

# ***Newsletter Articles From the Minister***

## **January 2008**

All "new" years arrive far too soon I think. On the other hand, I am cheered by the promise they inherently carry. Consider this latest addition. In Springfield, the year 2008 CE (Common Era) is being heralded as a "Year of Reconciliation" by various religious groups, because this year marks the centennial of the 1908 Race Riots. It is the hope of diverse faith communities that people will reach across racial and denomination lines to make connections that will bind up the wounds of the past and carry the entire community forward. I regard this present initiative as a potentially crucial milestone in Springfield's story.

Twenty oh-eight is also a significant milestone in the history of liberal religion in this community. One hundred and fifty years ago, the First Universalist Society dedicated its new brick church, located at the corner of Fifth and Cook Streets, on Christmas Eve. That little congregation promoted a liberal gospel and welcomed women preachers, who were a rarity in that day. More recently, a Unitarian fellowship was established by twelve men and women -- this was fifty five years ago come February. One of the more remarkable facts about that group is that not only did both men and women hold key leadership positions, but the group itself was racially diverse.

As we participate in the religious assemblies and various observances connected with the anniversary of the race riot, let us be mindful of our particular legacy -- and, of course, let us be motivated to create a noble history worth passing on to the next generation.

## **February 2008**

### **Leap Day**

It's a given that 25% of all sermons presented nationwide this month will be entitled "Leap(s) of Faith" (the percentage being somewhat skewed by newly minted clergy). This concurrence stems from the fact that this particular February contains an extra day, in keeping with the dictates of the Gregorian calendar. One may well wonder why the crafters of the Gregorian system preferred to add an extra day to February rather than, say, May or June. I suspect that the answer may reveal that they were in the employ of the church and that they lived in a milder Italian clime.

In any event, we all have an extra day on our hands. The obvious question to ask therefore is: will it be an extra day to endure, or an opportunity to create a transformation? In short, a burden or a gift? Minute by minute, hour by hour -- our habits shape our days, which in turn shape our seasons, and ultimately, our destiny.

Will there be a balance of chores and dreams, fear and confessing, doubt and blessing?

If time permits, I recommend watching the film *Groundhog Day*. As you may know, the main character is caught in a seemingly endless loop. That recurring day, repeated ad nauseum, is in effect a gateway to self discovery.

But oh, ever so gradually. One wonders whether the loop lasts months or even years. The main character pursues every whim yet finds ultimately that they do not satisfy his deepest needs. Hence, *Groundhog Day* is an old fashioned morality tale, about a human being coming to terms with the nature and value of the transient v. the permanent.

Come then, leap month, come then leap day. As we stand in the proverbial stream of life, panning as it were through our thoughts and our habits, may we recognize the small golden flecks of our existence from the refuse – and then share the former with our companions.

### **March 2008**

During these last few weeks of February, we saw quite a range of weather – heavy fog, snow, ice, high winds, freezing temperatures – all punctuated, occasionally, by hints of sun. On the other hand, many of us were able to watch the recent lunar eclipse; the sky was clear and the moon was full – a wonderful sight to behold.

These recent fluctuations in weather remind me that the forces of nature can offer a blessing or a curse. This is not a new revelation. You may recall that two years ago this month, Springfield reeled from the force of two tornadoes. Mercifully, no lives were lost. And, after we crept out of our respective basements, there was a proverbial silver lining: neighbors responded with compassion and creativity, turning out in force to help one another, without regard to race or religion or other distinctions.

One can sense this same feeling at the monthly Solemn Assemblies which are currently promoting a “Year of Reconciliation.” As you may know, these gatherings were organized by the Ministerial Alliance to mark the 100th anniversary of the Springfield Race Riot. That riot reminds us that human nature can also offer its own share of blessings and curses. The language and metaphors used at these assemblies may flow from a very different tradition, but there is no denying that something important is afoot. After each service, participants march to one of the sites associated with the riot. At these assemblies, people are neighbors, united in good will for one another and in hope for the future. I have been proud to note that more than a few UUs attend these.

As the seasons change, there will be many different events held here in Springfield to remember an ugly chapter of history. More importantly, bridges are being built to connect different communities. I encourage everyone to attend as many as possible. Something big is afoot, and we need not wait for the next big storm to move us to action.

## **April 2008**

Every year, every UU congregation faces several crucial tasks: these include recruiting new leadership, fostering a deeper sense of fellowship, and raising money. These efforts require dedication, vision, creativity and a lot of hard work. May we all offer our sincerest appreciation to all here at ALUUC who are engaged in these efforts.

Because our Pledge Drive begins on April 20th, let me say a few words about money. True, in UU circles, it is sometimes claimed that we prefer to avoid the topic. Yet we know we must, at least on occasion, raise the subject – because we also know, at least instinctively, that while a faith community is not a business it must be on financially sound footing.

When congregations are in decline, certain symptoms become evident. Membership contracts, the median age increases, and the remaining community relies more and more on shrinking pools of people and income to support itself. Invariably, in those cases, programs are cut and operating funds continue to wither. If the cycle is not reversed, the institution must ultimately disband.

Four years ago, the Rev. Daniel O’Connell spoke at my service of installation; to paraphrase one of his memorable quotes: “The good news is that there is enough money for all of this congregation’s programs. The bad news is that it’s still in your wallets.”

People laughed, knowing of course that there was truth in what he said.

We know that fund raising is a collective effort. We also know that when a new budget is considered, the basic question to ask is -- what does this goal seek to accomplish? Will this be a budget that strives for growth, or seeks maintenance of the status quo, or will it reflect a phase of contraction? The answer, as my colleague pointed out, depends on us.

Those of you who were here eight years ago no doubt remember well the discussions concerning the financial risks of calling ALUUC’s first full time minister, Rev. Alex Holt. That decision reached was a commitment to growth. A few households contributed to two different leadership funds, in essence pledging twice. All hoped that new members and friends would join ALUUC who would in turn help to carry the increased financial obligations. Thus far, this has proved to be the case.

Those who made those special pledges have fulfilled their promises. Thank you, for your vision and sacrifice. No doubt you have marveled at increase in the operating budget over the past few years. You have also have been astonished to witness our congregation undertake several ambitious projects – paving and extending the parking lot, special fund drives for a new piano and a new children’s playground. Perhaps you felt vindicated as well.

We are growing. Our investment is both for the present and for the future. Thank you to everyone who contributes in so many ways.

## **May 2008**

These past few weeks have witnessed a remarkable transformation in the landscape and skies. Evidently, winter has given its last flick of its tail and slithered off to parts unknown. It will return of course, but not for several seasons. But good riddance, in the meanwhile -- many of us have expressed a sense that this past winter lingered far too long.

We may rejoice that spring is an irrepressible burst of new life. At first glance, ample evidence of the regenerative power of nature exists only as far away as the nearest lawn or bough. The duck nest near the front door of ALUUC is surely convincing in that regard.

There is of course another aspect of spring. All is not green and all does not thrive, let alone survive. In my walks around ALUUC, I have noticed several dead birds; a nest of dead rabbits; a fallen and cracked robin's egg. These objects have been removed from the grounds. But the lesson lingers a bit yet. Life may be abundant and resurgent, but its success is by no means a foregone conclusion. One perceives at times that life contains within itself an inherent struggle. One may also well wonder to what extent luck plays a role?

All the more reason to cherish the gift of time which we enjoy. I know full well that different people can observe a similar scene and come to opposite conclusions regarding how one ought to live one's life. Some will pursue escapism; another will pursue compassion. Perhaps this has been ongoing since time immemorial. No one seems to have given a satisfactory account of why one might choose one path while another makes such a different choice. Genetics? Environment?

Also: why, when we take our walks, do some search the grass while others search the skies? I do not know.

## **June 2008**

Summer is not far off. As I look back over the past ten months, I realize that this has been a particularly busy year at ALUUC; I know full well that many people are ready for a healthy dose of rest and relaxation. Hopefully, everyone will soon have a chance to catch their breath. Services will of course continue as will various regularly scheduled activities. I look forward seeing you on Sundays, if not on other days of the week.

What spiritual insights might you experience during the next few months? Will these be prompted by people, by nature, or by solitude? When such moments come, remember to collect a stone or some water that will remind you of the event, if at all possible. Come September, we will have our annual water and stone communion service and everyone will have the opportunity to share. Until then, stay alert, enjoy the summer, and keep the sun screen handy!

## **July 2008**

This summer, fellow UUs are gathering at our annual General Assembly -- this year, the event is being held in Ft. Lauderdale. You may recall that last year's GA was held in St. Louis -- a number of our members (almost 10%) attended -- and came back inspired.

I know several people who attend these events religiously -- such folk are sometimes called "GA Junkies." I myself am less than enthralled with large crowds and I shudder at the thought of visiting southern Florida during summer.

Fortunately, I can visit the UUA website from the comfort of my home in Springfield and watch those events which will be streamed live via the internet -- you can watch too, if you like.

This particular GA has its points of interest. For example, the campaign for the next UUA President officially gains momentum; this campaign will last one year -- come the 2009 GA (in Salt Lake City) we will be asked to vote for the denomination's next President. In these past, these campaigns have proved heated -- I suspect that this year's race will be a lively one indeed.

Speaking of elections, I should mention that my UUMA colleagues will be voting this week on new members of the Executive Committee and for our standing committees -- as it happens, my name is being considered for an opening on the Nominating Committee. I will follow these events from afar.

In any event, I do have a certified container of "canned Florida sunshine" on one of my bookshelves -- I can take comfort in knowing that the warmth of Florida is only a few feet away, should I need it.

## **August 2008**

When I am abroad, I quickly become aware of discrepancies between certain experiences there and my expectations which have been fashioned at home. These discrepancies are often subtle. For example, at any restaurant in Spain, I notice that they set out salt but never pepper. A waiter may bring water, but not ice water. That same person will act surprised if I leave a tip. And so on.

We are all of course creatures of habits, and our habits no doubt vary from one individual to another. The persons with whom we frequently associate reinforce our sense of the norm. It is when we enter a new environment that we may perceive the extent that we differ from others.

Keeping in mind that August is a month when families and individuals often look for a new faith community, imagine what it must be like for a person to join us for the first time, be it special interest function or a worship service. They may be relieved to have successfully navigated themselves to our location but they might nonetheless be a bit nervous. How

will our reality mesh with their expectations? Perhaps they belonged to a different faith community years ago, or perhaps they have never been a member of one. We might wonder how such persons might differ in their expectations. Either way, they might well wonder themselves how they will be received here -- with a warm welcome, a suspicious glance, or will they be ignored?

What will be familiar and what will seem foreign to new eyes and ears? Will the invariable discrepancies be subtle, perhaps even refreshing? Will they encourage -- or discourage -- a future visit? True, we provide a "guest packet" but do we do all we can to treat them truly as our guests? What are the simple actions that we might do to transform a "stranger in a strange land" to someone who is known and appreciated? Let us be mindful of those who visit us, and ever gracious -- after all, we too were strangers once.

## **September 2008**

### ***We must continue efforts to transcend our divides***

I wish to thank the members of the community, especially my local clergy colleagues, who have expressed to me their shared senses of dismay and grief regarding last Sunday's shootings at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Knoxville. While such acts of violence, evidently motivated in part by religious bigotry, are always grievous, when they intrude upon a church, mosque, synagogue or school they seem all the more heinous. Ours is a relatively small denomination and several of our members and friends, including myself, know people who were present, even slain, last Sunday. ALUUC's former minister, the Rev. Mary Moore, recently served as the interim minister of the Westside Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville; many members from that congregation were attending the service at TVUUC and accounted for half the victims.

Soon, of course, representatives from Springfield's different faith communities will gather together to remember the victims of the 1908 Race Riot, where we will also dare to dream of a world wherein our fellow human beings will no longer resort to violence against others. We are blessed to live in a community that seeks to transcend our various divides, promoting in their stead reconciliation and compassion. While we may never see a complete cessation of deranged acts of violence, be they committed by individuals or by mobs, the hope of all persons of good faith is that they will in time become exceedingly rare.

*Rev. Martin Woulfe, Springfield*

Note: The above was published in the State-Journal Register on July 31, 2008 as a response to the shootings at the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation.

<http://www.sj-r.com/opinions/x223020297/Letters-to-the-Editor-July-31>

## **October 2008**

Autumn, again. Already, memories of summer are quickly receding. Cooler breezes and politics fill the air. Ah, politics....

I must confess an interest in politics -- both on the national stage and within the congregation. They are both challenging in their respective spheres. Now, I know that politics is often considered a destructive force but I think of it as a neutral term to describe how people influence others in the largest sense of the word. For example, politics on a good day is when Person A has an idea and works honestly, openly and with integrity to persuade others to support and implement his/her plan. There are of course days when honesty, openness, and persuasion are in short supply. Perhaps in some spheres, examples of the latter outnumber those of the former. I always advise people who attend the "New to UU" class that yes, there are politics even in churches. All churches. No one seems surprised by that revelation, and in fact some people reveal stories of how they themselves witnessed destructive politics in their former churches.

Be that as it may, politics are unavoidable. This is especially true of the UU movement, which practically venerates democracy as a religious value within our congregations, whether we be talking about autonomy, polity, governance or even how we manage our interpersonal relationships. Not every religious tradition of course places such a high value on democratic process. That too is not a novel revelation.

Not surprisingly, one of the classes which I took in seminary was Democratic Ethics. One of the chief goals of the class was to prod us to look at our notions of citizenship and membership. With each are responsibilities, rights and yes, even limitations. Taken in the right way, both are powerful catalysts -- for identity and commitment. Another fundamental lesson was that good politics depend upon good process.

As this season progresses, I hope that we will all reflect upon our own notions of citizenship and membership -- and forge a deeper sense of identity and commitment to our ideals and the tasks before us.

## **November 2008**

### **Lost and Found**

About a year and a half ago, I reported my dismay and displeasure upon discovering that several years' worth of e-mail messages, sent and received, had evaporated into cyberspace. This week, while working at the computer, I uncovered a cache of "lost" messages -- not all, but a tidy sum. It was like finding a time capsule that I had tucked away in the recesses of my computer's memory. I remembered the scene from *Amelie* where one man is given a tin box that he had squirreled away during his childhood. Mind you, this was not as far removed -- still, it was intriguing to see what sort of correspondence had occupied my attention.

That which is out of sight, is out of mind -- so says an ancient proverb. And it's probably true, especially with respect to past correspondence. In some instances, the messages were meager blurbs, in other cases, a virtual record of complicated tracks back and

forth. It goes without saying that the art of communicating via e-mail pales next to face to face conversations – let alone letter writing.

Even though the cache was deleted several years ago, life pressed on. Much contained therein faded as new conversations stirred in their stead. Maybe I was too busy to notice. Or maybe they were never really gone, only I didn't know where to look.

Some say that the key to a rich spiritual life is a lot like that – the obvious is ever before us, only we do not usually notice it. In a similar vein, I've also heard it said that the art of preaching is reminding people of what they already knew. When we are ready, then we can see and hear. And that seems to make all the difference.

As we move further into this season of autumn, may we– all of us – keep our eyes and ears attentive, hoping to be reminded of the lessons imprinted deep within our hearts.

## **December 2008**

During the past several months, Celeste has been asking probing questions about Santa Claus. Evidently, some of her peers have become “Santa apostates” while others (including Celeste) remain faithful – not to mention, grateful, to that benevolent resident of the North Pole and his cheerful company of non-union, non-human helpers.

For years now, Angela and I have encouraged her to sit on Santa's lap and have her photo taken – she used to be somewhat frightened by the experience but no longer. Celeste is also well aware that many people wear red suits and fake beards around the holidays, ringing bells and asking for donations. Several years ago, at a Rotary function, “Santa” walked into the room and she raced forward and gave him the child's equivalent of a bear hug. Later, though, she was positively shocked when she observed that same person changing out of (what turned out to be merely a) costume in the far corner of the room.

I have offered various explanations, relating that Santa has many helpers while he is busy at the North Pole. I suspect that she is beginning to doubt these assurances. The other week, while talking about my belated wish list for Santa, I mentioned that it would be unreasonable for Santa to give me something very expensive, e.g., like a new car. Celeste spun around and asked, somewhat incredulously, “Do you mean to say that YOU buy presents?” I realized that I may have misspoken and back-peddled as fast as the words could leave my lips. There was a small furrow on her brow for a brief moment but then it relaxed and I was off the hook. For now. Perhaps she is becoming a “Santa agnostic.”

As she continues to probe, I am reminded of the darling (and bittersweet) Christmas story by Katherine Anne Porter, in which she describes a real life conversation with her little niece. Porter describes how the two spent an afternoon together, window shopping in December and talking about presents. At one point, the girl confides to her aunt that she no longer believes in Santa Claus – yet she also admonishes her aunt not to tell the girl's mother “the truth” about St. Nick – because her mother “still believes.”

That little girl was wise beyond her years. When one “knows the truth” about certain topics, it is not always the kind (let alone easy) thing to redirect another’s convictions (especially when one had a hand in fashioning those convictions). One must choose one’s timing carefully, ere one receives a stocking full of coal come Christmas morning. In the meanwhile, I will read Celeste the sage response from an advice columnist, written many decades ago, to a little girl named Virginia who once entertained doubts about Santa.

Have a merry Christmas.