

**General Assembly Highlights**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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I am curious. Who here has heard of the term “GA junkie”? GA junkie, as in General Assembly junkie. It comes across as a bit derogatory. GA junkies go through withdrawal if they are not able to attend General Assembly every single year. Each year, thousands of Unitarian Universalists gather to conduct business, learn something, see old friends, and make new friends. Each year the assembly is in a different place, and last month General Assembly was in Minneapolis.

As it happens, I am not a GA junkie. Sometimes the hoopla is a bit “over the top” for my sensibilities. Keep this in mind when I wax poetic and exude enthusiasm for this year’s General Assembly. It was terrific! I feel like someone who has been on a fabulous trip (like, say, to the moon) and who now struggles to find words to express how wonderful it was. I cannot do the experience justice, and I am just going to have to accept that.

This is an idiosyncratic tour through the highlights of General Assembly. There were inspirational highlights, and there were practical highlights. I will begin with the inspirational highlights, and I will summarize the practical highlights afterward. At the risk of sounding terribly chauvinistic, it was great to be back in a part of the country where I feel at home. Minnesota and Wisconsin are neighboring states, and they share aspects of culture.

There are unspoken norms of politeness, diligence, and friendliness which are easy to caricature and to ridicule. However, let me tell you, it is a nice place to visit. A colleague posted on her Facebook page: “Wow, the Minneapolis airport is not like LAX!” Precisely.

Throughout the week, I felt moments of deep connection with the people that I encountered. For example, the Native American activist, environmentalist, economist, and writer Winona LaDuke delivered a major address. She is an Anishnaabekwe (Ojibwe) enrolled member of the Mississippi Band Anishinaabeg; she lives and works in Minnesota. Her words were inspiring, indeed.

Yet even more than with the words, I found myself resonating with the way she spoke. She sounded like people from my home town. She did not look like them. Her life experience was not like theirs. Her ideas were not theirs, but she pronounced words the way that they did. I felt a certain homesickness, even though I have not lived in that part of the country for 31 years.

Another General Assembly highlight was hearing the Rev. Keith Kron speak at the annual gathering of graduates of Starr King School for the Ministry. Rev. Keith led the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns at the Unitarian Universalist Association for over 14 years. In that time, he visited over 400 of our 1,000 or so congregations, supporting the Welcoming Congregation program, as well as the Beyond Categorical Thinking program (for congregations in search for a new minister). His new job title is Transitions Director, which is the office for ministerial settlement and transitions. Rev. Keith had us laughing until we cried as he recounted highlights and lowlights of being our movement's "professional queer."

Another General Assembly highlight was hearing my seminary mentor Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje speak on "Spiritual Fluidity: Towards Multi-Religious Thea/ological Education." He is Provost and Professor of Cultural Studies and Islamic Studies at the school. "Learning is a sacred revolutionary act," he said. I wish you could see the title of his talk in print because it's not "theological" (the male form) but rather "thea/ological," (the female and male form).

Dr. Farajaje proactively gives equal space and importance to women and to men. For example, the religions of Abraham, he said (referring to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), should instead be called the religions of Abraham and Hagar. (It takes a while for the implications of that to sink in.) For another example, it was Gay Pride weekend in Minneapolis the weekend that General Assembly was held there. This should not be Pride weekend, he said, but rather Street Uprising weekend.

Alluding to Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, Dr. Farajaje said that we're *all* in *somebody's* protected zone. We're *all* in *somebody* else's space. There has been a criminalizing of fluidities, he said, and we must interrupt fictions of purities. Unitarian Universalisms (plural) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can help us to commit acts of spiritual fluidities. So if you happen to see me around and wonder what I am doing, I might just be committing acts of spiritual fluidities!

Thursday, July 24 may end up being one of the best days of my life for two reasons. First, that evening, thousands of Unitarian Universalists attended the Service of the Living Tradition, a service in which significant ministerial transitions are recognized – deaths, retirements, and major steps along the ministerial credentialing process. I was among 40-some ministers recognized for receiving what is called “Final Fellowship.”

In a “Litany of Affirmation,” the Rev. Jory Agate said, “You have been tried and tested. Your call has been challenged. Your contributions to congregation and community have been examined, appraised and measured. And you have succeeded.” Thousands of Unitarian Universalists responded, “We give thanks for your devotion and celebrate your success.”

The second reason that particular Thursday may end up being one of the best days of my life is that after the Service of the Living Tradition, my dear friend Sue and I attended a concert in a hotel ballroom by Unitarian Universalist musician Peter Mayer. Peter Mayer wrote “Blue Boat Home” (which we have sung here) and “Holy Now” (as in “Everything is holy now.”). It was a peak experience to sit with Sue late that night and to hear Peter Mayer sing his songs. The songs ranged from the mystical to the delightfully “secular.” “Jamma Day” was inspired by the occasional days in which his wife never gets out of her pajamas. Peter Mayer had the audience singing the “Jamma Day” refrain with gusto.

Allow me to backtrack to the Service of the Living Tradition on a somber note. In the Service of the Living Tradition, there is a time when the names are read of ministers who have died in the past year. Rev. Peter Morales, the president of the UUA, was about to read the names of the ministers who had died in the past year and whose names were printed in the Order of Service.

He said, “We also received word that Paul Sawyer has died.” I knew Rev. Paul’s death was inevitable, but nonetheless I wept.

After those who have died are remembered and before those receiving Final Fellowship are affirmed, retiring ministers are appreciated. In the group of retirees was Rev. Barbara, my minister in Tampa just before I left for seminary in 2001. There was something very special about the Service of the Living Tradition. One minister had died, one minister was retiring, and another minister had received Final Fellowship. I had a visceral sense of what it means to be part of a living tradition.

Another highlight of General Assembly was the Sunday morning worship service. We sang the familiar “Come, Come, Whoever You Are,” but with a multicultural twist. As the familiar melody unfolded, a woman keened piercing sounds such as I had never before heard. It reminded me of yodeling, but more intense, as if she were in pain or in ecstasy. That was my introduction to “kulning.”

Norwegian and Swedish women have used their voices in this way to call a herd of cows and goats down from high mountain pastures at the end of the day, according to Wikipedia.<sup>1</sup> “The song has a high-pitched vocal technique, i.e. a loud call using head tones, so that it can be heard or be used to communicate over long distances. It has a fascinating and haunting tone, often conveying a feeling of sadness . . . When a call is made in a valley, it rings and echoes against the mountains. The animals, a number of whom wear bells tuned so that the livestock’s location can be heard, begin to respond to the call, answering back and the sound of the bells indicates that they are moving down the mountain towards their home farm.”

Here I am near the end of my time, and I’ve only mentioned the most inspirational parts of General Assembly. I must zip through the most practical parts:

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kulning> .

- 1) This GA was a lesson in anti-oppression and accountability, and Phoenix was ground zero. Should GA 2012 be held in Phoenix, as planned? After many impassioned conversations, meetings, and compromises, the ultimate decision was for Unitarian Universalists to hold a “Justice General Assembly” in Phoenix in 2012. It will not be General Assembly as usual, however. The bare minimum of official business will be conducted. The focus will be on activism.
- 2) I bought a compendium of 101 session plans for small group ministry sessions. Next month, four of us from this congregation will spend a few days at Camp deBenville Pines at an Institute focused on small group ministry. Rev. Ellen, Gayle, and I will attend. We are seeking a fourth person for our group.
- 3) I attended a great workshop on how to use “social media” such as blogs and Facebook to advance the mission of a congregation.
- 4) I attended a great workshop on “Growing Healthy Congregations.” The main focus was on the ways that anxiety ricochets around a congregational system, and how leaders in any system must be able to psychologically differentiate themselves from the group. Sometimes the caveats to a main point are the most memorable. I remember this point: “No minister ever was fired for saying ‘I don’t know what to do, but I’ll stay with you until we figure it out.’”
- 5) I bought a CD with the lyrics of songs from the Philippines in the Cebuano language, which is the language spoken by members of our partner congregation in the village of Calapayan. Right about now, Dave, Jackie, Angela, Lucien, and Julie are there. At 2:30 a.m. this morning Pacific time, Julie sent this email message:

“Today was our big day hiking up the (rather steep & challenging) path to our Calapayan congregational partners with ribbon-cutting ceremony at both the entrance to the path and at the chapel doorway. Rebecca Sienes Quimada, daughter of the founder of Philippine UUism and herself a Meadville-Lombard trained minister, led the services - and used lovely ritual elements new to our worship experience - sprinkling (sorta tossing, actually) salt (for preservation - of

RELATIONSHIPS!), water (for life) and oil (for healing) - and she did all three into the FOUR DIRECTIONS !! . . . “

“Imagine a room maybe 12 x 18 - a whitewashed chapel with four un-glassed windows wide open, a gentle jungle breeze and the concrete block construction keeping the cool in - even in the hot sunny humidity of these tropics. Imagine wooden planks on crossbars for pews - holding close to 50 people squeezed together to meet and greet us in worship and song: Imagine Efren's guitar music and those voices singing the rousing "Joyful Universalism" in Cebuano PLUS the offertory song "From you I receive, to you I give" and "Spirit of Life" - both in English. Very powerful . . . Nihal explained later that Rebecca's sermon was all about building a house on rock, not sand - and the paths that we take. The paths that brought us five here have provided a journey profound and unforgettable.”

Attending General Assembly should be on your “bucket list.” Ron Quinn experienced the power of General Assembly when it was held in Portland, Oregon in 2007. He spoke to the congregation about his experience:

“Being together with almost 6,000 other UU's at General Assembly in Portland this summer, listening to our best and most articulate thinkers, the sermons, the music, and all the other things we offer to one another, was a moving experience. And I was indeed moved, for good. The breadth, depth, and majesty of our faith, gathered together from all corners of this huge and diverse nation, changed me.”

“It was not an epiphany in the conventional sense of the word. There was no flash of insight, no lightning or drum rolls, and thank goodness no voices or altar calls. If it was an epiphany, it was one in slow motion. It began in the first huge worship service, but I was 4 days in discerning what was happening in a form that lends itself to language. It was a sort of consolidation, or assembly, of my experience of scattered pieces of our religion.”

”It is a center of gravity that sits squarely at the focus of my being. It includes all of you, and everyone else, and everything else. All other things that matter are around it, and connected to it,

but the centrality unifies it all. If we were inside a building with a cross and steeple, it might be described in individuals as “soul”, or collectively as faith . . . It is a sort of gravity for all of us, for our souls. How can that be? I don’t know. How did I arrive at this place? I don’t know that either.”

“It is truly a mystery to me. I believe that it is so, and I know that it matters beyond my power to describe it. I think the word for that is “faith”. I do know that the experience of GA made it happen. There was nothing essentially different between GA and our own gatherings here. There was just more of it, MVUUC amplified and multiplied, all under one huge roof for 18 hours a day, in all of our diversity and glory. It was the sum and substance of our thousand national congregations. It was us.”

I close with the benediction offered by the Rev. John Weston at the Service of the Living Tradition:

“Without individuals, nothing changes.

Let us therefore love one another as vessels of yet unrevealed truths.

Without institutions, nothing endures.

Let us therefore care for our association and its congregations  
as vessels of the truths, old and ever-new, of freedom, reason, and tolerance.

Care for our churches!

Love one another!

And all will be well,

And all manner of thing shall be well.”

May it be so!