



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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

“YoUU Are NOT Alone”

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Presentation delivered on July 16, 2017

by Lee Cornell, Karen Solheim, Susie Weller, *Delegates to UUA General Assembly*
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Centering Thoughts:

In every community, there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart, there is the power to do it.—*Marianne Williamson*

The community which has neither poverty nor riches will always have the noblest principles.—
Plato

I feel we are all islands—in a common sea.—*Anne Morrow Lindberg*

Reflections Overview: Lee Cornell

What is the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly--the UUA GA?

GA is a time for UUs from across the country and friends from around the world to gather together to worship, learn, connect, sing, dance, and make policy for our Association.

General Assembly is a time for witnessing. This year's theme of Resist and Rejoice was actively demonstrated during our New Orleans' style Second Line march and public witness for Sanctuary & Solidarity.

General Assembly is a time for remembrance and celebrating our Association's ministerial professionals. In addition to the traditional Service of the Living Tradition, there was a memorial service for Moderator Jim Key who passed away just a few weeks before the Assembly.

General Assembly is a time for personal growth. A time to hear of personal experiences, hurts, challenges, and accomplishments. We heard from Dr. Sanyika, a member of the Black Lives of UU's Council of Elders. We heard from Bryan Stevenson, the founder and the Executive Director of Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery as well as the author of *Just Mercy*, the 2015-2016 Common Read. We heard from many people sharing their learning and experiences with us in workshops, lectures, and services.

Now we invite you to return with us to the Big Easy as we share some of our thoughts about General Assembly.

Reflection: Karen Solheim

I have a confession to make: I am a General Assembly--GA--aficionado. Justice GA in Phoenix, Arizona, was my first in 2012, and I already have GA 2018 in Kansas City on my calendar.

Why? What is it that draws me to gather once a year with my Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) brothers and sisters?

The main reason is the affirmation that I am not alone. I have been a member here at UUFA for 18 years. As is a pattern with many UUs, I, having been raised Lutheran, had spent several decades being “unchurched.” I had been lost but now was found, and UUFA had become my world, y'all my tribe, and social action and social justice my lens.

A Zen proverb states, “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.” Gradually,

repeated references here and there to the UUA resonated and stuck. I realized that I was part of something much larger, and as someone with a somewhat addictive personality, I wanted more.

Imagine my joy and enthusiasm years later when I, as a slow learner, learned that that UUFA was part of something larger--the UUA--the mothership, if you will.

When I heard that the 2012 GA would be totally different than any other GA--focused solely on justice in general with a social witness event at Joe Arpaio's tent city in particular, I knew I wanted to be in that number, and indeed, I had the opportunity to do so.

Six GAs later, at this justice-themed GA in New Orleans, I was once again in the number: 4,069 onsite and 269 offsite delegates representing all 50 states and 604 congregations. Of these over 4000 delegates, about one third were ministers, over 500 folks identified as people of color, and over 300 youth were present.

Indeed, I was not alone, not only in body but also in spirit. Beginning each day with worship was a great way for me to become rooted before my horizons were broadened by the workshops, speakers, and interactions with other attendees. With the focus of this GA also being one of justice in general and racial justice in particular, I had my perceptions challenged and confirmed...wings and roots, wings and roots.

Challenged? Yes, one workshop speaker purported that only white people can be racist (based on her definition of the term *racism* involving the component of power). She also asserted that white people cannot label themselves as allies; that label must come from those without power. Both of these suppositions resulted in much discussion with Lee, Susie, and Rev. Alison, fueling my awareness that I have so much more work to do...although I do continue to wear my Black Lives Matter bracelet. My reality was also challenged by the notion that many times our UUFA worship services with the "sermon sandwich" could be described as Eurocentric or Puritan-standard and might not be as inviting to others who do not look like me, concepts that the Worship Arts Committee focused a great deal of our time discussing at yesterday's retreat. Challenged I was (as Yoda would say), but I also received confirmation.

Yes...I was thrilled to learn that over 15,000 folks as individuals and 300 congregations had signed the Declaration of Conscience, a document that many of us have already signed as individuals and that at our May congregation meeting we also voted to sign as a congregation. As Lay Minister for Justice, I had felt rooted in learning that within our denomination, over 160 Black Lives Matter banners have been hung (and possibly rehung and possibly rehung again), 63 Sanctuary UU churches exist, and over 800 congregations have conducted white supremacy teach-ins, something that we here at UUFA are discussing for Reverend Alison's post-sabbatical time.

"Resist and Rejoice" was the theme of this General Assembly.

I hope that you will resist, as I am trying to do, the temptation to stay safe in your comfort zone. I hope you will resist the temptation to play it safe, always doing what we've always done and getting the same results when the issues of racism, white privilege, and even white supremacy are raised. So many things need to be changed in this world. I hope you will lean with me into this discomfort of change and of having hard conversations.

I also hope that you will rejoice with me in knowing that while we at UUFA have congregational polity, we don't have to be on this journey alone. With over 1,000 UU congregations representing over 154,000 members, I am not, we are not, you are not alone. I am so glad we are on this journey together.

Reflection: Susie Weller

Why did I go to GA this year? Well, it was in New Orleans, and it was slated to be more justice oriented than business.

But why really do I go?

Growth—I go to GA to grow. That is why I went last year, and that is why I went this year. Although I go to represent the Fellowship, which I enjoy doing, saying that I go for me is

probably more appropriate. I go to see what other UUs are doing and fighting for. I go to see what amazing ministers we have out there and hear their sermons. I go for the keynote speakers and others. I go to be in the movement.

And in the movement I was. My largest take away was exploring the concept of a White Supremacy Culture. For me, being raised in the South in the 80's and 90's, a white supremacist was someone in the KKK. Someone who used the N word and meant it, someone who hated black people just because they were black.

So for UUs to be throwing out the words *white supremacist* in reference to themselves or us as a body, I was shocked. The word *racist*, sure. I learned last year through the Black Lives Matter work at GA and the work in our congregation that I had some racist thinking, I could accept that. But to be a White Supremacist. No, Ma'am. I am not a part of the Alt-right; I do not have a Rebel flag. This is not me.

So like many of us would have done, I resisted. I am not a white supremacist. I do not participate in white supremacist behavior. Once my defenses calmed down, I consulted Google. "White Supremacy"—the belief that white people are superior to those of all other races, especially the black race, and should therefore dominate society.

I don't believe that, and I don't believe they think that, so what are they talking about?

Google and I dug further into the concept of "White Supremacy Culture" and there it was. We found an article from *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun.

Looking over this document, I was beginning to understand. I could see what they were talking about. I could see **it** in myself (home, work, relationships), in the running and establishment of GA (the voting process, the conversations), and I could see it in our congregation, and I could definitely see it in our US culture.

Some of the traits of a White Supremacist culture are Perfectionism; Sense of urgency—our need for things to happen now, if not yesterday to feel accomplished; Defensiveness—which can dominate the conversation so that the real issue cannot be addressed; Fear of Open Conflict; Individualism. The list goes on. The more I read, the more I could see how I was participating in this culture.

Attending GA always makes me have thoughts I haven't ever had before. This GA has made me question not only my thoughts but also my every action and the action of the white dominant culture to which I belong. Indeed, I do have more questions than answers; however, a line from one of our UU hymns maintains, "To question even is an answer." May it be so.

Reflection: Lee Cornell

GA IS so much more than just conducting the business of the Association.

I feel that one of the most important actions of GA and the greatest gift GA gives back to those attending is witnessing. We have the opportunity to witness publicly on the streets of the host city for social justice. We have the opportunity to witness in community the successes of other UUs. We have the opportunity to witness as a diverse congregation of thousands the pain and struggles of others, to acknowledge their struggle as our shared struggle and to sit with them in love and as we work together toward an equitable, loving society. We have the privilege of witnessing in ourselves and others deep personal growth, transformation, and change.

For me, GA has been a deeply transformational experience. Being born in the early 70s, my only knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement came from what I was taught in school, with other white children, being taught by white teachers, using textbooks most likely written and published by white people. During last year's Service of the Living Tradition, Reverend Bill Sinkford shared his personal experiences as a youth leader attending his first GA in 1966 and

meeting Dr King at that GA as a set of elevator doors opened. Reverend Sinkford went on to describe being a black UU during that time, of the triumphs and failures seen since in the UUA and our country.

This year I also heard the professional insight and experiences of Dr. Robin DiAngelo, a racial and social justice educator, as she helped those gathered begin to understand what it means to be white and understand the water of “White Supremacy” that we swim in. I also heard Bryan Stevenson, speak of his personal experiences as a public interest lawyer of color in the deep South. These experiences opened my heart to understanding what white privilege is and opened my eyes to begin seeing the societal water I swim in.

And these growing edges weren’t just private things I kept to myself. Last year, Susie, Michelle Leebens-Mack, and I deepened our relationships during the drive to and from Columbus, Ohio.

After Reverend Sinkford’s sermon, Rev. Alison spent time with Susie and me, sharing her experiences during the Civil Rights Movement and supporting us as we reflected on what we heard and as we struggled to understand what it meant for our lives. This year, Karen, Alison, and I engaged in a number of discussions over a few days on the idea of white cultural dominance, helping us to see the water, and to begin considering what it means and how we can change. These personal, connected, honest discussions helped in my growth; and I can only hope that I was able to return to my friends the gifts they shared with me.

I will continue to return to GA as I am able because I know that these transformative experiences will continue as long as I’m willing to receive them. Would anyone else attending GA find the same meaning that I did? Probably not, but there were so many experiences that I missed and so many other perspectives I couldn't see that I am sure there were thousands of experiences equal to my own. I hope you are able to join me in Kansas City next year and share in the experience.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Of what communities are you a part? Which is the most and/or least important one?
Elaborate.
2. In your journey, have you heard about the Unitarian Universalist Association?
3. Does being part of something bigger give you peace, fear, or some other emotion?
Explain.

About what parts of your life have you resisted? About what parts of your life have you rejoiced?

About what parts of your life have you resisted and rejoiced?