

Pearls

From Jody Clark:

At the present time the UUA seems to be promoting the use of, in my opinion, extreme or trigger phrases such as oppression, abolition, fascism, oligarchy and so on.

My first pearl was the reinforcement of the power of music. When we were singing at GA, and there was a lot of singing, the divisive phrases and terms being used melted into the background and were lost in the positive words of the music.

My second pearl is the best phrase I heard: "Being a part of community makes community happen." I love this phrase as it sums up our church and the many opportunities...the more we are part of the UUCNH community the more community we create.

From Geoff Coleman (Sorry - these probably move beyond "pearls," and at the same time fall short of being "pearls," but are the best I have to offer):

To over-generalize, for sure, I've heard it said our Unitarian ancestors "led with their heads," while our Universalist forebears "led with their hearts." Within that framework, I would describe our congregation as coming more from the Unitarian perspective. At GA, I got a chance to see what a Universalist approach to worship looks like. There was much more willingness to acknowledge our Christian heritage (but without Christian dogma) and less fear of using the G-word to acknowledge a force larger than ourselves. There was considerable borrowing from African-American worship traditions as part of a variety of worship styles seamlessly incorporated into a single service. The excitement was palpable. Some people even had their hands in the air. Anecdotal evidence was provided that this is the type of worship that growing UU churches practice. It was said that, in planning worship, we are curators of experience for people to meet the holy.

There was an opinion expressed by many that we are living in the worst of times. Speakers commented that "dehumanization has been an integral part of violent destructive capitalism"; that people experience "intersections" of racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and other "isms"; and that "total apocalypse appears more likely than any apocalypse before." And yet there was hope and optimism that UUs can be a "force of liberation against the death machines of authoritarianism." Speakers mentioned that "faith development is our unique competency" as we engage the collective power of love and hope to create beloved community. What is required is that we put aside our differences, build coalitions, take advantage of our various resources, and, putting love in the center, continue our long tradition of fighting for social justice. Some suggested that our very theology is one of enabling oppressed people to liberate themselves and repair injustice.

I was struck by the degree to which the UUA went out of its way to ensure that the concerns of the few were accommodated by the many. The UUA was unapologetic in going above and beyond the collective recommendations of their advisors in requiring all attendees to wear masks. They offered "BIPOC-only" spaces during breakout sessions. Delegates were invited to excuse themselves from discussions they thought might do them harm, and were reminded

that they didn't need to be present for discussion in order to vote. The moderator asked a speaker to start her talk over again because the sign language interpreter was not "live" on the screen, even though all speech was closed-captioned on the screen.

From Rev. Lee Anne:

I learned that by several different measures, the UUA is shrinking and participation in GA has significantly decreased. While the number of UU congregations varies year to year, the trend since 2012 is downward. There were 1,054 UU congregations in 2012. There are 1,000 now. There were 215,356 UUs in 2012. There are 152,958 now. More recently, participation in the UUA General Assembly has decreased. Just comparing 2025 (Baltimore) to 2023 (Pittsburgh) the total individual attendance dropped from 4,148 to 3,279 and the number of congregations represented fell from 715 to 592.

I learned that the UU Ministers Association in close collaboration with the UU Association are replacing "liberal" with "progressive" and "religion" with "religious movement." During Ministry Days, UUMA and UUA staff referred to us as a "progressive religious movement" and assured the ministers that we are "all on the same page" and "don't need to debate anymore."

I also learned from the advertisement of a new Skinner House publication, *Impassioned, a Guide to Progressive Preaching*, by Lucas Hergert, that the UUA considers my kind to be "progressive preachers." This book is meant to show how "progressives can - and why they should - preach with feeling and force." Since I am always interested in improving my preaching skills (regardless of the source), I will be purchasing this book.

In the rules of procedure for GA 2025 the use of "Progressive Stack" was explained:

Tellers will use progressive stack in determining the order of delegates joining the queue to speak in a pro or con line. Progressive stack is a technique used to give those with marginalized identities a greater chance to speak. To use progressive stack, at least the first two speaking slots for discussion in both the pro and con lines will be reserved for delegates who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, disabled, fat, transgender or nonbinary, or delegates with otherwise marginalized identities. Delegates who want to participate via progressive stack must notify the tellers when they join a speaking line.

I am not sure what this change in nomenclature signals. Perhaps it's simply meant to distinguish the UUA from the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA), which is growing and claims to be "supporting and promoting the practice of liberal religion by embracing freedom, reason, and tolerance – rooted in our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and all peoples." Or, it might be a signal that the UUA is making it clear to everyone that UUs adhere to a progressive political ideology. Other options are possible. In any case, it does look like our infinitesimally small denomination/movement may be fracturing into "progressives" and "liberals."

From Robyn Travers:

I attended GA this year as a business only delegate, entirely online. This meant that the only GA activities I had access to were the general business sessions. I had no access to workshops or worship (other than the closing). I joined each day via zoom. It was completely free, and now I see why. If you are going to go to GA (which I have before) go to the full event. The workshops can be a lot of fun as well as the services.

The first pearl I want to share is really a pearl of confusion. During one of the sessions, they made a point to explain to us the process for which they will be reviewing, changing, and voting on the bylaws over the next several years. There was a slide that showed when each bylaw would be presented and what year it would be voted on. What I found confusing and interesting is that when they were laying them out, Article 3 was not listed in any of the slides. Article 3 is the portion of the UUA bylaws that addresses congregational membership in the association and congregational polity. It is curious that in this whole several year plan they listed each bylaw except Article 3. I am not sure why this is and I really didn't have any means to ask.

My second pearl, really is a pearl. During breaks they would play music for us on the zoom. At one point they played an absolutely beautiful song by The Sanctuary Boston. You can watch it [here](#). I had heard of The Sanctuary Boston as Matt Meyer (the drummer in the video) had been the theme speaker at Summer Institute several years ago and is the youth theme speaker this year. I ended up buying the whole digital album to support them. Check them out [here](#) ... great music, great community.

From Jonathan Murray:

This was my second GA, but my first in-person.

It was wonderful to meet some of my instructors and fellow classmates from Starr King in the flesh for the first time, as I had only known them *via* Zoom. Starr King's outgoing president, Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, gave a thoughtful reflection on her tenure, and the incoming president, Dr. Stephanie L. Krusemark, gave an inspiring talk on her hopes for the school and the UU faith.

I attended the worship workshop where new approaches and ideas were discussed. We were advised to:

- “Not to hold on too tightly to what almost worked.”
- Get rid of the “consumer mindset” when designing a worship service.”
- Be mindful of the time length of the sermon/service. “The mind can only absorb what the seat can endure.”

We also learned that one church showed solidarity with their local school district by offering “Strike Camp.” When the teachers went on strike for 18 days, the RE staff offered to watch kids K thru 8th grade to help ease parents' work schedules.

I also attended a workshop hosted by staff from First UU of Annapolis, Maryland. They discussed how they were able to increase the size of their congregation by 43% in just 3.5 years. They should have reserved a bigger room because it was standing room only, a sign that many congregations are facing the same challenge. Several of the ideas came from a book called "Fusion" by Nelson Searcy. While written from an evangelical standpoint, there is much crossover to our UU faith. All of the presentation slides will be sent to me and I plan to share them with the church. The five main points made to grow/maintain members are:

- Radical Welcoming
- Showing we care
- Building relationship
- Inviting, Inviting, Inviting
- Making it easy to get involved

NEVER say "Are you new?"
Instead, say "Have we met? I'm..."

I believe that future GAs should offer a workshop or a booth in the exhibition hall for both active and retired military veterans.