

A LITTLE BIT ROT'RY, AND LITTLE BIT UUA

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OPENING WORDS: Welcome. If you're visiting us for the first time, looking for a liberal religious home—you've found it. If you're looking for somewhere where you can be who you want to be, where you can be loved for who you are, you've found it. Welcome.

Tom and I have just returned from our pilgrimage to the holy land—the UU General Assembly—this year in Portland, Oregon. Our UU President, Bill Sinkford, calls it the UU State Fair.

To complicate our lives a good bit, we also attended, the week before, the Rotary International Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah. You wouldn't think so, but this proved to be a good decision—although I don't think our feet would agree with that.

We were able to compare the conventions and people and techniques in a way we couldn't have if there had been a time span between them. It seems to me that this comparison might prove valuable to share with you, because it gave us some insights into UUism. So, allow me, please, to jump back and forth between these two conventions for a few minutes.

My initial impression at the Rotary International convention was of people from all over the planet—20,000 people from all over the planet—dressed in exotically colorful dress and head scarves if they were from African nations, or in suits or dress slacks and golf shirts if they were American or western European. Women wore tailored clothing with expensive jewelry, had nice hair styles. Most of the Rotarians were couples, usually seen walking hand in hand like people who had been together forever.

Now, a quick flash to the UUA General Assembly. This time there were 6,000 people from the US almost exclusively. You could also see a great many exotic colors—reds and purples and greens—and that was just their hair. T-shirts predominated the dress code. I spent a happy half hour just standing in the crowds, writing down the words from their t-shirts.

- Tree hugging, dirt-worshiper
- Be the change you want to see in the world

- It doesn't bother me if you're straight, just as long as you act gay in public.
- May the god of your choice bless you.
- I'm diagonally parked in a parallel universe.
- And, my personal favorite—What if the hokey pokey IS what it's all about?

Again, lots of couples walking hand in hand, but at the UU, heterosexuality was not an issue.

The Rotary program of events book was maybe 4" by 8", with maps and information on each workshop and plenary session.

The Unitarian program of events book was twice the size, 8 ½" by 11", with 125 pages. It had the same sort of maps and information on each workshop and plenary session. But, in addition, were pages and pages devoted to where handicapped access was, where to recycle bottles, where to recycle paper, newspaper, where to recycle clear plastic and where to recycle compostible items; directions on where to find fragrance free zones; where to find areas of quiet meditation; where to locate chaplains or counseling; where to sit if you have chemical or electrical sensitivities; and what to do if you encounter non-inclusive language in the presentations, or among the delegates; the proper way to raise your delegate voting card without infringing upon the rights of others.

The Rotarians were stimulating—where can I sign up to help? How can I get my club involved? Making me want to get involved with all the projects of eradicating polio in the world, providing wheelchairs for the world's handicapped, providing clean drinking water for areas where none is available, and so on and so on and so on. People who wanted to get their hands dirty, get their money working, get the job done.

The Unitarians, on the other hand, were very welcoming—everyone was hugged with little or no provocation. Unitarians were eager to share the story of their congregations and passionate about their causes. There were Unitarians with petitions asking for your signature at every turn.

Both conventions had a large room with booths for anyone who wanted to exhibit their wares to sell or their causes to espouse. You could buy shirts and buttons and banners and hats in both conventions. The Rotary

convention had booths and booths of groups wanting to partner with various Rotary clubs—with projects like wheelchairs for those who couldn't walk—and in poor third world countries with no paved surfaces, this is quite a major obstacle; with projects like clean drinking water for people who have none; with projects like portable housing for disaster relief aid. The UU General Assembly had booths and booths of groups with information on curriculum; the Beacon Press had a huge booth; booths on assisted suicide; booths lined with petitions to sign on various issues; booths on saving the earth's resources.

At the UU General Assembly, the highlight of the opening ceremony was the banner parade. Hundreds of people holding their congregation's banner marched and circled the auditorium. Beautiful quilted banners, and banners with intricate calligraphy and banners with dimensional elements. Later, all those banners were hung from the mezzanine overhang at the convention center so we had several days to look at them. I took lots of pictures to share with you and there is a slide show of the banners on the sharing table.

Lots of differences in these conventions. Yet, for all their differences, I felt very much at home with both groups. Each group has so much to offer to help our world. Each group offers their help in unique ways. It occurred to me that if we could combine the strengths of the Rotary and Unitarian Universalists, what amazing work we could accomplish in this world!

I learned a lot at these conventions. It was my aim in attending to gather up a lot of nuts and bolts kind of information to bring back to you to help our fellowship get even better than it is. And, in the next few weeks, I hope to meet with the various committees and people to put this information to use. So, I won't load you down with all of that stuff right now, unless you have specific questions after the service. Let me share instead some of what I learned in a more general sense.

First of all, I learned this is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches. We're a bunch of churches associated—not bound and tied—with the parent church in Boston. We don't need to buy into every national UUA cause or position. We make our own decisions on where we stand.

I learned that we here at UUFRR are doing a whole lot of things right. Over and over again at the UU convention, as I talked about you all to other presidents of congregations and other UU's, I was told that our little group is

well-organized, headed in the right direction, thinking and planning for the future, with some pretty good priorities.

Time and again I heard people tell of their congregations of 120, and regularly had 40 at Sunday service, or congregations of 60 who had 12 regularly at Sunday service. We're a congregation of 36 who regularly has 41 at Sunday service. We must be doing something right on Sunday mornings!

I heard at the workshop on getting your first minister that before we're 12-15 years old, we should start thinking about putting in place a Planning Committee and setting up a five-year-plan. I told them that we're less than ten years old, we have had a Strategy and Planning Committee for about five years and we're on our second five-year-plan.

We're not doing so well in other areas—religious education, attracting young families, musical worship. I attended workshops on membership and growth and workshops on music in the service. I've brought back a bunch of new ideas that might help us in those areas.

We're also not so good at UUFR at actively—and that's the important word—actively—becoming involved with the needs of our community and the planet. The Rotary convention showed me how much more we could be doing with so little effort on our part, but with such a big impact on the world. And, I've brought back several ideas to share with you there as well.

Back in the 70's the Unitarian organization in America was extremely active in the racial civil rights movement—large groups of UU's went to Selma and marched along side of Martin Luther King Jr. some even died in that effort. UUA is very proud of that work and what it accomplished to make a significant change in the lives of African Americans in our country.

We're kind of resting on our laurels nowadays. No large issue has mobilized our national congregations like that one did.

Perhaps it's time the Unitarian Universalist organization put its considerable energy and enthusiasm and talents into addressing one of the many many issues that confront our world today. Not just form committees and talk about it and sign petitions about it—although talking and signing petitions are valuable.

Looking again at the Rotary organization—Rotary didn't just talk about eliminating polio from the face of the earth; they didn't sign petitions—they organized, raised huge sums of money for the effort, sent many many Rotarians to the countries where polio still was active and went door to door to vaccinate every child.

And today polio is almost gone from our planet.

They saw a problem that had a solution and they just went after it.

Wouldn't it be great if the Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches were to do a similar thing? If UUA partnered with Doctors Without Borders, for example, raised money, sent Unitarian doctors to areas where there is no medical support, we could change the lives of millions of people around the world.

If UUA – I don't know – decided that saving at least some of the world's rain forests was a great idea—and I think it is—they could raise money, buy a large tract of rain forest, protect it from logging, allow the scientific community in to study it, help the planet.

These are not moral issues of right or wrong. These are not political issues of right or left. These are human issues.

I'm not talking about shoving us all on the bus today, headed for Selma or D.C.—although showing our support for important causes by marching is certainly important. And I'm not talking about burning question marks on the lawns of the local radically right Christians.—although getting our liberal religious message out to the community is very important.

I guess I'm talking more about being more aware of what the needs of our world are and then seeing what we can do—actually physically financially DO –to help ease these problems, even if only in a small way.

Maybe what it takes is starting at the grass roots level—here in White Stone—here in UUFR. We can be instrumental in changing the way UUA does things. Take an active role.

- If I see someone here in White Stone that has physical limitations—no means of walking, or no way to ride to work or can't see well—then I

- could say, “Oh, what a pity.” Or I could buy a pair of glasses or a wheelchair and see that one person has an improved life.
- If I read in the papers that women in Nigeria are suffering from no way to feed their families, I could turn the page to the crossword puzzle, or I could write a check to help the Micro Finance group helping women to help themselves by financing their small business loans.
 - If I see a neighborhood overrun by drugs and crime—wherever—I could make sure I never end up in that neighborhood, or I could help organize an activity center to keep the young people at risk engaged in an after-school activity.

Gini Courter, the moderator at General Assembly—a remarkable competent woman—talked about Unitarian Universalists in general. She said that for years we have been wishing—wishing for change, wishing for equality for all races and peoples, all genders, all sexual orientations. We have been wishing for peace and wishing for a healthy planet. But now it’s time to stop wishing and start dreaming. We UU’s need to have a dream—a concrete something that we can pin our efforts to. And then we need to follow that dream by using the Rotary example and just make things happen. We can make a difference, but only if we quit wishing and start doing.