

## **August 12, 2018: “Gems and Pearls”**

### **Sermon Parts 1-3**

#### **Part 1: “A Community Experience”**

My name is Judy Bentley and I want to share with you about community at GA.

In 2014, I went to the Mountain Desert District Assembly in Sheridan Wyoming to be elected MDD Board Vice President. This was my first experience with a small gathering of UUs from across the District. I met my fellow board members who have become friends and then Regional Lead, Nancy Bowen who has since retired and is a member of our church and also my friend.

In 2015, 17 and 18, I attended General Assembly in Portland, OR, New Orleans, LA and Kansas City, MO.

From these gatherings and my work on the MDD Board, I have become friends with UUs from Alaska, Boston, North Carolina, Wyoming, California, Utah and more. And although they might live 800 or more miles away and I only see them once each year at GA, I know I could call on them and they would be right there beside me. Some like Elizabeth Terry who works for the UUA in Stewardship and Development or Carey McDonald who is Executive Vice President of the UUA have been to Albuquerque and to this Church. Carey spoke from our pulpit. Elizabeth and I had dinner when she was here, hung out in old town, came to our service Sunday morning and went to breakfast with members of the Denominational Affairs Team. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, Congregational Life Staff did a training with several church boards last Saturday in Los Alamos and then gave the sermon here on Sunday. All the past GAs I've attended have been opportunities to build my relationship with these amazing people, and that continued this year in Kansas City.

At GA this year, I became particularly close to two women from California. We became fast friends as we attended workshops together and walked, shopped and ate while we waited for night time GA activities. In fact, Peggy and Mara joined us for dinner one night to enjoy the local delicacy of burnt ends. I know what it sounds like but they actually a very delicious part of brisket.

In New Orleans I shared an Airbnb with Peggy, Mara and Martha Kettle along with our friends from the Los Alamos church. It was a lot of fun to get to know them so well as I'm sure Alana did with 4 others from our church this year. At the last 2 GAs, Angela and Dan arranged for the delegates attending from this church to get together. It was

really fun to see everyone outside of Albuquerque and their usual roles and routines and have dinner together as a large group and powerful to talk about how we were differently experiencing GA. GA is a community-building experience with friends both near and far. If you have the chance to attend a future GA, I highly recommend you take it so you can really get a sense of belonging to the larger community of Unitarian Universalism.

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I am Peggy Roberts and recently attended the UUA Annual General Assembly for the third time over 6 years, and second as a delegate from our congregation at First Unitarian. This experience affirmed the importance of community in my denominational identity, starting with my partner, Mara, and I traveling by Amtrak to Kansas City picking up other UUs along the route. Lodging near the convention center there, we joined the legion of 3,000 religious liberal UUs for 5 days for business, worship, educational, and advocacy meetings.

As I am involved locally with congregational and interfaith social justice groups in support of immigrants and refugees including expanded sanctuary efforts, I focused at GA on learning more about the mission and work on these issues by organizations such as UUA and UUSC as well as by other congregations and community groups. Through opportunities to network, gather resource materials, attend workshops and hear members of impacted communities, I gained greater understanding about issues, concerns and needed actions. I return home committed to further the community education, program, service and advocacy efforts supporting our neighbors and others impacted locally and nationally.

Unexpectedly, I had an experience affecting the intersectionality of my personal and community identities and history. I am a Unitarian since childhood, a family physician who trained in Kansas over 40 years ago, and also a lesbian feminist, who spent a decade in Boston providing care for men and women diagnosed with AIDS early in the epidemic. It was announced early at GA that Westboro Baptist Church members were coming from Topeka to protest our liberal UU denomination's meeting. This family church group is long known for claiming that gays deserve AIDS and has even protested at funerals of those who died. I instinctively knew that I wanted to join the small group of UUs planning a peaceful counter gathering. Carrying our signs of welcome and love for all, we walked out of the building, sang and stood together across the street from the 6 protesters, remaining as a group until after they left almost an hour later. I was truly affirmed by my action and presence that afternoon among this community of new UU friends.

As an added commentary, I wish to express my appreciation and respect for efforts taken by the UUA, and evident this year and last at GA, to reevaluate the commitment to diversity and challenge the white supremacy culture and organizational structure that has constrained our denomination. As delegates, we chose the first woman president of UUA last year, and voted this year to change our bylaws and sources to make them more gender inclusive, add a youth member to the board, and allow religious educators to gain full delegate status. The UUA board and staff are increasing diversity in their membership and leadership in their organizational and GA operations. Our UU denomination, as well as individual UU congregations, have this opportunity in time with better understanding and resources for introspection and consideration on how to be more inclusive, diverse, welcoming, and relevant liberal faith communities. I fully support making these efforts

## **Part 2: “A Justice Experience”**

After deciding to attend GA, representing the Young Adult group from our congregation, I checked out the UUA website to learn more. This was my first time attending GA and I didn't know what to expect. The theme was “All Are Called” and I tried to assess what that meant. I'm part of “all”, so what was I called to do exactly?

As a congregation, there are several things we have felt called to do recently. For some of us, this includes social justice work. And for some of us (myself included), this involves becoming a more diverse and inclusive religion and congregation.

It didn't take long to realize this type of justice work was a priority for many at GA. There were a lot of conversations — some I was a part; some I overheard — about how we should be a more inclusive faith. How do we let the rest of the world know our religion is welcoming and open to all, including non-white, non-college-educated, non-upper-middle class, non-able-bodied, and youth.

I feel lucky to live in a city that's diverse. I realized this at the registration table and saw I was the only one in attendance with the last name Rodriguez — the ninth most common surname in the United States. Growing up in NM, and raised primarily in a family with Spanish, Mexican, and Native American lineage, I identify as a “person of color”. But as a light-skinned middle-class woman, I also recognize my own privilege.

Being a diverse faith cannot mean tokenizing those who look different than those we're used to seeing in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings; justice work of this nature must go deeper than that.

One of the most enlightening experiences I had was when I attended a networking event on reproductive justice hosted by Trust Women, whose mission is “To open clinics that provide abortion care in underserved communities so that all women can make their own decisions about their health care.” I had just learned about a week before leaving for GA that my 16-year-old daughter is expecting her first child, due in September. This news came as a shock to our family, and required a bit of processing. I was doing a lot of that while at GA, and wanted to see what this workshop was all about.

Most of the conversation revolved around what our congregations can do, or continue to do, to help with reproductive justice efforts. Someone asked if the staff at the Trust Women clinics let young women who come in for care know, that studies show very young women who terminate a pregnancy accomplish more in life than those who choose to become parents. I felt my blood pressure rise. My maternal instincts are strong. I had to defend my daughter, and others like her.

I kept calm, raised my hand, and shared my reality. I told this room full of strangers that although I think it’s important for those studies and facts to be shared among everyone, what we must be careful not to do is sway young would-be parents in the direction we think they should go because then we are no better than those who tell us ending a pregnancy will lead to a lifetime of mental and emotional anguish.

I told them about my daughter, and about how she is choosing, even after having every option explained to her, to raise her son with the help of family and friends. Reproductive justice absolutely must include the right for women to choose if and when they become parents, and then supporting them in whatever decision they make regardless of age. What my daughter, and those like her need, is support that comes from a place of love and non-judgment. We ARE all called to do this work.

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Our denomination has been working hard on inclusion, but sometimes things get in the way.

One item of GA business was to vote on whether to amend the UUA by-laws to use gender neutral pronouns (“they”, instead of “he or she”). Then a floor proposal was made to change the amendment by just eliminating pronouns altogether (and always use the position title), instead of using “incorrect grammar”. The vote on eliminating pronouns was the only one at GA that was too close to call by a show of hands: we had to count every vote. We UUs really care about proper grammar.

Now, I understand that: in fact, my family gave me a mug that says “Grammar Police”. Where most police department mottos are “Serve and Protect”, we grammar police “Serve and Correct” (The mug was not a thank-you gift).

In the end, the “no pronouns” proposal lost, and the original amendment passed. The language in the UUA by-laws will now use the gender-neutral pronoun “they”.

I’d be willing to bet that most of you also care about proper grammar (even if it doesn’t bother you when people say “different than” when I know they mean “different from”).

So let me tell you why I came to terms with gender neutral pronouns:

First, I believe we all deserve the right to our own identities, and it’s important to honor that.

Second, there are people I care about in this congregation who are gender non-binary: that is, they don’t see themselves as wholly female or wholly male, but with elements of both.

And third, I realized we DO have a very common gender-neutral pronoun in English that we use all the time, with the same verb for the singular and the plural. Can anyone tell me what it is????

Okay, a hint: It’s not 3rd person, but 2nd person. That’s right, it’s YOU. Think about it.

So I’ve committed myself to use “they” that same way for anyone I know is non-binary. How will I know? Our denomination has started adding preferred pronouns to name tags, and our church is discussing that, too. You may have already seen that at some of our events.

I know it will take conscious effort for me to make this change, so I plan to practice. I hope YOU will join me in getting past the grammar issue to make ALL welcome here in our beloved community. Thank you.

### **Part 3: “A Spiritual Experience”**

My name is Mara Hoffman.

I found this past GA to be spiritually uplifting, thank heavens, because I see a lot of needed work as I continue to learn how to connect with others going forward.

Spirituality is an awareness of the gap between what you can experience and what you can describe.

One particular experience I had at GA encouraged me to continue on my path of embracing our UU's 7th Principle,

I covenant to affirm and promote: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Between 2001 and 2009, I worked on the Green Sanctuary Project, which helped establish Earth WEB here, traveled to Ghost Ranch, El Paso, and across the border into Mexico, and participated locally in a number of actions, workshops, and retreats that have helped me understand the importance of working towards climate justice.

So I thought I was fairly involved and had a strong understanding.

But this year at GA as I listened during the workshop "Called to Intersections of Justice", that had 4 outstanding presenters, I realized that I've only scratched the surface regarding our 7th UU Principle.

I listened to 4 outstanding presenters: the Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti, Rev. Jennifer Nordstrom, Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt, and Rev. Kathleen McTigue.

These 4 presenters were discussing a new book called "Justice for Earth: people of faith working at the intersections of race, class, and the Environment", which is the 2018-19 UU Common Read. They were far from wanting to sugar coat anything about the future of our existence.

And, these presenters are just 4 of 24 writers of this powerful book.

This workshop at GA made me realize how connected we all are, to each other and to the Earth. This spiritual experience at GA has inspired me to immerse myself with others as we come to grips with how we're to become active in and with our community and it's many challenges going forward. I think participating in the 2018-19 UU Common Read is a great place to start.

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I certainly learned things at GA: from workshops, from conversations, from observation, and from participation. But GA is not only about learning. And it's about more than conducting our business.

In recent years, some have noted that GA is becoming more Spirit-filled and Justice-oriented.

Now, when Kelsey Atherton said that we are putting the Universalism back in Unitarian Universalism, I think the orientation toward justice in that theme is clear. But I believe that becoming more spirit-filled is another way we are living into our Universalism.

Some Unitarian Universalists refer to our Unitarian heritage as “the Head” of our faith tradition, and our Universalist heritage as “the Heart”.

If there is some truth to this, then putting the Universalism back in Unitarian Universalism means embracing the heart, and the truth it reveals that is beyond analyzing, defining, and understanding. Sometimes the language of the heart is in feelings, and truths are felt, not articulated in words.

So, as many opportunities as there are to learn at GA, I found myself drawn to the experiential parts of GA that evoked a feeling in me. The moments that resonated with me most strongly, I have few words for to describe my take-aways.

I can tell you about the experiences themselves, but the wisdom I took from these moments is felt more than spoken.

The first moment that struck me was hearing Dr. Emily Jaworski sing “The World is Unraveling” in the opening worship service on the first night of GA. Her voice, and that song, pierced me, straight to my heart. It was so sad, true, and hauntingly beautiful all at the same time. Video of that service is on the UUA website, and while hearing it on your computer isn’t the same as being in the room, it is still worth watching.

The other deep truth that stuck with me is the wisdom from the sermon of that same service. Rev. Rebekah Savage shared the meaning of the phrase, Olam Chesed Yibaneh, I will build this world from Love. The power of this phrase is not to be taken literally. We are not physically building anything out of love. But there is truth and wisdom in the idea that if all we do is based in love for ourselves and one another, then the world will be a better place. That rings so true to the very core of my being.

Spiritual Experiences are about connecting to something greater than ourselves. For some, that “something greater” is God; for some it is truth and wisdom; and for some it is community. Whatever it’s called, I experienced it at General Assembly. And I have come back inspired to share it with you. I want to create experiences in our worship services here that reveal deeply felt spiritual truths. May our hearts be open to receive them.

The world is unraveling.

Olam Chesed Yibaneh.

We will build this world from Love.