

“2005 GA”
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Introduction

Good Morning!

At the 2005 GA, or General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Society, I attended a dozen workshops, four plenary sessions, three worship ceremonies, two lectures, one lunch with Rev. Sara and visited the Exhibit Hall countless times. All of this inside just three and a half days in June. It was a busy and exciting time full of learning new things and meeting new people. There were UU representatives there from every state but one and from foreign countries like New Zealand and Japan.

Today I want to share my GA experiences with you. If you've attended GA before, what I have to share will perhaps remind you of your experiences and freshen them in your mind. If you haven't been to GA before I'll do my best to paint a picture of what it's all about.

The GA organizers are truly amazing. I've rarely attended anything of this size – 4000 people or more – that was so well organized. There were so many different types of events to organize – from dances to worship ceremonies to workshops and lectures to concerts. And at every one I attended, there wasn't a late start or an unprepared speaker or even one single faulty microphone among them.

Workshops

The first things I want to talk about are the workshops. They're like going to the Brimfield flea market – there's something for everyone. I decided before I went to GA that I would attend workshops on many different topics, rather than to concentrate in one area. You could say that I was trying to find my niche. In one workshop I learned about poet May Sarton and at another I learned how to discern the personal gifts I could best give back to my church. The next day in a workshop I heard a panel discussion on cultural stereotypes and also heard

another panel that gave tips on website design to encourage church growth. Another workshop I attended was called “Blue State Church – Red State Nation” where we discussed politics in reference to liberal religions. And last but not least, I attended a workshop where we read pages from the Bible that were derogatory to women and with tongue in cheek ceremonially burned them by running them through a shredder.

Plenary Sessions

The Plenary Sessions are where business is conducted and voting is done. They are held in an arena type setting with a stage down on the main floor and seating around one end of the arena all the way up to the rafters. This was where we could really see our democratic UU principles at work. In the second plenary session we heard discussion on five Study/Action Issues for Social Justice. The chosen Study/Action issue was to be referred to congregations and districts for further review and study to determine if it was something we wanted to add to the UU Statements of Conscience.

Due to the lateness of my deciding to attend GA, I was sorry I didn't have a chance to ask this congregation what they would have chosen but Rev. Sara said to vote for what I thought best. The choices were Women's Rights Worldwide, Safety of Children and Youth, Peacemaking, the Need for Affordable Housing, and Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society. I went into the plenary session thinking I would vote for Women's Rights Worldwide, but the discussions led me down a different path.

Picture this – on the floor of the arena were five microphones, one for each of the issues. Delegates wanting to speak on an issue were to line up behind the designated microphone. It was obvious that several of the speakers were deliberately chosen and had well-rehearsed speeches. But what got my attention more was the enthusiasm of the

youth contingent at this plenary – even though only four delegates per topic could speak, the youth representatives lined up twenty-strong behind one microphone, all wanting a chance to speak. Their enthusiasm must have been as catching to all there as it was to me, for it was their chosen issue, “Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society” that carried the voting by a mile. The full issue is stated thus: “How might the moral and ethical grounding of Unitarian Universalism be given greater voice in the public square?”

Breakthrough Congregations

The Plenary sessions though were not just about business. There was music and song; we heard, and sang, several songs from the new hymnal supplement. There were talks by the likes of George Lakoff, a linguist, who spoke on his book, *Moral Politics*.

And in some of the most inspiring video I’ve ever seen were the stories of the Breakthrough congregations. In each of four plenary sessions, one congregation was honored for its growth. They were called the breakthrough congregations and their stories were inspiring. For example, the Quimper UU Fellowship in Port Townsend, Washington went from a few people meeting in their own houses to building their own church and growing to a congregation of 300 in just one decade.

Exhibit Hall

Of course no meeting in a convention center would be complete without an Exhibit Hall where you can make connections and go shopping. The Exhibit Hall was open every day of the GA and was a great fun place to meet representatives of organizations associated with UUism and to buy mementos. There were displays and representatives from many UU and like-minded organizations. Organizations like the UU Buddhist Fellowship, the UU Christian Fellowship, the UU Men’s Network, the UU

Service Committee, the UU Historical Society and UUs for Justice in the Middle East. And there were displays from theology schools and retreat centers.

At one table I picked up a free CD from the UUA called “Lay Leader Drive Time Essays” – short essays on many different subjects for lay leaders. Our reading today that Rev. Sara gave was from this CD. The essays from the CD are available on the UUA website for download, or I’d be glad to make a copy of the CD I have if anyone is interested.

There was a cyber café set up in the exhibit hall where we could check our emails. And for those of us who wanted to bring home some souvenirs or gifts, there were many vendor tables set up, selling everything from T-shirts to jewelry to bumper stickers to Fair Trade Goods. Both Beacon Books and the UUA Bookstore had huge displays where many of their most popular books were displayed, and even book signings were held by authors who spoke at GA.

Observations

One of the great things about GA is realizing that our small congregation has a voice and that if we wanted, we could have even a bigger voice. For example I attended a worship service put together by UUs for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Each year they give the Albert Schweitzer award to a sermon that best exemplifies the independent web of existence. The award-winning sermonist gives his sermon at this worship service. Certainly, someone from this congregation could give a sermon that could be submitted for consideration of this award or any other of the sermon awards. Other ways we could make our BUUC voice heard is to sponsor a workshop at GA or speak out on an issue in Plenary, or set up a table in the Exhibit Hall.

One goal of many at GA is to gather as many ribbons as possible on their badge holder. I could only manage to get two – one for being a delegate and one for being a member of a small congregation. Many of these ribbons are given out in the Exhibit Hall from organizations like DRUMM which is for UU multicultural ministries. There was one ribbon in particular that I couldn't get that absolutely floored me. My biggest surprise of the GA was finding out that the BUUC is not officially a Welcoming Congregation – that is, welcoming to Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender.

I had just always assumed we were. I believe the time has come for us to work this out – to make the effort and do the work that will achieve us recognition as a welcoming congregation to GLBT. There are a number of requirements in order to achieve this so won't be easy but we've already put in place one of the biggest requirements – the teaching of OWL in RE. But we'll need to hold workshops open to the public and advertise our intentions in the local newspapers. If you are interested in this effort, please let me know; we need to get the entire congregation behind this or it won't work.

Tips for Attending GA

I'm digressing – let me get back to the GA. If you are interested in attending, the sooner you decide to go the better. The best part about deciding early is that you'll be able to get lodging near the convention site, which will give you a very different experience than I had. I decided so late to go, I stayed about 3 miles away so I would take a cab every morning to the Fort Worth convention center; stay there all day, then take a cab back to the hotel in the evening. If you book lodging early, you can find lodging near enough to the GA meeting site that you can walk to the meetings. This

would give you the opportunity to slip back to the hotel between events to freshen up or to catch a quick nap. I would have appreciated the chance to do that.

It's easier to keep costs down too if you decide early. You can get a spot in the less expensive hotels which get filled up first; or find a roommate or two. You could also volunteer to help out at GA and receive free registration.

In 2004 Barb Hale and Misty-Dawn Shelley attended GA as our delegates. Barb relates that one of the things she remembers the most from GA is meeting a minister from a UU church 30 miles away from her home town in Ohio, and yet she never knew that church existed when she was growing up. It made her realize that we need to work harder to get the word out about our religion.

Next year the GA will be in St. Louis, but just as I found out, it doesn't matter where it is being held. It's all about the people. Wherever it is, you will be surrounded by like-minded people.

Conclusion

The first event I attended at GA this year was an orientation in which people who had attended GA several times gave recommendations. From all of them the top recommendation was to pace yourself, to not try to do too much, to make time for breaks. Based on the number of things I attended it may seem as if I didn't follow that advice, but I actually did, on just one of the mornings that I was in Fort Worth.

Early one morning, instead of heading straight over to the convention center as I had on previous days, I decided to visit the celebrated Japanese Garden, part of the Fort Worth Botanical Gardens. It was just early enough to avoid the heaviness of the mid-day humidity and heat of Texas. I love Japanese gardens with their simple lines and their

variety that is based on texture and shapes rather than color. Near the entrance to the Garden there was an area called the Suzuki Garden. It looked like a patio with square-foot blocks of flagstone interspersed with smooth river gravel. On three sides this “patio” was surrounded by green bushes and stunted, gnarled trees; on the fourth side were the clean lines of an open-air wooden structure. This structure’s vertical posts framed the Dry Landscape Garden, perhaps better known to us as a Zen garden with boulders surrounded by sand raked into even rows.

In this picturesque setting there were two people. One was an elderly Japanese man, dressed in classic Japanese clothing – a white tunic, belted at the waist, and white pants. His hair was pulled back into a small pony tail and in his hands was a long sword. It was so other-worldly looking, my first reaction was to look around for the photographer or the video camera. Surely this had to be a staged photo-op. But there were no cameras around.

The only other person present was a young Japanese girl, dressed like any American teenager, in a T-shirt and jeans. The man was talking to her and off to the side I saw another sword on the ground along with two open gym bags. A bit further along the path I found a bench concealed from their view so that I could sit and watch them unnoticed for a few moments. It became obvious that the man was instructing the girl in the correct stances, how to hold the sword, how to stand correctly, and how to swing it with deliberateness and grace in the ancient art of Japanese sword fighting.

This beautiful scene became a metaphor for me of what GA was all about. It’s about the old teaching the young in a setting that’s conducive to learning. It’s about the passing on of tradition, knowledge and skills to those who are eager to learn and to do.

It's about an old liberal church that has a great mix of life long members and an influx of new members who want to bond with the same liberal traditions and ideas. It's about those who want to inspire by passing on their knowledge in workshops, in lectures, in worship and in song. It's about newcomers eager to listen and learn.

Become a part of GA. If you have something you want to pass on or a desire to help others or a wish to see UUism grow, think about taking an active role in GA, volunteer to be an usher, go to make connections in a discipline that interests you and come back energized, or take part in a study issue, or speak in favor of or against an issue in plenary. If you've never gone to GA, go at least once. If the last time you went was two years ago or more, go again. Go as a delegate or, if not a delegate, go as a seeker of knowledge. Just go and seek and learn.