

A TALK: "A PIECE OF UU HISTORY, OR HOW "YOU" BECAME A "YOU YOU"
by IS RAPOPORT, March 212004 at the Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia.

Even rational religions, such as Unitarians and Universalists have their saints. In the early 19th century, both denominations could be said to have theirs. The Universalists had Hossea Ballou, the father of modern Universalism, minister of the 2nd Universalist Church of Boston and editor of the "Universalist Magazine." He preached universal salvation, which was the cornerstone of Universalist theology. As his theology evolved, he abandoned the doctrine of the Trinity. This wed Universalism to conceptual Unitarianism, if not to organizational Unitarianism.

At the same time, Unitarians had William Ellery Channing, Minister of the Arlington Street Church in Boston. His famous "Baltimore Sermon" of 1819 has been called the most influential statement of Unitarianism of all time. He was instrumental in forming an organization that developed into the American Unitarian Association in 1825. Both men were aware of each other, lived fairly close to one another, used material from each other's works, but never met socially or professionally. Channing lived on Mt. Vernon Street in the upscale Back Bay area, Ballou lived in the unfashionable side of Beacon Hill. What kept these two men and their denominations apart for so long was not theology, there were some organizational differences, but it was mainly the socio-economic gap between the two groups.

Ballou, himself, stated that the social differences between the groups were extreme. He said that Universalists seemed little better than barbarians, when compared with Unitarian graduates of Harvard, and the polished literati of the times.

Both denominations had their creation stories. Unitarians could trace their origins back to the Protestant Reformation; Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by John Calvin. King Sigismund of Transylvania, was the only Unitarian king in European history. One could go back even further to the Arian heresy of the 3rd century. American Universalism can be traced back to John Murray, who in 1770 sailed for America from England, after the death of his wife and child, and persecution for his Universalist beliefs. His ship ran aground off the coast of New Jersey. He went ashore to look for supplies and ran into a local illiterate farmer named Thomas Potter, who had built a chapel in the belief that a minister would appear! He convinced Murray to stay for a while. Murray then became an itinerant preacher spreading the word of Universalism from New Jersey to New Hampshire. He eventually settled in Boston. There is a Murray Grove Unitarian Universalist Center to this day in New Jersey.

Universalism, as I stated, sprang from the rejection of the predominant Calvinist theology that only a few "select" individuals would attain heaven, and that the rest of sinful mankind would be damned to eternal torment in hell. Universalism believed that "no loving God" would condemn a majority of mankind to this fate, thus "universal salvation." Universalists sent out missionaries: if enough people accepted their message, they set up a congregation, and then moved on, leaving the congregations to fend for themselves. They never had a pool of trained clergy, and like the Baptists of that period, defiantly boasted of the uneducated condition of their Clergy. Both groups felt they had a God-given mission to spread their faith. Universalism became very strong in rural areas, and by 1880 they were the sixth largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

The Unitarians, on the other hand, were mainly concentrated in the New England area. It was said they remained, "committed to the leadership of Jesus and the neighborhood of Boston." To appreciate the position of the Unitarians in the early 19th century, you have to read Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and herself a Unitarian. She wrote, "all the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarians, all the professors and trustees of Harvard were Unitarians, most of the judges on the bench were Unitarians, all the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches." It was a self-contained, intellectual, elitist movement that generally disdained the missionary zeal of the Universalists. Some wit at that time said, "Unitarians did not like any sermon they could understand."

By the time of the merger, while not as congruent with the Boston Brahmin establishment as they were in the 19th century, they were still influential. Harvard was no longer almost exclusively Unitarian, but at the same time 23 members of the Arlington Street Church were listed in, "Who's Who in America". A senior Warden in Kings Chapel was a former Governor of Massachusetts; a state judge chaired the AUA board; a Saltensall, a member of an important political family in Massachusetts was President of the Unitarian Service Committee and the AUA's Moderator was James R Killian, President of MIT, and President Eisenhower's science advisor.

From the early 19th century on, many in both denominations, despite their differences, saw themselves as natural allies -- and so began a hundred years of courtship, approaches, and withdrawals. There were some local mergers or attempted mergers: in 1824, the Unitarians and Universalists in Richmond, Virginia joined for a short time in the "Uni-Uni" church. In researching the history of the Albany, NY church, I found that they had approached the local Universalists in 1855 and again in 1875 on the subject of merger, but

nothing developed. There were some other isolated mergers among local churches in various states.

In 1899, the Unitarians at the annual convention passed a resolution to appoint a committee to “consider plans for closer cooperation “ with the Universalist General Convention, as it was known at that time. In 1908, a “National Federation of Religious Liberals” was formed, but died out in the 1930’s. In 1933, a “Free Church of America” came into being, but did not outlast the Depression.

In 1937, both denominations cooperated in the publication of a new hymnal. In 1947, a joint committee was formed to explore union, and in 1951, both groups set up the “Council of Liberal Churches” or the CLC. Two years later, they consolidated their departments of education, publications, and public relations. A year later, both of the denomination’s youth groups merged to form the “Liberal Religious Youth” or the LRY. In 1956, the newly renamed “Universalist Church of America” along with the Unitarians set up a joint merger committee.

On the Unitarian side, two determined, self confident men, both Presidents of the AUA were mainly responsible for moving the merger to fruition: Frederick May Eliot, who was President of the AUA from 1937, and Dana McClean Greeley who succeeded to that post, upon Reverend Eliot’s death in 1958. Reverend Eliot’s lifelong goal was to form a so-called, “United Liberal Church.” He felt that the new name would attract liberal Quakers, Ethical Culturists, and others. The Depression and World War II put his goals on hold -- simple survival was the top priority. Reverend Greeley of the Arlington Street Church oversaw the culmination of this dream and became the first President of the “Unitarian Universalist Association”. Reverend Greeley, a fifth generation Unitarian, was a charismatic leader, and was described as an incurable optimist. When he decided on a

course of action, there was no stopping him. He was also described as “a man on a white horse” and an “unstoppable force.”

His verve and optimism had its down side, he seemed unable to comprehend why anyone would challenge him! Also, in his drive for his goals he managed to spend all AUA's unrestricted endowment funds, with only the vaguest ideas on how to replace them. He was influential enough to get bank loans to cover the shortfalls. People complained that Greeley made plans that would saddle future presidents with high debts, which did happen. But even his severest critics gave him credit for allowing his opponents full opportunity to express their views on the Board ,or at the General Assemblies.

The Universalists had Phillip Giles, William Rice, and Raymond Hopkins, all present,or former Superintendents of the Universalist Church of America, working equally hard for the same goal.

Finally in 1961, in Syracuse, NY we see the culmination of all those years of commissions, committees, and studies. The Unitarian Universalist association was born.

There had been many months of debate on the practical matters of organization and money. What would be the new name of the denomination? This caused much debate: a totally new name as the Rev Eliot had wanted, “liberal” or “free” or something else? I remember some weird names being bandied about. It was finally decided to maintain the historical names. Whose name would come first? Hyphenated or not? It was finally decided on “Unitarian Universalist.” Many Universalists were happy with being named second, they said it made “ Unitarian” grammatically an “adverb.” No one considered the “Law of Unintended Consequences”-- the name Unitarian Universalist was not the easiest name to be typed or spoken and has evolved into the utter meaningless “UU.” Look at

our "UU World" -- the shortened form is used in sermons and in articles; I have even seen a license plate that said "UU Rev."

A major deadlock developed mainly among Unitarians over the "Statement of Principle." There were three factions: the traditional theists who wanted a reference not only to God, but to our Christian heritage; the universal theists, who wanted references to the great prophets and teachers of humanity, and the third group, the Humanists, who preferred no reference to any deity. The statement was revised again and again. Interestingly, the Universalists accepted the first statement, and sat back and waited patiently while the Unitarians argued. The final session went on until one a.m. The Chairman, Raymond Hopkins, went to bed exhausted and discouraged. He was awakened twice during the night by people delivering more versions. About four in the morning, the final version was slipped under his door by Percival Brundage, the former head of the Federal Bureau of the Budget. This final version was passed the next day.

A fascinating sidelight is that technically there was no merger, but a consolidation. This may seem trivial, but it was discovered that in a merger, any two or three congregations who refused to go along, could claim to be the successors to either the AUA or the UCA and claim all physical assets. Consolidation would not legally terminate the two predecessors. Someone luckily knew of this obscure Massachusetts law that was used in corporation mergers.

There was still opposition to the merger. Some Universalists felt that the Unitarians looked down on them, and that instead of a "merger" they would be "submerged." There were Unitarians who felt that the Universalists were "too conservative" theologically. I heard this argument in my own congregation. The opponents also left Syracuse still confident that it would not pass. In order to pass the proposal, there had to be at least

75% of all the congregations participating, but in the past the average participation was only about 20%. The proponents recruited 200 members of both denominations, both clergy and laymen, assigned congregations, and their job was to encourage, cajole, beg them to participate -- it worked! Over 90% of the congregations participated and it passed overwhelmingly: 9 to 1 among Unitarians, and 8 to 1 among Universalists.

There was much more work still to be done. In Syracuse only the broad outlines had been sketched out. Interim committees were set up to look into: nominating procedures, modes of organization, fundraising, regional organizations since the Universalists' state conventions held much of the money and power. They adopted the Unitarian idea of a Moderator to preside over board meetings, and at the General Assemblies and the idea of a relatively weak President, and a Chief Executive Officer chosen by the Board. They decided on two four year terms for the President, and the General Assemblies would be rotated around the country. There was also debate over the service committees. The Universalist Service Committee was an integral part of the organization, but it was finally decided that the new Unitarian Universalist Service Committee would be an autonomous organization, affiliated with the UUA, with its own Board, and raising its own funds.

The first GA was held in 1961. Even though it had been decided that the new President should not come from the leadership of either group since many felt it would be divisive, they didn't take into consideration the "man on the white horse." Reverend Greeley was determined to be the first President of the UUA and his name was proposed. Philip Giles, President of the Universalists, despite pleas, refused to let his name be put forward.

William Rice, the Chairman of the Merger Committee, was nominated from the Universalist side. Greeley won the election :1,135 to 980. Greeley had also been able to introduce into the rules that the "Executive Vice-President would work under the President." So much for the idea of a weak President! The birth of the Unitarian

Universalist Association coincided with a time of turmoil, and social upheaval in the United States, and the UUA with its history of social action was to be deeply involved in this tumultuous period of our nation's history.

First, there was the Viet Nam War. Reverend Greeley, a life-long pacifist, called "Viet Nam, America's greatest moral calamity." The Arlington Street Church, now under the leadership of Reverend Jack Mendelsohn, became the focus of much anti-war activity, as did many UU churches throughout the country. Greeley himself did not approve of some of the activities in the churches, such as draft card burnings. Some UU churches offered "Sanctuary" for draft evaders.

.Feelings about Viet Nam led to deep divisions in American society and in the UUA. Some members left because of the opposition to the war by many congregations. Others who opposed the war felt that a religious denomination had no business getting involved. Was opposition to the war a moral obligation, or a political position? This conundrum has yet to be resolved.

The other problem was that of the Civil Rights movement. The UUA would seem to hold the moral high ground. Both denominations had been in the forefront of the Abolitionist movement prior to the Civil War, and were also prominent in the fight for Civil Rights. In March of 1965, a UU minister, James Reeb, was attacked and killed in Selma, Alabama. He, along with over 100 UU ministers, were there to show their solidarity with the Martin Luther King Jr. movement. When the UU Board of Trustees heard about the incident, they adjourned and reconvened in Selma. But as the emphasis among some segments of the Civil Rights movement quickly moved from civil rights to black empowerment, the UUA could be said to have floundered.

In 1967 in response to a summer of racially charged riots, the "UU Commission on Religion and Race" called an emergency conference in New York City, held at the Biltmore Hotel. 140 delegates attended, some chosen from UUA headquarters, others from various districts and the rest, seminary students and observers.. Among the 140 there were 37 blacks delegates. Immediately 30 of the blacks withdrew and formed a caucus, closed to whites. This was named the "Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus", or BUUC. They came back with a set of non-negotiable demands. There was to be a "Black Affairs Council" chosen by BUUC that was to be funded for four years at the rate of \$250,000 a year. The funds would go for grants: "to fight political repression and economic exploitation in the black community, and support black cultural expression and community education," with the BAC council having the sole authority on how this money

was spent. After heated debate the conference approved the demands. But since the conference did not have the authority to implement these demands, a delegation attended the November meeting of the Board. The Board responded by voting not to form a Black Affairs Council, but to reorganize the "Commission on Religion and Race", by adding a substantial number of non-whites. They refused the request for a million dollars over four years. Feeling insulted and betrayed, the BUUC sent letters to all the congregations asking that they withhold monies from the annual fund and instead contribute those funds to the BUUC. In February of 1968, the BUUC held its first annual conference. It was established with six black and three white members whose goal was: "to determine the relevancy of a predominately white institution to its black constituency." No records were kept at that time, but it was estimated that blacks made up about 1% of the UUA. In April of 1968, two Philadelphia ministers started a nationwide network to support black empowerment in the UUA. Its acronym was, "FUULBAC", or "full recognition and funding for the black affairs council."

The UUA board reluctantly acknowledged the BAC, and invited them into affiliate status. At the same time they established a "UU Commission for Action on Race" with a \$300,000 "Fund for Racial Justice". The BAC could apply for grants, but it refused BAC its own funds. Both BAC and FUULBAC saw this, in their words, "As a sophisticated ploy to subvert the leadership of BAC." At the same time there was dialogue throughout the denomination: in publications; in sermons; and letter writing, so another organization came into being: "Black and White Action" or BAWA. It reflected the more traditional philosophy of integration in the civil rights movement. This led to years of antagonism between both groups.

At the 1968 Cleveland General Assembly, the delegates overwhelmingly voted against the Board's actions, and voted to commit a million dollars to BAC over four years. BAWA

was given neither funding, nor affiliate status. The next month it was discovered that the UUA's unrestricted endowment fund had been spent, and there was not enough money to fund current operations and programs. The board also decided that the BAC appropriations would have to be reaffirmed annually at each GA. They did manage to make some funds available to BAC for various programs, but in most cases the money ran dry in a short time.

Between the 1968 GA in Cleveland and the 1969 GA in Boston there was a tremendous backlash within the UUA. There were accusations of separatism, and resistance to the confrontational tactics used by both BAC and FUULBAC. There was a change in the mood of many members, this added to the financial difficulties within the denomination, that almost guaranteed that these issues would explode in Boston. There, it was recommended that the board allocate \$250,000 to BAC and \$50,000 to BAWA. BAC said it would refuse the money if BAWA got even one cent! As soon as the business session of the Assembly began, BAC supporters moved to take up this agenda item. When the motion failed, BAC and their supporters "took possession" of the microphones and brought the proceedings to a standstill. When the motion to change the agenda failed for a second time, members of BAC and their supporters walked out and threatened to leave the UUA for good. They reassembled at the Arlington Street Church. Reverend Mendelsohn, minister of that church, addressed the assembly and stated that the UUA was returning to business as usual, and that blacks were again relegated to the back of the bus. He said he was going to the Arlington Street church: "because I can't stand here and do business as usual any more and anyone who wants to join me is welcome to come." About 400 members walked out. As Reverend Mendelsohn left the stage, one of his colleagues came up and spit in his face! So much for calm, reasoned UU debate! The delegates stayed out for a day and a half, but were persuaded to return by Reverend Greeley.

Eventually the delegates voted to fund both BAC and BAWA. There was no dramatic resolution to these events. Many blacks left the UUA during these times and never returned. One of the young blacks that left is now our President, Reverend Bill Sinkford. He stayed away for years finally returning because of his passionate belief that, despite its flaws, Unitarianism Universalism had a saving message for the world.

By 1970, the financial condition of the UUA deflated much of the overheated rhetoric. BAC broke up into two factions which led to conflict and lawsuits between them, and then faded from the picture. BAWA was active until 1981 when it, too, was dissolved. There were, and still are, strong feelings to this day about these events. You can still read conflicting interpretations of the same event from individuals, depending on which side they favored: there are those who still feel that many of the blacks were not even members of our denomination. It is really impossible to decide who was right or wrong, or if there was a right or wrong.

Amidst all this turmoil of the 1969 GA, the delegates elected Reverend Robert N. West, since Greeley's two terms were up. West was nothing like Greeley, the former was a centrist and a quiet polite southerner. He has been described as the anti-charisma candidate. He served from 1969 until 1977. In addition to the conflicts over the Viet Nam War and the racial issues, he inherited a terrible financial situation. As I have mentioned, all the unrestricted capital funds had been spent. The UUA had a \$650,000 deficit plus a \$450,000 note due in a few days. In addition, the UUA had borrowed an additional \$50,000 two weeks before Reverend West took office.

West was able to get the bankers not to call in the note. He cut the budget 40%, laid off department heads, eliminated positions and set up professional management and personal policies. For example, previous to West, staff members at headquarters negotiated their

salaries independently. Now, all unrestricted funds received in the future would go to reduce the debt. He was also an advocate of voluntary funding for the BAC; when that was rejected, he wanted the payments stretched over 5 years rather than 4. BAC called this: "A shocking revelation of the institutional racism still rampant in the UUA."

West's economic policies were met with strong opposition from some of the Board members and from the districts, and many congregations around the country. One of the nicer things said was that: "25 Beacon Street should be sunk into Boston harbor."

Reverend West moved the previously private board meetings to a place open to observers. There was standing room only, many of the observers were disruptive (this was the 60's) shouting, yelling, and calling names. West stayed calm and courteous through these sessions, and to the abuse he received.. It was not to surprising that he had to be talked into running for a second term. His policies did pull the UUA out of a very bad situation, and in retrospect he has been hailed as an "unsung hero".

He changed the "Unitarian Universalist World" from a subscription periodical to a publication sent to all members. In 1970 a tabloid size paper was used, later it was changed into a magazine format, which is the "UU World" we now all receive. He was able to increase the funding for the Starr-King school in Berkley, California, one of our UU seminaries. He also organized the "Office of Gay Concerns". There were legal and financial problems with the Beacon Press, which I will speak about in a moment. When Reverend West finished his two terms, he entered the private sector. This last GA, held in Boston in 2003, was the first GA he attended since leaving his Presidency.

The UUA has two publishing houses: Skinner Press named after a Universalist minister, that publishes titles related to UU themes, meditation manuals, history, and beliefs; the other, the Beacon Press has a long and distinguished history dating from 1854 that reaches

out beyond denominational boundaries. The Beacon press has had its financial ups and downs, since printing serious titles is no way to make a lot of money. It also has a history of publishing books that other commercial houses would not touch. During the fifties it published a collection of anti-Senator McCarthy cartoons by Herblock. It published Paul Blanshard's controversial book, "Freedom and Catholic Power", which no other publisher would and for which The New York Times refused to accept advertising. It also published Victor Frankl's, "Man's Search for Meaning", which sold over 3 million copies.

The most controversial publication occurred during Reverend West's tenure. The "Pentagon Papers", these were the documents leaked by Daniel Ellsberg. Both The New York Times and the Washington Post had printed excerpts, but nobody had printed the complete set of documents. At that time Senator Gravel of Alaska, an outspoken critic of the war, was one of only two UU's in the Senate. Gravel was able to obtain the entire set of documents. He approached the editor of Beacon Press, who in turn went to Reverend West, who gave his approval and the papers were published. Many in the country praised the Beacon Press for its courage, but there was trouble. An official at the UUA's bank informed them that a team of FBI agents was going through their files and asking for a list of contributors. The UUA got a restraining order against the FBI, and this led to a long and expensive series of court battles leading all the way up to the Supreme Court. Senator Gravel was given immunity from prosecution because of his position, although these events finished his political career. The court ruled that the Beacon Press and the UUA had no immunity. Luckily the legal battles frittered away as the White House became involved in more serious problems relating to Watergate. In 1993, the Beacon Press published Marion Wright Edelman's, "The Measure of Our Success" which became a best seller, as did Cornell West's, "Race Matters". As of 2004 the Beacon Press is in the black, at least for now.

After its first sixteen, not always easy years, the UU Association entered a period of greater confidence and stability. I would like to cover some highlights from that period up until the present.

After twenty years or so, the original principles and purposes that caused so much controversy during the merger were barely remembered, out of date, and no longer served our needs. In 1984, new version of the principles was widely accepted and still being used today. Also, the 1964 hymnal, "Hymns For the Celebration of Life", was no longer acceptable because of outdated theological concepts and sexist language. Our new hymnal, "Singing the Living Tradition" was published after a few years of discussion and argument. Being UU's, not everybody is happy with the results. Why were some items left out, why did we keep others? But as some one has said, with several hundred hymns to choose from, if a congregation can't find thirty they like, maybe they are too picky!

The "Flaming Chalice" is used by all congregations, although it predated the merger and was originally the logo of the Unitarian Service Committee. Reverend Charles Joy, who operated out of Lisbon, Portugal during WW2, felt he needed a logo on his stationery when dealing with governmental and non-governmental organizations. It was designed by a refugee Austrian artist who had never set foot in a Unitarian church.. A widely used ritual is the "Flower Communion". It was developed by Reverend Norbert Capek of the Unitarian church in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Before the takeover of Czechoslovakia by the Germans, the church in Prague was the largest Unitarian church in the world with over 3000 members. The church was closed and Reverend Capek died in a concentration camp.

The new UUA was male dominated, as were most organizations of that time. However, women have made great strides: we no longer have separate men and women groups in our churches. In 1970, 2% of our ministers were women, today it is nearly 50%. Several women have been elected to the post of Moderator, and I believe we will see a woman President of the UUA in the not too distant future.

During Reverend West's tenure, he instituted the "Office of Gay Concerns". It has evolved into today's "Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns". In 1984, the UUA Board voted to support ministers who performed same sex unions. In 1996, the delegates at the GA voted to support "legal recognition for marriages between members of the same sex." In 1979, there were no gay ministers serving any congregations, but in 2004 there are many throughout the denomination. UU's have not gone through the arguments and acrimony that we see many religious groups going through at the present time.

We have been less successful in the area of diversity, our denomination is still mainly white and middle class. We are probably the most homogenous of all religious denominations in the United States. There are many factors contributing to this situation. One of the most important is that about 90% of us have come from some other or no religious background; we are basically self-selected. We have stayed consistent: a survey in 1978, showed over 75% of us had college degrees, and 40% had advanced degrees; 44% were in professional occupations, and one-half were over fifty years of age. A 1987 survey came up with the same results: four out of five members lived in a city or in the suburbs; three-quarters of those answering considered themselves somewhat or very liberal politically. That still leaves 25%! and as Reverend Goldsmith said in his sermon at the installation of our minister, Bill Phillips, "No, we are not a branch of the Democratic party." A sociological study, published in the sixties, entitled, "Religion Among the

Unitarians Universalists,” came up with very similar results. Nevertheless diversity is a goal to which we can and should strive for.

So, forty-three years after the merger we have surmounted many problems, but I’m sure there will many others. I think these thoughts are a good way to end this presentation.

What sets us apart from those who claim to be indifferent to religion is that we want answers. What sets us apart from virtually every other faith is that we will not accept easy answers. That holds true whether we call ourselves humanists or theists, agnostics or atheists, pagans or mystics; it holds true for the certain and the uncertain, for those who put primacy on intuition or on the intellect, or give equal attention to both. From time to time we may even change our minds, but one thing is clear to us, if religion is to be taken seriously, it is necessary not to lie. From that commitment flows the values that we cling to, and from which, in turn comes our devotion to Unitarian Universalism.

To make sure we are not self deluded, here is what a leading Evangelical scholar wrote about us in the “Trinity Journal”....”We can no longer ignore the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA is surprisingly influential far beyond what its official membership figures suggest. Unitarian Univesalists are often the movers and shakers in society” He goes on to say, “And what makes them so dangerous is that they proclaim as a saving message, a theology centered on tolerance, interdependence, and compassion.”

Maybe we should get this scholar to write our advertising copy!