

State of the UUA: From Fear to Love
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“The opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is fear.” I heard this truism from the Reverend Forrest Church in several workshops last week at General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Reverend Forrest Church is one of the most revered ministers in our Unitarian Universalist Association, and at age 59, he is dying of terminal cancer and has only a few months to live. In February 2008, shortly after receiving his diagnosis, Forrest Church wrote his final book, *Love and Death*, about his own journey through the valley of the shadow.

Forrest Church shared openly and with grace many of his life’s learnings. He spoke about how we can easily shield ourselves from grief and pain and loss by simply closing our hearts to love. But “love is grief’s advance party,” he said. Closing our hearts to love means we’ve allowed fear to claim us. When fear takes hold, we then learn bitterness and hatred. The goal of life is not to give meaning to our death; the goal of life is to live in such a way that our love lives on after we die. “The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear.”

In one workshop, the Reverend Forrest Church also connected the tactics of fear being ruthlessly promoted – on United States citizens – though our current government’s so-called “War on Terror,” as a way of closing our hearts to each other and to people in our global community. He compared our current situation with a situation that was much more dire in 1933, when unemployment was five times greater than it is now, when banks were failing by the handful, when bread lines stretched for blocks, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office and gave his first inauguration speech. 1933 was the first time the American people heard the now famous phrase, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

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Part of what made Forrest Church’s words so poignant last week – in addition to the fact that they were uttered by a man immanently facing his own death – was the situation in which General Assembly was held this year.

General Assembly, or “GA” as it is often referred to in its abbreviated form, is the annual business meeting and social gathering of Unitarian Universalists from across the United States. Each year, anywhere between 3,000 and 6,000 Unitarian Universalists attend GA, and each year GA is held in a different major city. Last year it was in Portland, Oregon, and next year it will be in Salt Lake City, Utah. In two years, in June of 2010, it will be right here in Minneapolis, Minnesota!

It takes many years to plan each General Assembly. Planning for the Fort Lauderdale GA began in 2003, shortly after President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” began. At that time, in an effort to make our nation more “secure,” our seaports were enclosed behind cyclone wire fences, and began requiring state-issued identification to enter. Since the Fort Lauderdale Convention Center lies within the port of Fort Lauderdale, that means it also lies within this so-called “security zone” behind the 15-foot-high cyclone wire fence. In 2003, the GA planning committee was given the promise – a verbal promise – that the security zone and accompanying gates would no longer be in place by 2008. At that time, no one knew that George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” and occupation of Iraq would last longer than World War II.

Though it may come as a surprise, I believe this may not be the first time our government lied to somebody. 15-foot-high cyclone wire fences enclosed the convention center and the entire port of Fort Lauderdale. Broward County Sheriff's deputies were stationed at every entrance through the gates with sheriff's patrol cars parked nearby. Everyone who attended GA this year was required to show a photo ID in order to enter the convention center. This meant that, in order for us to attend the business of our faith, and to attend the worship of our faith, we were required to first submit to government approval.

As unconstitutional as this was, in practice the "security" of the "secure zone" was ludicrous, and surprisingly painless. Yes, we were required to show our driver's license or other photo ID, but our bags were never checked, no one was physically searched as far as I know, and they had no metal detectors. In addition, shuttle buses that picked up conference attendees from their various hotels drove unmolested through the "secure zone" gates. I heard later that the bus drivers were supposed to check people's identification as they got on the bus, but to my knowledge, that never happened. Dozens of busloads of people were dropped off at the convention center doors each day without a whisper of interference.

As you may imagine, the state of fear encouraged by our government had considerable effect on the planning and preparations for GA. Last fall, the Internet email chat of the UU Minister's Association was buzzing with this issue. We engaged in passionate debate, ranging from authentic deep sorrow to blustery posturing. Ultimately, each minister had to make a choice – as did each lay person – about whether they would attend GA, and explore what their reasons were for attending, or not attending, our annual conference. Because of their passionate and reasoned convictions, some chose to stay home in protest or as a matter of conscience. Others, also because of their passionate and reasoned convictions, or as a matter of conscience, decided they would attend.

A few months ago I wrote a letter to the leadership of this congregation sharing my reasons for ultimately deciding to attend GA this year. In brief, my reasons for attending GA included my deep awareness of our denomination's covenantal foundation, and my personal desire to be in continued relationship with our larger association, committed not merely to our human actions, but to the principles and ideals our faith proclaims. It can be difficult to remain committed to ideals when our human actions fall so far short of those ideals, but we are human and we do fail. As I encourage members of this congregation to remain faithful to our own covenantal relationship even in times of disagreement and struggle, so I felt called to remain faithful to the ideals of Unitarian Universalism and be part of the conversation around "security" and "freedom" and fear and love that occurred repeatedly and in depth in many times and places at this year's GA.

The first thing that made it easier for me to attend GA this year was the change of venue for the UU Minister's Association meeting. Each year, the ministers meet for three days immediately prior to the beginning of GA, and always at the same location as GA. This year, however, when it became clear that the security zone would not be removed, the UU minister's executive committee moved quickly to find a different meeting place outside the "secure zone."

So many good people worked so hard to make the best decisions they could under this year's painful circumstances. Though this General Assembly was the most difficult for me to attend – and I've been going to GAs since 1979 – I felt honored to be with our own people of faith who did not buckle under aggressive government promotion of state-sponsored fear. Even within the convention center, with Broward County sheriff's deputies at the door, our workshop presenters, worship leaders and the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill

Sinkford, repeatedly spoke truth to power, reminding us and calling us to responses made in love to the government's attempts to instill fear.

As is usually the case, GA was packed with events and workshops. One positive outcome of this year's "security" problem is that it fostered and inspired conversations regarding many issues of access: access to United States citizenship; access to health care; access for people with disabilities; access for people of color to power and decision-making both outside and inside our denomination; youth access to denominational program changes; and access for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to civil marriage and human rights.

I have attended Unitarian Universalist churches since I was about 10 years old, and I've attended General Assemblies since I was 13. Over the past several years I have observed new movement within our liberal faith. If I were to use one word to describe this movement, this current state of the Unitarian Universalist Association, it would be the word "maturity." This year, perhaps partly because the security issues forced our hand, this religious and spiritual maturity was much more visible and articulated.

You may be wondering now what I mean by "spiritual and religious maturity." Consider teenagers. The job of teenagers is to rebel, to resist authority, to test boundaries. Teenagers do this to discover their own limits, to test the limits and authority of their elders, to learn where they belong, and how and why. Teenage rebellion often seems as though it has no purpose. But this rebellion is crucial to human formation. We need to first learn what we are not before we are more authentically able to explore who we are. One mark of maturity is differentiation: the quality of recognizing how we are different from those who formed us, and the ability to understand that we do not have to own or take on their baggage. Another mark of maturity is articulation. The more we are differentiated, the more we are able to articulate who we are: our beliefs, our visions, our resources, our limitations and our gifts.

I see a similar dynamic at work in our Unitarian Universalist Association. Our association began with a merger in 1961 from two separate denominations, the Unitarians and Universalists, each with long and distinguished histories. As a movement and institution, we are now only 47 years old. The first years of our life were marked by contention, fueled by society's contention in the 1960s and 70s. As a small band of religious liberals, we regularly rejoice in defining ourselves by what we are not: we typically say things like, "we are not Christian," "we do not have a creed," "we are not burdened by dogma," "we are not a hierarchical religion," "we do not believe in hell." To me, this sounds an awful lot like a teenager in a high school lunchroom complaining about parents.

People most often seek out a spiritual community when they are in the midst of transition: they just moved to town, they just got married, they just got divorced, they recently had children, their children recently left home, a family member died, or they lost their job. If people come to us seeking the bread of spiritual depth and sustenance, and all we give them is a stone of negativity, complaint, and rebellion, it makes sense to me that very few people would want to join us, and it makes sense to me that our movement would remain small and socially irrelevant.

My experience with Unitarian Universalism at General Assembly this year is that we are a faith that wants to grow up. *We are* growing up. For too long we allowed ourselves to assume we can come to church believing whatever we want. For too long we prided ourselves on the dysfunction of pathological individualism at the expense of moving together to construct a deep, true, and vigorous beloved community of faith. For too long we numbed ourselves into believing that "democratic process" means that the minority of people with the loudest voices get

to have their way. For too long we lived in a realm of self-righteous fear and anger, content to be a thorn in the side of those who are in power but reluctant or afraid to claim the power we already have.

This year I experienced in the leadership and in the people at General Assembly a growing willingness to move through our liberal religious faith together, opening our hearts to risk the possibility of spiritual depth and transformation. I experienced people who stepped forward to accept the mantle of maturity; who engaged in spiritual depth with one another; who worshipped not as a gathering of individuals but with a sense of congregational identity; who took the resources we have to forge partnerships with people from other faiths in order to address the social ills of our time; people who are working to define words like “God” and “prayer” and “holy” so they mean something sacred to us in our work now and are not merely cast-off time-bombs from a fundamentalist faith that instill cynicism and fear into our hearts.

We are no longer content to remain simply rebellious or virtually invisible. As a result of the ad campaign in Kansas City a few years ago, the congregations there have grown by 50%. Our recent ad campaign in Time magazine, according to Time’s survey team, was the third most remembered ad in the magazine, and recently Newsweek magazine approached us to begin working on a partnership with us as well. In another area, seven years ago, only two Unitarian Universalist chaplains were in the entire military – now we have 13 chaplains either in the military, or in training. Last year, the UU Legislative Ministry of California organized the Interfaith Amicus Brief, a “friend of the court” brief signed by more than 400 clergy and interfaith groups across California. The brief was cited twice in the state Supreme Court’s 2008 decision that California cannot bar same-sex couples from marrying.

This year, more than I’ve heard in past years, came repeated calls for Unitarian Universalism to come of age, to engage with each other with a spirit of generosity – not a generosity of money, but a generosity of listening, a generosity of faith, a generosity of deep sharing and genuine engagement with our differences, not simply so we can understand each other, but so we can find our commonalities and move forward together. A new tool I experienced several times was called “Appreciative Inquiry.” Appreciative Inquiry is a good process tool that can help us evolve, asking its participants to discover what is already working in a situation and why, rather than complain about what isn’t. What I heard repeatedly this year at General Assembly were repeated calls to move together not with arguing and fear, but together with a spirit of generosity and love.

At one of the final Plenary Sessions of General Assembly, Reverend Forrest Church was presented with this year’s annual Distinguished Service Award. During his humorous and gracious acceptance speech, Forrest Church described our faith as “one light – Unitarianism – through many windows – Universalism.” He also said that “ ‘God’ is not God’s name, ‘God’ is our human name for that which is greater than all, yet present within each.”

In the coming years, as we work together to become more mature in our faith, may the light of God illuminate our relationship, allowing us to listen, learn, and love.