Whether it means the end of everything as we know it or a magnificent opportunity for the values upheld by Unitarian Universalists isn't clear to me, and I don't have the capacity or the responsibility to make it happen. But many of our younger ministers have great ideas about missionality – living out our values, rather than organizing committees, and challenging people to dive to the depths of their spirits rather than argue endlessly about the details of doctrine that don't mean much anyway. So I went to a workshop called Occupy Your Faith, by the Rev. Beth Ellen Cooper-Davis. She's part of a group of ministers and forward looking lay people called the

Red Pill Brethren. “Don’t worry,” she said, right off the bat, “we’re Third Wave Feminists. We can be brethren.”

What Ellen offered was a roadmap for our next steps as people of liberal religion, one loosely inspired by the Occupy movement. First, she reminded us of that old TV SciFi show, Star Trek. How did it work, she asked, that wherever the crew went, anywhere in the universe, they found intelligent races that spoke English? The Universal Translator. Every Unitarian Universalist needs a universal translator – our neighbors, Christians and non-Christians, conservatives and liberals, use a lot of religious language, words that may have many different meanings, some of which would be most useful for us, especially when we want to ally ourselves with other progressives in projects of social justice. We can no longer afford to hold ourselves aloof from people who are our natural allies. We need to be able to communicate with them, to find common principles. We can’t afford to indulge our allergies any more. And so she elicited from the audience all those words that make them edgy. One after another: faith, grace, prayer, she had a list of 40 or 50. And then she went through and translated them into terms that are useful and healthy for us. With that tool in hand, Ellen went on to use a word from our Christian heritage: EASTER. We are an Easter people.

E – Educate yourselves. Know the history and sources of Unitarian Universalism. Know the Bible and how to read it as a progressive. Yes, Virginia, she said, we can read the Bible with our reason intact. The alternative is isolation, and ultimately decline.

A – Articulate your own beliefs. Work on your theology and see how it connects to the people around us. For Ellen, the universal translator is especially important – she serves a church in Texas, and if she can’t articulate her faith in terms her neighbors can hear, she will not be able to stand on the side of love with others.

S – Service. This is essential. We are not here merely to huddle together and feel superior to our backward surroundings. We are here to bless the world, to make it a better place. Ellen uses those scary words. Begin, she says by asking what is salvific. What saves us? Saves us from what, you may ask. Saves us from global climate change, from the ills of poverty and ignorance, from the war on women, from the never ending lure of racism, from all the challenges and erosions of the world. What creates wholeness and holiness in the lives of human beings, Ellen asks. Then figure out how to make that wholeness manifest in the world and find ways of being with others who are also doing the same.

T – Transformation. Ellen invited us to radically embrace our neighbors, to know who is our neighbor, to become the change we want to see in the world.

She skipped the second E, and then spelled the end of EASTER with R’s.

R – Relocation, Redistribution, Reconciliation. These are the ways by which we take everything deeper. Ellen asks: In what ways do you live your faith out on the ground now? How could you take that one step deeper? What would it look like lived out as fully as possible?

That's the six-minute version of a two-hour workshop, which itself is the condensation of a lifetime commitment towards living our faith as if we meant it.

This is just a little taste of the great riches of General Assembly. I've left out my favorite part, spending hours in the Exhibit Hall, talking with the artists who make flaming chalices jewelry and clergy stoles, buying little tschockes for my granddaughters, and something for the fund raising auction here, collecting pencils and brochures and postcards and temporary tattoos from all sorts of UU organizations, visiting with all the different UU theological groups, from Humanists to Christians, to Buddhists, to Mystics, to Pagans. Buying books at the bookstore and Beacon Press. Grabbing lunch with an old friend or talking to someone you don't know yet. Oh, and the opening and closing ceremonies and everybody's best sermon. I recommend you go on line and watch the sermon from the Service of the Living Tradition. Rev. Vanessa Southern begins with these same questions of the future of religion in the United States, and she reaches into your heart and mind and shakes. Who will we be? How will we promote our values in the next century? How will we save the world? Vanessa had us, thirty three hundred Unitarian Universalists on their feet, clapping and singing and dancing in the aisles.

General Assembly is a marvelous experience. Next year, you can be part of it, on line as an off-site delegate or in person – in Providence. Don't miss your chance.