



Elderberries

Unitarian Universalist
Retired Ministers and
Partners Association

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Thank you to Fall 2022 conference planners (left to right, top row to bottom): Barbro Hansson, Jon Claney, Johanna Nichols, Terry Ellen, Peter Friedrichs, Christine Robinson, Beth Miller, Rosemarie Smurzynski, Cynthia Cain, Richard Speck, Wayne Arnason, and Arthur Berman, whose roles are described on the final page.

President's Pondering by Susan Veronica Rak

Any of you who have had to do physical therapy in the aftermath of injury or surgery can relate to the experience of learning to do familiar things all over again. For me it's been with respect to walking. I imagined that recovery from surgery (some repair work involving tendons and ligaments) would be swift and I'd be marching around the block in no time. Of course it is a slower and longer process than that.

As I've done my exercises over and over again, I've felt a bit like a dog in agility training as I, none too nimbly, step over and around cones and barriers. I marvel at what it takes to just take a step: all of the things that have to properly connect and come into alignment to be able to move, with the focus on balance and where to place my foot. I am increasingly aware of all the things that impede this, or that can throw me off kilter.

We've just celebrated New Year's, and the arrival of 2023 got me to thinking about taking those steps. As we move into a new year, we need to pay attention to where we are going, whether we are following old familiar paths or taking on something new. Our focus includes both where we place our feet and what is ahead, where we want to be going as we engage the various muscles, bones and tendons in taking those steps.

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This is true for your UURMaPA Board too! I know we've mentioned before how the world has changed so much, how the pandemic has shifted our perspective and altered how we do things. Considering UURMaPA's purpose and activities in this new light, we are making those first, perhaps awkward, steps into what I see as a new era.

I hope you will engage with us as we move toward adopting the Board's proposal for new language describing UURMaPA's "Purpose," as listed in our By-Laws. This doesn't change who we are but helps guide our steps. This Board continues to build strong connections with the wider denomination. We know that it is not our role to drive UURMaPA in a particular direction with respect to issues within Unitarian Universalism, and that each of us in UURMaPA has a different relationship to the wider Association. But as a Board, we've wondered how these relationships, different as they may be, play a role in who we are.

And we wonder, in these changing and sometimes challenging times, how best we can support our connections. The need for connection never leaves us. We are, as entities in an ever-changing cosmos, part of an abundance of networks that form our universe. But our most tangible and important network may be our person-to-person connection. And that's the center point of UURMaPA's function.

As the main character in E.M. Forster's novel *Howard's End*, Margaret Schlegel, says, in her struggle to find her place and her purpose in a changing London, the salvation of every soul lies in this one imperative: "Only connect! Live in fragments no longer." Step by carefully placed step, we will make these connections happen!

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UURMaPA Board Welcomes Responses to a Purpose Change

In the Fall 2022 *Elderberries*, your Board announced a next step in this year of study of “a covenant or something like it,” for UURMaPA. The Board decided to go in the “something like it” direction, proposing the following changes in our Purpose and inviting response or discussion with the Board until mid-April 2023. The Board is considering the following amendments to our own Article II (in bold italics):

“In faithfulness to the Unitarian Universalist tradition and to the guidelines and code of conduct of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, ***the members of the Unitarian Universalist Retired Ministers and Partners Association embody in our lives and our conduct with each other the values that we proclaim on behalf of our faith.*** Our purpose is to be an inclusive multicultural community that serves the interests and enhances the well-being of retired Unitarian Universalist ministers and their life partners through informational communication, periodic membership gatherings, and other supportive programs and activities. ***As a Unitarian Universalist organization of professionals and partners, we recognize that fulfilling our purpose calls us to cultivate anti-oppressive attitudes and practices consistent with our shared values, thereby promoting our collective well-being.***”

Since the Fall Conference, the President has received four responses from UURMaPA members, and we thank them for taking the time to offer their reflections. We encourage and welcome additional responses, sent to president@uurmapa.org.

A full summary of responses will be available in time for the Spring Conference, and the Board’s decision about whether to make this change or move forward in a different direction will be announced at that time.



Left to right, members of a UURMaPA cluster group that has been meeting for six years in the virtual format: Olav Nieuwejaar of New Hampshire, Johanna Nichols of Vermont, and Carol Hepokoski of Minnesota. Not pictured: Jim Banks of California. Three of the four met in Boston.

If you have photos or articles to contribute to *Elderberries*, please send them to editor Ann Schranz: elderberries@uurmapa.org.

Treasurer's Update by Richard Speck

Our finances are very stable. We continue to receive donations from many of you to sustain us through the years. We thank you for that and encourage anyone who has not done so to think of us in your donations for 2023. Some people have established a monthly donation system that sends us a small amount each month. Perhaps you could do that as well.

We have been prudent in our spending so that we live within our means. As of January 1, 2023, we have \$33,768.25 in our checking account and \$19,232.03 in our money market account. Our endowment stands at \$81,543.56 as of the end of November. As of the end of November, we had received \$22,114.07 in income and spent \$15,800.15. Our two virtual conferences have essentially broken even this past year with small surpluses. I'll be updating our spreadsheet to close out the year this week.

We have not embarked on a concerted fundraising campaign in over two years. I will be recommending that we do so in 2023 to enhance our endowment. I would like to see us grow that reserve to well over \$100,000 in 2023. If you are making end of life decisions, you might want to include UURMAPA in your estate planning. My wife, Janet Tillman, and I have already done so. In 2021, UURMaPA received a gift of \$27,000 from the estate of George Brooks. We added the bulk of this to the endowment so it could grow in the UUA Common Endowment Fund. A small portion was added to our money market fund. That one gift grew our endowment tremendously. If you have any questions about our financial status, please contact me, Richard Speck, treasurer@uurmapa.org.

Nominating New Leaders

Your Nominating Committee is currently looking for two UURMaPA members who would enjoy working with colleagues and helping lead our association for the next two years, beginning in July.

UURMaPA Board, Connections Chair: How we connect and build community with each other in UURMaPA has been changing - along with many other aspects of our pandemic-challenged and digitized lives - and so the role of this Board member is evolving as well. The new Connections Chair will be helping direct both proven and fresh creative ways to keep us in relationship and offer members support as needed.

Nominating Committee: My term ends in June, so we are seeking a fifth member of the Nominating Committee. As I am a minister's partner working with a great group of retired ministers who will all be continuing on this committee, we hope to find another partner to join the committee to maintain diversity.

We would really like to hear from any member who might be willing to volunteer for a leadership role with UURMaPA – this year, or sometime in the future. Email us at nominations@uurmapa.org, or give one of us a call!

-- Judy Gibson, Chair, with Mel Hoover, Ginger Luke, Beth Miller, and Suzanne Redfern-Campbell



From Gloria Guldager, UU Retirement Plan Director

As we head into 2023, the Retirement Plan Team is working hard to prepare for the transition to our new recordkeeper, Empower, scheduled for February 27, 2023.

Please watch your mail for a welcome brochure from Empower to provide all of the details you will need to navigate through the transition, including important contact information and blackout dates. A copy of the brochure can be viewed at this link:

https://www.uua.org/files/2023-01/Participant_Empower_Transition_Brochure_1.5.23.pdf

The transition to Empower is going to significantly improve the experience for our participants. You can expect lower fees, a robust website with powerful financial planning tools and resources, and the ability to monitor all of your financial accounts on one dashboard.

We look forward to shepherding us all through this transition to Empower and making the UU Organizations Retirement Plan stronger and better positioned to help all attain financial security. Please watch for more information regarding the transition in the coming days and weeks, and you can also review the recordkeeper FAQs on our Knowledge Base. In addition, we will be scheduling several Q&A sessions for our participants. Please continue to send all questions and comments to retirementplan@uua.org.

Peer Support Group Update

Peer Support Groups consist of no more than 10 colleagues who meet virtually once each month, generally on Zoom, to offer mutual support, encouragement and inspiration as we navigate the transition from active service in our chosen vocations to a new and different way of life during retirement. If you would be interested in joining—or facilitating—such a group, please contact UURMaPA Vice President Ned Wight at vice-president@uurmapa.org.

Ned is also open to your suggestions about virtual support groups with a specific focus. Two such groups already exist: a Caregivers Support Group for members who have particular roles as caregivers within their households, and a Grief Support Group for those recently bereaved. A third group, focused on social justice and social action, has been proposed. Please let Ned know if you are interested in any of these three special-focus groups or if there are others you would like to suggest.

Spring 2023 Conference -- Reserve the Dates!

The Spring 2023 Conference is coming to a screen near you on Monday, May 1 through Wednesday, May 3. It will again be offered as a virtual gathering in the Land of Zoom.

“Thirty Years Both Ways: Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future.”

Thirty years ago many of us were involved with the 1993 General Assembly, the controversy about the Thomas Jefferson Ball, and the campaigns to elect a new UUA President. While we were preoccupied, the world was changing right under our noses. The first web browsers giving wide public access to the internet became available in 1993.

How many of us imagined how different our personal and church worlds would be now compared to then? Can we begin to imagine how different they will be thirty years from now, and what the generations of ministers that follow us into professional and lay leadership will have to deal with? Several panels will explore these questions with all of us having a chance to engage.

The conference will of course also offer opportunities to connect more deeply in small groups, at least one Odyssey presentation and a Remembrance Service honoring those we've lost recently. In addition, cultural ambassador Reggie Harris will be with us to share his songs and stories of joy, hope and freedom. His powerful voice and guitar, the depth and insight of his songwriting, and his deep knowledge of traditional African American spirituals and freedom songs has captivated audiences for more than 40 years.

There will likely be an in-person, regional “pod” gathering at First Unitarian Church of Wilmington DE. Local Health Department recommendations and the congregation's Covid guidelines will be followed.

On-line registration will open in mid-February and the fee is staying put at the bargain of \$40 per individual. For more information and program details, be sure to check the Activities page on UURMaPA's webpage:

<https://uurmapa.org/activities/>

There will also be postings from time to time on our UURMaPA Facebook pages -- the private group “UURMaPA (Unitarian Universalist Retired Ministers and Partners Association)” as well as the open group “UURMaPA.” In addition, be sure to check your in-box for “UURMaPA-Announce” emails in the coming months.

Harboring Refugees

by Phyllis and Peter Morales

“Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you? Would you harbor an exile, or a refugee?”

Ysaye Barnwell’s lyrics ask us to examine the level of our compassion. Usually, the question feels distant and hypothetical. Sometimes, in life, the question is immediate and real.

Eight years ago it became very real for us. Juan de Dios Garcia’s life and the lives of his wife Maria and their children were in clear danger. We had met Juan through the work of the UUSC and its president Charlie Clements. The congregation Peter was serving in Colorado had created a scholarship program for Mayan children in collaboration with Juan’s grassroots organization in Guatemala. Juan’s work as a human rights advocate made him a target. (Human rights advocates are routinely murdered in Guatemala.)

Juan was getting death threats. Their house was being shot at. His car was bombed. He was afraid, especially for Maria and the children.

“Would I harbor you?” It wasn’t an abstract question. We had to decide. We talked it over and then called Juan and told him they could come stay with us in Colorado. When they got on the plane the children did not know they were moving to the United States. A few years ago the *UU World* did a story about them: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/refugees-home>.

It has been eight years! Today the Garcias have been granted asylum (a maddeningly long process) and live across the street from us on the Olympic Peninsula. The youngest child, Edmond, has now lived half his life in the U. S. The daughters, Pahola and Marta, have both graduated from high school.

What began as a modest social justice effort of the congregation Peter served has developed in ways that are both personal and political, private and public. Life has a way of creating these connections.





On the public level, our human rights advocacy and work with scholarships for impoverished Mayan children has grown. What began as a program that paid for three youth to attend the equivalent of middle school now supports 65 annually. Over the years 189 students have benefited from the program and 74 have graduated from high school—something unthinkable a few years ago. There is extensive information about this program and its historical background on our website: <https://guatemalasholarship.org>.

We helped to create a nonprofit organization to support both the scholarship work and far-reaching changes to address the causes of the murders and abuses suffered by Mayan and other indigenous peoples. The nonprofit is called Digno (“digno” translates as “worthy” or “dignified”). We encourage you to check it out at <https://digno.org>. Juan continues his work to alter the way organizations like the World Bank fund projects that so often harm indigenous peoples.

On a personal level, we have been forever changed by our decision to harbor refugees. The Garcia family is now part of our extended family. Isn’t that always the case? An act of compassion immediately helps the recipient. In the long term, we have received so much. We would encourage others to think of ways you can offer safe harbor. It can change your life.





Greetings from Katie Kandarian

Greetings from my latest hometown of Reno, Nevada. I'm a new member of UURMaPA, leaving the congregation I most recently served in Durango, Colorado on the last day of 2021. For the first three months of 2022, I thought my husband Ron and I would be happy and content in the mountain paradise of Durango, a small, hip, liberal western town with a university of 4000 students, close to all kinds of recreation, a super-foodie charming downtown, and far from freeways and suburban sprawl.

But I quickly realized that minus the anchor of congregational life, I felt a giant hole. When I suggested that we might move to be closer to family in a year or so, Ron said, "Why not go now?"

Within two weeks, our townhouse was on the market and by the first week of May, we were in Reno. We have a son and daughter-in-law right here, and a daughter and fiancé only 40 minutes away in Truckee, California.

Ron coached high school football here this past summer and fall, and I've gotten connected to a yoga studio I love. Both of us have already become deeply integrated into the alcohol recovery community here. It's a super active fellowship of people and it keeps us busy. Lake Tahoe and the closest ski area are only 30 minutes from us.

Welcome to recent retirees

Daniel "Charlie" Davis and Gail Davis
Joan Davis
Leonard De Roche
Joanne Giannino
Jeff Jones and Carol Buffum
Julia McKay
Jane Ramsey
Donald Randall and Sally Randall
Tandy Scheffler
Gregory Stewart and Stillman Stewart
Debra Thorne
Bevan Tulk

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We've also just become grandparents to a baby here in Reno and another baby in Los Angeles (an easy 50-minute flight to Burbank). I am taking small steps to making a connection with the UU Fellowship of Northern Nevada, and our colleague serving them, Rev. Karen Foster, happens to live only three blocks from my new house.

In December, I finished my eight-year term as chair for the Fund for Social Responsibility. I am a mentor to a minister in preliminary fellowship and am currently filling out an application for another UUA committee. Part of the requirement for the committee is to be a member of a congregation. So I have reached out to the CLF about membership.

I have been a life-long UU and a full-time UU minister for the last 23 years, so I am surprised at how my life has filled up without all the congregational and theological focus. I will be paying attention to the Article II changes at the General Assembly level and feel excited and hopeful about the living tradition that is Unitarian Universalism.



What's Happening with Mary Wellemeyer?

Somehow a young family from Colombia had found their way to Northwestern Montana, based on the promise of work for the man and his cousin. Somehow, the young wife who had been making the difficult journey with them found her way to the hospital in town to give birth. Somehow their story came to the attention of the volunteers at Valley Neighbors, who try to help refugees and asylum seekers in their area.

The baby was in the NICU, and the parents could stay with her, and the cousin was in a house owned by the employer for the benefit of employees. But the employee housing wasn't going to last for long. Oh, and the baby had been delivered by cesarean section, so Mom was recovering from surgery.

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The volunteers found housing, baby supplies, and food as the drama unfolded. After a week or so, with Baby's weight increasing and Mom doing well enough to feed them both, the family went back out into the world. They went first to the employee house for a day or two, then to a guest house rounded up by a volunteer. A network of volunteers is looking for more permanent housing that the family can afford, a challenge in this area of high employment and a tight housing market.

That was the most exciting of the cases the volunteers were managing over the holidays. It was not all crisis. There were also delicious tamales and lots of smiles elsewhere in town. This is the group of volunteers I help guide in my retirement. I'm excited by the energy of the younger people in the group and challenged to keep up, finding more sedentary things to do as they dash around from crisis to crisis.

We live in a cluster of small towns in a rural area not far from the Canadian border. Needless to say, it's a conservative area with a history of white nationalism, but we're doing this anyway. Spurred by the County Commissioners' announcement a few years ago that they would not be allowing refugees to enter our county, we've been promoting a contrary path. Partly, we promote through information. Our first forays into public awareness were film showings and art projects. We met people and shared our concerns. But it turned out to be a slippery slope that led to direct action. A couple we met early on travels each winter to a border town in Mexico where they teach English in an informal way while they help people waiting to cross the border.

Through that couple and an agency they work with on the United States side, we got our first family of asylum seekers. Originally, we intended to help people who came through the officially-sanctioned process of refugee resettlement, already on the path to work and citizenship. We started in a different way because political realities kept the border closed to refugee resettlement programs.

I want everyone to know how difficult it is to gain asylum in the United States. This family had fled for their lives from gang violence in their Central American homeland, but plain old gang violence is not enough. And for plain, ordinary people, expressing the sources and horrors of what they endured in a convincing way is an incredible challenge.

There are legal expenses and travel to sometimes distant offices to maintain required contact with officials in charge. Legal fees are mostly beyond the means of plain, ordinary people, so we find ourselves searching for pro bono and "low bono" possibilities for representation. And plain, ordinary people need to work, but people seeking asylum have to go through several steps in their process followed by a months-long waiting period before they can receive a work permit. Before that, the asylum seeker must depend on support of others or work under the table.

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It is not at all clear that asylum will be granted. But the process is long, and fraught with peril. And the result may be that “our” family will become part of the shadow society of undocumented immigrants growing in our country. Our Colombians may be in the same situation.

Our several families of Venezuelans may have a better chance because of some special arrangements made as their country’s so-called socialist government collapses. And at last, some officially recognized refugees are about to arrive. Ours are from Afghanistan, a very different challenge. Language. Culture. Everything.

Clearly, this is no place for a retired old middle class white woman. I think I’ll keep on anyway.



Photographs by Anne Spatola

Request for Assistance

You are invited to contribute to an article to be written by Gail Collins-Ranadive for the next issue of *Elderberries*. She asks, “How are others among us dealing with watching much of what we've spent our lifetimes working for being dismantled? It seems that setbacks in women's rights, civil rights, voting rights, etc., are rolling us back to where so many of us began -- back in the 1950s. Those years were NOT the best of times for many of us.”

Please share your thoughts with Gail at revgcr@aol.com.



Greetings from Becky Gunn

It is difficult for me to believe that I retired from ministry over eight years ago. I lived in Bangor, Maine for the six years of my ministry there and loved the fall weather – the colors, the light, the vibrant weather. However, I am a mountain-west girl by birth and upbringing so decided that I would return west for my golden years.

I moved to Prescott, Arizona – a beautiful high desert mountain town with terribly conservative political leanings. I didn't quite understand the depth of the political divide, but I have found a cadre of progressive friends with a strong commitment to social justice. Though I am not happy about the political climate, I am comfortable with my community.

I knew no one when I moved here in 2015, but loved the mountains, the sky, the wildlife out my back window. I live with a view that is stunning as well as soothing. Immediately upon arriving I searched out a book group and checked out the life-long learning opportunities. I began taking classes at OLLI (Osher Life Long Learning) and within a year began teaching classes related to religious history and mysticism.

I was asked to join the Curriculum Committee and have served there since. I became Chair of the Committee during Covid...a learning experience in itself moving toward offering online content. This past year I was elected to the Governing Council and am now its Finance chair. I love this organization because it offers volunteers the opportunity to share their knowledge and wisdom. I, in a way, consider it a ministry - it is my way of opening my heart to those in this community.

At about the same time I became involved with AAUW (American Association of University Women), whose focus is empowering women and righting associated inequities. I became Public Policy Chair and then Vice President Elect and then President of the Branch. I feel that working for the rights of women is also a ministry. Just recently I became the President Elect for the Arizona AAUW and will assume the presidency In July. My goal is to generate more energy state-wide to publicly advocate for health care rights and educational equity.

I have also been involved in the local Democratic Party working for local candidates. It has been frustratingly futile in terms of success, but I know that if we are ever to have social justice, equity, peace and a loving, supportive community, we need not to let our voices be silenced. I have facilitated retreats/goal setting events for both Prescott Indivisible and the Democratic Women of the Prescott Area.

My skills as a moderator, a consensus driver, are yet another ministry for me. Life provides challenges. In April I fell and broke my right arm/shoulder, which required a total reverse shoulder replacement. I live alone by choice, but was initially concerned that I could not cope with the tasks of daily living while healing. I was incredibly blessed, however, with a community who came to my rescue, providing food, care, transportation and most of all love. I've never been comfortable asking for help, but I know now that asking for help allows others to show their care and support. This group of friends were there for me through those hard times, and when I would thank them they would say, "You would have done the same."

I have found a home here where I can offer some wisdom, some caring, some advocacy, and some leadership. My title may no longer be minister, but I am still a minister each and every day.

Call for Creative Sageing Award Nominees

Each year, UURMaPA recognizes one of its members—a minister or partner—with a "Creative Sageing Award." Drawing upon the wisdom of rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in his landmark *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, this annual award recognizes one of our members who has done something particularly impressive and/or inspiring during their retirement. Previous recipients have written books, undertaken significant projects, or done something unusually creative during this chapter of their lives.

If you would like to nominate yourself or another UURMaPA for this year's award, simply identify the person and submit a brief description of their achievement(s) or project to UURMaPA's Vice President, Ned Wight (vice-president@uurmapa.org) by April 15, 2023. Ned and a small committee will review submissions, select an awardee and announce the recipient at the UURMaPA virtual new member welcome gathering this summer. If you have any questions about the Creative Sageing Award, don't hesitate to contact Ned.

Regrets upon Entering a New Year

by Marilyn Sewell

Years ago a question was posed to me by a half-drunk man at a small dinner party:

“Do you have any regrets?”

“No, not really,” I answered.

He became angry, verbally abusive, as he tried to force me to admit to something, anything. Actually, I was beginning to regret having come to this dinner party. Now, though, I am ever more in touch with the dark side of my personality. I wake in the night. I dream troubling dreams which give me hints about a reality that my consciousness has been bent on escaping.

What? Am I not the good (really excellent!) person I always thought I was, the persona presented unfailingly to others? Maybe not all that lovable, but always, always moral, always following the rules that good people follow. Never tell a lie. Work hard. Pursue excellence. Pay your debts. Vote in every election. You get the picture.

When I’ve been tempted to decry past behavior, my ego has generally rushed to the rescue. When I’ve fallen short, I would say to myself, “Well, it was the best I could do at the time.” Maybe, maybe not. What seemed to be a closely woven fabric, clean and tight, began showing signs of weakness, spots appearing, even holes. Now I would answer the dinner party guest differently.

About that virtue of always telling the truth—it’s a practice I’ve had to reconsider. I’ve been one of those people who, if you ask me, “Do I look fat in this dress?” will undoubtedly say “yes.” I’ve been critical more often than kind. I’ve spoken too many times when I should have listened. I’ve insisted that I was “right” when right didn’t matter, the person did.

I remember being at the bedside of Daisy Bingham, our former church secretary, a self-effacing older woman who had been faithful to the church over long years. Daisy is dying. A room in the church has been called Bingham Hall, after her—the name evolved casually, and the church is now in full re-hab mode. So Daisy asks me, “Will the church keep the name Bingham Hall?”



I say (the truth, of course), “I don’t know.” I’ve wondered more than once what I should have said. If I had it to do over—the encounter, I mean—I think I would have smiled, taken her hand, and said, “I expect so.” Then I would have repeated, to reassure her, “Yes, I expect so.” In fact, the name Bingham Hall has been retained. But she never knew.

My Victorian grandfather, Big Papa, with whom I grew up, set the standard for righteousness and judgment in our household. He used to say grace at every meal. He would end with something like “May we walk circumspectly with thee.” But once in a while, usually at Christmas, he would call on my errant father, whom Papa characterized as “the prodigal son” of his seven grown children. OK, fair enough—my father was an alcoholic who got in fights, ran with reprobates, gambled, and went to “roadhouses” on his way home from the oil rig. Not to mention the extensive number of girlfriends and the five wives.

When Daddy had to pray, he always bowed his head, veiled his eyes with one calloused hand, and paused for a long time before he spoke. Was he actually going to come through with a blessing this time? We were all waiting. The turkey was waiting. Finally, he would pray, and he prayed the same prayer every Christmas: “Dear God, forgive me for all the dirty rotten things I’ve done.” Then he would weep soft tears. Even as a child who desperately wanted her father to stop drinking, I was pretty sure that God preferred Daddy’s prayer.

Sometimes transformation does occur, coming as a benevolent thief in the night, taking away some hardness or some sadness I thought would always be a part of me, allowing me to forgive another, or myself, as I increasingly choose mercy over judgment. We’re not asked to be perfect, we’re asked to be faithful, to return again and again, after violating the values we claim, the good we would do. Our blunders, our failings, serve us well: as we flail around in the muddy flats of life, they push us helplessly to God.

What New Things!

by Sally White



On the first day of my retirement, I officiated a sunset wedding on a pier over the Atlantic Ocean. Beach weddings were one of the perks of ministry in a small town on the North Carolina coast. Beautiful setting, happy occasion, new beginnings all around – I thought long and hard about staying right there. Keeping a low profile would not be too difficult – COVID was ebbing, but it soon surged back again. And I was so tired – so drained after an eighteen-year ministry – that solitude seemed an unqualified blessing.

But (long story – I will spare you) one of my takeaways from my last sabbatical was this simple truth: “There is no future in looking back.” Not that the past is not important – only that to dwell in the past keeps me, at least, from learning/realizing/doing new things – from growing in wisdom and perspective. So, while staying in place during that first year of retirement, I filled the solitude with inner work: journaling; talk therapy; reading; walking and biking; reconnecting with long-lost, long-time friends and places – people and spaces that hold pieces of my own past – and with colleagues. I joined one of the UURMaPA virtual clusters.

And was interested to learn that this question of whether and how to live in retirement in the place where you had served in ministry was up for many of us. We spent much of the first year talking about it: about identity and role; about collegiality and competition; about friendships and professional relationships; about belonging, and home, for body and for soul. And I began to realize that I was starting to be too much alone. Too willing to talk myself out of trip to the grocery store, a walk, a phone call. Once, after a weekend that included a visit to my daughter and attendance at a UU church service, I came home, parked my car in the garage, and did not start it for an entire week. (And then I had to call AAA because I had left a light on in the car, and it had completely drained the battery. There’s got to be a message there...)

Upstate, instate, in Greensboro North Carolina, there is a continuing care retirement community grounded in Quaker principles. Since my college days at Earlham (a Quaker school), I have been deeply drawn to and deeply fed by Quaker values and practice. Friends Homes offers the unflinching respect of Friends, the richness of community, a wide array of activities and facilities (from a warm salt-water swimming pool to a Skee-Ball game, to Sunday afternoon opera screenings, to Guilford College right across the street). (A friend who has visited here says it is like a cross between a resort and college! And that’s just how it feels to me.)



In April (2022) I began a conversation with Friends Homes about moving in. And I began sorting and packing and really looking at my stuff. The apartment would be about 2/3 the size of my condo, so I had to downsize. I realized that my life was filled with books and papers and dishes and stuff that I had been hanging on to for years just in case. Just in case one of my children might one day want them. Just in case the somebody who had given it to me ever asked about it, or came to visit. Just in case I might find a use for it someday. I began to give away and throw away and let go.

I began to honor and to claim my own sense of what is important, what is useful, what is necessary, what has value. After 20 years of ministry in which I gave priority to the needs and the wants and the health of others – and before and during that ministry, 40 years of marriage and parenting in which I also prioritized the needs and wants and health of others – my own needs and wants and health began to emerge, for what felt like the first time in my life. Even more powerfully, my own spirit, my own soul, my own sense of myself began to surface, to come out of dormancy, or out of hiding.

I moved to Friends Homes in late July (2022). I am making new friends, learning and realizing and doing new things. The inner work continues, but it is balanced by a community that waits right outside my door – casual greetings or deep and challenging conversations. Books to read and walks to take. I am out of the path of hurricanes and in the presence of gentle hills and tall trees and a Friends Meeting that was first gathered in 1751 (and that I can attend without obligation or the projected expectations of others). I am putting down roots and I am putting out new shoots. I belong, and I am home.

Once a Minister, Always a Minister

by Victoria Ingram

I made the decision to retire at the end of July, 2021. It was the right time for me to take my leave from my congregation in Hamilton, Ontario. There never seems to be a “best” time to release yourself and your congregation from your covenant of service. However, we’d enjoyed 11 years of healthy, productive time together. They were aware that I had been planning to retire for a couple of years. And I was ready, even though we were still in the middle of the pandemic.

Not all of ministry’s duties would I regret leaving behind. Things like budget meetings, raccoons in the attic, or technical glitches on Sunday mornings. But the relationships built over our time together in the congregation were hard to say goodbye to. I knew that some of my most satisfying moments in ministry were those when I was invited into another person’s life, to hear their story, and to be asked for validation, insight, options, and support. I wondered if I’d ever have the chance to be that minister again.

On the other hand, my husband and I were looking forward to spending more time together, to embarking on long-awaited travel adventures, and doing some projects around our home. I’d be able to read more, visit friends often, and get more done in the garden. There would be a number of changes in my life as I became a retiree. But there were also a few things I was already doing that I hoped to do more of. One of those was going to water aerobics at the community pool in our neighborhood.

In 2017, as I prepared for knee replacements, I’d started going to water exercise as a way to gain strength and flexibility. I loved it! I continued after my surgeries and found a new pool to frequent when we moved to a new neighborhood. You often see the same group of people at the pool, and it was nice to have friendly faces to smile and chat with. Someone once called these people “significant strangers” - people who you may not know that well, who you may not consider “friends,” but who have an impact (hopefully positive) on your life.



During COVID, my ability to go to water aerobics was determined by the current provincial rules about facilities being open or not, masking, social distancing, and vaccine mandates. So, as I could, I made my way to the pool. When so many things were curtailed or limited, it was wonderful to be able to see people at the pool, exchange a wave and a word, and feel connected to the outside world again, if only for the 45 minutes of the class.

As time went by, restrictions lifted, and it was possible to get to know the others at the pool a bit better while chatting in class or relaxing afterward. I learned about peoples' families and health (of course!), their interests and experiences. It was motivating to think that someone would notice if you didn't make it to class, so on the days when I would perhaps have rather stayed in bed, I got up, put on my suit, and headed to the pool. The smiles and the laughter and the camaraderie made it worth it.

One day, one of the ladies at the pool came over and asked if we could talk. Of course! So she told me about her concerns for her older brother who had recently received a serious cancer diagnosis. She wanted to help and support him and his partner, but they weren't the kind of people who liked to talk about how things were going, even with their family members. She was conflicted about whether she should confront him and demand information, or if she should wait and see what happened as he began treatment.

I listened to her story, of course. I heard her love and her concern and her deep desire to help and support her brother. And I remembered some of the best advice I'd heard about situations like this from a seminary colleague doing his CPE placement. He'd shared with us that his supervisor had told him of the value of "show up, shut up, it's not about you" as a strategy for approaching situations where one's role was really to be there for the other, to keep one's own needs, ego, and desire to help in check.

So, I shared that story with her. She laughed and said she could see how that might be the best approach in the situation with her brother. We talked about what she needs vs. what he and his partner need. She considered what "showing up, shutting up, and remembering it's not about her" could look like in her situation. Then, she shared that she could send them an email each day to let them know she was thinking of them, so they would know she cared and available, if needed, but that she realized her need for more information and details and to give advice was HER need, not theirs.

I saw her again the next week at class. She was beaming! She couldn't wait to tell me how valuable our conversation had been for her, not only with her brother, but in other aspects of her life, as well! She'd sent her daily emails, but hadn't imposed herself on the situation any further. She felt good about respecting their boundaries and learning a new way to interact with situations in her life.

And I was beaming, too! Here was a new way for me to be there for people, to use my listening and reflecting skills to be of service, and to have the opportunity to share in others' lives. I told my husband about this interaction when I got home. He now calls it my "pool ministry" and waits for my stories of how I've been able to minister at water aerobics.

Word got around, and I get the chance to be the "pool minister" every once in a while. I have to remember my words of wisdom myself - show up, shut up, it's not about you. If someone wants to talk, I can be there and be of service, and I can have boundaries about my time and energy and purpose at the pool, as well. Having a way to still minister is satisfying and meaningful for me. I just never guessed it would be in the leisure pool of my community center.

Book Bench

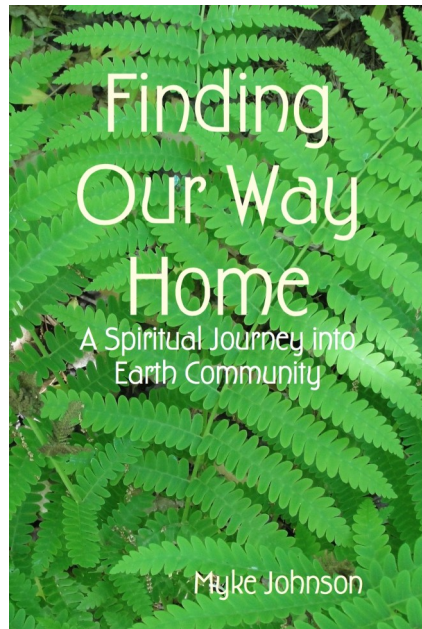


Photo by Margy Dowzer

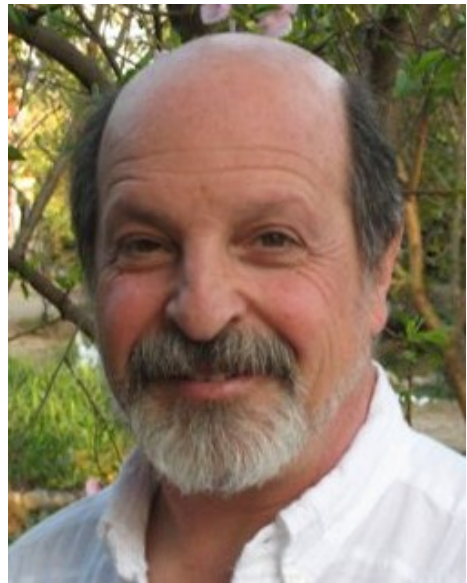
Finding Our Way Home: A Spiritual Journey into Earth Community by Myke Johnson

All my life I have felt rooted in spirituality. As a young Roman Catholic, however, I learned that spirit was separate from earth somehow, that we were to let go of this world in favor of the next. Through the long journey of my life, all of that changed. I was called into interconnection, into an intimate partnership with all of the diverse and beautiful beings of this earth. I wrote *Finding Our Way Home* as a record of that journey, and hopefully an experiential guide for others who are hungry for a deeper relationship with earth, with each other, and with the Spirit within and among all.

I self-published the book in December 2016, and I was glad to have time (before and after) with my congregation to explore the ideas in the book, through preaching, and through a seven-week workshop in which we could go deeper together. However, I needed to retire from ministry in 2018 because of chronic illness, and thus didn't have the same energy I had hoped in which to bring the book and the workshop to wider audiences. Instead, it has been through word of mouth, small groups, and blogging that I have continued this part of the journey. You can find the book via my blog site at <https://findingourwayhome.blog/book/> or through Amazon and other retailers.

Lyrical expressed, it weaves together lessons from a chamomile flower, a small bird, a copper beech tree, a garden slug, and a forest fern, along with insights from Indigenous philosophy, environmental science, feminist witchcraft, fractal geometry, childhood Catholic mysticism, the prophet Elijah, fairy tales, and permaculture design. Each chapter includes practices for further reflection and experience.

This eco-spiritual journey also wrestles with the history of our society's destruction of the natural world, and its roots in the original theft of the land from Indigenous peoples. Exploring the spiritual dimensions of our brokenness, it offers tools to create healing. *Finding Our Way Home* is a ceremony to remember our essential unity with all of life.



Rob L. Eller-Isaacs



ROBERT L. ELLER-ISAACS (1951-2022)

The Reverend Rob Eller-Isaacs, a much beloved and esteemed ministerial colleague, whose transformative and justice-centered parish ministry was marked by liturgical depth, public engagement, and radically inclusive personal and communal hospitality, died on 23 July 2022, aged 70.

Rob was complex and visionary, endearingly brash and blunt and brusque—a challenge to friends and adversaries alike—but ever with compassion and a glimpse beyond the immediate for what might yet be. With Walt Whitman, he contained multitudes. Yet, with a powerful combination of keen organizational insight, institutional passion, and a legendary ego, Rob rose to years of influential leadership in both the UUMA and UUA. Bev Smrha, a long-time lay leader in the Oakland UU Church, saw early on that Rob’s “instincts were authoritarian and hierarchical, but he tempered [them] with an intelligence that knew [those instincts] were wrong” (quoted in Sheri Prud’homme, *Gather the Spirit*, 216-17). Ever aware of his own imperfections, Rob turned this consciousness, as he did with so many other insights, into poetry. It is a mark of his humility that he is the author of one of the only litanies of atonement to appear in the UUA gray hymnal, partly no doubt a legacy of his boyhood church in Chicago whose liturgy every Sunday included a prayer of confession.

Appreciation of his paradoxes was on full display in tributes from parishioners and clergy alike at a celebration of Rob’s life in September 2022 at St. Paul’s Unity Church (Unitarian). One layperson wrote: “He was so damn grounded AND hopeful AND bossy at the same time. I just loved it.” Another praised his wife Janne “for making sure he was the least sexist version of himself possible.” In a [eulogy](#), our colleague Wayne Arnason described Rob’s most devoted friends as “the ones who could love him unconditionally and either stand up to him or ignore him when he was a jerk.” Yet another layperson recalled, gratefully, “his seeing in people what they couldn’t yet see in themselves.” And his fellow UUA trustee, Denise Rimes, valued how “he taught me so much about governance, but, more importantly, how to serve with grace and conviction.”

Sadly, the cancer that claimed Rob’s life, scarcely a year after he had retired from a distinguished career spanning forty-five years, robbed him of a well-deserved and much-anticipated fifth season of fuller life as husband, father, grandfather, and, in our reverend colleague Lindi Ramsden’s words, “more time to make good trouble ... [and] sing more songs.” Lindi further recalled what Rob’s radical welcome had meant to her in the early years of her own ministerial formation:

I was 27 and had just completed my first year of seminary. Rob was whip-smart, opinionated, and an unabashed sing-out-loud young man ... already seasoned by years of UU leadership. At that time, an openly lesbian woman like me was not able to serve in UU parish ministry. Rob invited me to be his intern minister anyway ... [when he began] as the First Unitarian Church of Oakland’s Urban Extension Minister... The internship was an all-hands-on deck, fly-the-plane-while-building-it experience.... His talent as a liturgist, his collaboration and mentoring gave me a foundation for what became decades of ministry.

Robert Lewis Isaacs was born on 7 November 1951 in Chicago to Alexander J. and Rosalia P. Issacs. With his older sister Jane, he grew up in a home overflowing with books. When his parents, as non-observant Jews, found their way to Chicago’s First Unitarian Society, Rob began a religious journey at age five through Sunday School, as an enthusiastic singer in the Chicago Children’s Choir, and later into Liberal Religious Youth (LRY). The church programs and camps and the stillness of its sanctuary kept him moving and growing through his teens. The church community helped him form and mold how he perceived

the world. The choir instilled in him a lifelong love for choral music and a deep commitment to working toward multicultural harmony. His call to ministry was inspired in no small measure under the tutelage of the Rev'd Christopher Moore, founding director of the Children's Choir.

Rob attended grammar school and junior high in newly integrated Chicago schools. He spent three years at the Woodstock Country School in South Woodstock, Vermont where he majored in English literature. During those years and immediately thereafter he was deeply involved in the struggle to end the war in Vietnam. He served as Vermont co-chair for SDS Vietnam in 1968 and was president of two local groups, treasurer of the Central Midwest Federation, and continental LRY president (1969-1970). He eventually left Woodstock and received a diploma from Britannica Academy in Chicago. During this period, it became ever clearer to him that his future lay in professional religious leadership. In the fall of 1970—at age 19!—he entered Thomas Starr King School for Religious Leadership and was graduated with an M.Div. in 1975.

Mr. Isaacs was called to the Unitarian Society of Whittier CA in 1976 and ordained by them on 16 January 1977. In his six years there, steady growth was driven chiefly by the arrival of young families with children, average Sunday worship attendance expanded from 12 to 80, and pledging units rose from 7 to 97. There was growing institutional enthusiasm, an effective lifespan religious education program was built, and for the first time in ten years the congregation had a nursery. Midway through his tenure there (1979) Rob married Janne Eller, whom he had met in the earlier 1970s when both served as halfway-house counselors in San Francisco. Together they adopted the surname Eller-Isaacs.

In 1982, the Rev'd Mr. Eller-Isaacs accepted a call, subsidized by national UU funding, to the First Unitarian Church of Oakland CA as the UUA's first Urban Extension Minister. He served as sole ordained minister for the Oakland church until 1985 and then in a team with Janne, who had just finished her own M.Div. Together they designed and implemented programs of worship associates, strong pastoral care, teaching, and justice work which were replicated in many other churches. Raising more than five million dollars from multiple sources, Rob helped guide the first phase of renovating and restoring the church's historic landmark building, while re-establishing a vital, effective congregation. The church grew from 20 to 310 active pledging members, and the budget from \$35,000 to \$368,000.

The congregation led the way in developing opportunities for shared ministry and formed a vibrant worship life, a strong and nourishing sense of community, and an effective constellation of neighborhood justice ministries. After the iron curtain fell, Rob was a co-founder, with David Keyes and Bev Smrha, of Project Harvest Hope, building sustaining and sustainable friendships between U.S. and Transylvanian congregations (see more at Sheri Prud'homme, *Gather the Spirit*, 243-47).

After 18 rewarding years at the Oakland congregation, Rob and Janne accepted a call as co-ministers to Unity Church (Unitarian) in St. Paul, Minn. There they modeled respectful collaboration and inspired the congregation to commit itself to genuinely shared ministry. Their ministry was unusually creative and substantively marked by its thoughtful and deeply religious character.

The Rev'd Mr. Eller-Isaacs enriched the church with his creativity and the breadth of his knowledge. He saw the church as a source of nourishment and inspiration for its people who then live out their

values in their daily lives. In 2006 he received an S.T.D. *honoris causa* from Starr King School for the Ministry. He retired with Janne in 2021 and the congregation named them ministers emeriti.

Rob Eller-Isaacs was deeply active in the larger UU movement. He served on the Panel on Theological Education, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and the UUA Board as Pacific Southwest District trustee. He chaired the UUA Committee on Urban Concerns and Ministry (1987-91, managed John Buehrens' campaign for the UUA presidency (1991-93), served as a UUMA Executive Committee member (1983-85), as its transformative president (2007-10), and on the UUA Board of Trustees (2013-2017). As UUMA vice-president during Rob's presidency, the Rev'd Sarah Lammert remembered that "sometimes my job was to sit next to Rob at the tables of power and step on his foot when he got too full of piss and vinegar."

Rob had a deep concern for and intense presence with people, greeting church newcomers with enthusiastic warmth. He could relate to both old and young. His community activism focused on three primary areas: racial justice, housing and homelessness, and local community enhancement. He was involved in countless organizations and campaigns during his long years of ministry, with special attention to many initiatives in Oakland and St. Paul. His and Janne's open door and personal hospitality were legendary.

Rob Eller-Isaacs was a man of strong passions, appetites, and opinions: for full-throated singing, for fierce commitment to racial justice, and for unwillingness to put up with mediocre food and wine. Denise Rimes treasured "an evening I spent in Boston with him and Jim Key. We went to a high-end Italian restaurant in the North End, where the two of them introduced me to some of the finest wine I've ever had and a meal that can never be forgotten."

Rob and Janne traveled the world, appreciating natural wonders, art and architecture, and most of all delicious food. He was grounded in a vision for what was possible in each life, and certainly in his own. He engaged in daily spiritual practices and held all to the same standard of discipline, expansion, and soulfulness. He was a voracious reader and loved to memorize poems, carrying the beauty of words with him wherever he went. His love of singing was lifelong, and he could sing hundreds of songs by heart, across genres and traditions, late into the night as well as on family road trips.

Robert Eller-Isaacs was survived by his sister Jane, his partner in life and ministry, the Rev'd Janne Eller-Isaacs, their children Jonah, Jessie, and Hannah, and three grandchildren. Bountiful and deeply heartfelt memorial services, well worth watching in online videos, were held in [Portland](#) and in [St. Paul](#).

Memorial gifts can be made to the [Unity-Church Unitarian](#), 733 Portland Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55104; the [UUMA](#), 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210-1409; the [Chicago's Children's Choir](#), 78 East Washington Street, 5th Floor Chicago, IL 60602; and [The First Unitarian Church of Oakland](#), 685 14th Street Oakland, CA 94612.

Notes of condolence can be sent to Janne Eller-Isaacs, 4770 NE Going Street, Portland, Oregon 97218.

Blog and Website Links of UURMaPA Members

Nina Benedetto

www.ninabenedetto.com

My work is in response to life's twists and turns. Somewhere between allegory and realism, these paintings can be understood as "envisions" meant for the viewer to imagine ideas or ponder possibilities. The title of each piece provides a skeleton key into these riddles of mixed metaphors, mythology, puns, aphorisms, and cross cultural allusions.



Gail Collins-Ranadive

www.gailcollinsranadive.com

This is primarily a place to showcase my books.



Duane Fickeisen

dfickeisen.wordpress.com

The title (Duane's Rants, Raves, and Reviews) pretty much summarizes the content, which includes reflections on gardening and cooking and life, rants about things that are just plain wrong, and an occasional rave.

It's eclectic. Recent entries include a ghost story (set at Seabeck, where many of us have been for UU gatherings), a year-end letter, a rant about gas-powered leaf blowers, and reflections on Judy Welles' death and the wrenching shift from the abstraction of thinking one of us might die someday to the reality of it. Check out the Mainebow entry (it's worth waiting for the slide show to download)!



Penny Hackett-Evans

www.pennyhackettevans.com

This space is dedicated to assisting you in finding one or many of your own sacred paths.
May this be a place of possibility,
a place where any of us might say “what if I . . .”
A place where options are offered,
a box full of new crayons, waiting to be used.
A place for reflection, silence, stillness and movement.
May this be a place where your heart can open,
where we each dare to name what we long for.
May it be a place of holy rest and also holy daring.
In the name of all longing . . . May it be so.



Lillie Mae Henley

I have a YouTube channel that features short videos and imagery for healing after abuse (YouTube.com/@lilliemaehenley). It's based on my book, *The Healing Way: A Path to Recovery after Abuse*.

Jonalu Johnstone

jonalujohnstone.com

The website promotes the work I do as a spiritual director, voice-over artist, and writer.



Tom Korson

apocryphalpress.com

My blog is political satire. I am the solitary reporter. Others “assist.” Some others are real, and some are fictional.

Gary Kowalski

revolutionaryspirits.blogspot.com

Revolutionary Spirits: Faith, Politics, Opinion -- Commentary on current events often connecting headlines to the aspirations of America's founders and framers

santafelandscapes.com

Santa Fe Landscapes -- Artist's website featuring original paintings of the Southwest

Peter Lanzillotta

onespiritcoaching.com

This is an inclusive resource for spiritual life coaching and interfaith spiritual direction, offering a collaborative opportunity for discovering your own best answers to life's questions and concerns. I have also just completed my "legacy" project. It's designed to be a daily wisdom journal. The four-volume *Seasons of the Soul* begins each day with a quote from an interfaith teacher. I have included my personal and lifelong reflections as an educator, therapist, clergyman, and spiritual life coach. The last page of each day is left open to invite the reader to begin their own reflections or spiritual journal.



Robert Latham

www.mythinglink.com

My blog addresses national and world events in light of American politics.



Johanna Nichols

newriversidemusings.wordpress.com

I began a blog in 2013. It contains personal reflections on life.



Theresa Novak

theresauuco.wordpress.com

I created the blog in June 2013 while I was serving as an active parish minister. Entitled "Sermons, Poetry, and Other Musings," I intended to help share the good news of UU. Some of the "musings" could have easily been labeled theological or political rants but I was a little more careful with them while I served congregations. .

In April of 2018, well after my retirement, I began blogging weekly about my weight loss journey, mostly using the heading "Weekly Bread" and the tag "Kaiser Medical Weight Management." I lost over 170 pounds with that program and am much healthier as a result. The Weekly Bread postings (over 200 to date) have helped keep me sort of on track. I also post with the tag "hiking homilies" with thoughts inspired by all the trail miles I have covered since losing the weight and getting a new knee. The blog now reminds me of all the handwritten journals I completed during my younger years.

Michael D. O'Kelly

mdokelly.com

I call myself a poet, since the poetic voice best holds and incants my "AUM-afflatus spirituality." I used to be a corporate speech writer, UU minister, family therapist, thespian (acting in many plays), seller of "stuff." At age 70, those roles behind me, I decided to get my writings in order on my word processor.



Emilie Richards

www.emilierichards.com

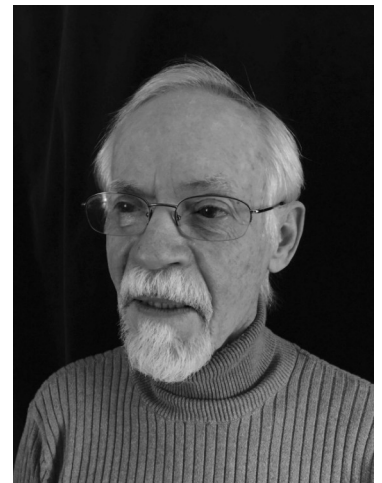
Emilie Richards is the author of over 70 novels, which have been published in more than 21 countries and 16 languages. She regularly appears on bestseller lists, and 10 of her books have been made into television movies in Germany. Emilie lives in Sarasota, Florida with her husband, Michael McGee, in the winter and Chautauqua, New York in summer.



Peter and Eleanor Richardson

redbarnrockland.org

Peter has written eight books, and Eleanor has written six books. The red barn is in Rockland, Maine, built about 1799 by Peter's Ingraham ancestors. We store the books there, but we do not print our own books.



Chris Schriener

<https://www.schrinerbooksandblogs.com> (This is the overall website. It has links to the others.)

The blog of most interest to UUs is Theists & Atheists: Communication & Common Ground. It draws on my book, *Bridging the God Gap: Finding Common Ground Among Believers, Atheists and Agnostics*. There are few sources of information and encouragement for people who want to build bridges between believers and non-believers. The site offers over 100 posts, with well documented information that is useful to ministers.

<https://theistsandatheists.wordpress.com>

Did God Really Say THAT!? A Blog about the Bible has been useful to those whose friends or family members still think every word of the Christian Bible is divinely inspired. That would mean the Christian God favors genocide, child-beating, and an unheavenly host of other terrible practices.

didgodreallysaythat.wordpress.com

Michael A. Schuler

www.maschuler.com

Currently on the site is an autobiography, postings of several sermons, excerpts from my 2009 book, *Making the Good Life Last* (Berrett-Kohler), and "teasers" for two more manuscripts in progress. One of these, *Humanism: In Command or in Crisis?*, runs to over 300 pages and is substantially complete. I hope to make it available in the first half of 2023. The other is a memoir focusing on my rather idiosyncratic father. I also have a blog section. The blog posts are all in short-essay form and could provide grist for anyone still writing original sermons.



Gail Seavey

<https://www.gailseavey.com>

It includes my unredacted Berry Street Essay 2016, both written and recorded. It also includes blog posts since retirement in 2020. A few posts center on ongoing conversation responses to the essay.



Philip Zwerling

<http://www.philipzwerling.com>

Phil Zwerling served four UU churches over 20 years (Ashby MA, Boston, Los Angeles, and Tucson) and then taught writing for 15 years at Ursinus College and the University of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. He has published six books (nonfiction and plays) and is at work on two more books due out later this year.



Successful Fall 2022 Conference Includes “Pods”



Back row, left to right: Rose Edington, Mel Hoover, Dennis Reynolds, Duane Fickeisen, Dave A. Johnson, Deborah Raible, Peter Morales, Steven Storla, Linda Horton, Linda Andrews, Roger Rochester, Barry Andrews, Amanda Aikman.

Front row, left to right: Lucy Hitchcock, Suzanne Reynolds, Phyllis Morales, Millie Rochester, Sue Nichols, Barbara ten Hove.
Photographer: Jaco ten Hove.

Our annual fall conference was offered online and in Pods on October 24 – 26, 2022. The theme was “Mindful Dying: Freeing Ourselves to Live.” Three days, three sessions! Each session was preceded by a slide show assembled from photos that participants in the conference sent in. Curated music accompanied the photos. The registrar reported 188 retired ministers and partners and several people who were not retired ministers or partners attended the conference, 43 of whom chose to meet in “pods.” We met for intellectual challenge, collegial support, and spiritual nourishment. We met in large groups, small groups, and topics of interest groups. A larger team of presenters joined a team of planners to bring a sterling conference of stimulation and connections which were well received.

“Pod” meetings were held in Wilmington DE, San Rafael CA, and Seabeck Conference Center, WA. The organizers were Richard Speck, Anne Spatola and Theresa Novak, and Jaco and Barbara ten Hove, respectively. Highlights follow.

From Jaco and Barbara ten Hove:

We were fortunate to reserve the entire “Pines” residence at Seabeck (on the Hood Canal), a new building with great views of the Olympic Mountains plus a spacious meeting room with an 84” viewing screen. The conference center provided nine hearty meals, with options for vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free diets. The grounds are beautiful, and we were fortunate to have decent enough weather for some nice walks. We had 20 participants (15 clergy, 5 partners).

Outside the well attended virtual programming, we did our own worshipful opening on Sunday night, had two fun evening programs (“Show and Tell” Monday and “Sing-a-Long” Tuesday) and also led our own short closing after the second Odyssey on Wednesday morning. There was plenty of time for snacking, socializing and connecting. People loved, loved, loved being together in person and we heard almost nothing but kudos for the way things unfolded. When we asked for a show of hands for who might want to come again next fall, almost everyone said they would consider it, so Pines is already reserved.

From Anne Spatola:

I am so glad we hosted a gathering in San Rafael CA. Our group was small, as only six people were able to attend in person. Many others expressed interest but had prior commitments. The six of us were together for two days. Since the third day did not involve any small groups, we decided to attend sessions separately that day in the virtual format. The commute was a major factor for half the people in our group. The site was too close to justify getting a hotel, but long enough to involve traffic and time.

There might have been some hesitation from others regarding the novelty of the pods. Once folks hear about the positive experiences, more might be willing to experiment. We were lucky to have state-of-the-art equipment at our congregation. I think that positively impacted the experience. In our small groups, we did very deep check ins and shared some sensitive feelings about the topic. There was a high degree of trust. We engaged during breaks, eating in smaller groups, or walking the grounds. There was a lot of getting to know each other better. We are now planning more gatherings to include partners who were not at the conference.

San Rafael CA participants, left to right:
Jay Atkinson, Stanley Stefancic, Laurel Liefert, Anne Spatola, Theresa Novak, Sonya Sukalski.

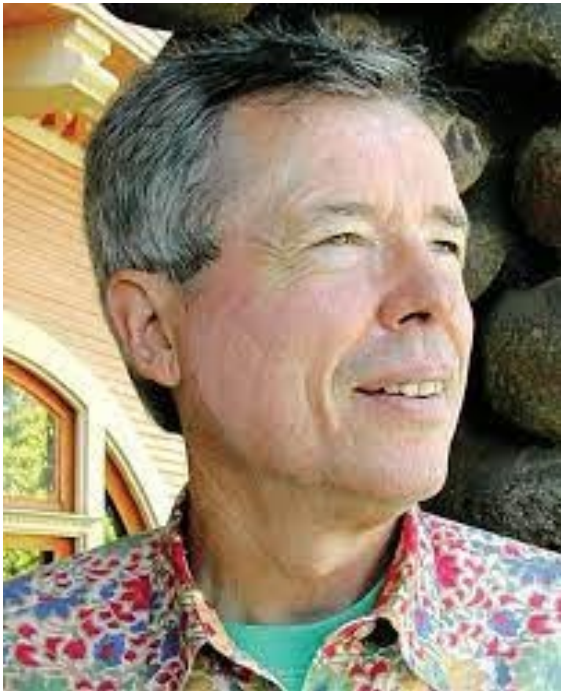


From Richard Speck:

We had 13 people gather in the First Unitarian Church (Wilmington DE) parish hall over the three days of the conference. Some could only make some of the sessions, so all of us were not together the whole time. We ate at local restaurants on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. We watched the presentations on a large screen TV and used the parish hall and sanctuary for small group meetings. Coffee, tea, and water were always available. We had a table of snacks for nibbling during our time together. Those who could not commute stayed in local hotels. Everyone seemed to enjoy the being physically together and looked forward to doing this again. This was a smashing success.

From recruiting participants to making on-site arrangements to coordinating the virtual and in-person events, the organizers made sure that all who attended had a worthwhile experience. All agreed that the leadership of Barbro Hansson and the technical assistance of Jon Claney were key to their success. Each pod reported that, as we hoped, participants enjoyed being together in person and found the experience rewarding. There are some elements we will tweak, but the consensus is that Pods will continue! We love the flexibility of having folks be able to take part from home or to gather with colleagues and enjoy fellowship in person.

Thank you to Fall 2022 Conference Participants



Tom Owen-Towle



Mary Kay Hamilton



Yvonne Seon



Nina Benedetto and Dan King

Fall 2022 Conference Overview

Day 1- Session I

Welcome and Greetings

Our convener, Barbro Hansson, extended a warm welcome on behalf of the Planning Team and acknowledged that the theme, “Mindful Dying,” is maybe not the most appealing, but in facing death head on, we can free ourselves to live more fully. The theme is about letting old ways of being and doing die, to allow new life to come into being.

Opening Worship

The opening worship service was led by Christine Robinson of the conference planning team, and featured comments and a meditation exercise to help the virtually gathered colleagues be fully present to the conference. Music was provided by the Conference Choir, put together by Richard Speck.

Conversation with Rev. Susan Frederick- Gray

UURMaPA was pleased that we were able to have UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray meet with us at the Fall Conference. In this, her final year as President of the Association, she is focusing on three major things:

- 1 - to support the smooth transition to a new president, and to properly say good bye and offer appreciation to staff and colleagues
- 2 - supporting the UUA By-laws renewal, a major and much needed project, which focuses on eliminating redundancy in the system and building in flexibility. This work will be completed under the new president’s leadership.
- 3 - Article II of the Bylaws revision: a major refocusing in this expression of our faith, as currently laid out in the Principles and Sources

In addition, she mentioned working with LREDA in support of children, youth and family ministry, as numbers have declined for traditional Sunday School in congregations, post-pandemic. Regarding multi-platform General Assembly and other programming, she spoke of the need to take what we’ve learned to build community in how we network and connect both on-line and in-person. President Frederick-Gray addressed the challenges of ministering in the kind of “end times” in which we find ourselves - the struggle to hold up hope and build community as we continue to work for justice and deep cultural change. And she spoke of “what comes next” for her: a post-presidency sabbatical that will focus on rest and exploration of what her next chapter will be.

Day 1- Session II

UURMaPA Board Presentation Part 1

Conversation with President Rev. Susan Veronica Rak

Susan extended a welcome to all participants on behalf of the Board and offered thanks to the Planning Team for their efforts. The rest of the Board time was devoted to a video presentation from Board member Wayne Arnason on the next steps in a year-long study of whether UURMaPA needs a covenant. Elsewhere in this issue of *Elderberries*, the Board's latest proposal is described in detail: a proposal to amend the Purpose of UURMaPA in our by-laws, instead of creating a unique covenant.

Small Group Check-Ins

Our small groups met twice the opening day, first for a general check-in and then again for "How is it with thy spirit?" and a theme-inspired "What is your dominant image/phrase for death, and why"? They each met for about an hour. We had 44 gracious facilitators for the groups of five. Then during Tom Owen-Towle's presentation on the second day we had three shorter 20-minute break-out groups of three to reflect on Tom's points and questions during his delivery.

Day 1- Session III

Service of Remembrance

UURMAPA conferences always include a memorial service for those colleagues and spouses who have died since the last gathering. This conference's memorial was planned and led by Dan King and Nina Benedetto. The gathered congregation remembered their colleagues and learned a little bit about many of them. The choir provided music for the service.

Day 2- Sessions IV and V

Preparing for Your Own Farewell with Rev. Tom Owen Towle

The keynote, delivered in four parts by Tom Owen-Towle, took us on a journey into Mindful Dying. Jaco ten Hove introduced Tom saying he is an unapologetic Universalist and one of our Better Angels whose wisdom and experience continues to provoke and help us, as well as make us smile. A master of wordsmithing, Tom refers to retirement as *re-firement*, his way of spicing it up, and even more relevant to the purpose of his keynote presentation, affirms our *death-right*.

With skill from years of leading workshops, ministering to people and his personal life stories, Tom guided us with compassion and tenderness while also challenging us to go deeper with our reflections on how we wish to approach our mortality. In the first and longest part of his presentation, which was titled "I owe God a Death," Tom spoke about how he owes God a death and the earth a pound or so of chemicals and shared his own thoughts and reflections, his theology, about death.

Death cannot be tamed, he said; it is unknown and mysterious. The idea is to be real about it and carefully and thoughtfully plan for what he calls our homestretch, our final goodbye. Tom challenged us to "reflect deeply and prime diligently for our death while we are still alive and kicking ... and face our end as valiantly and creatively as possible." Doing that, he suggested, involves unspeakable gifts for us personally as well as for our loved ones. While being sent into breakout groups of three, we were invited to reflect on Tom's message and then share our thoughts with each other.

The second part, focused on grieving our deaths, began with a short presentation by Tom in which he reflected on the nagging emotion of sadness as he contemplates returning to the eternal love that brought him into existence. In the same triad groups as earlier, we were invited to share our reflections on the question, “What grieves me most about leaving this life, what makes me sad or heart broken, or might cause some regret about my dying?” Tom concluded these first two parts by singing the familiar song written by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, *Return Again, Return again, Return to the home of your soul*.

In the third part of his keynote, Tom introduced the next question for us to ponder, “How do I wish to die spiritually?” He suggested we must remain “trustful agnostics,” since death has too many unknown factors and we rarely control our ultimate demise. Tom’s comforting core conviction is, “As long as we are breathing we can love and be loved.” Inviting us to think about our own spiritual virtues, Tom shared his three. Serenity as in being content, gratitude for a rich life, and merrymaking as in wanting to be fully sung out when he perishes. In triad groupings, we shared our own thoughts.

In the fourth and final part of his keynote presentation, Tom posed the questions, “What happens after I die? What constitutes my theology of post-death?” To prime our pondering, he listed and elaborated briefly on 10 post-death theological suppositions, including nothingness, dust to dust and Nirvana to name only a few. As an unwavering Universalist, he naturally included his own post-death theology, “returning to everlasting love.” Internalize your current perspective on post-death reality, he suggested, and then update it as you progress along your homestretch. This fourth part also ended with break-out groups of three.

Tom summed up his keynote presentation with personal reflections about the final goodbye, in which we surrender to the mystery that fashioned us.

Day 2- Session VI

Conversation with the UUMA Board President

We were pleased to welcome Leslie Takahashi as she was beginning her term as President of the Board of the UU Ministers Association. Leslie offered some initial reflections on the Board’s role and priorities. She described continuing work on the recommendations from the UUA Commission on Institutional Change, the continuing review of the new Guidelines and the UUMA By-laws, and her own interest in deepening the conversation about perceived tensions among generations of ministers. On this third topic, Leslie had prepared a few slides that outlined her perceptions of broad challenges in our current culture that are influencing the future of our faith and our ministry. The slides also included a brief list of some of the differing experiences and perceptions that older and younger ministers have. She expressed interest in furthering this conversation with UURMaPA, even though at our request Leslie did not attend the Topic of Interest on this theme, which was intended to be a conversation among UURMaPA members.

First Odyssey -- YVONNE SEON, Yellow Springs OH

The session began with a moment of remembrance honoring Mark Ward, whose unexpected death made it necessary for Wayne Arnason to take responsibility for these Odysseys.

Yvonne Seon's Odyssey had a non-traditional format, featuring a video conversation/ interview facilitated by her daughter, the actor and media producer Felicia Chappelle. Preceding the conference, a written Odyssey essay prepared for the Skinner House book, *Darkening the Doorways*, had been sent to all conference registrants.

Day 3 - Session VII

Presentations on Our UUA Retirement Plan and Opportunities in Ministry

Richard Nugent, the Director of the UUA's Office of Church Staff Finances, offered a brief live presentation on some of the staff changes in his office, and on the new custodial managers of the UUA's Retirement Plan. Richard took questions but was also available for a longer conversation in a Topic of Interest.

Keith Kron, Director of the UUA's Transitions Office followed Richard with a presentation of similar length on opportunities for ministry in the current market. He expressed thanks for the many UURMaPA members who have stepped forward to undertake Temporary or Interim Ministries of diverse duration during a time when there are congregations unable to find ministers for such positions. Keith also took questions and made himself available for longer conversation with those interested.

Second Odyssey -- MARY KAY HAMILTON, Pacific Grove CA

Mary Kay Hamilton is married to Dennis Hamilton, who for 27 years served Horizon UU Church in Carrollton, Texas, a northern suburb of Dallas. Mary Kay offered a vividly presented and engaging video Odyssey that began with a personal story of her first "mistake" as a minister's spouse, setting the scene for her sharing details about the joys and sorrows of life that came before. Mary Kay's spiritual journey took her from a Catholic upbringing and Baptist experimentation to the discovery of Unitarian Universalism. Then she pulled her husband into our faith and, to her surprise, into his call to ministry.

Along the way, difficult tragedies in her family life caused Mary Kay to challenge traditional Christian beliefs. She worked through depression and grief, towards a mature and sustaining faith. Her career path through many different paid jobs and volunteer commitments eventually led her to work as psychotherapist for Genesis Women's Shelter in Dallas. She retired in 2014 at the same time as Dennis's retirement from active ministry. Mary Kay and Dennis met and married while living on the Monterey Peninsula, and she is delighted to be back "home" with family and friends in California where they enjoy outdoor activities, justice work, and friends.

Day 3- Session VIII

Topics of Interest in Small Groups

Over 100 of us chose one of the nine sessions offered by our colleagues, partners and UUA staff. Many thanks to our presenters for a rich and varied smorgasbord of topics.

1. Caregivers Support Group, Sylvia Howe, Columbus OH
2. Creative Writing: Over, Outside and Beyond the Pulpit, Judith Campbell, Oak Bluffs MA
3. UU Retirement Plan: Transitioning from TIAA to Empower, Richard Nugent & Gloria Guldager, UUA Headquarters, Boston MA
4. Navigating the Ministry of Absence, Barbara Child, Nashville IN
5. Writing Your Own Obituary, Eleanor Richardson, Rockland ME and Naples FL
6. Spiritual Health and Well-being Following Times of Trauma and Crisis, Susan Suchocki Brown, Kittery ME
7. Intergenerational Tensions Within Our Ministry, Wayne Arnason, Charlottesville VA
8. Retirees Addressing the Climate Crisis and Climate Justice, Terence Ellen, Pikesville MD
9. In Transition: The State of Unitarian Universalist Ministry and How Retired Ministers Can Help, Keith Kron, UUA Headquarters, Boston MA

Day 3- Session IX

Conversation with the UUMA Executive Team

Darrick Jackson represented the UUMA Executive Team. We thanked him for his Team's preparation of a video update on current UUMA issues and offerings sent to all participants. We asked Darrick in this segment to offer a video reflection on the changing roles and new opportunities for retired ministers within our congregations. UURMaPA Board member Gloria Perez offered some additional questions and conversation with Darrick before a period of questions.

Looking Ahead: a Closing Presentation with the UURMaPA Board

UURMaPA Board President Susan Veronica Rak welcomed everyone to the penultimate session of the Fall Conference and expressed appreciation to the Conference planners and presenters for all their hard work. Then individual Board members spoke for a few minutes on the working done in their area.

Vice President Ned Wight mentioned the "small groups" - peer and support - new and established that are going on and invited participation as new groups form. Millie Rochester spoke of changes in the Connections Network within UURMaPA, the focus on "geographic areas" not being as effective as it once was. The goal of Connections has not changed, but we have changed, and UURMaPA continues to develop new ways to connect. Ann Schranz highlighted how *Elderberries*, our quarterly newsletter, is another way of connecting, especially in the wake of Covid. Contributions are welcome!

Gloria Perez, Secretary, highlighted the work the Board has been doing about inclusion, particularly for People of Color, concerned that not everyone coming into UURMaPA will feel comfortable. She highlighted the ways the Board has approached the question of how we can be more welcoming. In addition, she invited participants to consider joining a small group focused on issues of class, to better understand the ways our origins affect how we participate in the world. Richard Speck, Treasurer, noted that during the Pandemic UURMaPA did not make a financial appeal. However, now we will be sending out a request for donations. There is not set goal in mind, but \$10,000 to \$15,000 would be nice!

Barbro Hansson, our Conference Coordinator, reiterated that UURMaPA will continue to hold virtual conferences, but “pods,” which we tried for this first time in this conference, are the wave of the future. The dates announced for the next conference have since been changed to May 1-3, 2023.

Closing Worship

The closing worship service was planned and led by Richard Speck of the UURMAPA Board, the conference planning team, and choir director. With words and music, we were sent back to our lives, until we meet again!

FALL 2022 CONFERENCE PLANNING TEAM

Convener: Barbro Hansson (Peterborough NH)

Scribe: Johanna Nichols (Montpelier VT)

Public Relations and Publicity: Rosemarie Smurzynski (Arlington MA)

Worship Coordinator: Christine Robinson (Albuquerque NM)

Small Group Coordinator: Terry Ellen (Pikesville MD)

Topics of Interest Coordinator: Beth Miller (Sarasota FL)

Pod Liaison: Cynthia Cain (Mackville KY)

Slide Show Creator: Peter Friedrichs (Keene NH)

Music Coordinators for Slide Show: Arthur and Andrea Berman (West Vancouver BC)

Virtual Choir Director and Internet Liaison: Richard Speck (Wilmington DE)

Zoom Master and Tech Professional: Jon Claney

Choir -- This year the number of participants was less than previous virtual choirs. We wound up with five people. We produced six musical numbers that were integrated into the opening worship, the memorial service, and the closing worship. They were well received. The most challenging music was an arrangement of “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen. It was a joy to collate and produce the videos that were used.

From the Scribe -- The scribe for the UURMaPA Conference Planning Team takes notes of decisions made, reports from program leaders, and tasks to accomplish before the next meeting. A draft of the notes go to the conference convener and the final form is sent to the planning team members and others who are responsible for the UURMaPA communication sites. The highlight of this position is getting to know colleagues on the conference planning team. A great deal of intention goes into planning a conference. It is a delight to watch the effort unfold.

The spring conference will take place on May 1 - 3, 2023.