

## **Our Stories—Essjay Foulkrod**

Essjay Foulkrod has been very busy in her 95 years (and going strong) on Mother Earth. It is not easy to choose what to include in a short story but it is clear that the strongest thread in her life has been the grounding influence that church and spirituality have provided for her.

Essjay is a seventh generation Unitarian (yes, 7th!) and she remembers when the Universalist Church of America joined with the American Unitarian Association in 1961 to become the UUA. Her parents and grandparents were all very active in the church and Essjay has continued in their spirit of service and volunteerism. She notes that she has always been impressed with the dedication, the knowledge and effort, and the heart that UU volunteers commit to causes important not only to their own community but which effect all of humanity. It is obvious that she is honored to be a part of that tradition.

Her story begins in Weston, MA and continues at the University of New Hampshire and then Middlesex University in Waltham, MA where she received her degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. She moved back to NH where her then husband was completing his studies. She was denied the opportunity to take the state boards to become a veterinarian and was told outright that the positions were being held for men. Unwilling at that point to fight this blatant sexism (1947 was a far different time) she settled into raising three children, became very active in the UU congregation in Nashua and worked part time. As the children got older she worked many years at Boston University first in administration in the Biological Science Center and then as the Science Acquisition Librarian in the Mugar Library. Her science education was surely put to good use.

She retired from BU in 1975 and a second marriage brought her to Fairhaven, MA in 1980. She joined First Unitarian Church in New Bedford. She never stopped working, turning her interests now to the trade of antiques and collectibles, eventually owning her own store. After her second divorce she became increasingly involved in women's issues, New Age studies and GLBTQ issues. Church activities reflected her interests—she cofounded a CUUPS (Covenant of UU Pagans) chapter in New Bedford. She worked with groups within and outside of the congregation leading a Women's Talking Circle at the church and helping to run the Lavender Cafe (a monthly substance-free gathering of Lesbians offering music, entertainment and a nonjudgmental safe place) at the local YWCA. She opened her own New Age bookstore.

When she decided to leave New Bedford she found herself drawn to Rhode Island through friendships she had made with congregants at the Westminster Unitarian Church. Essjay joined lives with Pam Brightman in 2004 celebrated by a Handfasting Ceremony, an ancient Celtic ritual in which the hands are tied together to symbolize the binding of two lives. They married two years later in 2006 when same sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts. They came to UUCSC shortly after that. Her marriage to Pam (a very gifted artist according to Essjay) included several very happy years before they decided to live separately.

Essjay was active in five different congregations and was on the Board of Trustees of four of them. The list of her committee work over the years would fill this entire story and covers a wide range of social justice issues. One highlight not already mentioned is the cofounding of Womensphere, a group of Unitarian Universalist women in south-eastern New England that meet to learn about the importance of ritual in our daily lives and to honor Gaia and her world. At UUCSC Essjay has been active on the Social Justice Committee helping to start the Equal Exchange Table and working on the Disability Justice Committee and the Share the Plate initiative to name just a few efforts.

Essjay gave up driving shortly before her 95th birthday and is bored to tears during the pandemic, very much missing church activities and especially people. She much appreciates the few socially distanced visits she has had with UUCSC members and was happy to join the car rally in support of the Defund the Police initiative. She admits to slowing down a bit and is not unhappy upon reflection of her long life but she is eager to get back to church and to service, whatever form it may take.

*Elizabeth Donovan, July 2020*