

“Resist & Rejoice”

Reflections on the 2017 UUA General Assembly

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At the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship

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What General Assembly Taught Me (Elena Sasso)

One special part of General Assembly (GA) is the Service of the Living Tradition. In this worship service the UUA recognizes those entering ministry, those completing ministry, ministers who have died in the past year, and other significant transitions. I was inspired by the sermon given by Rev. Cheryl Walker entitled “A Name, A Difference.” She spoke about how the motivation people have determines the impact of their actions. People who go around wanting to make a reputation or a “name” for themselves seldom make a positive impact. On the other hand, people who want to make a difference usually make a lasting impact.

The next day I experienced the very thing that Reverend Walker was talking about. Amy, Esther, and I attended a workshop about an organization called Days for Girls. GA includes opportunities to volunteer and we signed up for the Days for Girls Service project. To learn more we went to the workshop. Days for Girls provides feminine hygiene products and health education to people who menstruate in impoverished communities. Celeste Mergens shared the story of her inspiration to create this organization. She used to work as a civil engineer, working to ensure orphanages had needed resources. She got an email about a orphanage which had gone for several days without food and water. She immediately worked to get them food and water, but later that night she wondered what the girls on their periods were doing. She emailed her correspondent, and got the reply that the girls sat in their rooms on pieces of cardboard for the duration of their period. She started working to make these girls’ lives better. After several attempts which didn’t work out, she came up with a reusable pad which lasts for two to four years. With the privilege we are accustomed to, we wouldn’t think of being exiled from our homes, prevented from attending school, or isolated in a room. The girls she

met were unable to do those very things. When some of the girls tried to get pads they were sexually taken advantage of by people in positions of power.

In some societies, menstruation is considered taboo. Many traditional religions consider menstruation to be unclean. People cannot talk about it and no one could hang a sanitary napkin to dry without being shamed. The reusable napkins allow people to have their own pads and wash them in discrete ways, due to the bright colors and designs which disguise them as regular handkerchiefs. These people are now empowered to attend school without restraints from menstruating.

On Saturday, Esther, Amy, and I worked our shift, creating the feminine hygiene bags which were to be distributed. The bags were filled in assembly line. UUs are pretty fast workers; we finished our shift in half the time allotted!

Days for Girls was founded because of one person's plan, and with the help of many people around the world, it is able to make a difference. People work from homes to sew parts of the bag and mail them to other groups which put the parts together. Other people work on distributing the bags and teaching health education to people who will not receive any other sexual education. When an issue is much too big for one person to conquer, it truly takes a team to make the difference. The founder of Days for Girls wasn't looking to make a name for herself. She developed this program to respond to a serious need, and it is making a difference.

There is nothing more humbling than realizing your own privilege. At GA, I not only became aware of privilege I took for granted, but I learned how I can use my privilege to help those who are less fortunate. I thank the Fellowship for sponsoring me to go on this wonderful experience!

To donate or learn more about *Days for Girls* go to their website, <https://www.daysforgirls.org>.

My Reflections On UUA GA 2017 (Amy Weber)

Good morning. It was my joy to attend the UUA General Assembly in New Orleans as a voting delegate and also as a youth sponsor. This was my first GA as a delegate. As a youth sponsor it was my job to see that Elena and Esther got safely to and from New Orleans, and to and from the hotel each day, and to see that they were eating well, etc. I also made sure that they saw a little bit of New Orleans while we were there.

I was very impressed with Elena and Esther's level of involvement at GA and their excellent behavior. They read their materials, thought about and discussed the issues we were voting on, went to the big candidate forum for the UUA presidential election, as well as the special forum that was held for the youth, and a couple of the candidates' receptions as well. They helped clean up in the great hall when other youth left trash behind. They got up and ready each morning with no help from me, and were ready to go on time.

The first night we were there, they told me they wanted to go to the worship service the next morning at 8 am. I said, "Oh, you girls might be better UUs than I am!"

But we went, and it was wonderful. All the worship services had lots of singing, with a great band on stage and usually a choir as well, and excellent sermons. It was a wonderful feeling to worship with and sing with thousands of other UUs. If you'd like to watch some of these online, I would recommend the Service of the Living Tradition and the Sunday Morning Service.

One of the items we voted on was a Responsive Resolution on "Making the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign more inclusive." I'll just read some of that to you:

"WHEREAS, use of the word "Standing" as default justice language places a high value on the justice work and commitments of able-bodied

people, while it makes invisible and excludes the justice work of people with a wide range of disabilities and autistic people;

“WHEREAS, Unitarian Universalist principles call for “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;”

...

“THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the 2017 General Assembly calls upon the leaders of the UUA’s “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign to create a new imagining that better includes and reflects the needs and contributions of disabled people.”

This was a challenge for me because I tend to want to let a metaphor be a metaphor. One speaker spoke very eloquently about how our senses and our bodies are the way we interact with the world, and so our language is full of expressions and metaphors that reflect this, and it would be hard to remove them. But I couldn’t ignore the voices of disabled UUs that were saying that the current name of our major social justice campaign was painful for them, so I voted to support the resolution. The other thing that influenced me was that the leadership of the campaign, the people doing the actual work, and the staff people who will have to deal with the logistics of any name change, were supporting the resolution and saying that it was long overdue. We don’t know what the new name will be, but they’ll be working on it.

We attended a musical presentation called, “Step by Step: The Ruby Bridges Suite,” inspired by the African American girl who integrated the New Orleans public schools in 1960 at the age of 6. This new cantata by Darrell Grant was presented with a jazz ensemble, a choir, slides and readings. I really didn’t know what to expect and almost went to another event. I was glad Rev. Sarah said, “Oh, you have to go to this, it’s going to be great.” I know I can’t do it justice to describe it here, but I do encourage you to find it on the UUA GA website and watch it online. It’s incredibly moving.

As a member of the fellowship’s Racial Justice book group, it was very exciting for me to hear Bryan Stevenson in person at the Ware lecture. He wrote “Just

Mercy,” one of the books our group has discussed, and is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, which helps the poor, the incarcerated and the condemned. He generously met with members of the youth caucus before the lecture. When the youth asked what they could do, he mentioned three things: work to end the misguided war on drugs, and move to treat drug problems as a health issue and not a crime issue, work to end mandatory sentencing, and respond to the political climate of fear and anger that creates these policies. Don’t respond with fear and anger ourselves.

After being at GA, we really felt the importance of all that the UUA does, and we talked about how we would like to be a fair share congregation, and pay our UUA “dues” as we sometimes call them. I know there’s a campaign now to encourage members who are able, to write a check for their portion, and I plan to do that over the next few months.

Thank you for allowing me to attend GA, and I hope some of you will consider attending next year in Kansas City. Thank you.

GA Reflection

Esther Hughes

Like I'm sure many of you were, I was shocked by some of the recently uncovered hiring practices and mistreatments of people of color that have been going on throughout Unitarian Universalism. This GA marked a new chapter of resisting white supremacy culture within our faith and without. That's why this GA was such an important thing for me and the whole UUA. We are finally waking up to a problem we've had since the beginning.

In New Orleans, people of color have suffered greatly. Since colonial times, people of color in New Orleans have resisted oppression in many ways. Today, monuments to Confederate leaders and ideals have been removed. We were exploring the city one day and passed by Lee Circle. The center of this circle once raised a statue of Robert E Lee to the heavens. Now, only the immense column remains, reminding all who see it of the work that still needs to be done. New Orleans’s attitude of resistance is why some of the most impactful

parts of GA for me were the instances when we engaged with the community, culture, and leaders of color of New Orleans. Of all the positive connections we tried to make, the connection with the Family and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children or FFLIC was particularly eye-opening. On the first full day of GA we were drawn to an area in the exhibit hall where people were coloring and writing postcards to incarcerated children. A representative told us they worked with incarcerated children as young as 8. I was shocked to hear that often somewhat minor behavioral infractions can lead to confinement of young children. We made two postcards each, and it was quite a sobering experience. On the last day of GA, after Bryan Stevenson spoke about the mass incarceration of African American youth just the night before, representatives from FFLIC spoke to the huge crowd. Shortly after, we raised just over \$100,000 for the organization.

Another meaningful part of my GA experience was bridging from youth to young adulthood. I and at least 30 others crossed the big stage in front of thousands of people. On the other side of the stage were the 3 interim co-presidents. I shook their hands and they each gave me words of blessing. I then sat on the stage joining all the other young adults. This ceremony made me really think about my future and how I want to keep my faith and all it has taught me with me. Speakers talked about how this transition is not really exclusively a beginning or an ending, but just part of the middle. We as bridgers were encouraged to use our faith to rejoice in tackling issues that may be difficult. Later that night, Bryan Stevenson gave his rousing ware lecture. I found myself with tears in my eyes many times throughout it. In many ways, it was answering the questions I had been asking myself at the bridging ceremony about what I should be doing going forward. One resonating idea he shared was about getting proximate. He encouraged all of us to get out of our comfort zones and get personal with oppressed communities. This really clicked for me as something I can do going forward as a young adult. Since GA, I've started looking into programs in Cincinnati where I'll be studying that deal with issues like poverty, racism, and injustice. We as Unitarian universalists are called to fight against these things and

rejoice in this fight. I challenge myself and all of us to take risks in order to do just that.

GA Reflection

Rev. Sarah Richards

As you've gleaned from the last three reflections, there is much more to GA than we can share in an hour, even if we only hit the "high points." For me, attending the Worship services is an experience unique to General Assembly, that I look forward to every year. I can't put the powerful feeling of being and singing among thousands of UUs into words, but "transcendent" is a start. I was moved in other ways in attending workshops that I'm still absorbing on dismantling systems of white supremacy in our society, in our institutions – UUA, and in our worship services, as well as working through internal white privilege. Throughout the General Assembly, I was so struck with the leadership modeled by our interim co-presidents, Rev. William Sinkford, Rev. Sophia Betancourt, and Dr. Leon Spencer. In worship, reporting business, in ritual and conversation, they reminded us of our religious roots and presented a loving, determined vision for who we can be as a movement.

The election of our new UUA president, the public actions, and service projects you've heard about this morning were big news in the UU-osphere, on the internet, twitter, FB, instagram, etc., but there was one story that made the national news – the violent robbery of two UUA staffers, James Curran and Tim Byrne, in the French Quarter Saturday evening. At GA, we learned of it from our newly-elected, not-yet-installed president, the Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray. In that moment, she was a pastor to a congregation of 4,000 plus who tried to absorb this shock, and stay in the moment of community. I'd like to share a portion of a statement she sent to all Unitarian Universalists across the country the following week. She wrote:

I...want to acknowledge the sorrow, fear, anger, and heartbreak of seeing a loved one, a member of our community, violently attacked. I have experienced all of these emotions in the last few days, as have so many of the UUA staff and wider UU community. Throughout the General Assembly, we reflected on the narratives and wider systems of

oppression that perpetuate both systemic and personal violence. This week, those reflections became personal and proximate.

As I have listened to Unitarian Universalists reflect on this situation, I have been moved by the connections made to Bryan Stevenson’s powerful message to us at General Assembly that “simply punishing the broken—walking away from them or hiding them from sight—only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too. There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity.” May we hold the young adults who are accused of carrying out the robbery, Rashaad Piper (20), Nicholas Polgowski (18), DeJuan Paul (18), and Joshua Simmons (18), with the universal love that we hold Tim Byrne and James Curran. This is so very important. Many voices have lifted up hope for a process of restorative justice.

These are our Unitarian Universalist values calling us to live in the reality of the heartbreak of our world, while remembering that no one is outside the circle of love – that compassion is always our guide, and that as a religious community, we seek the well-being of all people and the dismantlement of systems of oppression that undermine our collective humanity.ⁱ

What a fitting “take-away” from this year’s General Assembly, and really, words to guide us in our own congregation’s mission. We CUF Delegates to GA2017 hope that we’ve given you many images and vignettes of the GA for you to think about. We hope that you will be inspired to represent CUF at next year’s General Assembly in Kansas City!

ⁱ <http://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/pastoral-message-from-rev-susan-frederick-gray> accessed 6/29/17.