

Liberal Beacon

Issue 6 | September 2023

Welcome to the September 2023 issue of *Liberal Beacon*, the news magazine of the North American Unitarian Association. In this month's issue, Stephen Polmar offers a rational, humanist reflection on the importance of miracles, while Terry Cummings wrestles with her complicated feelings about the differences among Unitarian Universalists that have led some of us to consider breaking away from the religious association that has supported and sheltered us for so long. Candace Schmidt reviews *Self-Portrait in Black and White*, a memoir by Thomas Chatterton Williams about the ways in which becoming a father challenged his understanding of race, and Todd Ekloff memorializes Rev. Dr. Finley C. Campbell, the founder of the UU Multi-racial Unity Action Council, who passed away last month.

The event I am most looking forward to this month is the NAUA Academy session on September 19th, when Ken Ing will discuss the roots of the ideological conflict on the left between what he calls traditional liberals and a newer identity-centric movement. I've been sensitive to this conflict for quite some time, and as someone who has always taken an interest in philosophy and intellectual history, I have my own ideas about where it comes from. I personally trace it back to conflicting conceptions of the role that culture plays in shaping human behavior, and the question of whether any of us can truly transcend our culturally-constructed worldviews to achieve an elevated perspective on human affairs. (I'm a liberal because I think we can.) But I'm the cerebral sort who enjoys dropping words like "epistemology" into casual conversation, and I have no idea whether Ken will approach the topic from this angle. I expect his talk will either confirm my impressions about what's going on under the hood

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of this conflict or present an entirely different way of thinking about it, and I expect to find it stimulating either way.

Frankly, I could use a little stimulation. I have stepped into this new role as the editor of the *Beacon* because I think I can help to articulate the principled objections that many of us have to the UUA's new approach to diversity and social justice, but in the day to day I oscillate between optimism and despair. Some days my head is full of ideas—arguments, metaphors, anecdotes—that I think might help make the case, and other days I'm brought low from living with the flat-out sucky feelings this situation foists upon us all. If you're here, reading these words, maybe you can relate.

—Kevin McCulloch

On Miracles for Unitarian Universalists

Stephen Polmar

This summer I've spent some time reading "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" by Thomas Jefferson. The book is better known as The Jefferson Bible and in fact it was not actually written by Jefferson; it was edited by Jefferson. Jefferson's goal, as he wrote to Unitarian minister Joseph Priestly, was to "separate the moral pearls [of the Gospels] from the superstitious dung of the Christian Religion." He had asked Priestly, the founder of British Unitarianism who had fled to the United States, to undertake the project of editing the New Testament. However, Priestly died in 1804 before responding to Jefferson's request. Jefferson himself initiated the work in 1805 while still President of the United States. The results of his initial work on this project are lost. Jefferson took up the project again in 1819 and completed the project a year later. However, the work was not published until 1904.

To achieve his goal of producing a New Testament that emphasized the moral messages of Jesus, Jefferson sought to remove all references to things supernatural and to delete all references to the miracles performed by or associated with the life of Jesus. His method was to literally cut and paste selected passages from six bibles, Greek, Latin, French and English, into a book. Those selected passages included Jesus' many parables and other statements reflecting Jesus' theological concepts with a major emphasis on morality. Gone are the virgin birth and the resurrection. Reading Jefferson's Bible, the blind remain blind, the paralyzed immobile, lepers unhealed and Lazarus remains stone cold in his tomb. None of these "miracles" are mentioned.

One might wonder if early Christianity would have had such popular appeal if the gospels did not attribute 37 miracles to Jesus. It seems likely that few would have considered him divine in

any way. I expect he might have been thought to be just another somewhat annoying itinerant preacher or rabbi from the hinterlands of the Galilee.

Nonetheless, Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers, theologians and philosophers believed that Jesus was attempting to impart an important message that was being obscured by the popular focus on his miracles rather than on his moral precepts. Therefore, why not just get rid of miracles entirely?

As we, too, think of our liberal religion as a product of the Enlightenment, and being based upon the principles of freedom, reason and tolerance, should we eschew the concept of miracles all together?

Miraculous events such as those attributed to Jesus fall into one category of miracles, namely "surprising and welcome events that are not explainable by natural or scientific law and are therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency." This type of miracle is designed primarily to support the notion that Jesus has some special relationship to God. The gospels do not claim that Jesus is God. That claim would not be established until the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E..

To any rational person, the miracles associated with Jesus are not what fundamentalist Christians claim them to be. They may be misinterpretations of events. Perhaps the empty tomb of Jesus resulted from a grave robbery and was interpreted as a resurrection. (The first of the New Testament gospels to be transcribed in Greek, the Gospel of Mark, originally ended with an empty tomb; the resurrection scene was added to the end of Mark decades after it was first written, apparently to make it conform to the later versions of the story). Similarly, the changing of water to wine

at the wedding at Cana could easily have been a misperception of diluting wine with water, which was a common practice at the time. Other miracles attributed to Jesus or associated with Jesus' life may be total fabrications. The virgin birth and the visit of the Magi, for example, were likely inspired by mythology from other Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures, including the mythology that some Roman Emperors were the product of virgin births and thus, divine. Thus, ignoring the notion of miracles would seem to be entirely consistent with our concept of a religion based upon the Enlightenment principle of reason.

However, there is another definition of the word miracle, namely "a highly improbable or extraordinary event, development or accomplishment that brings very welcome consequences." I believe that this type of miracle is important for all human beings, Unitarian Universalists included. When taking cover in one's basement hoping that you and your family will survive a tornado bearing down on your town, you are hoping or praying for a miracle that will result in your survival. When informed that you or a loved one has a life-threatening disease and that the treatment has a likelihood of success only in the single digits, you will hope and even pray that you or your loved one will be one of the few lucky ones in which the treatment works. We humans might not be able

to escape those miracles that are important to our individual survival and well-being, but we can, and perhaps should, free ourselves from miracles invented to establish the divinity of Jesus or the existence of an omnipotent God or gods.

Miracles are improbable events, but improbable events do occur, just obviously not very often. These miracles are statistical events. Given enough time and repeated attempts at anything, what was thought to be a miracle inevitably will occur. The Earth is estimated to be 4.5 billion years old, which is certainly enough time for innumerable unlikely events to have occurred. One does not have to invoke a role for some supernatural creator. During such a time span "miracles" were and still are inevitable.



I believe that our existence, yours and mine, are the result of such miracles, indeed thousands of miracles in the sense that we and all life on Earth are the result of miracles. These included the chance collision of asteroids with the Earth's surface over billions of years bringing water to our barren rocky planet. The chance interaction of organic molecules to form cells and then development of photosynthesis resulting in an atmosphere containing oxygen. This "miracle" permitted life forms such as primitive animals to evolve, and ultimately in the evolution of our own species. These evolutionary processes occurred in large part through chance events, little miracles, specifically mutations in

the genetic material, most of which failed to produce a favorable result. But occasionally one did and resulted in something that gave rise to a plant or animal with a better chance to survive, reproduce and flourish as a species.

Therefore, you and me, every human being, every animal and plant, every drop of water and all aspects of our habitable planet are the result of billions of improbable events, miracles. The recognition of this fact engenders within me a sense of awe, gratitude and humility.

I certainly agree that the biblical miracles that Jefferson chose to excise from his Bible should be ignored. However, I do believe that we should cherish all those other miracles that produced life on Earth and have led to our very existence. While we as Unitarian Universalists trace our tradition of liberal religion to the rational Enlightenment concepts of freedom, reason and tolerance, I feel that there is room in our religion for an emotional appreciation of and even a spiritual response to those chance events, the multitude of miracles, that created us and our world.

Loving Alike While Co-Existing Apart

Rev. Terry Cummings

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

—John Wesley

For decades Wesley’s inspiring words have been attributed by UUs to Francis David, who founded the Unitarian Church of Transylvania during the sixteenth century. It seems a bit ironic that a denomination that loudly condemns imitating other faith traditions as a form of cultural appropriation should claim Methodist Wesley’s words as its own, but there it is.

That we don’t have to think alike to love alike is a simple enough concept, but one that often fails to hold up in real life. A disinterested observer of the early 21st century might well conclude that we have failed to heed Wesley’s wise counsel.

Last December, writer and author Bill Haltom wrote a guest column for The Tennessean newspaper with the headline “Incivility in American politics today has reached a level of hatred we’ve

never seen.” (<https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/contributors/2022/12/07/americas-current-political-climate-reeks-of-hatred-selfishness/69703839007/>)

Hatred? In a different era such a headline might have received national media attention. That incivility in our public dialogue has risen to the level of hatred, in a country that can justifiably be proud of its bipartisan accomplishments, is worthy of a public outcry. Hatred is an intense emotion.

That no national outcry ensued was probably due in part to the fact that Mr. Haltom accurately described the zeitgeist to which most of us are now inured. Most of us no longer bat an eye when we are reminded of how much has changed in our relationships with our fellow citizens since the turn of the new millennia. Mr. Haltom did not err in his choice of words.

I think most people would agree that few organizations or institutions are immune from the incivility that has permeated seemingly every aspect of public and religious life. Including our

religious denominations and individual churches and congregations. Including the denomination that claims to speak for all Unitarians and Universalists.

Drawing on the example of “the late great Tennessee Senator Howard Baker,” Mr. Haltom suggested that instead of hating those we disagree with, we should “all remind ourselves that the other person may be right, and seek to find common ground and yes, compromise, when possible.” It is hard to argue with the wisdom of these words, or with the thesis that in the last 20 years the national dialogue has gone from incivility to hatred. It seems commonplace to hear some people condemn those who disagree with them as morally flawed, even evil and, dare I say it, sinful?

I can’t help but wonder whether the news media is partially responsible for this—because of the way in which it sublimely incorporates its own statements of opinion into its presentation of the day’s events. It’s not enough to report that such and such happened today. The news is embellished by the reporters’ (and their networks’) own opinions. Evidently this is an effective marketing strategy, judging by the advertising dollars it seems to generate.

As one who believes the default setting in our brains is to act with kindness and with love—at least until the fight or flight impulse in our amygdala is triggered by some kind of existential threat—I am optimistic that the hatred that seems at first blush to be ubiquitous is not as deep as it might seem.

I don’t know anyone who actually enjoys feeling hatred. We would all prefer to feel love; it is in our very nature to do so. There must be millions of people on both sides of the various issues that divide us who are longing for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. Mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, doesn’t that sound like a welcome idea?

We don’t have to think alike to love alike. Moreover, we don’t all have to follow the same leader-

ship, or be part of the same organization, to pursue a shared faith or religious tradition. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, there are over 47,000 Christian denominations worldwide. For the most part these denominations get along with one another, sharing a common faith, and separated mostly by differences in ritual and biblical interpretation, although there are some sharp divides that can sometimes lead to violence.

Unitarian Universalism currently boasts only one denomination. A single UU denomination might have made practical sense when it was a tent that sheltered a multitude of religious opinions and beliefs, but we might question whether that is still the case. We might question whether the current UUA leadership is intent on making the denomination doctrinaire, even creedal. Perhaps the merger/amalgamation of 1961 wasn’t such a great idea after all?

As the denomination faces directional and transformational challenges that have left many of us feeling adrift, many UUs may well be yearning for reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. Unfortunately, there doesn’t appear to be much potential for the current UU leadership to remind themselves that the other person may be right, and for seeking common ground, and even compromise, when possible.

There is enough room in this world for another religious denomination founded on the core beliefs of Unitarianism and Universalism. Such a denomination could co-exist with the existing denomination and need not be in conflict with it.

Early in her excellent 2007 book, *Speaking of Faith*, journalist Krista Tippett writes, “Every institution and essential human question is up for grabs in our time—definitions of the beginning and the end of life, of gender and marriage, of community and government. The unresolved issues before us touch realms of intimacy where it is impossible to be merely rational. We respond

by clamping down fiercely, at both ends of the spectrum of our public life, on the answers that we do have. Our sacred traditions could help us live more thoughtfully, generously, and hopefully with the tensions of our age. But to grasp that, we must look anew at the nature of faith, and at what it might really mean to take religion seriously in human life and in the world.” For many of us who were first drawn to Unitarian Universalism by the seven principles and six sources of our faith, the denomination held the promise of doing exactly what Tippett suggests is needed.

Tippett cogently observes in her book that scripture is a form of art, and that sometimes art can be more precise than science or knowledge in finding and expressing truth. The six sources of Unitarian Universalism—which a clergy colleague and friend recently pointed out to a group of us,

glaringly omit any reference to the world’s fastest growing religion, Islam—are a gateway to truth in the religious and spiritual sense. We do not commit improper cultural appropriation when we engage with the sources of our faith tradition.

After self-identifying as a UU now for fifteen years it seems to me that our faith does not often enough engage seriously with the sources of our faith. Perhaps if that were remedied, we could find a path to affirming and promoting the mutual forgiveness and reconciliation that so many of us wish for, in our communities, in our denomination, and in the world. We’ll more than likely need to do that in a different denomination than the one we are accustomed to being members of, however, and let the other denomination go its own way. At least for now.

Self-Portrait in Black and White

by Thomas Chatterton Williams
(W.W. Norton & Company, 2019)

Book review by Candace Schmidt

Thomas Chatterton Williams, in *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, has written a deeply personal and unflinching memoir of his individual journey through racial paradigms. Williams’ reflections on what it means to be taught one set of ideas about his personhood while continuing to evolve his expanding sense of self is quite moving and evocative, leading readers to question their own “received” ideas about race and what it really means.

Williams traces his experience in childhood being lovingly raised by a black father and a white mother in an upper middle class home. He attended private schools and went on to attend Georgetown University and obtain a master’s

degree in journalism from New York University. He describes his father as an erudite intellectual who strove to instill a love of literature and learning in his son, and to instill a strong sense of black identity as well. The author discussed accepting wholeheartedly the one-drop rule: “A drop of black blood makes a person black because they are disqualified from being white.” He has come to realize that this categorization, this essentialism, is not real but a fiction. Through his own confrontation with this fiction of race, he has learned: “People will always look different from each other in ways we can’t control. What we can control is what we allow ourselves to make of those differences.”

What happened to Williams that enabled this momentous change in attitude was the experience

of becoming a father. His wife, Valentine, who is French and white, gave birth to their daughter, Marlowe, in France, where they had decided to live. Williams was shocked at the sight of his daughter in the delivery room as he gazed at her blond hair, blue eyes, and impossibly fair complexion. Marlowe's appearance in that delivery room immediately shattered his previously unquestioned assumption that the one-drop rule reflected any kind of reality. Williams said without hyperbole he walked into the delivery room as one person and came out an altogether different one. As he processed this transformation, he came to realize that his daughter's life was not going to be lived on his (previous) terms. This transformation has led Williams to conclude that one's inner sense of self ought not to derive from or be held hostage by the ignorance or mistaken thinking of those with whom one shares a society. By this thinking, Williams would be an Arab today if he allowed the assumptions of French society to define him. (He recounts being sometimes asked by French Arabs why he did not speak Arabic. When he stated he was a black American, their response was, "But you are not black, Michael Jordan is black!")

In *Self-Portrait in Black and White*, the idea that race is something intrinsic and unchangeable is overturned by the idea that it is imposed and illusory. Our notions of race are shaped not just by

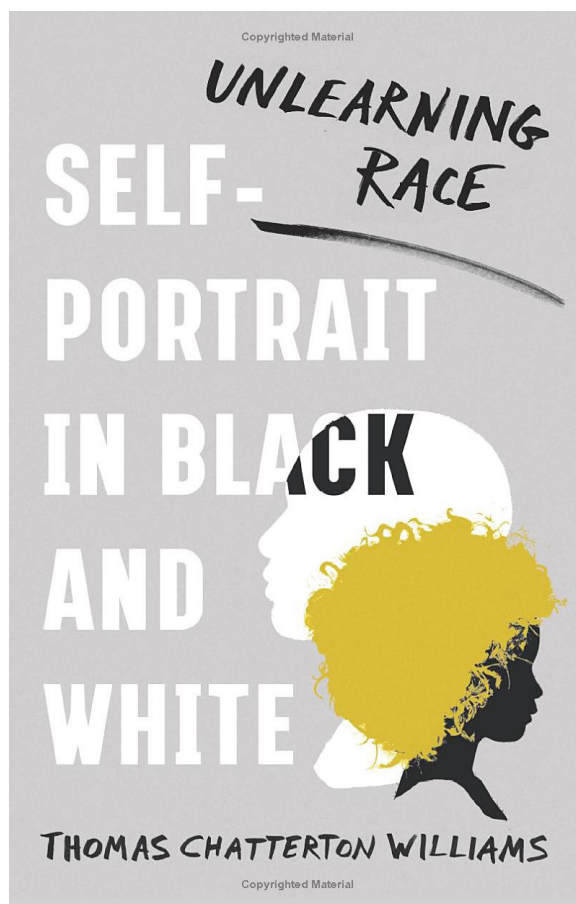
what we look like, but where we happen to live. In France, American black people have always been considered first and foremost American and not black. But the reality of basic biology is there is no such thing as distinct races of *Homo sapiens*, on any measurable scientific indicator. Rather, as Williams notes, "We all make, according to our own geographical and cultural orientations, infer-

ences about other people and ourselves based on the loose interplay of physical traits, language, custom, and nationality, all of which lack any fixed or universal meaning."

The author goes on to state that in order to shift the dismal paradigm of narrow identifications even based on social constructs of race, thinking people of goodwill will need to find a new vocabulary. To move beyond fictional racial categorizations, people must undergo a radical rethinking of how differences are seen and how they are explained.

My personal reaction to his book was one of awe at William's willingness to be completely transparent about issues so difficult

for many people to talk about. I feel it took real courage for him to openly and honestly dissect his transformation and even transcendence of the racial paradigms he had held dear. I believe *Self-Portrait in Black and White* points the way for all of us to transcend our own narrow understandings of physical differences and to begin to expand our consciousness about the uniqueness of human existence, which defies categorization.



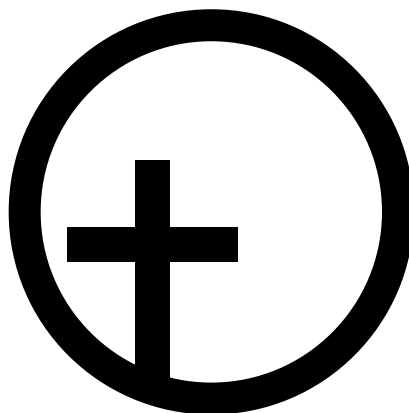
Voices of the Past: Brainard Gibbons

On Monday, October 24, 1949, the religion section in Time Magazine printed an article entitled “Creeds from the Creedless,” about the Universalist Church of America’s Biennial Assembly in Rochester, New York. “Major subject on the Universalist agenda,” the article says, “was the perennial plan for merger with the Unitarians, who were also feeling cramped by Christian creeds.” Explaining the Unitarian position, the article cites a five-point statement of faith adopted by 127 Unitarian ministers in New England. One of its supporters, Rev. Dilworth Lupton of Waltham, Mass., said, “Behind the statement is our conviction that religion resembles art; it is bigger than any of its manifestations. And the conviction, too, that our Unitarian churches should be fellowships where, as in art centers, people holding various theories could come together for common enrichment.”

Little more than a decade before the merger would occur in 1961, it seems the Universalists had arrived at a similar place regarding the future of their religion. “The Universalist Church of America talked about cutting loose once and for all from

‘supernatural Christianity’ and proclaiming a ‘truly universal faith,’” the Time article says.

Universalist minister Rev. Brainard Gibbons of Wausau, Wis., a president of the Universalist Church of America and this month’s Voice from the Past, presented this new vision to the 700 delegates at the 1949 assembly in a sermon entitled “New Wine and Old Bottles.”



A new type of Universalism is proclaimed which shifts the emphasis on universal from salvation to religion and describes universalism as boundless in scope, as broad as humanity, and as infinite as the universe.

For a long time, Universalists have been reaching beyond the narrow bounds of Christianity to pluck their grapes of knowledge from the vines growing in the boundless vineyards of truth, and the religious wine pressed from them cannot be contained in the old Christian bottles... Is this Universalism’s answer: a religion, not exclusively Christian or any other name brand, but a synthesis of all religious knowledge which passes the test of human intelligence, a truly universal religion?

NAUA Academy News

September’s NAUA Academy program will take place on Tuesday, September 19th at 4:30-6:30 pm Pacific Time and 7:30-9:30 pm Eastern Time. Ken Ing will be our speaker, discussing the topic of “Left vs. Left: What’s Happening Here Ain’t Exactly Clear.”

The ideological differences causing rifts in many UU congregations did not originate in Unitarian Universalism. Many countries that trace their heritage back to the Enlightenment are experiencing an ideological tug-of-war between traditional liberals and an identity-centric movement. Most

traditional liberals don't understand the belief systems underlying the identity-centric movement. Ken's talk will attempt to explain those belief systems, and the reasoning behind them. He will be synthesizing the insights and perspectives of numerous books and other published writings. Ken believes we can't resolve a conflict if we can't articulate the perspectives of both sides.

Ken Ing retired in 2019 after spending his entire career in information technology. He lives in the northwest portion of the state of Washington. He is a frequent contributor to the local UU fellowship's adult learning program, creating 13 talks over the past 4 years, usually about history or politics. He is a member of the NAUA Academy Advisory Board.

To register for the September NAUA Academy program please click the following link: <https://naunitarians.org/civicrm/event/register/?id=7&reset=1>.

If you have missed any of the previous NAUA Academy programs, you can find videos of those programs on the NAUA website by clicking the following link: <https://naunitarians.org/services-2/naua-academy/>. The videos of the previous programs are found at the bottom of the NAUA Academy page.

The programs for this Fall are currently being planned and will be announced in the October Issue of the Liberal Beacon. The October NAUA Academy program will take place, as usual, on the 3rd Tuesday of the month, October 17th.

—*Stephen Polmar*

Coming Events

NAUA Monthly Worship Service – September 16, 10:00 a.m. Pacific Time, 1:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

Our Sept. speaker is Bob Meyerson, whose topic will be “Thoughts Are Free,” from a 500 year-old German folk song. Bob will talk about how free thought and free expression can be instruments of positive change, whether for major political reasons or religious thought.

Bob grew up in New Jersey, graduated from Farleigh Dickinson University and spent his career in the insurance business. He later attended Starr King Unitarian Universalist Church in Hayward and became a UU in 2001. “I was always a UU, but didn't know it 'til then.”

He has led services at Starr King and about 6 or 7 churches in Northern California. Bob is a folk music buff and he feels that carrying on the folk tradition is one of his callings. He has had a long history of supporting liberal causes from his early 20s to today. Civil rights have been a passion with Bob since his teenage years. He was a founder and first president of the West Essex (NJ) Human Relations Council, and Chairperson of the Caldwell (NJ) Board of Health.

A reminder link to the Zoom Room will sent out to our members and subscribers in advance of the service.

NAUA Monthly Clergy Gathering – September 28, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Pacific Time, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

Attendees at our monthly clergy gathering enjoy the kind of anonymity, open discussion, and supportive collegiality that has long been the norm among Unitarian ministers. Please plan to attend if you can.

The Passing of an Iconic Figure and Compassionate Friend

Our NAUA community is mourning the recent death of Rev. Dr. Finley C. Campbell. Rev. Campbell, perhaps known best these days as the founder of the Unitarian Universalist Multiracial Unity Action Council (UUMUAC), passed away peacefully at home in Chicago on August 18, 2023. Born in Anderson, South Carolina on September 23, 1934, Finley was just weeks away from his 89th birthday. He moved with his family to Detroit, Michigan when he was eight years old. His father was a Baptist minister and his mother a schoolteacher and pastress. Finley was himself ordained as a Baptist minister at the ripe old age of seventeen. Just five years later, in 1956, he attended his first Unitarian service at the Unitarian Church of Atlanta and was stimulated by the intellectual sermon, the discussion with and questioning of the minister afterward, and, most impressively in 1956, that blacks and whites were able to worship together and be together without a second thought. This experience came to epitomize his approach to racial equality and justice, and to his friendships and family. “The unity of light and dark-skinned people of the world.” Our sincerest sympathies are with his wife Bobbi, their children Phillip, Paulette, and David; co-children Kathi and Mark; and grandchildren Taylor, Bryanna, Lya, Lanny, Laïssa, and Anastasia, as well as to all our friends and partners at UUMUAC who will help carry on his legacy. The world is a lesser place without Finley C. Campbell in it, and a better place for him having been here.

Goodbye, Big Brother.

—Todd F. Eklof



Submitting Letters to the Editor

Thanks to those who have submitted letters for this issue. Those wishing to do likewise can address matters of interest to Unitarians and Universalists and other religious liberals, including current news and events.

Please email your submission no less than five business days before the end of the calendar month in order for publication in our next issue. Letters are shorter than opinion pieces and should be no more than 250 words. Form letters and letters considered libelous, obscene or in bad taste will not be printed. Anonymous letters will not be printed. NAUA reserves the right to edit all letters for length. The decision to print any submission is completely at the discretion of the editors.

Please write “Letter to the Editor” in the subject line and email your submissions to nauaedboard@gmail.com or mail them to:

North American Unitarian Association
Letters to the Editor
4340 W. Whistalks Way
Spokane, WA 99224

Letters must include the writer’s name, full address, and phone number for verification purposes. Only the name and town will be published.

If you’re interested in learning more about NAUA, please explore our website at www.naunitarians.org.

To become a member of NAUA, go to <https://naunitarians.org/membership>.