



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Celebrating the Journey” ©

Three homilies delivered February 17, 2013
At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*No single decision you ever made has led in a straight line to where you find yourself now.
You peeked down some roads and took a few steps before turning back. You followed
some roads that came to a dead end and others that got lost at too many intersections.
Ultimately, all roads are connected to all other roads. Deepak Chopra*

*Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you. You must travel it by yourself. It is not far.
It is within reach. Perhaps you have ben on it since you were born, and did not know.
Perhaps it is everywhere – on water and land. Walt Whitman*

Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now. Maya Angelou

Not all who wander are lost. J.R.R. Tolkien

Homily by Kristin Shea

Hello, My name is Kristin Shea, and I attend UUFA with my husband, Tom Senyitko, and our children, Mia and Jack. We started attending UUFA in 2009, and became members in 2010. I was raised in the Episcopal church, and Tom in the Catholic church. Before we moved to GA in 2009 from Virginia, we talked occasionally about attending church, but it was rarely pressing enough of a desire to get us out of bed on Sunday mornings. When we did attend, and I recited the words I had been trained as a child to recite, I felt like a hypocrite, saying words that held no meaning for me. We also had become cynical about organized religion, as the biggest, most prime pieces of real estate in our county were taken up with huge, fancy church buildings that screamed of great wealth. I harbored resentments about many of the outrageous rules and traditions that some of these religions touted that just made no sense to me.

When we moved our family from Virginia to Georgia, it was a good time to try again to find a church that we could be comfortable with. I wanted our kids to have some experience with God and the origins of the Christian stories that are generally common knowledge.

I had shared with a friend some of our concerns about traditional Christian religions, and she said to me "Why don't you try the Unitarians...they have no creed, and are accepting of whatever beliefs you might have".

That was very intriguing to me! I had never heard of Unitarians before then, but I got online, found the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens (did they seriously have to have such a long name?!), and decided to give it a try. We arrived at UUFA, and were immediately greeted by a number of very friendly faces.... Frank, Deb Keys and Paul Schliekelman to name a few, all of whom made us feel so welcome. It was the most important part of getting us to come back again, so please remember that any time you see a newcomer on Sunday.

In addition, I remember several things about that first service that made us come back. I remember being thankful that there was no communion ceremony. I remember thinking to myself afterward "I can't recall God being mentioned at all today!" And I remember Tom commenting on the basket in front of the coffee requesting 25 cents for a cup of coffee. We loved it, because it was so contrary to the displays of excessive wealth that we had seen in other churches.

We attended several more weeks after that, and were amazed that every service was entirely different, and you never knew what you were going to get. At UUFA, I love the music, the meditation, that people wear shorts and flip flops to church, and most importantly, the way speakers invite us to decide on our own if we agree or disagree with what is being said.

When I think about what I get out of being a member of UUFA, I often liken it to the 8 years I spent living in London, England. Coming from a small town in Oregon, I knew very little about the big world outside our borders. I grew up with very little diversity of race or of thought, and when I moved to London, I felt like the bubble I was living in burst and my entire world expanded in color. I met so many interesting people of differing nationalities who had grown up in such different environments than I had, and who viewed the world, and America, in such a different way than I did. Similarly, prior to coming to UUFA, I never knew there were so many diverse and interesting beliefs out there.

For example, I never knew about the various Solstice celebrations, I had never heard of Imbolc (just learned that one last week!), or the various Pagan beliefs. And though I had heard of them, I really didn't know what the various Eastern religions stood for. And I really wanted our children to grow up knowing about all of those things, including the story of Jesus, Joseph and Mary.

Which reminds me of the time I first knew that we had done a poor job of educating our kids in any kind of religious history.

My kids are big fans of Carrie Underwood, a country singer from American Idol whose first hit was called "Jesus, Take the Wheel". One day we were on our way to a service at UUFA in which the story of Jesus' crucifixion would be acted out. On the way to the service, I asked the kids if they knew who Jesus was, and they said "Yes". Then I asked if they knew how Jesus died, and my son Jack said, "Did he crash the car when he took the wheel from Carrie Underwood?"

Clearly our kids needed some religious education. But, I wanted our kids to think for themselves about a range of beliefs, and let them decide which ones worked for them. And, I wanted them to grow up around other people who practiced acceptance of diverse beliefs. I was so pleased when I learned that Religious Education in their first year here was focusing on many different World Religions.

So, I can definitely say that the both the kids, and Tom and I, have learned a great deal from being a part of UUFA. From the very first time we came, it was like breathing a sigh of relief, to have finally found a place where, what I always thought I believed, but couldn't put into words, was being lived out. It has been a place where I have learned about what spirituality and faith mean to me personally. And when we faced Tom's health crisis recently, it was the place of support and community that we needed. Every time I come here, I leave feeling more peaceful. So, thank you all for being a part of that!

Homily by Gary Rinker

“Who am I? Why am I here?” Those two questions were the self-introduction given by Admiral James Stockdale a little over 20 years ago. The grandfatherly gentleman appeared so bewildered that many who saw him wondered if he knew the answers to those questions himself. Hopefully, I won't seem as bewildered as I answer the same two questions today.

My name is Gary Rinker. I have been a member here for almost four years. I was raised by non-religious parents. They didn't prevent me from exposure to religion, though. There were aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors who invited me to attend bible school and Sunday school with their children.

I was 8 years old when I 1st attended a VBS program. What I remember most about that experience is a couple of the songs that were taught to us: One was called “Trust and Obey” and the other was “God Said It, I Believe It, and That Settles It for Me.” My parents had always encouraged me to ask questions, but the message of the songs was to put the questions aside and just believe what I was told. At 8 years old, I was already fascinated with dinosaurs. I couldn't make the questions go away.

My faith deficiency disorder has continued throughout my life and I have spent the majority of it non-religious. Unitarian Universalism did not appeal to me because it answered my questions or offered me some ultimate truth. Instead, absent were the messages and messengers held to be so sacred and infallible that they were exempt from scrutiny. By becoming a UU, I was affirming the right of all of us to keep asking questions.

Although I haven't found an ultimate truth, I do have a favorite fact. Probably the earliest awareness that I had in life was that I was not alone. Other people were doing things to make my experience a more pleasant one. My search for truth and meaning has been its most successful as a

search for people with whom to work to make the shared experience of life a little more pleasant. I find a high concentration of people and opportunities like that here at UUFA. That is why I am a member. That is why I support this fellowship.

Homily by Clela Reed

My journey to UUFA is probably similar to many others'—a succession of various denominations over the years, a growing awareness that my concept of God is greater than the grandfather-in-the-sky, and a lack of conviction when I had to recite the Apostle's Creed. Unitarian Universalism with its seven principals feels right to me and my husband, and we are glad to have this fellowship available to us, and are particularly happy that we're allowed to sing in the choir with this wonderful group of people.

But it's my spiritual journey *after* joining in 2004 that I want to talk about. Here I've found a supportive and inspiring community for my own creative ventures, specifically, writing poetry. Though I was an English major and then an English teacher who loved poetry, and though I often wrote poems for friends, family, and my students for special occasions, I always thought I was an essayist or a fiction writer at heart. So when I left teaching in 2003 to concentrate on writing, I didn't know my poet self was waiting to be sprung. And to take me over! But writing poetry is a lonely venture and poets are notoriously insecure in their abilities.

Here at UUFA I've found several members who are also poets (as well as painters, dancers, musicians, photographers, sculptors, potters, and jewelry makers), and a congregation who is appreciative of poetry and the arts in general. I have felt encouraged and have had my small triumphs celebrated, I've been invited to read my poetry and have it read by others at various Sunday services. In the Goddess group I've been deemed the Poetry Goddess and have had the pleasure of leading several poetry workshops with able and enthusiastic participants. When I was in the Peace Corps and I had a new chapbook published, I dedicated it to this congregation, and Amber was kind enough to give a reading in my absence. In short, I have felt the best kind of nurturing for my art and for the spirituality it requires. And, make no mistake, poetry IS a spiritual exercise. Robert McDowell, author/editor/mentor, has written in his book *Poetry as Spiritual Practice*, "[When we read and write poetry,] it is as if a long-settled cloud in our mind suddenly dissipates, and we are divine once again [...] poetry makes you into a tuning fork of the Divine."

I'm grateful to UUFA for helping me stay tuned.