

## **The Larger Movement: Impressions of GA 2009**

the Rev. Edmund Robinson  
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Reading: from presentation by Rev. Cecilia Kingman at workshop entitled  
“Abundance in Troubled Times”

“I have spent the last ten years working on a theology of stewardship both as a stewardship educator and as a minister, and all the conversations I have been having about a theology of generosity or a theology of abundance with Terry and some of you...I always felt a little awkward and out of place and it took me until very recently to figure out why. It wasn't until I read Paul Rasor's very excellent book, *Faith Without Certainty*, that I realized that the theological frameworks I have been using to build a theology of stewardship are not actually part of liberal religion. I grew up in a different tradition that taught that the most important thing we can do with our money is to build the kingdom of God. I was raised Baptist and Presbyterian – we call that Baptherian – but I was raised among people who tithed, not because it was an instruction from God – there's some mythology out there among us about that – but they tithed because it gave them great joy. Their joy came from knowing they were participating in a magnificent work, a work that transcended our own lifetimes. Building the kingdom or the Beloved Community or the kin-dom whatever you want to call it, building that is a task worthy of our sacrifice, that's what my grandfather and others taught me. They put aside achieving a more comfortable standard of living in order to participate in that great endeavor of bringing God's love into this world. In that tradition, abundance is not about the extra material well-being we have, it is about an abundance of joy that leads us into a gladness. Their example taught me that each of us has a part to play, whether humble or exalted, as the Bible says, each of us has a part to play because we are all called to offer all God's gifts, my grandfather used to say, to build that Kingdom here on earth. Building churches and serving others is how we make God's love manifest in this world. I still believe this.

“I was also raised in a family of mixed class background and from my working class side, I learned that the single greatest thing we can do with our money is to take care of the community and take care of one another. In working class culture mutuality and community are the highest values. We take care of each other. My brother was recently unemployed for a stretch in Maine – Maine's economy is actually worse than out West – and so we sent him a ticket. And he came to us, and he slept in my daughter's room – that's a working class response. We sacrifice our own material desire in order to provide for one another when there is need. When one of us has more, we share. When one of us has a little extra, we give. There is no shame in needing help and there is no shame in asking for help. And our people don't know that in our churches.

“In working class culture, we all know that, as the song says, we all need a little help to get by. We also believe that community institutions are worthy of our support and our sacrifice, particularly those that are providing for the next generation. We are bound and beholden to one another. And I still believe this. “Now as a young adult, I was exposed to liberation theology.... These teachings say that those of us who have privilege can bring about the kingdom of God by using that privilege to create radical change... We are saved by our solidarity by our ethic of concern for the most vulnerable. And this solidarity asks us to renounce the benefits of privilege... and work for the dismantling of economic injustice. Liberation theologians tell us that to really love God, we have to love justice more than our own lifestyles, or as Daniel Berrigan says, we have to love the poor more than we love normalcy. For those of us who are poor, we must give up the myth of our own powerlessness, the safety of our own passivity and for those of us with wealth, we must cast our lot with the poor, and although this is the hardest one for me to practice, I still believe this.

“None of these messages, though, are a part of liberal theology. Nor are they part of the middle and upper-middle class culture of Unitarian Universalism. I have felt far too often like a duck out of that proverbial water ...My response to this as a stewardship educator and now as a minister has been to keep teaching these theologies in hopes that we can weave them into our own tradition. For I believe that Unitarian Universalism lacks a theology sufficient for the day we are in. I believe that we are mired in a story about our selves and our money and it is hampering our ability to serve our people and it is harming our future. We have – we all know this – we have statistically much more wealth per person than most other faith traditions and yet what do we have to show for it? Our churches pinch by, many of them, our youth groups meet in dark dingy basements, many of them, our ministers graduate from seminary with tens of thousands of dollars in debt, we have no colleges of our own, have you noticed?

“Do we love something more than we love this faith? [Preach it!] It’s possible, but I don’t think that’s it, actually. I don’t think we’ve asked our people to love this faith as much as they loved what they have been told to love by the consumer culture. Our behavior has been shaped more by our culture than by our theology, and so I believe what we have is a failure of theology.

“We are not my friends, I’m sorry to say this, but we are not counterculture. Our people may not have enormous homes or flashy jewelry or drive giant SUVs, but they sure love their vacations in Tuscany. The middle class message of consumerism and status has failed us all. It is one of the direct causes of the ecological crisis. And our patterns of consumption were fueled by an unsustainable credit bubble contributing to the current financial crisis.

“We all played this game.

“Our materialism has separated us from one another and stripped meaning from

our lives, and our people know that, they know it in their bones. We need a new story to tell them, a new narrative to replace the old story that what you buy or where you travel is what you are. They need a new ideal that embraces the loyalties of community and counters the vicissitudes of hyperindividualism. And it is we as religious professionals who need to craft that new narrative, build new theological structures that will invite our people into a more committed and sacrificial faith. If what we have is a failure of theology, then it is we who have failed. We are the ministers, we are the theologians. It is our job to tell our people a theology, a story, that is worthy of their commitment and sacrifice. Our people are hungry for lives of meaning and purpose. Jean and I have seen this, we have worked all over the country, and they are starving for this message, and they are eager to be asked to commit themselves to a project that is worthy of their lives.”

1. Big news:
  - a. Peter Morales was elected UUA president over Laurel Hallman
  - b. Commission on Appraisal’s Attempt to change the Principles and Purposes failed by a very narrow margin
  - c. UU University was a resounding success, from what I could see, restoring some of the sizzle lost by the affiliate policy
  - d. Speaking of sizzle, that’s how you pronounce SSL, the UUA’s new campaign for advocacy of our core values: Standing on the side of Love.
    - i. It is intentionally open to other faiths who share these values
    - ii. Illustrated by the immigration rally on Friday in SLC
2. Personal: chance to connect to my cousin
  - a. Beautiful house, right on edge of foothills
  - b. Ditched rental car, made my way by public trans and bicycle
  - c. Downtown SLC at 4600 ft elevation; Rick and Faith’s house 1000 ft higher.
  - d. Got *lots* of exercise.
  - e. Talked to Rick and Faith about their involvement with local UU church; met the minister at the rally.
  - f. Tour of LDS conference center and the “Goditorium.”
3. Other notes which resonated with me
  - a. Paul Razor’s Berry Street on “Ironic Provincialism,” which began with the question: does it seem to you that UUs are always in an identity crisis.
    - i. Razor went on to quote Dean Llewellyn Fisher, a Universalist theologian, almost a century ago: when asked where Universalists stood on an issue, Dean Fisher famously remarked: “we do not stand. We move”
    - ii. His central thesis is that the more we talk about change and diversity, the more, ironically, we seem to be slipping into the kind of provincialism we claim to deplore. Despite decades of commitment to anti-racism work, we are still a largely white denomination, and largely middle class.

- iii. Rosemary Bray McNatt gave response, noting that her own son can't decide whether to continue as the only black youth in a white congregation.
- b. Same theme at GA: Mark Morrison- Reid spoke on the Perversity of Diversity. His central thesis is that this is an ethnic faith: it has New England, upper-class roots. It is more class-bound than race-bound, and as the number of people of color with college degrees has risen, so has the number of people of color in our congregations. The slope of the two lines is almost the same.
- c. I decided that we could fruitfully be part of this conversation, and I asked Josh Pawelek, who is scheduled to preach here in August, if he would consider talking to us about race, since he has been and anti-racism trained for the UUA for a decade.
- d. I was put to a severe test when my last night with my cousin conflicted with the Service of the Living Tradition; Mary Harrington was the preacher, and I have watched part of her wonderful sermon on video on the UUA website, where you may also watch it.
- e. Also, I should note that I was missing a ribbon on my name badge because the church I serve is not a fair share congregation; this whole name badge ribbon system is designed to encourage congregations to pay their fair share, so I pass that along to you that I didn't get the fair share ribbon this year and hope that we can do better by the Association next year.
- f. UU University: challenge of theology. Here is the response of Galen Guengerich, whom I watched installed last year as the senior minister of All Souls, New York. The six hours he presented were not just lecture; he had two worship services, some songs, and a lot of film clips and music. But here is my transcription of him describing his conception of God.
- g. A little background: he draws heavily on a strain of theological thought called process theology, which derives from Alfred North Whitehead. Perhaps this responds to Cecilia Kingman's call for better theology.

Galen Guengerich

[Scientists try to describe the world with reference to matter and energy]

“Theologians pursue a different goal; rather than trying to explain the physical world, describe it and explain its workings, we try to interpret human experience and account for its meanings. The periodic table of theological elements is laid out in terms of meaning, purpose and value. None of these can be put under a microscope. Instead, we need to ask what ideas we need to interpret our experience and account for its meaning. In my view, one necessary idea is the idea of God.

“You may have noticed that I said the idea of God is a necessary idea. I did not say that God exists, nor did I say that God does not exist. I believe that God exists in the same way that Beauty exists, but not in the way that an apple exists.

An apple is a physical object, a distinct entity. Beauty never appears to us, but we find the idea necessary in order to account for our delight in the symmetry and form of certain objects and experiences – sunsets, symphonies, sculptures by Rodin. Like Beauty, God has to be made manifest through other forms as a quality of the experience.

“In my way of thinking, the idea of God is necessary to account for two kinds of experience that otherwise remain unaccounted for.

“One has to do with the past. When we think of the most enduring elements of existence, we usually think of physical things – rocks, planets, galaxies. On the other hand, we usually think of the elements which make up the realm of meaning – thoughts, feelings, emotions, experiences – as fleeting and ephemeral. Over time, however, the opposite turns out to be the case. The atoms that make up a given body or object eventually disband themselves and go on to constitute something else entirely. Even so, the experiences made possible by those atoms remain. The question is where experiences go when their physical substrate no longer exists. Where do they go?

“We have a word for the totality of the physical world. That word is universe. We also need a word for the collection of all experiences in the universe. For me, that word is God.

“Whitehead calls this the consequent nature of God, suggesting that God is in part, the consequence of, and thus constituted by, all experiences whatever. This idea of God accounts for our sense that experiences matter. They don't just matter to us, they matter period. Even though no one may remember them or even know about them in the first place, experiences don't just vanish into thin air.

“Armchair philosophers often debate the question of whether a tree falling in the woods makes a sound if no one hears it.... This trivial question actually raises a serious religious issue: what happens to experiences no one knows about or remembers? Who hears the lonely cry of an anguished soul in the night's darkest hour? Who suffers with the young boy who is abused by his father? Who bears witness to the travesty of an infant girl abandoned by her parents on a hillside to die? What if nobody does? What if nobody cares? God is the idea for me, at least, that accounts for our sense that just as atoms are never lost in a physical reaction, so no human experience, however sad or tragic, is ever suffered alone or eternally forgotten. As Whitehead put it, everything that happens in the universe – its sufferings, its sorrows, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy – is woven into the harmony of a completed whole. God is the name we give to our sense of an immanent presence that bears witness to everything that happens in life. This is not a God with a grey beard in the sky. It's a sense we have of a certain kind of experience that we need a name for but you can't stick under a microscope. For me, the idea of God as a refuge of the past, is a necessary idea.

“The other experience the idea of God is necessary in order to explain is the idea of the future. At any given moment, the future can unfold in a number of possible ways. Possibilities have to come from somewhere. This is actually a serious philosophical problem, where possibilities come from. Because until they happen, they don’t exist, exactly, but – where do they come from? Simply put, for me God is the idea that accounts for our sense that the future is possible at all. Whitehead calls this God’s “primordial” nature, which points to God’s role as the beginning of the future. The idea of God also accounts for our sense that the future will unfold in a way that leads towards meaning and not towards chaos.

“This doesn’t always happen, of course. The Greek notion, the ancient Greek notion of fate is one I love. It’s not a predestined outcome. But it’s a tendency of the future to move in a particular way. Like the tendency of a plant to grow towards the light. The plant can be turned away from the light, of course, but it will always grow back towards the light.

“In a similar way, the idea of God accounts for our sense that the future can unfold in a purposive and meaningful way, even though sometimes it doesn’t. God is the transcendent source of possibility, what Whitehead called the eternal urge of design. For most people who say they don’t believe in God, these two aspects of the idea of God – immanent witness to all past experience and transcendent source of future possibility – isn’t the problem. The problem is the idea that God is a personal being, or, to put it more precisely, a conscious being. This is the parking spot by the Mall door problem. {Does God exist to answer prayers like let me find a parkign spot near to the door so I won’t have to walk in the rain?]

“Is God independent of time and history, able to step in and change things? In a word, the answer is no. In my view, people who accept scientific inquiry as a valid way of knowing and yet believe that God can change the laws of nature are simply — how to put this? – confused. In any event, I’m not interested in building a bridge between contradictory worlds. I’m interested in an idea of God that children of the enlightenment can believe in.

“The question is where consciousness and choice enter the divine picture? The answer is simple. They enter through us, through our consciousness and our choices. Recall that the consequent nature of God is constituted in part by our experience as human beings. It accounts for idea that our experiences are never lost. The only way that God plays an active role in time in this case is through us. William Blake was on the right track when he wrote:

“Every one of every clime  
that prays in deep distress  
prays to the human form divine...”

For his part, Blake thought that the ‘human form divine’ described only Jesus. My view is that you and I are also the ‘human form divine.’ To say that we are the

presence of God in this world is not a metaphor. We are the hands and voice of God.”

I will end there, but observe that in saying that you and I are the hands and voice of God, Rev. Guengerich is standing foursquare in a Universalist tradition. I am fond of quoting the great preacher Quillen Shinn:

“So we sing the glad song of victory. All the resources of the universe are pledged to the great consummation, God's character, and his infinite love. I love to think of the agencies we see now at work. Every exertion you put forth to make this world better is so much done to make our doctrine true. God works through instrumentalities. We are all to be agents. A Universalist who is idle, doing nothing to make his doctrine true, is a counterfeit.”

We have a mighty faith, my friends. Let us go forth to the divine work of the world.

Amen