

## “AFFIRMATION”

There is, deep within the heart and soul of us all,  
A quiet place wherein  
Life runs and flows with a murmur.  
It flows in every living soul, and every living soul flows in it -  
Springing up and gushing forth  
Like a newborn brook, deepening as it joins with others,  
Until it ebbs,  
And returns to the endless sea from whence it came.

Within this ever-changing stream  
Aimless souls wander without direction -  
Believing there is beauty, but knowing not her lovely face,  
Believing there is hope, but knowing not how to call her name,  
Believing there is love, but knowing not her soft caress.  
And yet sometimes, in this secret place that lies next to the heart and soul of us all, there  
burns,  
Midst the shadows of our fears, a tiny spark, which glows, and -but for an instant-  
illuminates the darkness, and we know that this tiny spark  
From this place must be transmitted - with a hope, and a prayer, and a promise!

## “Now is the Time, Nurture Your Soul, Help Heal the World”

by Michael Searing, September 6, 2009

The preceding words were conceived by a young man more than six decades ago. The time was Spring or early Summer, and this *philosophical statement in lyrical form* represented his rebirth from a period of depression and questioning. I knew that young man then, I knew him **well**-he is with **me** still.

When I volunteered to speak about the topic of what brought me to Unitarian Universalism and what keeps me coming back, not to mention why other people should become UUs, I didn't know what a heavy load this would be. After all, I have been attending UU congregations for more than six decades now, and it seems like a *habit* - albeit a *good* habit, as one of our longtime members once observed. But why? *What force* drives me to jump in the car every Sunday and head up Route 7 to the Ridge (not to mention many other days and night)? *Why would I*, finding myself in a strange town, turn to the white pages or the Internet and look up the local Unitarian-Universalist congregation, and *why* would I want to know if there were a UU congregation nearby should I ever consider a move? In short, what do I get out of all this, and why should *YOU* consider a strong commitment to my faith community?

To consider the *first question*, of why I have a permanent love affair with U-Uism, I will take you back in time. The young man who decided to let his light shine had failed

his senior year in high school-or, more precisely, had just stopped, stubbornly, like a donkey that refused to go on. What was the *point* of it all? Why should he try? Why should he study or complete term papers if there was no meaning in the universe? So his body went through the motions, *but his mind and his soul* did not participate. U-Uism had not *prevented* this period of depression, but it did *nurture him* before his meltdown and *helped provide the spiritual and intellectual stepladder* that helped him recover his sense of *well-being* and self-worth. Luckily, drugs and alcohol did not beckon-angst and depression were enough by themselves.

When I think back to my first days with U-U, I want to thank Don and Uula Saunders for doing something very un-U-Uish. They convinced their good friends, Chuck and Florence Searing, to attend the Unitarian Church of the Germantown section of northern Philadelphia. My parents were lapsed Presbyterians, young adults of the Great Depression years. When they attended college at Northwestern U. in Mom's native Evanston, Illinois, they were *older and possibly more serious* than typical students, having weathered personal setbacks of one kind or another. They majored in Sociology and wanted to save the world. Conventional religion held no answers for them. They experimented with various religions, including the Ethical Society, or simply stayed away from church.

For me, childhood was a *religious void*. Sunday was just another day in the week and my thoughts and actions were not guided by any formal religious creed or directives. *All of that changed* when our family moved back to suburban Philadelphia after several years up in rural Bucks County; Mom and Dad decided that my sister and I should have *formal religious experience and training* and they began attending the local Episcopal Church that was the religious home of good friends of theirs, Jed and Ceddy Baker. I was twelve, going on thirteen. *At that church* I started to familiarize myself with Christian doctrine and theology. I think that I took all of it *symbolically*, as I do to this day. Some of the *rituals* of Episcopalianism seem *rooted in the deep recesses* of human longing for love, for explanations of life and death, for *enlightenment* in the dark days of the year, and the inevitable rebirth of flora and fauna each Spring. Indeed, similar patterns prevail in the other great religions of the world. I remember answering a church school teacher's query of "How do we know that there is a God?" by saying "because I can see the trees and flowers, and who caused these things to be?"

It was at this point that Mr. and Mrs. Saunders prevailed with Chuck and Florence Searing, and Mom and Dad enthusiastically launched themselves into membership at the Unitarian Church in North Philly. While *they* attended services and adult fellowship programs such as the enticingly named "Intimate Strangers" *I took up Sunday school of a different kind*, and became active in *Liberal Religious Youth*. The first Sunday school class I entered emphasized readings from "*The Church Across the Street*," by Sophia Fahs, the great Unitarian *religious educator*. *Today*, we still use this curriculum for our youth. This class taught me respect for *other denominations and cultures* and seemed much more to my liking than strict Christian dogma. *At the same time*, LRY *sponsored social activities* and religious activism and *inspired me* to attend three straight summer high school sessions at Rowe Camp in Rowe, Massachusetts. At Rowe I shared in the workload, sang silly songs, participated in challenging discussions with guest speakers including the humanist and biologist Albert Szent-Gyorgy and UU minister David Parke. We played sports, walked to the lake, composed Sunday Chapel services, took special

bus trips to Marlboro Music Festival and celebrated the weekly ritual of the “Spirit of Rowe.”

At that time, in the late fifties and early sixties, the Germantown congregation opened its pulpit up to guest speakers on all but four Sundays a year. Having lost a beloved minister to death, the members had decided to retain the assistant minister to perform pastoral duties and invited other speakers on the remaining 48 Sundays. Therefore, Unitarian giants such as S. Powell Davies, Jack Mendelssohn and Kenneth Patton graced the pulpit. Norman Thomas, the socialist leader who was an ordained Baptist minister, preached twice. Even the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke on one occasion. Thus, *this church*, its interior still shaped in the form of a cross, *represented the breadth and diversity* of the Unitarian Universalist movement as the fifties entered the sixties.

When *Unitarianism*, the religion based on the *principle that God is one entity and not three*, merged in 1961 with *Universalism*, which teaches that *all souls, not just some, can be saved by a loving God*, the movement was complete. The Universalist ideals of love and acceptance of all people *influenced my concern for a theology based on equal opportunity for all people*, friendship and cooperation among nations, and *peace in our world if at all possible, inspired me in my youth* and remain keystones of my social and religious philosophy to this day.

I think *you can see that* my religious roots *were planted deeply* in the soil of the U-U movement early in life. Perhaps that is *the first reason* that I formed the healthy habit of frequenting U-U churches and fellowships. And what a lucky thing for me! Where else could I have the *duel benefits* of having the *freedom and responsibility* to mold a *personal* religious credo? I took my predilections to UU with me to college in Providence, and to the Unitarian Church of Garden City, Long Island when I entered the workaday world, and to the *Rev. Donald Szanthy Harrington's Community Church* when I moved into Manhattan. And *what other religious denomination* would *permit my fiancée, Barbara Gorsline, and me* to participate in the crafting of our own wedding ceremony? This is *just what we did* under the guidance and counseling of the Rev. Albert Q. Perry of the Unitarian Church of Flusing, NY, where we were married 40 years ago. When one of our former members mentioned that she and her husband *felt very uneasy being required to affirm certain fixed verbiage* in their *traditional Christian wedding*, I thought to myself, “what a shame they had not already encountered UU prior to their betrothal.”

Thus, *freedom from fixed dogma*, coupled with the responsibility to shape one's personal religious credo, is another important reason why I came to this religion and have stayed here. *Another* compelling force, I find, is the *cornucopia of services* that we enjoy week after week on Sunday mornings. Even before this congregation had a minister, I was stimulated by the variety of offerings from week to week. Sometimes we could come, not sure of what the program was that day, and find ourselves *enraptured by* what happened during that particular hour and a quarter. This phenomenon has *continued to this day* - though I admit I usually consult “Comment” before heading along to Exit 5. Sometimes it is *the music* that especially touches me, or a milestone or a reading. Very often it is the *lyrical wisdom of our ministers* that makes my day or, more to the point, gives *me refuge* from my life outside this sanctuary.

That brings up *another point*: those of us who are turned off by inflexible dogma *still have spiritual needs* that *cry out* for fulfillment. The *table of my life* requires a religious

leg *without which it cannot stand* - the other legs - job, social life, marriage and parenthood are also vitally important, but my life *would not be complete* without the spirituality that I can practice in this sanctuary - and carry with me throughout the week.

*Two other points* before I quit. First, Unitarian *Universalism has fueled my social conscience*. It has helped prevent me from slipping into the comfortable refuge of materialism or self-satisfaction with my career or my achievements, whatever they might be. The young man who occasionally picketed for civil rights and attended a United World Federalist conference on his way home for college spring break (at home) has *turned into the senior citizen* who works at the Soup Kitchen and who *contributes a night* at the DD Homeless Shelter every fourth or fifth week. *Here* I first considered the importance of *recycling* to inhibit the demolition of Mother Earth's resources and it was *in this place* that I first sensitized myself to the problems and rights of gays and lesbians. I am not always comfortable with everything that happens here and I am often challenged and stimulated - and thank my Unitarian Universalist God for the pinpricks and the stimulation!

And “**why**,” you ask, “**should I consider joining and becoming an active member of this religious movement?**” Well, for *one or more of the same reasons* that have motivated me. I *do believe* that our Unitarian Universalist faith *provides a springboard for action*. I also believe that *if one truly believes* in the importance of our seven principles, one *must take action* to truly “*live one's faith*.” In this spirit, I have become an active member of our own Social Action Committee and plan to continue in that role. I can say more about that, outside the scope of my prepared remarks, and I *do want to leave some “sermon time”* to hear some of *your thoughts and reflections*.

You should know, if you have not already noticed, that our associated congregations, as represented by their delegates, have elected a new President of the UU Assoc'n, of congregations, the Rev. Peter Morales, who vibrantly believes that our religion can not only “*nurture your soul*” but also “*help heal our world*.” Peter believes that *far too few “unchurched” people* have discovered *the Good News* that our Unitarian Universalist faith can bring to them. These are beliefs that I share. As the years of my life have gone by, I have become *increasingly annoyed by and angry about mankind's inhumanity to their fellow human beings* and have resolved to contribute against those trends. It has occurred to me that it is no longer *naïve* to believe in the necessity of *worldwide peace*, which I would *define* as the *active process* of solving our problems and settling our differences without resorting to the *amoral breakdown into war*. *To the contrary*, I believe that the time will come, and come soon, as it must, when it will be naïve to believe in war, in strife, in torture, in inhumanity foisted by power seekers on other members of our fellow human beings. Although all of the *world's great religions share a version* of Christianity's *Golden Rule*, national “leaders,” instead of recognizing the shared situation of the one race that matters, the **human** race, have all too often resorted to demonizing “the Other” and marching off to war. I truly believe that “business as usual,” of doing “what we always have done” will surely shorten the existence of human kind *and destroy the resources* provided to us by Mother Earth.

I do not want to diminish the substance of the first thoughts that I have already shared with you by dwelling too long on my last thought. War and Peace has not only already been a book, but this subject, plus where and how we go from now could well be the subject of a separate sermon or series of sermons and discussion sessions.

Lastly, before I *stop talking and start listening*, I have *one more point*. Let me mention one word: ***involvement***. This religious movement and, especially, this place, first the Barn and now the Ridge - has given me a place where I **belong**. When Barbara and I first came here, we knew that UU'ism was *the right choice* for us. We *wanted a place to worship* and to *give our child* - not to mention *unborn children of our dreams* - a faith tradition to learn and grow. However, *we were not prepared* for the warmth and the friendliness of the *reception we received* from the people of this congregation. *Always remember this* - each *new person* who enters our door is *in search* of a spiritual solution. As research has revealed, people come to a *religious institution* at a *time of change* or a *transition period* in their lives. I believe that they, *and that means you*, gentle newcomer, *can find what they are seeking* here and now. Our congregational members and friends should *never underestimate the importance* of each and every human being. So, when we notice someone we don't remember chatting with, "just say hello" and *honor the inherent worth and dignity of this new person* by paying *full attention* to their concerns and questions! What matters most is not facts and figures and names but *what brought visitors here on this day?* What *motivates* them?

Many people have passed through our doors over the past thirty-five years. As a former finance chairman, canvass chair and Board of Trustees member and Board President, I used to *fret and worry* as to the reason that some folks just didn't stay with us. Later, I became *more philosophical* as I realized that *it is less important* if we become just a stepping-stone on someone's spiritual journey - the *important thing* was simply *being here for them* when they needed us.

*Still and all*, as a *confirmed, no-nonsense UU*, nothing gives me *more satisfaction* than to see people who *land here and stick here*. Above all, I say that *you can get as much out of this experience as you put into it!* ***Involvement***, that's the thing. When I agreed to Keith Dupree in 1974 that I would help him lead the canvass campaign, little did I realize what would follow. We had to *reorganize our finances* and *make a concerted effort* to contact every possible person in the search for operating income, better known as pledge dollars. The work was *satisfying*, and I found that, to *this introverted and somewhat bashful person*, even the act of visiting in someone's home to canvass them led to better *knowledge of* and friendship with many people. That *first fund drive* occurred for me during a *period of emotional and financial turmoil* due to the loss of the job that had brought me to this corner of CT, and it helped me to *retain my sense of purpose* and *self-worth*. The *rest* is history - I was *even more stuck on this place* and this religious movement than before. Round Robin dinners, potluck suppers, teaching, social action, Sunday Service Committee, and yes, back to the Board again. And, as an added bonus, the opportunity to *vent my thoughts* and *bare my religious soul in public without fear of having people laugh in my face!*

So that's it! History, diversity, freedom, responsibility, challenge, social action, all make this a *wonderful place* and *religious movement* in which to be involved! And the young man who felt himself to be in tune with all living souls has looked back into the quiet place inside himself and decided that there are many reasons for his constant attendance here. Thank you, fellow worshippers for this opportunity. Consider this *my chance* to let my little light shine. I hope you have *enjoyed* what I've *shared with you* today!

