



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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

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## “Love Reaches Out”

by General Assembly Delegates

Reflections delivered on August 3, 2014

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### Centering Thoughts

*The mission of the church is not to meet our needs; the mission of the church is to heal our world.  
It is to give ourselves to something larger than ourselves.* The Rev. Marilyn Sewell

*The purpose of all religion or the message of all religion is summed up in the phrase, ‘you are not alone.’ But too many of us, too many of our congregations, like to behave as if we are. We are indeed interconnected. And part of being interconnected is a spiritual practice of Generosity to one another.* Larry Ladd, UUA Financial Advisor

*The truth is that for most of us, taking a stand is a lot easier than reaching out. We’re great at standing on the side of love. We’re not as good at reaching out to people who we don’t know, people who might disagree with us, people who are different, people who make us uncomfortable.*  
The Rev. Peter Morales, UUA President

### Introduction, by Herb West:

This morning, several of us who attended the annual General Assembly (or GA, for short) of the Unitarian Universalist Association in June will share reflections, insights, or readings that we found meaningful or inspiring. GA is the annual meeting of our denomination where we discuss and vote on policies and other matters of importance to our association. It is also an opportunity to gather with fellow UUs from around the world to worship and sing together, to demonstrate our values through public witness, and to participate in a myriad of workshops on a variety of topics.

Ten of us from UUFA attended GA this year. I use “attended” figuratively since three of us (Lee, Myrna, and me) were not physically in Providence but “attended” through the miracle of technology from our own homes. Having been to five previous GA’s, I missed the amazing experience of being in the same place with thousands of other UUs, singing hymns and worshipping and attending workshops. On the other hand, it was much less expensive! You’ll hear more later about the off-site experience.

If you want to learn more about GA, go to [uua.org](http://uua.org) to watch videos and read transcripts of the meetings and worship services.

## **Chalice Lighting, Karen Solheim**

At any General Assembly, part of the focus is obviously on worship. In fact, over the four days of this GA, seven worship services were held, and the topic of “Love Reaches Out” was explored throughout.

At the very first worship service on Thursday morning, the Rev. Meg Riley shared, "Love reaches out. That's what we're here together to affirm this week. Love gives. Love offers itself. Love says here, take more, when you try to mooch a little bit from the side secretly. Love generates more love the way spam email generates more spam email. The way eating one pistachio leads to eating another pistachio. Love always says more, more, more."

As Herb lights the chalice of our faith, I share the following words also from Thursday morning's worship:

Love is the chalice that holds the oil. Love is the oil that feeds the wick. Love is the wick that burns with abandon. Love is the flame which dances an ancient pattern. We light the chalice of love.

## **Reflection, by Herb West**

The theme of this year's General Assembly was “Love Reaches Out.” Unitarian Universalism does not focus on beliefs, as we UUs hold diverse beliefs and don't always agree with each other. What we focus on, or at least try to, is what we do with our lives. As our Transylvanian Unitarian ancestor, Francis David, said, “We need not think alike to love alike.” We UU's put love into action.

In his report to GA, UUA President Peter Morales highlighted the five year anniversary of the “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign, which the UUA started in 2009 to challenge exclusion, oppression, and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, race, religion, or any other identity. We have been at the forefront of promoting marriage equality, which has now expanded to nearly half of all Americans! And we fight for immigration justice. No longer just a UU program, Standing on the Side of Love now reaches out to include people of all faiths as well as those who don't identify with any religion.

But Rev. Morales cautions: “Standing on the Side of Love is wonderful, but real love—true, deep, strong religious love—does more than take a stand. The truth is that for most of us, taking a stand is a lot easier than reaching out. We're great at standing on the side of love. We're not as good at reaching out to people who we don't know, people who might disagree with us, people who are different, people who make us uncomfortable. And yet,” Morales urges, “the future of our movement—the future of our being able to make a difference in the world and in the lives of millions of people—depends on our learning to reach out.”

The Rev. Mark Stringer, minister of the First Unitarian Church in Des Moines, IA, said in his sermon at GA's Sunday morning worship, “We shrink from taking risks, fearing that not everyone

will agree, as if anything worth doing has ever received universal agreement. We quibble over logos and buildings and which names for the holy belong in our services and which names don't." Our greatest stumbling block, he said, is that while "we say we promote religious freedom, ... we too often don't want to be in the company of people practicing faiths other than our own."

Many speakers at GA stressed the need to reach out in love to others, not just those we're ministering to, but those we're ministering alongside. We may differ in beliefs and disagree on some, even many, issues, with those of other faiths in our community. But when we share a passion for something like feeding the homeless or working for a living wage, we need to go beyond our differences and disagreements, and work together for the common good. As Rev. Stringer said, "Give those of different faiths who share our interest in working for justice and building the beloved community the space to be who they are. This isn't about you. This isn't about us. This is about the work we are called to do."

Finally, UUA President Morales reminds us, "We are a religious movement. We're not a club. We're not a political action group. Our story is a story of brave souls giving their lives in service to something that's far greater than themselves, and that extends far beyond their lifetimes."

As this year's GA emphasized, Love reaches out, urging us to find common ground with our interfaith and non-religious partners and work for positive change, even though we may hold different beliefs or disagree on some issues. Likewise, we need to do the same within our own congregation, opening our own doors to greater diversity, agreeing to disagree on some things, while working together in covenant to achieve our shared mission and vision.

### **Reflection, by Lee Cornell**

Having watched a couple of worship services and a general session online at last year's GA, I was looking forward to attending GA this year. I downloaded the program book as soon as it was available and read it. I picked out the programs I wanted to attend. I memorized the route from my dorm room to the convention center. . . . Unfortunately, financial obligations kept me from traveling to Providence, but this did not stop me from being present at GA.

My preparation for the trip exposed me to the Virtual GA and Off-Site Delegate areas; and as I registered as an off-site delegate, I committed to be as fully engaged in GA as technology allowed. I set myself up with my laptop showing the virtual session hall and my tablet showing the off-site delegate chat session. What I experienced surprised me. The wonderful IT Staff at the UUA have developed a user interface that does a wonderful job of immersing you in the GA experience.

I lit my chalice and sang along with the worship services. I listened, commented, and voted along with the other delegates during the general sessions. I met new UUs from around the country, chatted with Herb during the slow parts of the general sessions, and felt the power and energy of GA.

Listening to the discussions of my fellow off-site delegates, and talking with the GA tech support staff; the future of General Assembly is the Virtual GA experience. It allows us to minimize the

environmental impact of travel and gather more UUs together to experience GA in congregations, clusters, regions, and districts. I encourage everyone with access to the internet to consider participating “fully engaged” in GA next year in Portland. Even if it is just for the evening worship services. I propose, and am willing to lead the effort, to setup a GA experience here in Athens so that members of our congregation, and friends within our cluster of congregations, may gather to experience this wonderful event live surrounded by love.

### **Reflection (prerecorded on video), by Molli Freeman-Lynde**

Good morning friends,

Many of you know me, but for those that don't, my name is Molli Freeman-Lynde, and I have been attending the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens off and on for over twenty years. I was lucky enough to attend General Assembly in Providence earlier this summer, proudly wearing a nametag as a member of the Fellowship. I am speaking to you from my apartment in Boston, the UU heartland, where I moved with my husband almost a year ago. I recently started my second year of law school at Northeastern University. Since Providence is about an hour from Boston, I was able to travel back and forth for the most part, keeping up with my school and work responsibilities while also enjoying the many gifts GA had to offer. I first want to take a moment to encourage any youth or young adults listening to apply for scholarships if you want to attend GA, but are prohibited by the cost. When I heard that GA was going to be nearby in Providence, I knew I had to attend, but as a broke student, I couldn't possibly pay the registration fee. Fortunately, there is a special scholarship for youth and young adults. It was very easy to apply, and my registration was fully covered. I believe that in some cases you can also get money for travel, room and board, although I covered my own.

For many years, my experiences at the UUFA and in other UU spaces have had a major impact on my development and growth as a person, particularly in middle and high school. I attended General Assembly for the first time in 2003, when I was a rising senior in high school. GA was held right here in Boston, and the Coming of Age class from the fellowship came together to mark the end of our journey, (Well, the end of our CoA journey, the journey continues always). I attended for a second time in 2005, right after my freshman year of college, when General Assembly was hosted in Fort Worth, Texas. Both times I was overwhelmed (in a good way) by the innumerable workshops, meetings, worships, and constant presence of 1000s of other UUs. I met people from all over the country, and reconnected with friends I had made from other UU adventures.

My experiences this time, nine years later, certainly had some similarity to the first times. I was again energized and inspired, and made connections and reconnections. But at the same time, experiencing GA as a young adult was markedly different.

I paid much more attention to the workshops being offered this time around. My interests are more concrete than they were, and I was particularly strategic about attending workshops related to immigration reform, a topic that is very important to me personally, and is also the area of law

where I am most interested in practicing. I was able to make contacts in the Boston area and elsewhere, and feel inspired by the many others working to fix our terribly broken system. To that end, Sister Campbell's Ware lecture was a major highlight. I believe you can watch the whole thing on the UUA website, and I would strongly urge you all to do so if you can. She is a powerful speaker, and truly walks the talk. When I wasn't attending immigration-related workshops, I made my way to the Young Adult room, where I strategized about effective young adult ministry, talked with some youth who were newly-bridged about their hopes and fears, and enjoyed one of the TED-type talks that the Young Adult Caucus put on, about using technology to spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism. After several years living abroad, it was a great joy to be able to connect with young adults in this most recent phase of my life. In the process, I was also able to reconnect with a few friends from long ago who are still active in the association. One is now a minister, and another is serving on the board of trustees!

I found Friday and Saturday night services to be extremely powerful, moving and particularly relevant to my life the past several months. As some of you may know, my life was turned upside down in January when my mother-in-law died, and my husband traveled back to Mexico to care for his 14-year old sister. Since the theme of GA was "Love Reaches Out," the services were filled with themes of love, community, and healing, and I felt supported and lifted up. On Friday, at the Service of the Living Tradition, I clapped and cheered for Alison and Amber as they were recognized for major achievements, and was moved to tears by several of the speakers, but particularly during the Reverend Rebekah Montgomery's inspiring sermon. The Saturday night service was led by Sanctuary, a group here in Boston that holds bimonthly services in a sort of evangelical UU style, and I was again moved to tears, as we all sang and worshipped together. I was reminded that I am enough. Whatever I am feeling, whatever I am doing, however I am living, I am enough. What a powerful message.

In closing, I want to say that it was so wonderful to connect with the Athens contingent, who welcomed me with open arms, and even shared their dorm suite with me Saturday night. I feel so blessed to be part of such a strong community, one that helped raise me, and that continues to reach out in love through every stage of my life.

Thank you.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Who are some people who make you uncomfortable? Why?
2. How are you interconnected to your neighbor?
3. What can you do to reach out to someone different from yourself?