

Now Is the Time
Rev. Kathleen Ellis
6 April 2008

Now is the time, an in-between time. Live Oak is in transition as a congregation from a pastoral to a program sized church, and we will further that journey through a visit next weekend by Susan Smith, the Executive Director of our Southwestern UU Conference. Live Oak was just an acorn in 1991 when folks started thinking about establishing a UU congregation in this part of Austin. We have inherited their vision, raised a generation of kids, and still they bless us with their curiosity about religion and their development as spiritual beings.

I first joined a UU church in Columbia, MO, in 1975. My boys were 5 years old and 6 months old at the time, so I was looking for a place where our values at home matched the values taught in a religious setting. Five years later I discovered the pure joy of summer camp, UU style.

I found journal entries from those days, beginning in 1980:

Sat. 8/9/80 My experiences at SWUUSI [Southwest UU Summer Institute] were truly mind-stretching and we are very pleased that we went. ["We" included my first husband Bob and our sons Rob and Fred.] We attended morning worship services, talks about the universe by Dr. Ralph Alpher, workshops, vespers, evening programs, parties and late nights on the beach at The Point for singing and smooching. The boys had a good time with their activities, too.

The talks on the universe were so good, even though I don't have enough math and physics knowledge to have understood it all. Bob thoroughly enjoyed it and got to know Dr. Alpher on a personal basis. His wife Louise was in my art workshop and I talked with her several times. In the afternoons I attended a religious education workshop emphasizing 3, 4, and 5 year olds. *Growing Times* is the new UUA curriculum for that age.

Last night I googled Dr. Alpher and learned that his dissertation proved the Big Bang theory in 1948. "No one accepted these ridiculous ideas until 1964 when two radio astronomers showed Alpher's theory was correct. Unfortunately, they received the Nobel Prize, not Ralph Alpher."

(<http://www.light-science.com/alpher.html>)

The next year I wrote:

"8/26/81 SWUUSI was really good. We had been unsure of the them—Born Again UUism?—but the speaker, Dr. Forrest Church (N.Y.) did an excellent job. And now we really do feel born again, in the sense of reaffirming our faith and our dedication to Unitarian Universalism. The afternoon workshop I chose was perfect for me. [The Rev.] Robert Latham presented a way of cutting through to the core of what we really believe. It was very good for me to struggle with words to express what I feel, and then to find that others feel that way, too. There were differences, of course, and it was madness when the people at our table tried to come to a consensus in making a statement of belief, but the amazing part was how really similar our beliefs are. I wish world religious leaders could go through the process together. Latham strongly feels that the UUA, beginning with individuals in the smallest congregations, should make a statement of some substance. . . . deep down inside I think maybe we all have the same needs and goals."

By the third year I was on the SWUUSI staff, and eventually became director in 1989. A few years later, my current husband (and last husband!) Jon Montgomery went to SWUUSI for the first time, and I invite him up to tell you about that. . . .

My boys also got to go to weekend rallies as teenagers, and as a parent I sometime went along. Someone has to make sure they get a little bit of sleep—in their own rooms. At First Church, Dallas, I was privileged to sleep on a padded pew in the sanctuary. How many of you have gone to rallies?

The boys both had a chance to learn about sexuality in a religious setting. I'd like to invite Mary McIntosh to tell us more about the work she does in that regard. . . .

I have grown spiritually in no small part because of the support and challenge provided by my Unitarian Universalist connections. My sons grew up as UUs, just like these young people who bring such energy and talent to Live Oak. Do we need to grow in numbers as a church and in the larger UU world?

More is not always better—witness 6 billion human beings inhabiting our small planet. Consider the excesses of our consumer-driven society, the corporations that suck their employees dry then send their jobs overseas for the sake of the bottom line, such as the sudden closing of the Dell manufacturing plant in Round Rock. Jobs and health insurance—gone for a thousand families.

The Rev. Marilyn Sewell said, “Some liberal and some conservative churches offer *feel-good messages, and draw huge crowds* by telling people that they are fine just the way they are. Some liberal and some conservative churches offer *feel-bad messages and draw huge crowds* by telling people that they’re pathetic and helpless.”

“Unitarian Universalism offers a more complex message, and draws a smaller crowd” and, I would add, so do some other liberal and conservative churches.

That’s okay. We don’t want to grow in numbers just for the sake of growth. But it’s not okay to remain “the best-kept secret in town.” Our goal is to provide a religious home for everyone who hungers for spiritual depth and an opportunity for lifespan spiritual development. We do this in several ways: by welcoming all who enter our doors in good faith, by inviting our friends, and by letting our voices be heard on the side of justice and love.

Welcome your open hearts to many beliefs, many personalities. Welcome those who are hurting in their personal lives or looking for a new way to explore spirituality and grow their souls. Support those among us who encounter illness, accident, death, or tragedy through pastoral care and small group ministry.

Offer a language of reverence, as our UUA President Bill Sinkford suggested several years ago. We are called to understand that we are a religious people whether or not we believe in any god at all. Call them “wisdom words,” like this poem by Robert Bly:

A man and a woman sit near each other, and they do not long
 At this moment to be older, or younger,
 nor born in any other nation, or time or place.
 They are content to be where they are, talking or not talking
 Their breaths together feed someone whom we do not know.
 The man sees the way his fingers move;
 he sees her hands close around a book she hands to him.
 They obey a third body that they share in common.

They have made a promise to love that body.
 Age may come, parting may come, death will come.
 A man and a woman sit near each other;
 as they breathe they feed someone we do not know
 someone we know of, whom we have never seen.

“A Third Body,” *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds*, p. 19

When I first joined that UU church in Columbia, MO, I encountered many kinds of wisdom: a book discussion group in which long term members were equally interested in my newly developing ideas; a chance to work in the nursery; the dedication of my children; participation in worship. I felt so welcome even though I didn't always know what I believed. They accepted me as I was, but by offering lots of different views and ideas, they also challenged me to articulate my faith and live out my values.

A hundred or so UUs who live out their values by working on sub-standard housing twice a year. On April 19 we'll be working on a house in Pflugerville, because poverty is no longer concentrated in East Austin, but is moving out to the fringes of the city. Houses are cheaper, but they are also cheaply built, and start deteriorating fairly soon. Feel free to sign up for that project.

Brenna Pritchard has joined others to work in New Orleans. I've asked her to tell us about that experience. . . .

One of my bumper stickers says, “The most radical thing we can do is to introduce people to one another.” Would you like to know a secret? Welcoming someone into a church is not just for them. The radical thing is that we are changed for the better. True hospitality is a spiritual practice. If we like it here, we'll make space for the newcomer—in worship, in small groups, in committees, in religious education, in social action, in music, in leadership. By getting to know each other, we benefit from the gifts each of us brings to the Live Oak table.

Let us provide food and shelter for the spiritually hungry, for the religiously homeless. There are so many people who would benefit from our way of doing religion, but they haven't found us. What will it take to grow our faith? A publicity campaign that began last fall continues this week with an ad in Time Magazine.

Bill Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, says “Now is the time to grow our faith. . . . to let the world know we are

here, and to welcome those who seek our community of peace, justice, and love. Now is the time for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective because our religious values are sorely needed to help heal a wounded world.”

To do this effectively we need to know we are not alone, but connected to other congregations, to our Southwestern Conference, and as an Association so that we can combine our efforts and make ourselves better known. You have an opportunity to shape the future of our faith, and to combine your contribution with mine to grow our faith through growing our numbers.

When you’re talking about our religious values, more is definitely better. In sermons and classes, documentaries and letters to the editor, we are encouraged to speak up and speak out. Recently it was an offensive political drawing—I won’t call it a cartoon—that insulted Planned Parenthood, the dilemma of women who face an unplanned pregnancy, people of color, and Margaret Sanger, a Unitarian who worked tirelessly to teach birth control to poor women who desperately needed family planning.

Live Oak’s other minister Chuck Freeman is speaking out on the radio—exploring spiritual and religious ideas as they intersect and sometimes collide with society and culture. Lynn and Billie Slater, Alison Dieter, Leslie Cunningham, Paul Sullivan, Larry Smith, and many others are speaking out on justice issues.

A new song based on words by W.E.B. Du Bois goes like this:

“Now is the time for hearts to be open;
no better time, this moment of grace.
This is the day, we can't wait for tomorrow, or someday: now is
the time.

“Now is the time for planting and tending
seeds borne of hope, commitment and faith.
Cherish this day, and the power in knowing why we say: now is
the time.

“Love is the lesson, and the legacy we know.
Now is the season for the seeds of love to grow, and so...

“Now is the time for vision and courage,
witness to love, to spirit and truth.

No better day than the promise of this one, so we say: now is the time.”

We stand for justice, equity, and compassion; we encourage people to ask questions about religion and ethics; we recognize individual worth yet we encourage spiritual growth. Now is the time to share our good news! Will you share yours with me?

And the people said, “Sure!”