



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“What’s the Connection: Interdependence or Independence?”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen & Ms. Karen Solheim

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), covenant to affirm and promote [the Seven Principles]. The living tradition which we share draws from [the Six Sources]. Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support. UUA Bylaws

The [Unitarian Universalist Association] is a voluntary association of autonomous, self-governing local churches and fellowships ... which have freely chosen to pursue common goals together. UUA Bylaws

We are called to send out many roots in a covenantal interweaving of commitment and accountability, becoming stronger through our relationships with each other.

Rev. Deanna Vandiver † (The chalice symbol designates a UU author, musician, or contributor)

Together Time:

A discussion (with pictures) of redwood tree roots and their interconnectedness to serve as a metaphor for congregational life and relationships.

Reflections: (with singing “When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place” between reflections)

Rev. Alison Eskildsen: Opening words

All Unitarian Universalist congregations, whether called a church, fellowship, or other name, operate independently from one another. You, the members, vote or voice how you spend your money, who will be your minister, what causes you engage in, and who will govern you. This is called congregational polity because authority rests within the local congregation. We inherited this model from our Puritan spiritual ancestors.

However, in 1954, members of this Fellowship voted to become a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association. As such, we benefit from many of its resources, such as religious education curricula, worship material, ministerial settlement, justice initiatives, communication tools, expert consultants, and more.

Although we freely make our own decisions, our association means we do not exist in isolation from other UUs. We freely visit other congregations and whether as professional or lay leaders, we associate with one another to learn new ways and check whether old ways need changing. We are both independent from and interdependent with the larger UU world.

Hymn #1008, 1st chorus and verse

Karen Solheim, Lay Minister for Justice: First Reflection

I have shared before from this pulpit that for several years (or even a decade or so) after I joined this Fellowship, I finally realized that I was part of something even larger: the Unitarian Universalist Association (the UUA) to which I refer to affectionately as “the Mother ship.” Raised Lutheran as a child, I had heard of the Missouri Synod, but in my quest as an adult for a “church home,” being connected to something more global was not part of my criteria. I needed to find my Athens-Georgia tribe first, and, indeed I did, within these walls.

However, because of traveling beyond the Classic City, my tribe expanded, through visiting other UU congregations in Atlanta, Savannah, and north Georgia. Whenever I visit a UU congregation, I do tend to “out” myself by making visible my chalice necklace, so the reception I receive during the introduce-yourself-if-you’re-a-visitor time always made me feel welcome.

Where I have visited the most, however, is All Soul’s Church in Washington, DC. Much larger than us and considerably more diverse ethnically, I feel right at home not only because of similar worship elements in the service--they, too, have the grey hymnals and great guest musicians-- but also and more importantly, because of the individuals with whom I interact.

Within a UU worship service wherever I attend, there is a warmth, a commonality, a community of which I automatically feel a part. I hope that you too have had that experience.

Wherever I travel, if I have the chance, I try to visit UU congregations, fellowships, or churches, resting assured that I will see our faces in each other’s eyes.

Rev. Eskildsen: First Reflection

My heart is in a holy place. You make it holy by your presence. You make it holy by the respect you hold for one another, despite all differences. You make it holy by bringing your collective hopes and dreams for a better life for yourself and others. You make it holy by recognizing that life is more than what we get out of it, but by what we give back. You make it holy because you bring to the proverbial altar your highest aspirations. And, you make it holy because you bring all that you are, your gifts and shortcomings, your joys and sorrows, and despite all these things, you accept each other. Together, will all of our hopes and dreams, imperfections and challenges, we make this place holy.

And in every Unitarian Universalist congregation across the country, other people are creating holy places, too. When entering another UU congregation, as Karen said, I feel a sense of familiarity and welcome. I feel as if I’m walking on holy ground whenever I gather with UUs.

I am glad not to be alone, not to be so independent that I miss the wisdom others have to offer. I am in relationship not only with you, but with ministerial colleagues and religious professionals in North Georgia, the Southeast region, and across the nation. You benefit, as I do, from these relationships. I check in with them about what we’re doing and they learn from me what we’re doing. If we’re doing something extraordinary, they benefit by following us. If we’re doing something questionable, we benefit by their alerting us to another way.

As the hymn proclaims, when ‘we see our faces in each other’s eyes, then our heart is in a holy place’. Whether I am among you or at regional or national gatherings, my heart is lifted and I am in a holy place.

Hymn #1008, 2nd chorus and verse

Ms. Solheim: Second Reflection

The title of today's service--as you can see from your Order of Service is "What's the Connection--Interdependence or Independence?" and of course, in true UU fashion the answer is both. It is really not an either-or. I like being part of the mother ship...the UUA...both on the congregational level and on the association level.

If I wanted total isolationism and not to be challenged though an exchange of ideas, I could just stay home. What I receive from my interactions here at UUFA does generate new thoughts. However, being part of almost 1100 congregations in the US solidifies that I am not alone and not isolated and that my way of thinking and being is embraced and challenged not only in Athens, Georgia, but also in Athens, Ohio, and Athens, Pennsylvania.

Believing that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, I also embrace the collective wisdom of those we elect to serve within our denomination and their ability to hire quality individuals as employees of the UUA. Therefore, the UUA hopefully represents the best of the best--individuals who bring perspectives that are not even on my radar...yet...and who reinforce those that are. Thus, I applaud, for instance, as many of you do, the UUA Standing on the Side of Love campaign,

an interfaith public advocacy campaign promoting respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, confronting issues of exclusion, oppression, and violence based on identity with core issues of focus including LGBTQ equity, immigrant justice, racial justice, and intersectional movement building.

Trusting Martin Luther King's assertion that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," I resonate with other UUA-justice initiatives such as the White Supremacy Teach-ins, the focus of which centers not on holding up white UUs as being swastika-waving neo-Nazis but on a way for me to try to look at the waters of the white dominant culture in which I swim and the privileges those waters afford me.

Also powerful is UUA's work with the Sanctuary Movement (which has no connection whatsoever to the Expanding Our Vision Task Force) in joining with faith and immigrant communities to protect and stand with immigrants facing deportation and protecting immigrant families who face workplace discrimination or unjust deportation.

Through other UUA programs and resources, we have already accomplished a great deal. For instance, the UUA worked hard to make sure lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are full members of our faith communities through its Welcoming Congregation initiative. UUFA became a Welcoming Congregation in 1996.

UUFA worked with environmental justice and is now recognized as a UUA Green Sanctuary Congregation. UUFA is also recognized as a Breakthrough Congregation due to uniqueness of our Lay Ministry program that Reverend Alison instituted.

And as many of you know, the UUA was also instrumental in helping us during our ministerial search process, providing guidelines for the entire search process and an interim minister. Even in the Expanding Our Vision process, the UUA was involved, suggesting a consultant to help guide our initial thought process concerning even having a capital campaign.

Lastly, even all the hymns we sang today are by UU composers. In short, our UU connections beyond these walls have broadened and enriched life of UUFA.

Could we have done our own work on the local level and arrived at the same place?

Maybe... sooner or later. However, our being connected with the UUA has not only held up a bar to which to aspire, we have saved ourselves time and talent (and treasure) by being in community with others throughout the country who have the same values, thus achieving more together.

Rev. Eskildsen: Second Reflection

The UUA is not without its faults. It is no more perfect than our own Fellowship. But I believe it serves an important function. If a congregation becomes too independent and isolates itself from the rest of the UU world, I think it risks becoming incestuous. It can easily stray far afield or become cult-like if there isn't outside influence or accountability. Just as we covenant with one another here, our congregation covenants with all the other UU congregations across the country to form the UUA. And like our Board and Lay Ministers who are from among us, the UUA hires committed leaders from among the larger 'us' to help guide us.

The UUA leadership, in my view, does not demand we follow a particular course. Rather, I like to think of the UUA as our leading edge, like the lead goose in a flying 'V' formation. They may be ahead of some of us on certain issues, such as how to create racial equality, whether to promote sanctuary cities or churches, and economic justice. They may also be off course and we may prefer not to follow them. But our independence allows us to make that decision. However, I like that they push me and you into new and uncomfortable places. Their prodding helps us grow and change at our own rate, within the context of our own location and culture.

I believe isolationism risks more than it gains. I value hearing other voices – your voices, your stories – and I try to listen with a loving mind. I want to hear your struggles as well as your 'ah hahs!'

We are not all alike. We are not all in the same place of readiness, willingness, or understanding for certain types of change. Receiving what the UUA has to offer, but making our own choices, I believe keeps the right balance between independence and interdependence with other UUs.

Ms. Solheim: Third Reflection

My first leap in to the larger UU world was through being a delegate to GA. Usually, at GA, attendees worship, witness, learn, connect, and make policy for the Association through democratic process, and indeed, those things did happen at my first GA. Just as when I first entered the walls here and knew I was home, the same thing happened on a much grander scale with over 3700 of my closest "friends." Imagine the power of UUs gathered in convention-size auditorium all singing "Spirit of Life" (or any other UU hymn for that matter). Just as our music is wonderful here, it was magnificent plus there.

However, this particular GA in 2012 in Phoenix was special: it was a Justice General Assembly, the result of delegates two years before overwhelmingly voting to bring an immigration-focused "Justice General Assembly" to Phoenix rather than boycott Arizona because of the inhumane treatment of undocumented immigrants.

My most memorable moment was joining round 2,500 UUs--many wearing Standing on the Side of Love t-shirts and/or carrying banners, plus hundreds of people from local activist groups, a candlelight vigil was staged outside Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's huge outdoor jail, "Tent City." As we waited together to board the bus to Tent City, we sang...both protest songs and UU hymns; we were kind and gentle with one another in boarding the buses, and there seemed to be an unwritten but ever present code that we had each other's backs if something went

awry as we marched in front of Tent-City with Arpio's armed guards on horseback glowering at us.

If you went with UUFA to Selma to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Civil Rights March known as Bloody Sunday, I hope you had similar emotions being part of the sea-of-yellow Standing on the Side of Love shirts as we ate and sang together, encircling the church auditorium, holding hands, and singing "We Shall Overcome" before we marched and crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Rev. Eskildsen: Third Reflection

If you've never been to a General Assembly (GA) when roughly 5,000 or more UUs gather to sing, learn, vote, and experience the power of being large in what often feels like a small religious tradition, like Karen, I highly recommend it. Depending on where it's held and your housing needs, it can be expensive. But the Fellowship often contributes funds to defray attendee's costs. For those who can't afford the cost or time away, through the wonders of the internet you can freely participate by watching it live or at your convenience. Delegates can now vote remotely, too.

Sharing the silence of sacred space with 5,000 or so of your best UU friends is awesome. The music is terrific, the speakers inspiring, and the workshops informative. Like a big family reunion, we come together to learn and grow and share an incredible experience. It's the closest we UUs get to an old-fashioned tent revival. If they had altar calls, I'd be up front on my knees because the God of my heart would be stirred within! Imagine, the power of thousands worshipping together. I prefer the intimacy of UUFA, so I wouldn't want to experience that every Sunday as occurs in some mega-churches, but once a year, it's well worth it.

At UUFA, we're beginning to plan for ways you can learn about and voice your opinions on what will be voted on at GA this June. Our delegates should represent our views. By voting at GA we influence the UUA's direction, and ultimately our own. I believe not paying attention to the UUA, whether by voice or vote, abdicates our responsibility as a member congregation. We should complete the circle of communication that flows between the congregation and the Association.

Meditation

'When we feel the power of each other's faith', even when we differ about what that faith is or means, and 'when we listen with loving hearts', then we enter into sacred space, then our hearts are in a holy place, whether we are here at the Fellowship, meeting with colleagues or fellow lay leaders, or just being together at regional or national meetings.

I invite you now to get comfortable for a time of shared silence, a time to notice this holy place, this sacred space, and this beloved community. Our time of silence will be ended with our singing once more. (*Followed by a time of silence, then singing*)

Hymn #1008, 3rd verse and chorus repeated

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you feel connected to the UUA or UUs beyond Athens? What has been your experience with other UUs or representatives from the UUA? What might change your level of connection?
2. How does the idea of covenant, not creed, resonate with you as a 'tie that binds' UU together?
3. Do you consider yourself a representative of the UU tradition? In what way are you (or might you become) an ambassador for Unitarian Universalism?