



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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

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## “Unitarian Universalism beyond Our Walls”

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Reflections delivered on June 12, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Together, we create a force more powerful than one person or one belief system. UUA.org*

*I want a faith that recognizes that religion is ultimately about our connections.*

*We become fully human in relationship. Rev. Peter Morales, UUA President*

*The idea is that we are better, more effective, stronger, more religious, together than we are separately. Kay Montgomery, former Executive Vice President, UUA*

### Reflections

*Reflection on Connections through the Southern Region by Aleta Turner:*

Since becoming a member here, I have attended a number of events within our larger district and region. Services, workshops, song readings, and informal gatherings with other UUs have given me opportunities to connect with new people, to reconnect with old friends, to gain new ideas, to get excited, to be moved to tears. When I participate in such events, I feel part of a larger movement. It is one thing to know in the mind that there are more than just those in this room; it's another to make actual connections with such folks and to feel it.

In April, several of us (Herb, Myrna, Karen Solheim, Lee Cornell, and myself) carpoled to attend the Mid-South Spring Gathering. It took place on a single Saturday in Marietta. You can see that even if travel to some of the more distant events is tough for you because of time or cost, an event like this can be pretty easy to attend. Depending on our various interests, we spent time in sessions on stewardship, social action, and leadership as spiritual practice. We ended with a moving worship service. All of us came back having learned things, with new ideas, and renewed energy as well as strengthened connections with UUs from several states.

That was just one example. As I said, there are a variety of events. In the past there have been mass choir sing events, events focused on keeping congregations healthy, and meetings for people with various specific interests. Just recently was a training for anyone involved in teaching and ministering to our youth. All of these are opportunities to deepen your ties to Unitarian Universalism and further connect with people who share our values.

I want to encourage you to attend any of the events held by our Southern Region. There are several opportunities throughout the year to attend workshops with other UUs. Led by our regional UUA staff, including Maggie Lovins, whom some of you may remember is our point person, these events are great ways to get to know other UUs from around the South and discuss what we are all doing. Is there something you want to do here, but you aren't quite sure how to start it? There may well be folks at other congregations working on the same thing – you don't have to reinvent the wheel. It can be really useful to realize there are others dealing with the same issues, to bounce ideas off one another, and learn how other folks have tackled things. Beyond all these practical effects, I think you will find that it is meaningful to be in a room full of people who all want to live in accordance with our Seven Principles.

*Reflection on Connections through General Assembly by Michelle Leebens-Mack:*

I would like to speak to you today about our connection to GA – the UU General Assembly. I first attended a UU General Assembly in 2003. That year, in Boston, I was surrounded at times by approximately 5000 other people who were like me. We were soothed by the voices of Sweet Honey in the Rock, including UU singer Ysaye M. Barnwell. We were rallied to vote and to continue to work for justice by Julian Bond.

At UU General Assemblies we live our 5th UU Principle, to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process – and democracy can be a messy thing. I found, at the same time, how empowering it can be to be educated on the democratic process. My greatest joy at that General Assembly was watching the empowerment of my young mentee from my previous congregation in Syracuse, New York. Sixteen-year-old Sammie was a youth delegate absorbed in the proceedings of the debate on an issue. We heard lines of people share their opinions at the pro and con microphones. At a certain point, she turned to her youth advisor and said, “I believe that everyone has already made up their minds.” Her advisor told her what it meant to “call the question” – and she did! Sammie marched up the center aisle of the huge auditorium in Boston, and called the question.

General Assembly has also been a way for me to deepen my own faith.

At the GA in San Diego, I lead a Small Group Ministry group. During a facilitator group meeting, I was challenged on my previous beliefs regarding ideas on individuals with mental health issues. This turned out to be an opportunity for me to grow and to learn – to see things in a way that I hadn't before.

You don't need to join me and the rest of the delegation from the UUFA in Columbus, Ohio, to be empowered by what goes on there. You can *now* watch it streaming live on the web. Rev. Alison, Lee Cornell, Karen Solheim, Susie Weller, and I will be bringing back energy and ideas that can be carried on here at the UUFA. We will also bring back information on how we in our congregation can connect to ideas and activities of our greater UU community, ways that we can grow our movement, linking it to our unique message.

Ours is a small global denomination, but we are recognized for our powerful and important voice and message.

It is a message of how people of differing beliefs *can* share important values, and this year's GA theme is "Where Faiths Connect."

It is a message that we are a faith of "deeds, not creeds." In the Heartland of the U.S. in Columbus, Ohio, GA will be a fertile place for us to learn and grow.

It is a reminder that when we stand together with other UU churches and individuals we can accomplish so much more carrying our message to the world to always "Stand on the side of Love!"

*Reflection on Connections through SUUSI by Penny Oldfather:*

I've attended UU summer institutes all my life. It was 72 years ago that my mother taught me to swim at a Summer Institute in Ardmore, Okla. So I was thrilled to discover our wonderful Southeast UU Summer Institute (or SUUSI) which I first attended two years ago.

Maybe you would enjoy a week in a different world – a world where you can leave your ordinary life behind? Then please join me and about 1200 other UU's at SUUSI. SUUSI is an annual gathering of kindred UU spirits who come together to play, learn, think, be silly or serious, sing, dance, and receive hugs from friends old and new. The mission of SUUSI is to "provide a one-week experience evoking the best within us, in concert with Unitarian Universalist principles." It's the second largest gathering of UU's in the world. UU's flock there each year to experience what has come to be called the "SUUSI magic."

The conference is traditionally held during the third week of July. This year the dates are July 17 – 23<sup>rd</sup>. We're very lucky because SUUSI's new venue is within just 2 ½ hours from Athens on the campus of Western Carolina University at Cullowhee, NC. This is a beautiful location amidst the Blue Ridge Mountains, about 30 minutes from Asheville, NC.

SUUSI has something for people of all ages, interests, personality types or sleep schedules. I hope lots of UUFA kids will go. They'll come back fired up to be part of our RE program and youth group.

For me, the music experiences are the most amazing. There is live entertainment every evening, concerts and singing in the afternoons. And informal jamming at all times of the day. I don't have words for how wonderful the music is. There are a large number of singer-songwriters who converge each year at SUUSI – to sing with us, entertain us, and inspire us. I'm so excited to be again taking the class on Improvisational Singing, which I took last time I went. If you need further confirmation about the music, ask UUFA member and local musician, Pinkie Bergman, who is part of the music scene, herself. Actually, Pinkie has been going to SUUSI for nearly 20 years, and served recently as president of the SUUSI Board of Trustees.

Do you like birding? White water rafting? Yoga? Ping Pong? Disc golf? SUUSI's got it. Maybe you're into bluegrass jamming, filmmaking, song writing, circle dancing. SUUSI's got it. Perhaps

you'd prefer healing meditation, right-brain drawing, and the genius of Hildegard von Bingen, storytelling, home brewing, or a murder mystery party. You're in luck. Maybe you're ready for the spiritual lift and challenges of the morning and evening worship. Or you might like to read a book in a place with a view, or take a nap.

Please join us for a great week together. We'll proudly carry our UUFA banner together at the opening banner parade and ingathering. We might hangout together at Community Time in the afternoons. As part of the SUUSI closing tradition, we'll sing Ric Masten's beloved song, "Let It Be a Dance," and experience the emotional Closing Circle with 1200 UU's on the final morning. At SUUSI, as at other UU Institutes I have attended over the years, I looked around even on the first day, and somehow knew immediately that these total strangers are my "peeps."

I felt inspired by new knowledge and ideas in the worship services, workshops and conversations. I felt the freedom that comes with feeling accepted for who I am among a large gathering of those who share UU values.

I returned home with a heart full of music and a deep sense of gratitude for what it means to be part of the larger Unitarian Universalist community.

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

1. Have you made connections with Unitarian Universalism beyond UUFA? If so, how has that strengthened your faith?
2. How would you explain UUFA's connection to the UUA to a visitor or new member?
3. How can you make stronger connections to Unitarian Universalism?