

From the Minister ... 2010

January, 2010

FOOD PANTRY DONATION

Thank you to everyone who visited the open house at the Aznarte-Woulfe household on Sunday, December 20. Well over 100 pounds of food were collected and donated to a local food pantry, benefitting those in need.

Every New Year brings an attendant opportunity to reflect upon the events of the year just ending. This most recent New Year's Eve, I watched a retrospective of musical artists and comedians who performed live on Spanish TV during the past fifty years ; once upon a time, the very thought of half a century struck me as an impossibly long period of time. Incredibly, though, the footage commenced with 1960, a year in which I happened to have been born.

Fifty does not seem so old anymore. Funny, though, how things used to look so grainy – not to mention, black and white.

This past year was a time for personal and professional growth: I am indebted to the congregation for permitting me to have a sabbatical period, during which I was, among other boons, able to study Spanish and focus on my health. Both activities (learning a language/improving one's physical health) are, according to a popular book on Happiness, two definite steps that a person may deliberately take to improve the relative happiness of his/her life. Authors have identified a handful of other concrete steps that any person might undertake. Truth be told, I do feel more happy this new year than last year; certainly much more so than say, some other, more distant years that I can recall. Surely, happiness is not the mere by-product of age. There is a study, expounded by Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book, [The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want](#), that has been brought to my attention by several UU colleagues. One of them has even written an Adult Religious Education curriculum that is based upon this book. It is my hope to teach this course here at ALUUC; perhaps this will increase my relative level of happiness as much as the participants.

In any event, I wish all of you a happy and healthy 2010.

February, 2010 no article

March, 2010

The days are awash with reports of the imminent arrival Spring: several people have reported seeing robins, although I myself have not noticed any. The sun seems brighter, but lumps of snow and ice linger yet. On the other hand, I've noticed that some potholes have been filled. More compelling are the small mysterious holes which have appeared in my yard – evidently the entrances to burrows of small animals.

Nature is stirring. The pace of life will doubtless accelerate. I ask myself, what signs indicate that life is stirring within our religious community? The number and diversity of programs currently meeting at ALUUC is remarkable. The Fantasy Auction and the Pledge Drive will soon be in full swing. We will welcome more guests and new members who will continue to fill chairs during Sunday worship.

One of the significant changes coming this season will involve Milestones. As many people are aware, our congregation has grown during the past few years and that fact has called for the Program Committee to periodically re-examine elements of the liturgy. During the past seven years, we have added some elements, moved others, revised still more. It's all part of the growing process. The Program Committee and I are well aware that Milestones is a very important part of the Sunday service. I and others cannot imagine our congregation without Joys and Concerns in some form. We hope that all those who cherish this ceremony will be energized by the changes which will be unveiled during the March 14th Service.

Ray Kroc, the man most associated with McDonald's, once declared: "When you're green, you're growing; when you're ripe, you rot" (I happen to know that quote because many, many years ago, I worked at a McDonald's). While we are nothing like a fastfood enterprise, I think that his observation can apply to our situation. We are green, and we are growing. I am encouraged by that.

May the coming spring, with all its bursts of energy and excitement, provide further incontrovertible evidence that life continues.

Liturgical Changes at ALUUC

Our tradition of worship is one that welcomes innovation as well as tradition. As such, it consists of a liturgy which has evolved to enrich our time together. During the past few decades, the Program Committee has introduced various changes in the words, rituals and sequence of elements associated with our worship time.

Those with long memories may recall when the lighting of the chalice was introduced. There was a time when the participation of service leaders was uncommon. The development of regular summer services is another example of a change that met a growing need. More recently, we have added an opportunity for visitors to introduce themselves as well as revising the statement of "Welcome" which is shared at the beginning of the service.

In the interest of improving our liturgy, the Program Committee is announcing several changes, the most significant of which is connected with how we will celebrate Milestones during our worship time together.

The main impetus for this revision is the simple fact that the number of people who participate in worship has increased, and the number of Milestones and

Announcements has increased correspondingly. Because these begin towards the first half of the service, one result is that the time allotted to teachers to lead their Religious Education classes is diminished.

We recognize that Milestones are a cherished part of our time together, both in terms of affirming our particular religious culture and also because this ritual helps fulfill one of the missions of this congregation: to further our nurture and support of each other both in our human needs and in our search for spiritual fulfillment. On the other hand, we recognize that given the growth which we have experienced thus far, it would be prudent to modify our practice of this ritual.

On Sunday, March 14, a modified form for Milestones will be introduced by Rev. Woulfe. In particular, Members & Friends will be asked to write down their joys & concerns on cards which will be collected and then read aloud either by the minister or service leader during the service. On those same cards, people will be asked to indicate whether they wish to remain anonymous or have their name mentioned in connection with their milestone; they will also indicate whether they would want to have that milestone included in a special new "Milestones" section in the monthly newsletter. These cards will be collected and then shared with the congregation, not unlike the litany which we include each service before Thanksgiving. After these joys and concerns have been shared, the congregation will sing "Spirit of Life" or a similar hymn. When the service is concluded, the cards can be shared with the Pastoral Care Committee to follow up with those who desire such contact.

The candles for silent joys and concerns, located in the back of the sanctuary, will remain available to those who desire them. In addition, a bowl filled with stones will be placed on that table. Those stones replace the use of candles at the front of the sanctuary; people may select a stone from that bowl, move in line to the front of the sanctuary, and deposit the stone in a basin which will be at the front.

It is envisioned that this ritual will be similar in some respects to the "Water and Stone Communion" which is used at during the Ingathering Service, held each September. We will add those stones to the memorial garden – either after each service or at various times during the calendar year.

Recognizing the importance of including children in the liturgy, once a month, the Children's Focus will be devoted to their Milestones. The minister or service leader will invite children to come forward to publically share their joys and concerns. Children will also use stones but they will speak for themselves, without having to write their particular joys or concerns out in advance. Parents are encouraged to accompany them. We believe that this will continue to afford children an opportunity to develop their public speaking skills & confidence. At the same time, it will help us get to know them and fulfill another key purpose of ALUUC: to provide a place for learning and the sharing of values and memories within and between generations and to guide the next generation in its search for meaning.

We are confident that this new style of Milestones will enhance the quality of worship without detracting from the friendliness and intimacy which is so important to all of us.

Here are several more changes in our liturgy which we hope to implement soon:

- Someone who has a significant joy or concern will be invited to light the chalice.
- New members will be invited to extinguish the chalice at the end of the regular service
- One member will be invited to share a short statement about how he/she has found a religious home here.

Those members and friends who have musical gifts are encouraged to contribute some additional music to a Sunday service. Those who desire to either share a personal statement or some music, are asked to contact either Rev. Martin Woulfe or Penny Wollan-Kriel, Chair of the Program Committee.

April, 2010

One of my sabbatical goals during April and May is to visit other UU congregations as time & distance permit. You may be aware that last spring, I used the first part of my sabbatical to visit congregations in or near Chicago, Urbana, Peoria, Bloomington and Kirkwood, MO. One immediate benefit was the joy of hearing my colleagues preach; I had never heard several preach before while others I have not heard preach since we attended seminary together.

A second benefit was that these opportunities gave me the chance to study how different congregations worship and behave. I generally arrived "undercover," carrying a small notebook & jotting down notes. I paid special attention to how I would be greeted, e.g., during coffee hour. Thus, when the service ended, I would follow the throng of people into the fellowship area, tuck the notebook into my coat pocket, and fill a cup of coffee. As you might expect in such social gatherings, I saw clusters of friends greeting one another. Meanwhile, I stood in the very center of their fellowship hall, quietly sipping my coffee. I probably looked no different than a typical introvert who has shown up for a Sunday service. I am happy to report that in every instance someone from the congregation took the initiative and extended a greeting, although in several cases it seemed to take more than a few precious minutes. Had I been a genuine newcomer, those minutes might have instilled (or deepened) a sense of alienation. Not long after someone had made contact, I would reveal that I was a visiting UU minister; my greeters typically responded with greater interest and I would be hurriedly introduced to more people.

I share this because ALUUC invariably receives several new guests on any given Sunday. It is doubtful that we will have many undercover UU ministers among them; more likely, he/she is looking for a church home or is interested someone in the sermon topic. They will notice what we do and say, in particular if we say "hello."

The good news is that I often receive feedback from many people, especially our guest speakers, that we are a very friendly church. My continuing hope is that all our guests are experiencing a comparable level of hospitality. On those Sundays when I am away, I trust that everyone will do her/his part to welcome those who are new. Who knows? There might just be a future board president (or minister) among them.

May, 2010 on Sabbatical, no article

June, 2010

One of the more fascinating – and important – discussions which is currently taking place within the larger UU circle centers on issues of diversity. Actually, this has been an on-going conversation for more than a decade. It's worth noting that our notions of diversity have evolved over the decades – once, diversity meant that theists and humanists could coexist relatively peacefully within Unitarian congregations. In time, diversity pointed towards racial diversity, followed by sexual orientation, and more recently, the conversation has expanded to include different levels of education and class.

At the heart of this discussion are two key questions “why aren't we growing more as a religious movement?” and “why are we attracting more minorities?” In response to the first question, I am reminded that Thomas Jefferson once famously predicted that within a generation of his own lifetime, most US citizens would be Unitarians. As we all know, that did not happen. For nearly two centuries, religious liberals have bemoaned our apparent lack of success.

Nonetheless, the first question is worth asking again and again, for it prompts us to take a realistic assessment of who we are at present and who we desire to become. But how does one measure “success?” Numerical growth is clearly one yardstick commonly used. As the identified number of UUs remains static population while the population of the US grows, this signals a genuine decline.

One reality to bear in mind is that UUs are now, and have always been, a tiny denomination – one UU minister, the Rev. Ruppert Lovely once declared that there weren't enough UUs in the world to elect a dog catcher in Chicago.

Of course, other denominations are wrestling with similar issues. It may well be that the younger generations are less drawn to connect with religious institutions. Cosmetic changes in liturgy may not be the answer. Perhaps the answer is that a growing percentage of the general population finds religion irrelevant. Indeed, recent Pew Studies have indicated that this is a measurable trend.

In response to the second question, some assert that our forms of liturgy, our language, etc., are barriers to growth. Might our rituals, our musical selections, our sacraments (or lack thereof), or even our core theology be responsible? If some or all of these are the “culprits,” what might we change – and are there things which we dare not change?

A different approach might be to ask, what do we offer that is unique among the many religious traditions? We might even ask – is Unitarian Universalism truly a religion per se – or is it something else, namely a way to be religious?

Why is this attractive to those who presently belong? Perhaps we should begin by asking whether our emphasis on inclusivity truly possesses a universal appeal, or might it actually repel a significant percentage of those not presently affiliated with us? Our conversation could include the question, to what extent do non UUs even know that we exist? If they do know, are there other types of barriers – e.g., location, time of service, etc., that prevent them from attending, assuming that they were interested?

These are fascinating questions, and I doubt that there will be a universal consensus within the larger UU circle any time soon. I do look forward to exploring these, and other questions, at General Assembly and in the seasons to follow. In the meanwhile, we can work at promoting growth – and diversity – the old fashioned way: by inviting our friends, family members, and coworkers to a service.

July 2010

Summer is a rich tapestry of colors and sounds, the evening song of the cicada, the lazy flight of fireflies, the hiss of fireworks ... and the pageantry of General Assembly.

I have just returned from the UUA's General Assembly, which was held in Minneapolis this year. I have not yet finished unpacking my car. But I want to record a few memories before they begin to fade.

Imagine a convention center wherein are gathered several thousand UUs, cheering, singing, debating, applauding, worshipping, listening. A wonderful and uplifting moment in time. Even the streets outside pulse with UUs wearing their ID badges and (invariably) colorful t-shirts, many of which were bright yellow & advertised "Standing on the Side of Love."

If you have not yet attended a GA, the event usually begins with a parade of banners, a long procession of people, each carrying their congregation's banner, followed by a small knot of people from that particular congregation, others cheering and waving as each contingent is recognized, all moving to the pulse of music.

Worship at GA fills a large hall, lyrics are shown on a screen, words are recorded in real time captions, deaf language signers translate. Adult & youth choirs blended their voices. Rituals and liturgies familiar to us were enacted there, but on a much larger stage. I should mention that my favorite such worship is the *Service of the Living Tradition*, which honors those who are new to the ministry, those who are retiring, and those who have passed away. This year I personally knew several who had died.

For those who can attend workshops, each day has a dizzying array of topics, including: Margaret Fuller, Ministry, Youth, Young Adults, Social Justice, Diversity, Worship, Social Networking, Stories, UU Identity, Church Administration, and Stewardship. etc. There are dozens scheduled at the same time, so one must plan his/her agenda very carefully, to take full advantage of the course offerings.

This GA devoted considerable energy to its plenary sessions, which is an important embodiment of democracy within our movement, delegates discussed and voted on by-laws and actions of immediate witness. Notable among the discussion was whether the UUA should cancel its scheduled convention in Arizona in 2012; the final vote was in favor of meeting there AND of creating a "social justice GA," something which promises to be quite different than any previous GA.

One significant Social Justice activity was a public witness in favor of Marriage Equality. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were present. I know of several colleagues who performed dozens of Holy Union ceremonies for same sex couples, in the public parks. As is true of other GAs, there were also coffee houses, a dance, reunions and many meals shared by people, some who had just met for the first time.

I learned that my alma mater, Meadville/Lombard, has sold its property to the University of Chicago and is seeking a collaborate merger with Andover-Newton.

The next GA will be in June of 2011 and will be in Charlotte, NC. I hope to be there, and I hope that many of you will be able to attend as well.

August, 2010

Faxing seems so old fashioned these days; in the last few months, I have Skyped, IM'd, and even learned how to text on my phone (not while I drive though!). Most teens & tweens can text circles around me, no doubt. I marvel that there was a time in my twenties when I had refused to get a pager, like many of my peers, and even for a while, had consciously avoided owning a cell phone.

Now of course, I have new concerns: when I learn that children as young as Celeste sometimes have their own cell phones and Face Book accounts, I resist the urge to equip children with so many technological devices and internet options – if they are saddled now, will they ever know a time when they can be truly solitary? I try to imagine a modern-day Thoreau, trudging off to his/her shack, suspending cell phone & internet access for a year ... could it be done? Also, I dread to consider how much time are we investing therein, individually & collectively, which could be have been better spent on genuine, real world pursuits. In short, at what cost comes our constant interconnectedness?

Others of course have noted, with varying degrees of alarm, that we are living in an age of massive information overload, which is a by-product. Some of the information of course is useful but we all know instances of people who swallow any information that

they find on-line. In the way of example, I was researching the reported similarities between Osiris and Jesus – the number of possible web sites for those two keys is 1,120,000+ as of this moment; some of them affirm a connection, others vehemently deny it. None that I have yet encountered contain any evidence, merely statements that sound authoritative. Which is correct? Where are the scholars we dare trust? It is a tall task, sifting through so much proverbial hay, looking for that one needle.

This recent exercise – and, watching “Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader,” prompts me yet again to review what I happen to regard as “the Truth.” What was taught several decades ago by earnest teachers may or may not still stand the test of time. Books I read decades ago, whose truths have been impressed upon me, may also or may not be accurate. Some of the information may be correct, but other may be superseded by more recent revelations. Heaven help me if I were obliged to take a Science or Geography test! Even history, that wonderfully interpretive field, in which I have long had a keen interest, is often revised, based on new information, recently uncovered – or released.

What shall we then say about religious Truth? Much of what the world’s religions are built upon depends on certain specific incontrovertible truths – but of course, it is well known that there has always been much dispute (sometimes bloody) over which “facts” become accepted & celebrated.

I suspect that any serious seeker after truth must periodically step back from the masses of conflicting information and peer into a mirror, perhaps into a scrapbook, and reminds him/her self, once again, what he/she knows and why, beginning with oneself. Which reminds me of an old adage: knowledge of things is knowledge; knowledge of other people is wisdom; knowledge of oneself is enlightenment. The latter is something which cannot be found on-line; perhaps the “Truth” can never be successfully penned (let alone IM’d). “Revelation is unsealed” is a favorite saying amongst religious liberals – the older I get, the more I sense the wisdom of this; how very true this aphorism rings, but how very difficult at times to appreciate. In the meanwhile, let us exercise caution and, as the Buddha taught, strive to create a middle path as we navigate our journey through all the conflicting -- and competing -- “truths.”

September, 2010

I have a wooden curio that rests on one of the bookcase shelves in my office - it is four sided, and each aspect spells out the name of one season: winter - spring - summer - autumn. I had not noticed before how each word has six letters, but there it is , for any one to see. As the seasons change, one merely has to rotate the object a quarter-turn and this seasonal calendar is up to date.

So too with the annual cycle of congregational life; a few weeks can make quite a difference. As we enter this new season of growth and renewal, I am conscious that our congregation life will become quite active, quite suddenly. A peek at the church calendar reveals a grid brimming with events. Two notable events are the Water &

stone Communion, which is already less than two weeks away as I write, and the Trash & Treasure sale, which will soon be in our midst. Anyone who has helped with these or other events knows full well that they just do not happen by themselves -- a lot of work and planning go into these and other events.

The key to success begins with volunteer participation. Those who are new to the congregation are encouraged to assist as much as possible -- not only for the sake of the congregation and these events, but also so that they may through immersion experience the greater depths of fellowship in this religious community. The benefits are boundless.

October, 2010

I habitually make lists. One such example is the record of "Rites of Passage" which I've officiated during the past twenty years. Every wedding, union, memorial service, funeral and child dedication is recorded therein. One hundred and twenty three weddings thus far, and more are on the horizon. I noticed that the ratio of weddings to gay/lesbian unions is about 10:1; with the availability of legal weddings for gay & lesbian couples across the Iowa border, I expect that the demand for union ceremonies here in Illinois will diminish greatly. I also notice that the ratio of both weddings & unions to funerals is about 4:1. Many of the weddings were for non-members -- couples who wanted a "religious ceremony" but had no specific connection to any denomination. Some of their faces, and the details of those ceremonies, are hard to remember. I do remember nearly every memorial services & funeral though. On average, I have conducted four memorial services per year since arriving here seven years ago. I look at some names and dates and am incredulous that so much time could have passed.

I regard funerals and memorial services as much more demanding than weddings. Every wedding might have a minor glitch and yet no one will remember. But since a funeral or memorial service is the final farewell for someone, I feel much more pressure to create a flawless ceremony. I feel that I owe that much to the family, if not the individual. I do like that in our tradition, we offer more of a "celebration of life" than one often finds in other traditions. I have attended funerals for family and friends and been horrified at the message delivered by the clergy, or been shocked by how little was shared about the individual.

When someone dies, my sense of being a minister, and its inherent responsibilities, assumes a greater depth. One of my early mentors told me that being a minister is a unique privilege, because you are invited into a family's most intimate moments of joy and grief. At such moments, I stifle my own impulse to grieve until the work is done. This is especially true for when I work with the family to create a service but moreso when the actual service is in progress. Once the service is over and the people have left the building, then I can sit down and left grief come to the fore. For me, it's the hardest part of being a minister.

November, 2010

I recently spoke with a writer who is preparing a story about immigration for The UU World magazine. Evidently, a colleague had suggested my name to her. When I spoke with this writer, I recounted what I still regard as a nightmare for my family. In brief: in May, 2001, Angela and Celeste had travelled to Spain to visit her family; when they returned to O'Hare Airport, they were denied entry into the US by an INS agent and then deported. Mind you, Angela & I had been married for two years and Celeste had been born here. That particular experience and several more related to INS during the next few years were mostly awful. To make a very long story short, our story ended on a positive note: suffice it to say that Angela & Celeste were permitted to return.

On October 10, Shelly Heidemann, Executive Director of Faith Coalition for the Common Good, spoke here on the immigration issue. As the service description noted, Ms Heideman has worked more than 10 years with Latino and African immigrant families who live, work and attend school in Beardstown and Rushville, IL. She knows their stories and their struggles. Shelly shared some of these stories and discussed how US immigration policies are affecting over 11 million people living in the United States. I found Ms. Heidemann's presentation engaging. It also reminded me of my family's former nightmare. In retrospect, I realize that I was quite fortunate to have had the means and connections to marshal on behalf of my family. I empathize with those who stories have not been as fortunate.

I am pleased that the UUA included the Immigration Issue as part of its Standing on the Side of Love campaign and I hope that the charged rhetoric of the debate will give way to a more somber discussion once the elections are behind us. I consider how my own ancestors arrived here more than a hundred years ago (one of whom evidently jumped ship) and I wonder how much consideration they would receive in today's debate. I do not doubt that immigration, as an abstract issue, is a very complicated affair. As the UUA and our nation continues to wrestle with this issue, I hope that we will always remember that the very fabric of peoples' lives are at stake.

December, 2010

This month's article was submitted to the SJ-R as a letter to the editor on Monday, November 29th. On November 30, the Illinois House passed the Civil Union bill and on December 1, the Senate likewise approved the measure.

A recent stream of letters to the SJ-R, tinged with religious language, disparages our neighbors & fellow citizens due to their sexual orientation. I would remind such missive writers that our human nature is derived from one common Author. Even then, each human is unique with respect to genetics, temperament and the accidents of fate – to name a few variables. Perhaps more importantly, let us be reminded that prejudice is not innate, but is acquired. History records that prejudice left unfettered seeks to excuse reprehensible personal behavior and the enactment of unjust laws; and lastly, that the ultimate fruit of both is anguish for our fellow travelers in life.

The great tragic lament of the ages is that far too often, such prejudices are instilled and reinforced through one's religious education. Those who offer citations from the Bible would do well to first remember that Scripture was inspired and not dictated. This distinction is profound but often overlooked. Further, we all ought to remember that anyone who grounds his or her theological position from Scripture is always, always selective. We should remind ourselves that the highest calling is to frame one's actions upon the spirit rather the letter. When I consider the life and teachings of the Founder of Christianity, I find it impossible to reconcile his message with a gospel of intolerance. To preach, let alone practice one's faith in such a way that demeans or demonizes the humanity of our neighbors is surely a complete and utter corruption.

With respect to the public sphere, I hope that empathy and decency will ultimately persevere, and that our laws will in due course reflect the notion that a person must be accorded basic protection based upon his humanity and accorded praise or blame based on the content of his character rather than upon other concerns. When this can be achieved, it will be consistent with the highest standards of the American tradition.