

Betty Baron's Responses to Town Hall Conversation

January 26, 2015

Thanks: I'd like to thank the MVTF for inviting all of us to express our opinions, and I appreciate the comments of those who attended the town hall meeting on January 11. Thanks, too, for recording, transcribing, and disseminating the conversation. I'm going to try to articulate my reactions and concerns online.

Reality: Centuries ago, John Lydgate, poet and monk, said "You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time." Abraham Lincoln apparently adapted this by changing the verb to "fool." I believe both quotations. One person finds the program and service too long. Another thinks it's too short. Some believe the coffee period "is the focus of the fellowship," while others would do without it entirely. Et cetera. Conclusion: we ain't gonna please all of the UFL membership all of the time.

But we knew that already, of course. So now we have a chance to share our joys, concerns, and underlying values, and we are trying to respect the democratic process as we reexamine our mission and plan for the future.

Personal Background: Here's where I'm coming from. I became a UU in Ann Arbor in 1962. Frank and I were married in the garden of the 1st Unitarian Church of Berkeley in 1964, but for various reasons (living where there was no official UU congregation, being busy, and so on) we didn't attend any Sunday group for years. We came to Lawrence in 1970. As UU "agnostics with children," we joined the UFL in 1976. We liked the program format, which was quite different from that of the UU churches we had previously attended. We found most programs intellectually stimulating or spiritually satisfying--or both--and we liked the people here.

Our kids grew up in the fellowship, but the **RE classes** were very small. Our two did not manage to form strong bonds with peers--there were not many peers--and they missed their friends. When our son became a teenager, with an early-morning paper route, he wanted to sleep in on Sunday mornings. Our daughter visited Plymouth Congregational Church with

some of her close friends, and she joined the group there. Like parents here, now, we hoped that our offspring would appreciate their UU beginnings and continue the tradition, but we were not going to try to force anything on them.

I followed Judy Wilson as volunteer RE director, but I didn't have time to do all that I envisioned. I was elated when the congregation agreed to *pay* a person to work in that important position. When we returned from a year abroad, I was very happy to see that the congregation had grown significantly; there were now several younger families, and the Sunday school had expanded. The fine RE staff continues today, and so does the youngsters' emphasis on social aspects. I am glad that the service now includes a story for all ages, and I enjoy seeing the young ones. I understand some of the factors that prevent regular attendance, however, and, as Lynne Bodle says, "If we can figure that one out, good luck."

The Wider UU Community: Until I attended a GA for the first time, my main connection with the UUA and the wider UU community was in receiving (excellent) curricula and support and in exchanging ideas with others in the district. At the GA, I learned more about what the UUA did for congregations. I also met many interesting people and am still in touch with some of them. One aspect of UUism that I value greatly is diversity; I was among Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, atheist, and humanist UUs; older and younger ones, etc. Paradoxically, we have enough in common that we can usually feel relatively comfortable even among hordes of other UUs.

Language: Like Lynne, I believe that semantics matter. Unitarian Universalism comes from a Judaeo-Christian tradition, and many members grew up in Christian churches, so I can understand why they like the word "church," but I prefer "fellowship" or "congregation," if only because these are more generic, all-embracing terms. (Would folks consider "temple" or "synagogue" instead?)

When we began having "services" here, I was pleased to hear the term "spiritual celebration," which connotes, for me, a sense of joy, depth, and freshness. I also liked "reflection" instead of "sermon." I thought these were accurate and original descriptions. Now we hear "worship service" and "sermon," instead. Have we

changed just so that we can conform to what others say? Does it matter?

Mary Beth asks about changing our name. The idea of changing it to include "Universalist" has come up more than once, and UFL members have supported the possibility. The problem seems to be that there would be plenty of red tape, and the tape would cost both time and money.

Program: For me, this is still central--I consider it something of a "secular spiritual celebration"--so I would not like to see three simultaneous events--or even two, the way it has often been in recent years. If we are going to accord the program the respect I believe that it deserves, we simply cannot schedule other events at the same time, regardless of the convenience for attendees or facilitators. Although we've been told that this is not the place to suggest solutions, if we don't do that, we sound only like chronic complainers. Therefore, some ideas for times for such meetings as New to UU: lunchtime after the service, Wed. nights, Saturdays, Sun. late afternoons.

Jill speaks of two roads (p. 9, the second half of the paragraph) and ends by urging us to "think, which road do you want to take, because we can't take both of them." I ask, **Why not?!** As I see it, the current schedule is working quite well. Of course, it doesn't please everyone, but no one ever believed that it would.

Coffee Period: Sometimes we need to talk UU business with others, buy scrip, and take care of other details, but, ideally, we have a chance to continue conversations stimulated by the program or just to get to know other better. It's good to have this between the program and the service. This way, those who come only to the program can stay to socialize with those who attend only the service, as well as with those who stay for both--and in my opinion, people are always going to choose one or the other or both. If we did not have both, I'm quite sure that we would lose some members. . . .

Although I could say more, I've gone on long enough. I'd like to end with what I regard, in no particular order, as **a few positive developments over the years:** *the spiritual celebration in addition to the secular one, expanded efforts in social justice action, connections to interfaith groups, partnership with the*

ECM, Joys and Concerns, music with director Susan Harper and as organized by the chamber music group, paid RE/LLD staff, building addition and the opportunity to display art, the reorganized library, opportunities/activities such as Wed. night suppers and classes, chalice circles, men's and women's groups, and the recording of both program and service. This list is probably not exhaustive, but I have exhausted the time and must quit now.

I'll end by invoking Abraham Lincoln once more. He said, "The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time."

Thanks for reading this.

From Silke Johanning

Sunday mornings, both the program & service are important. The formats are different, but they complement and enrich each other. It shouldn't go into or viewed as either/or or competition. Times don't matter for me. I don't think attendance numbers alone say anything about success for Sunday morning or Wed evenings. Over the last years many more little new groups have formed and are still going - that says something about "success"/interest or needs of people. There are all sorts of individuals going to the Fellowship with a million different needs, views, etc. and many can find somewhere to fit in and contribute. I think it's a good sign that many new groups/activities surface and normal that some will disappear or continue or change. What is important: to make sure to have a steady core of individuals who are committed for long term to the Fellowship. We don't want to fall apart.

From Tim Miller

I'm especially troubled by the notion that we can't pursue two tracks. Indeed, why not?

My longstanding interest in terminology comes into play again: "minister" means servant, even though in practice some leadership functions are inseparable from the other duties of ministry. But if the root job description is not "servant," then we might consider another term. "Pastor" means shepherd, which implies more governing duties. "Priest" is one who has special powers the rest of us don't have—especially the

exclusive right to administer the sacraments. What kind of leadership do we want?

Sure, you're welcome to pass my observations along. I know you and I are not alone in hoping to preserve what we value most in the Fellowship!

Tim