

Resist and Rejoice, Together!

Rev. Cathy Rion Starr, Unitarian Society of Hartford 9/10/17

Rev. Cathy reflects on this year's General Assembly in New Orleans that was full of celebration, creativity and resistance. Come relish in the culture of New Orleans and learn about the innovative collaboration at this year's GA as we introduce our themes for USH this year: Collaboration and Joy!

This year, as I have every year for the last 8 years (or so), I got on a plane the day after Father's Day to go to General Assembly – the annual business and spiritual gathering of Unitarian Universalists – “GA.”

Heather and Robin stayed home this year, participating by livestream, so I took Braden by myself to New Orleans. When we arrived in Baltimore, our next flight was delayed due to a storm, and right there I knew I'd be ok parenting solo: soon after I'd set Braden down on a blanket in a corner near our gate, I flagged down a colleague to join us. She made silly faces at the baby while I went to the bathroom (BY MY SELF!). When I came back, 2 other colleagues had joined our cluster on the floor of the crowded airport. We soon grew to a full on gaggle of UU ministers.

Every 45 minutes or so, our gate agent came out to say “well folks, I still have no news from Air Traffic Control – hang tight.” We laughed! He was in good spirits, we had no control over the flight, and we were together – a random gathering of UU ministers in the Baltimore airport, not knowing whether we'd get out or be stuck there – but we were together, and we were dry, and we were fed, and that song “we'll get there, heaven knows how but we'll ge-e-t there, we know we will” reverberated in my mind as the baby passed from one set of loving arms to another.

I was skeptical that we'd get out that night, but I knew that I would be ok. So we enjoyed one another while we waited.

Collaboration and Joy are our themes for this year together here at USH.

Collaborating with those we know and those we don't yet know to take care of one another and our world with as much joy as possible.

This is what we did in that airport – we supported one another to take care of each other and enjoy our airport time that could have been simply stressful, lonely, and maddening.

And we got there (that night!).

In the months leading up to GA, we had the unprecedented resignation of UUA President Peter Morales in the wake of criticism about racism in Unitarian Universalist Association's hiring practices, then Moderator Jim Key resigned due to a cancer recurrence that took his life within a month, and the President of our Minister's Association and 2 other high level UUA staff resigned.

Over 700 of our congregations, including ours, participated in the White Supremacy Teach In (I've NEVER seen 70% of our congregations do ANYTHING at the same time

in the way we did this!) The UUA board had appointed 3 interim Co-Presidents – a creative and unusual move, all three people of color who have devoted their lives and incredible gifts to Unitarian Universalism, and I'd also had a baby!

A lot of huge things happened in the leadup to this year's GA.

I wanted to go to GA this year, even solo with Braden, because it was a critical year – a year where we, as Unitarian Universalists, might either reaffirm or really break our covenant that “your people are my people, my people are yours.” A year that could go really well or that could fall apart. I wanted to part of making it go well.

Entering this General Assembly, intensely raw emotions abounded: anger at those who resigned; confusion about white supremacy; frustration that UUism has been unable to really bridge multiple cultures; fear that this crisis would split our faith; fear that we would repeat the massive exodus of Black UUs and other people of color as happened in the early 1960s (take my upcoming class if you want more about the Empowerment Controversy); anxiety from some White UUs about whether this conversation about race and racism would leave them out; anxiety about President Trump's attacks on our environment, immigrants, refugees, public schools, and more; excitement about being in New Orleans; cautious optimism about the opportunity to shift our UU culture to a more authentically multicultural, anti-oppressive one. It felt like our emotions were revealing themselves in the weather was, as we arrived in NOLA during tropical storm Irene!

So here I was, alone with a baby in a tropical storm, with my own anxieties and hoping to play some small helpful piece in supporting our faith's health and vitality. [Ha!]

Holy cow, was it a wonderful General Assembly!

First of all, we didn't implode. We didn't have a massive walkout. We had free and fair Presidential election, wonderful worship, lots of celebration intertwined with resistance to injustice, and accomplished the business of our denomination with integrity and care.

I'm not going to give you a book report summary of General Assembly: I encourage you to read more about GA in the UU World that just came out and to go watch one of the worship services or workshops that are online at uua.org.

Instead, I want to tell you a couple stories.

First, a story about collaboration: Our elected moderator presides over the General Assembly, just as our President here presides over our Annual Meeting.

But the scale of GA means it's one heckuvan annual meeting! The Moderator presides over hours of reports, updates, decisions, and votes over the course of 4 days. It takes new Moderators a year or two to get in the groove of steering this massive ship.

So when Moderator Jim Key resigned and then died just a month before GA, it left a gaping leadership hole, not to mention lots of grief!

Our UUA Board chose to get creative in the wake of Jim's passing: they chose an experiment called the “tri-mod,” spreading out the leadership across three board

members – Kathy Burek, a white woman, along with two younger Black board members: Greg Boyd and Elandria Williams, all incredibly experienced in UU governance.

Kathy, Greg, and Elandria modeled creativity and risk-taking in moderating together. They built on their existing relationships with one another, divided up tasks, and tapped into their individual strengths to work together.

The Tri-Mod's task was to guide us through the decisions and business of GA within the rules – Roberts Rules. Dear Robert and his rules! They can be arcane. There are time limits that can be amended sometimes but not others, motions for a Committee of the Whole, friendly and unfriendly amendments - all these rules can be taken strictly and get us tied up in knots of process. Our own longtime member Nina Elgo sat on the stage as Parliamentarian, next to the UUA lawyer, helping ensure that we were following Roberts Rules as we'd agreed to.

That sets the stage for Saturday morning's business session. Jami Yandle is a relatively new UU in Ohio. Jami had worked for months towards amending our 2nd source to be more inclusive of all genders (changing "words and deeds of prophetic women and men" to "prophetic people." Jami carefully worked to get enough congregations, including ours, to sign onto this change to put it on the GA agenda.

It came time to address Jami's amendment, including some tricky maneuvers to change the 2nd source without triggering a bunch of other unwanted changes to our bylaws (yes, the principles & sources are codified in the bylaws of our association!)

I was nervous: all it would take was one delegate who knows Roberts Rules really well to move something or other and derail this tricky yet important work. With awe, I watched Tri-Mod Greg Boyd on stage at the mic, with Elandria on the floor talking with the organizers of the amendments, carefully working together to maneuver these tricky waters.

I watched Jami and a few other trans folk at one of the microphones putting forth the amendment.

Braden and I joined 20 or so other members of TRUUST – our transgender and genderqueer UU Professionals organization – at the "Pro" mic, ready to share a statement in favor of the amendment. Incredibly for a gathering of thousands of UUs, not a single person spoke against this amendment! Not one!

Instead, I watched as the conversation vibrantly supported genders of all types, and then as nearly all of our 4,000 delegates raised their yellow voting cards in favor of inclusivity. And I cried.

We are a faith that democratically voted to say that transgender and gender non conforming people are welcome. We are a faith that is experimenting with shared leadership.

Our tri-mods modeled vulnerability in making mistakes and quickly acknowledging them and moving forward.

Our tri-mods modeled multi-racial and cross-generational collaborative leadership.

Our tri-mods deftly guided us through business procedures in a way that felt more spiritually grounded than many a worship service!

Our tri-mods modeled risk-taking in trying a new way of doing business.

Collaboration can be amazing.

The second story from GA is about New Orleans:

NOLA – is a city that has known tremendous pain and racism (“sell you down the river” is a phrase about the most awful slave markets & plantations in Louisiana), and a city that knows how to party.

Thanks to Sam for bringing some NOLA music to today’s worship service, just as it was infused throughout General Assembly. As the UU World put it, NOLA GA was “hot, humid, joyous, full of music & dancing.” And the food – oh, the food!

It was fitting that we held THIS GA in NOLA – for that combination of dealing with the long history of white supremacy & racism while also uplifting joy and celebration is pervasive in NOLA AND in our faith right now. The Ministry Days that precede GA began with heart wrenching stories of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and with painful truth-telling about racism’s impact on UUs of color.

As UUA Co-President Sofia Betancourt put it: “The charges of racism in hiring surprised our community. Many white UUs asked, “how this could be?” But most UU people of color were not surprised – only surprised that it had been called out. And that difference in reaction was itself a shock and challenge to our community that we want to call Beloved.” (UUWorld, p.38)

We want to call our UU communities beloved. But that’s hard when UUs of color experience painful macro and microaggressions – like one Black UU leader who finished speaking on the plenary stage and a white UU immediately approached to tell her how much she looked like Michelle Obama (she looks totally different!).

We want to call our UU communities beloved. And we, especially white UUs, would rather not face questions of white supremacy within our beloved faith.

What I experienced at NOLA GA is that we can call our UU communities beloved and celebrate them while also addressing our faults and injustices in the world.

What I witnessed at GA gave me hope that we can engage without falling apart, but finding joy in the muddle and mess together. We don’t have to be the UUs arguing at the pro & con mic– we can be UUs dancing in New Orleans.

And dance we did.

The tradition of a GA public witness – usually a rally or protest, this year began with a second line. Second line is a NOLA tradition “established by black New Orleanians to express grief and celebrate life, and for generations has offered cultural resistance to

systemic oppression.”¹ So what an honor and treat it was to have The Young and Talented Brass Band, and the Original Big 7 Social Aid and Pleasure Club lead a second line for us, together with dancers, handkerchief-waving, parasol-holding UUs rejoicing together under the theme “love resists.”

Robin & Heather watched it live from home, then Robin watched it again and again – you can see a picture from it on your OOS, and go home and watch it yourself! The energy is contagious!

NOLA knows how to dance and sing and have fun. And NOLA knows pain and grief. Both. This is our task – to dance and sing and enjoy and also to engage the world as it is – imperfect and in pain. Not one or the other, but BOTH, together.

And we can’t do that alone.

Hence; joy and collaboration, our themes for this year!

How might we experiment with new ways of working together, as the co-presidents and tri-mod have done in our UUA of late? How might we get out of our silos – internally and in the broader community?

Let’s reach out and get to know folks who we don’t know. I have several coffee dates set up in the next few weeks with folks in the broader community and in the congregation, and invite you to reach out and do the same – whether it be coffee or a Circle Supper or a Secret Buddy. Downstairs right now, kids & Chancel Arts team are collaborating to prepare for Water Ceremony. Already, just by putting these themes out there, Sea Tea Improv has reached out to us to collaborate joyfully together this year!

I’d love to have restart an all-church retreat for fun and deepening of relationships. Let’s have some parties – with games or dancing or music or comedy!

What is it that makes you shine – art? Music? Food? Connection? How would you like to bring those shining gifts to the Meeting House and our broader community?

Let us not be afraid to lift up joys in the midst of the sorrows of this old world – we need the joys more than ever!

Together we are strong.

Together we must celebrate!

Together we will struggle!

Together we will challenge one another, and care for one another, and keep weaving relationships within our congregation and within our broader community.

So may it be.

¹ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/uua-public-witness>