

Liberal Beacon

Issue 7 | October 2023

Welcome to the October 2023 issue of *Liberal Beacon*, the news magazine of the North American Unitarian Association. We begin this month's issue with Stephen Polmar's reflections on the conflict within the UUA and the various emotional responses it is inspiring in people. Next, Rev. Todd Eklof interviews Rev. Terry Cummings about her path to Unitarian Universalist ministry and the conflict that led to her being disfellowshipped. Later in the issue, we have two pieces from Lynn Jinishian: one on the Play Club religious education experiment at the UU Church of Spokane, co-written with Stephanie Gronholz, and one on *The Scout Mindset*, a book that encourages us to abandon our judgmental "soldier mindset" and meet disagreements over beliefs and values with an open-minded, exploratory attitude.

By laying out the issue in this way, I hope to demonstrate that, despite the anguish and despair many of us feel over the changes underway in Unitarian Universalism, there's still hope if we stay true to our liberal values. I'm not sure what "stage of grief" I'm at personally; I don't think "accepting that the ultimate fate of liberal religion is out of my hands, but still incredulous that we need to defend liberal values against the UUA" is exactly one of Kübler-Ross's stages. But still, there are a few things that are giving me hope.

The first is the NAUA community. Prior to becoming editor of the *Beacon*, I had mainly met the other members of the editorial board. But since I'm now in a position of attempting to serve the wider NAUA community, I've spent the past couple of months connecting with more individuals, hoping to better understand what we're attempting to build. I am delighted to have met such a broad spectrum of thoughtful, passionate, committed people.

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The second is that I feel like we're getting a better handle on the ideological differences underlying the current conflict. If you haven't watched it yet, please check out Ken Ing's "Left vs. Left" NAUA Academy program from September. Ken does an excellent job of summarizing some of the key ideas motivating the identity-centric movement that is challenging traditional liberalism, and explaining how they inspire illiberal attitudes and behavior. His account ties the broader phenomenon to specific things happening within UUism so it's an excellent place to start. I watched his presentation live, and it reminded me that one of the main reasons I've stayed a UU my whole life is the opportunity to meet and learn from such intelligent people.

Kevin McCulloch

Different Responses to the Current State of Unitarian Universalism

Stephen Polmar

Unitarian Universalism is dying. It is true that many other denominations are also suffering a decline in membership and church attendance, but for Unitarian Universalism various factors in addition to the religious malaise within the general population have contributed to the decline. There is active flight from the denomination due to recent and ongoing fundamental changes in the foundational concepts of Unitarian Universalism as a liberal religion. The imposition of control on the part of Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) leadership is curtailing the centuries-old tradition of congregational polity. Efforts by the UUA to encourage the abandonment of the seven core principles of the religion, as well as the six sources of the faith, are an example of the many troubling changes occurring within the denomination. The list is long.

Recognizing the likely consequences for the fundamental nature of Unitarian Universalism as a result of the direction in which the UUA's current leadership is headed, some courageous ministers and lay persons have raised their voices and called attention to what they believe are the misguided policies of the central UUA hierarchy. Their voices provide an alternative vision of Unitarian Universalism's future as a liberal religion. A number of dissident groups have formed. The number of members in these groups, including the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA), is still relatively small, although growing rapidly. The survival of Unitarian Universalism as a religion will depend, however, upon the majority of Unitarian Universalists recognizing and responding to the existential crisis threatening their denomination.

To date there have been no large formal unbiased

surveys of the responses of Unitarian Universalists to the changes that have already taken place or those that are proposed for the religion in the near future. From my own personal interactions with my Unitarian Universalist friends, as well as what I have read on some of the various dissident groups' websites and in social media, it seems to me that the current state of Unitarian Universalism has caused widespread and varied grief responses very similar to the "Five Stages of Grief" described by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. These stages are *denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance*. While Kübler-Ross's concept was initially applied to dealing with the grief reactions related to one's own imminent demise, it has subsequently been applied to the death of a loved one, and even to divorce, job loss and other similar personal "loss" situations. While Kübler-Ross's hypothesis is not accepted by all psychologists and mental health professionals, it nonetheless provides a descriptive framework with which to characterize behavioral responses to significant personal loss, including spiritual and religious loss.

The first stage of the Kübler-Ross schema is *denial*. At this stage the respondent refuses to believe what they have been told and often will cling to a false but more acceptable reality. When told that they have a fatal illness, a patient may believe the diagnosis is simply wrong, that there was some mistake. A similar reaction is commonly encountered among Unitarian Universalists, particularly when told that the emphasis on covenants in the proposed bylaws will strictly limit the ability of their congregation to make its own decisions. Congregational polity will be strictly curtailed if not completely eliminated. Congregants will say

that the UUA has very little to do with decisions made by their congregation. That was so in the past, but is no longer true. There are now many examples of instances when UUA leadership intervened directly in the local affairs of congregations. Nonetheless, denial is probably the most common Kübler-Ross stage at the present time.

It should also be pointed out that, in addition to those in denial, some members of UU congregations are totally unaware of the bylaw changes or their significance, suggesting that these changes were not mentioned by their minister or brought up at any congregational meeting. There are also those Unitarian Universalists who have embraced the identity-centric policies of the UUA leadership and support the changes to the bylaws and to the fundamental nature of the religion. Individuals in these groups would not be expected to be experiencing any form of grief response. The number of these individuals compared to those who have recognized the changes in their religion and are manifesting some form of grief response is not known.

Anger is the second Kübler-Ross stage of grief, which occurs when an individual can no longer sustain their denial that an unfavorable outcome is on the horizon. In the case of Unitarian Universalists, anger is often a reaction to the frustration at the realization that they are powerless to prevent the course of the demise of the religion that has been an important part of their lives. Based upon my conversations with friends and my reading of posts on social media and other on-line sources, anger may be the second most common response, after denial, to the UUA-promoted changes to Unitarian Universalism.

The third Kübler-Ross stage of grief is *bargain-*

ing. Here the individual tries to strike a bargain with the entity that is causing his or her grief. For example, some people will vow to change their lifestyle to avoid the consequence of an inevitably fatal disease. Others will try to negotiate with God to give them more time to live so that they could be present at an important family event such as a wedding or birth. In the case of the ultimate death of Unitarian Universalism as we have known it, some groups have tried to negotiate with the UUA leadership or appeal to other Unitarian Universalists attempting to preserve an important aspect

of the religion, namely the seven principles. They may believe that if the seven principles were retained, their religion as they have known it might survive. However, I believe that the changes that have already been made to Unitarian Universalism, particularly its denominational governance,

go far beyond anything that retention of the seven principles could reverse.

I would also note that while the Kübler-Ross stages are defined individually, one often observes more than one “stage” occurring in the same individual at the same time. I have often observed a person expressing both anger and bargaining concurrently.

The fourth Kübler-Ross stage is *depression*. At this stage the individual despairs, realizing that there is no hope of changing the final outcome. For example, realizing that one’s own death is inevitable and imminent, some will become withdrawn, sullen and mournful. At this stage, Unitarian Universalists recognize that their denomination is dying. If their own congregation has also chosen the path set out by the UUA, they will resign from their congregation. Sadly, many of us have already

I believe that the changes that have already been made to Unitarian Universalism, particularly its denominational governance, go far beyond anything that retention of the seven principles could reverse.

done so.

The final Kübler-Ross grief stage is *acceptance*. In the case of one's own impending death, at this stage people will realize that the end is inevitable and will prepare for it, often cherishing every remaining day that they have. It is at this point that emotional turmoil ceases and clear thinking predominates. Unitarian Universalists who have reached this stage accept the undeniable fact that

The Dark Season

by Rev. "Twinkle" Marie Manning

We are at the threshold of the Seasons,
the doorway to the Year,
when the Veil is thin,
and time passes amorphously.

We turn inward as the Darkness beckons
us.

We welcome the warmth of the fire,
contemplating the mysteries of the Un-
seen.

We honor the soft ache in our hearts
for those we have lost:
the people,
the dreams.

And we rest.
For rest we must, to heal.

This is the cycle of death and rebirth;
release and renewal.

We cherish this time
as the lessons it offers
penetrate our knowing.

May we breathe in wisdom
and breathe out patience.

May we find comfort in the warm embrace
of The Dark Season.

the Unitarian Universalism of the UUA is no longer their religion and many will set about seeking an alternative liberal religion.

Individuals do not necessarily experience all of the Kübler-Ross stages of grief in the sequence described above. Some will only experience one or two stages. There are some of us that arrived at the stage of acceptance relatively rapidly, while others have remained stuck in one of the earlier stages. Psychologists may say that those of us who arrived quickly at the acceptance stage did not truly experience grief or perhaps experienced it only briefly. Grief is likely to be more profound and prolonged if demise of the loved one is sudden and unexpected. Those of us who arrived at the acceptance stage relatively quickly may have seen the changes coming for several years and were therefore not surprised at the current state in which the denomination finds itself.

Metaphorically sitting at the deathbed of moribund Unitarian Universalism, some retain the hope of denial while others are still bargaining. For many, finality will not come until June 2024 at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly when the bylaws of the UUA will be changed. This will be the funeral of a once vigorous faith. But even then, some may remain in the stage of denial. Nevertheless, many of us who have reached the stage of acceptance have already been planning and working on a future liberal religion, a successor to the Unitarian Universalism of the UUA. A religion based on the principles of the Enlightenment that gave birth to Unitarianism. A religion of freedom, reason and tolerance, rooted in a commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and all peoples. A religion that will be supported and served by the North American Unitarian Association.

The author wishes to thank Rev. Terry Cummings for her editorial assistance and suggestions, as well as Frank Casper, Julie Hotard and Lincoln Baxter for reviewing the manuscript and for their comments.

An Interview with Rev. Terry Cummings

Conducted by Rev. Todd F. Eklof

NAUA has brought many wonderful people into my life. One of them is Rev. Terry Cummings, who has fast become one of my dearest friends and colleagues. Like me, Rev. Terry has been disfellowshipped by the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee, which is only a small part of her story. This interview is her chance to publicly share what happened from her perspective, an opportunity that, until now, she hasn't been afforded. But her inspiring journey is about far more than merely losing a credential from an institution whose own reputation is increasingly on the line and whose approval, in my opinion, isn't worth much anymore. In addition to her brilliance and courage, those who know her best experience Terry as a kind, comforting, and loving presence. It is my privilege to introduce you to Rev. Terry by allowing her to share something of her life, her challenges, and her triumphs in her own words. —*TFE*

Tell us a little about your background and what drew you to the ministry?

I grew up unchurched, although I attended a Catholic School from age five to age ten. That was very important for me, because my teachers instilled in me a deep sense of right and wrong, a moral compass that has stayed with me throughout the decades. Growing up in the U.K. during the 1960s and '70s, though, with the sectarian strife between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland regularly in the news, I developed a negative view of organized religion that lasted until my gender transition when I was in my mid-50s.

I moved to the U.S. in 1979 and had a long career as an attorney in New York City. On 9/11, the law firm where I worked had its offices on one of the higher floors of the North Tower, the 85th floor

if I remember correctly. Around 8:40 a.m. that morning I was already in a lobby elevator waiting for the doors to close when the first plane hit the building. If the plane had hit only a few seconds later, I would have been ascending and most likely would have died.

Those few seconds saved your life. Were they also life changing?

Yes, but not right away. My brush with death that day triggered some soul searching, and eventually therapy for issues regarding my gender identity that I had buried since childhood. Five years later, around Thanksgiving of 2006, I made the decision to transition, although I did not pursue it until 2008. At that time, with my marriage over, my house no longer my home, many of my friends wanting nothing to do with me, and even some of my law clients taking their work elsewhere, an old friend recommended that I check out the local UU congregation. Despite my misgivings about organized religion, I followed her advice.

I'm glad I did. I found UUism transformative and was welcomed and supported throughout my transition journey. Before long I was involved in racial justice work, teaching Sunday school, and even served on the board. The "U" became a major part of my life.

Big enough obviously to eventually move you to change careers. How did that happen?

That's right. By 2012, I had had enough of practicing law, but I wanted to "run to" rather than "run from." That's when I felt a real call to ministry. I enrolled in seminary and the rest is history. I should add that in many ways my relationship with my law clients had been a pastoral one, and the transition to ministry was not as much of a leap as one might think.

I will always consider the UU Congregation at Montclair, New Jersey as my spiritual home. It was and is a very healthy congregation and I learned a lot from the two ministers who were there when I joined as a member. In hindsight, a most important lesson was the need for proper boundaries between paid staff and members of the congregation. If the congregations I served most recently had been similar, I have no doubt that I would still be in full-time ministry today.

I want to hear more about what happened and why you aren't, but first tell us about your career as a minister and the congregations you served.

When I was in seminary I did my field education at the Central Unitarian Church in Paramus, New Jersey.

The congregation there, as well as the minister (who has since become a very dear friend), taught me a great deal, more than I could ever repay. In particular, I learned about the importance of presence and being my authentic self. I found that people warmed to me when I let them see who I am, without being pretentious.

This was reinforced during my internship at a congregation in one of the suburbs of Boston. The minister who was my internship supervisor resigned unexpectedly towards the end of my internship year and, for the first time, I got to see firsthand how traumatic a ministerial separation can be for a congregation, and the long-term effect it can have. To this day I'm still in contact with some of the parishioners who guided me through my internship, and who looked to me for leadership after my supervising minister announced their departure.

Next, my first position as a full-time minister was

with a delightful, healthy congregation in northern Arizona. I was their interim minister. It was an affirming and positive experience and if the UUA's rules had permitted it, they would have called me as their settled minister.

But, with my interim contract ending, I went into search again. I made some bad decisions during this process, including declining a settled minister position with a small congregation in favor of a contract position at a congregation in Pennsylvania. I spent the next two years with that con-

gregation, which had a significant history of misconduct and conflict. It really was not a good fit for me, and although a majority of the congregation's board subsequently approved my nomination as their settled minister, I felt it was best for me and the

congregation that I move on, despite the ongoing pandemic.

Sounds like a big decision at a difficult time. Where did you land and how did it go?

From Pennsylvania I headed to Connecticut to serve as the interim minister of a congregation. I didn't know it at the time, but that congregation, too, had a recent history of conflict and a history of misconduct. I'm sure I could write a book about the seven months I spent there. Overall, I accomplished a great deal, but found it to be a hostile environment for any minister right from the outset. Without the support of the church board when it mattered, and with the UUA staff not being supportive either, it was a recipe for disaster.

I see red flags hearing that the UUA staff was involved at all because this ended up being a situation in which you feel the UUA interfered with your ministry and the autonomy of your congrega-

tion. Is that correct?

Indeed. I made a very positive impression with the congregation from the outset and received high praise from many sources, including many of the board members. Nevertheless, the congregation had many serious internal issues, resulting from years of mistrust of ministers, unskilled leadership (in my opinion), misogyny, and ministerial misconduct. The church was a hot mess, in a nutshell.

Shortly after I began my ministry, I learned that my predecessor co-ministers had given a staff person cash and gifts in the amount of approximately \$12,000 from the minister's discretionary fund. UUA guidelines state unequivocally that payments to staff from the MDF are subject to withholding taxes and must be put through payroll, which was not done. Shortly after I brought this matter to the attention of the board, I heard that the staff person involved was making defamatory statements about me on social media, accusing me of racism.

About a month later, a different staff person disclosed that they weren't vaccinated against COVID and objected to being required to be vaccinated. At my request, the board adopted a mandatory vaccination policy for all staff and volunteers. Thus began a period during which I was the object of hostility by the staff person in question. On more than one occasion I asked for leadership and the personnel committee to work with me to resolve some of the staff issues, but this never happened.

Eventually, unwilling to accept supervision and healthy boundaries, and hostile to my identity as a transgender person in a position of authority, the staff in question accused me of creating a hostile work environment.

I apologize for interrupting the flow here, but I'm frequently bothered when people casually use terms with specific legal definitions, like "hate speech,"

or, in this case, "hostile work environment." These are serious accusations. I know the legal definition of a hostile work environment varies a little from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but, in practical terms, a hostile work environment refers to any unwanted behavior by coworkers, supervisors, contractors, or others in the workplace, that makes it impossible for an employee to perform their job duties. This might include verbal abuse, offensive jokes, ridicule, insults, name-calling, threats, intimidation, or offensive pictures or objects. How does a supervisor attempting to correct illegal and dangerous situations meet any of these criteria?

I don't think one supervisor, especially a newly hired minister, can do it on their own; it requires an institutional response. The things I was accused of by the staff were outrageous. Obviously, the factual accusations were false, and in many cases absurd (for example that I wasn't qualified to be an interim minister because I purchased my home in Connecticut rather than renting one). I'm still a licensed attorney and feel confident in saying that, if anything, I was legally the victim of a hostile work environment rather than the other way around. The work environment was already unfriendly when I arrived at the church, and it didn't get any better afterward. One of the employees even went so far as to call the police when I showed up on a day when she wasn't supposed to be working. It was a scene right out of G. Lloyd Rediger's book, *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack*. The title says it all.

Circumventing the congregation's established complaint procedures, and I suspect with the active encouragement of regional UUA staff members, the complainants took their complaints directly to the UUA. An independent investigation team was appointed by the board to investigate the complaints. The UUA also appointed a retired minister to investigate on its behalf. The UUA and church investigations into the complaints were represented to me as being independent of each

other. That proved to be untrue, as a member of the UUA regional staff played a significant role in both investigations.

This is the piece of your story that is particularly troubling to me, that the UUA allegedly involved itself in and interfered with the internal working of an autonomous congregation. If it's an employment matter, it's up to the congregation to deal with it. And in the old days the UUA leadership would have said so. UU ministers may receive a credential from the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee, but we are not ordained, called, installed, or otherwise employed by the UUA.

Exactly right, but the board was unaware of that and looked to the UUA regional staff for guidance, who accepted the opportunity to be involved. At the end of May 2022, I was summoned to meet with the church board in their entirety (plus, to my surprise and humiliation, the UUA regional staff member) and informed that I had to agree to a negotiated resignation. At the end of September, I was the subject of a so-called interview by the Executive Committee of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA, at the end of which I was informed that I was removed from fellowship because it was I that had created the hostile work environment, and they didn't see a future for me in ministry.

Just a few weeks later the congregation itself provided me with a copy of the report and recommendations of its own internal investigation team, as it was required to do by law. That report cited no misconduct by me and recommended that I be invited to complete the duration of my contract. The congregational investigation team also found insubordination by one of the complainants and recommended that they be disciplined.

I have since learned, based on conversations I've had with people who know what transpired, that the UUA staff person involved allegedly played an active role in advising the board to insist on my negotiated resignation. One person with knowl-

edge of what took place shared with me that the board was ready to accept the recommendation of its own investigation team that I serve out the remainder of my contract, but its members were persuaded by a UUA staffer not to do so. I have no way to verify that this was the case, but I have no good reason to doubt it either.

After my MFC experience I was provided with a draft of the public shaming announcement that is a characteristic of the UUA when a minister is removed from fellowship. The draft was defamatory and wrong, and I had to ask a lawyer friend to represent me in raising objections. After four months of letter writing the UUA modified their announcement slightly, which they published in January of this year. It is still defamatory in my opinion and reads like they slammed the door after me when I was gone.

I happened to be meeting with you in a Zoom meeting just as you got that email announcement, as were a few other of our colleagues. I'm glad we were there to support you, but as one who has also been excommunicated from the professional order of UU ministers, and now listed on the UUA's website as an ethically unfit, uncooperative, abusive bully, I know personally just how unfair and unfounded these decisions have become.

Right, the irony is that real the bullies seem to be the ones in power, not the ministers.

So initially you had this incredibly transformative experience with Unitarian Universalism, which proved to be a supportive community just when you needed it most in your life. It became so important that you left your first career to become a UU minister yourself, which isn't easy to do. Then, suddenly, you're out, just like that. I'd like to say that I can't imagine what you've gone through, but I think I have an idea.

Inhuman and unjust, and dishonest. After the complaints were made in late March of 2022 I was

placed on administrative leave for several months, barred from communicating with my Committee on Ministry, and subject to an investigation by UUA staff; an investigation that reminds me of the way in which the former East German secret police, the Stasi, spied on people and encouraged informers. I know that UUA staff conducted interviews with some of my detractors in my prior congregation (what minister doesn't have a few of those?), but not my supporters. It was a one-sided, secretive process to which I was given no opportunity to respond.

At one point during the investigation, I received a set of cryptic questions from the congregation's investigation team that I suspected at the time could only have been drafted by a member of the UUA regional staff. It was obvious from the questions that there was a presumption of guilt and that the burden of proof lay with me to prove my innocence.

I believe that the Investigation Team breached confidentiality by providing a copy of their report to the UUA regional staff before I was disfellowshipped, which ultimately found its way to the MFC. If I had not later invoked my rights to see the report under Connecticut's employment laws after I was removed from fellowship, I would never have seen the report.

Before my MFC encounter a UUA staff person (apparently inadvertently) disclosed to me in a telephone conversation that a report about me had been prepared by two regional staff members (who she named) and sent to the MFC. At first, she said I would be provided with a copy of the report, and then immediately backtracked and ended the conversation as fast as she could. I was

never given a copy of that report.

In my opinion, the MFC did not follow its own written policies and procedures regarding the information that ministers accused of misconduct are permitted to provide (rule 16B).

I have since learned that the MFC executive committee took into account that some years ago I had had a falling out with the former leadership of TRUUsT [Trans UU Religious Professionals]. The MFC did not give me an opportunity to share my memory about that either.

In my opinion, the MFC did not follow its own written policies and procedures regarding the information that ministers accused of misconduct are permitted to provide.

In looking back, it seems obvious that once the complaints about me were filed with the UUA it didn't matter what the true facts were, nor how competently I had performed my work. All that mattered was that complaints had been

made by people who didn't like the decisions I made in my ministry.

My attorney raised several procedural and substantive issues with the UUA regarding the decision to remove me from fellowship. The UUA's primary response, through its lawyer, was to cite the protection afforded by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution regarding "matters of church government," rather than respond on the merits.

Many unfortunate ministers before me have fallen afoul of what has historically been a flawed process. I fear that unless there is reform very soon many more will follow.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

It was probably a mistake to change congregations during the COVID pandemic, and I did not do

enough due diligence on the Connecticut congregation before I made the move. I also probably should have resigned when it became obvious that its board wasn't capable of addressing the deeper issues regarding its staff, instead of allowing myself subsequently to become a scapegoat.

I'm sure you never imagined anything like this happening when you began perusing UU ministry and I appreciate your willingness to share your story from your own perspective. Any closing thoughts about what comes next for you?

My call to UU ministry is as strong as ever and I have no intention of allowing the UUA to deprive a congregation that might benefit from my love

and compassion from doing so. I feel that I have one more congregation to serve in my future before I retire from ministry. In the meantime, I am involved with the Metropolitan Community Church of Hartford, Connecticut, which is truly a beacon of light for members of the LGBTQ community regardless of their religious background.

I'm also very glad to be actively involved with NAUA and I hope that my contribution will enable NAUA to grow as a beacon of liberal faith in the tradition that so many people are accustomed to. I enjoy contributing regularly to the *Liberal Beacon* and interacting with the many clergy who are a part of this new movement. I believe NAUA has a strong future ahead.

Letting Kids Be Kids: UU Church of Spokane's Summer Play Club

Stephanie Gronholz and Lynn Finishian

It all began by asking, "How can we support our children becoming the independent, creative, and resilient young adults we hope for?" With a little research, we've learned that we're unlikely to realize that objective with any specific structured curriculum in our Sunday morning religious education (RE) program. The good news is that there are folks devoting their lives to studying this very topic, and they've created an abundance of resources to share what they've learned—mostly aimed at parents and teachers. Our question became, "Why not try this in RE?"

In an age where structured activities and constant adult supervision often dominate children's schedules, RE at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane took a refreshing step back this summer. Embracing the Let Grow Play Club framework, we created an environment where children could play freely, cultivating independence, teamwork, creativity, and agency. This

innovative approach comes from the work of Lenore Skenazy, Jonathan Haidt, Daniel Schuchman, and Peter Gray, co-founders of Let Grow. Let Grow is a "nonprofit whose mission is to give kids back the developmentally crucial 'vitamin' our culture accidentally removed from childhood: independence." You can read more about Let Grow on [their website](#).

While it may initially sound like a "free-for-all" with no point to it, Play Club is not designed to be unstructured time for children—but rather self-structured time. In other words, it isn't the adults who are giving kids a structure to follow. The adults are instead providing children with opportunities to explore, take calculated risks, and learn from their experiences without constant adult intervention. At its core, it champions the idea that children can and will develop essential life skills through self-directed play.

And so... with no RE-credentialed curriculum in

sight this summer, the UUCS church grounds became the canvas for this experiment. The children quickly learned that adults were present for safety purposes but would not be directing or controlling their activities.

What did the children do with all this freedom? From toddlers to pre-teens, they figured it out! Toddlers toddled, fell, and got back up again. Older children helped younger children navigate the play structure. They explored the wooded area. They traversed the labyrinth. They stumbled upon an abandoned sand pit which ignited all kinds of creativity and imaginative adventures as they dug intricate tubes and tunnels. One or two artists in the group consistently brought out a few craft supplies to the picnic table. And yes, a couple even decided to test limits and go into the “forbidden territory” of the memorial garden, only to be quickly encouraged by others to join them somewhere else.

Though some adult volunteers felt initially challenged by this hands-off approach, they were quick to recognize, and even enjoy, the benefits of allowing the children to solve problems, negotiate conflicts, and make individual and communal decisions. Simple changes in adult/child interactions can make a big difference. One example is to avoid saying “be careful!” Kate Sunderquist writes in [this blog post](#) for Let Grow that “when we stop telling our kids to be careful and instead provide them with the useful and necessary information they need to make their own risk assessment, we

build their confidence, increase their resilience, and give them the tools they need for independence.”

As the calendar turns toward fall and RE returns to our Children’s Chapel model—another innovative approach to nurturing our UU values without a structured curriculum—we’re taking these important Play Club lessons forward:

- Diversity in age and backgrounds promotes cooperation, collaboration, and friendship.
- Children are innately capable of self-directed play, and they thrive when given the freedom to explore and create on their own terms. Play Club is empowering and confidence building.
- Problem solving and social skills develop naturally when children have to figure out how to keep the play going without adult intervention.

Given these lessons learned, parents and RE volunteers found this experiment to be a resounding success. As society continues to grapple with concerns about over-scheduled childhoods and diminishing opportunities for unstructured play, initiatives like this serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of giving children the space, time, and trust they need to grow and develop naturally.

What do the children think? Well, we’ll have to get back with you on that. They’re outside playing right now.



From the Membership Team

I want to introduce myself to readers of the *Liberal Beacon*. My name is Edith Mayfield and I'm a lifelong Unitarian. Rev. Todd Eklof recently asked me to work with him to co-chair our new membership team and also to write this column, which will continue to focus on our members.

I'm happy to tell you that our list of individual and institutional members is growing rather rapidly. What's exciting is that our membership is growing spontaneously. We do not actively recruit! New members are joining NAUA (the North American Unitarian Association) every day. Recently one of our members, Ken Ing, offered an excellent program through our NAUA Academy Program. This was *Left vs. Left: What's Happening Here Ain't Exactly Clear*. In the days following his talk, many people told us that they were joining NAUA because of Ken's presentation. If you missed it the first time, you can [find it](#) in the NAUA Academy section of our website.

NAUA also just started offering a new type of program on zoom. We call it Happy Hour. It's designed to help us get to know one another. During our first Happy Hour, on September 13, Rev. Todd talked about the NAUA teams that are already up and running. These are the Academy team, the *Liberal Beacon* team, the membership team, the technology team, and the worship team. Rev. Todd also talked about some of the teams that he envisions for the future: an Annual Meeting team, an endowment team, an elections team, a finance team, a fund-raising team, an international outreach team, and a ministerial services team.

At that first Happy Hour, those words were hardly out of Rev. Todd's mouth when people started to use the chat feature on Zoom to volunteer for teams. Almost immediately one couple volun-

teered to work on our Annual Meeting team, a team that is still in the making. Two members told us, in the chat, that they'd like to volunteer for the membership team. One man told us that he had a background with technology and that he'd been running his congregation's Sunday morning Zoom programs.

if you think that you'd like to volunteer for one of NAUA's teams, you don't have to wait for one of our NAUA programs to write it in the chat. Send me an email (edithpuppylover@yahoo.com) and I'll pass along your offer. For existing teams, I will pass along your offer to the person who is chairing that team. For the teams that are still being formed, I will pass along your offer to Rev. Todd. He will be in touch with you!

I'd also like to encourage you to pass along your suggestions for what you'd like to see covered in future NAUA programs. Let me know your thoughts, please!

Edith Mayfield
edithpuppylover@yahoo.com.

October NAUA Worship

Not Fallen Angels: Reconsidering Fashionably Cynical Attitudes About Humanity and Civilization

Service begins at 10:00 a.m. Pacific (1:00 p.m. Eastern). Join online [here](#).

Our speaker this month is the Rev. Mark Gallagher who was a UU parish minister for about 25 years, mostly in Vancouver, Washington, where he now carries on a private practice ministry of preaching, teaching, and spiritual growth work.

The Scout Mindset: *Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't*

by Julia Galef
(Portfolio, 2021)

Book review by Lynn Finishian

Even though this article is intended to be a book review of *The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't*, by Julia Galef, I'd like to begin by asking you, the reader, a question: If you are not a life-long Unitarian Universalist, what drew you to explore this religion and then freely choose to become affiliated with a local congregation or fellowship?

Though I wouldn't have been able to articulate it at the time, I'm quite sure now that I was drawn to this faith 27 years ago because, having outgrown my Christian beliefs from my childhood church, I naively thought all Unitarian Universalists already had a "scout mindset"—like it was their code of honor. I wanted to be in community with people like that and further develop this mindset in myself. Today, I understand more fully that UUs are (hopefully) striving for this mindset—but have to work as hard as anyone else to put it into practice.

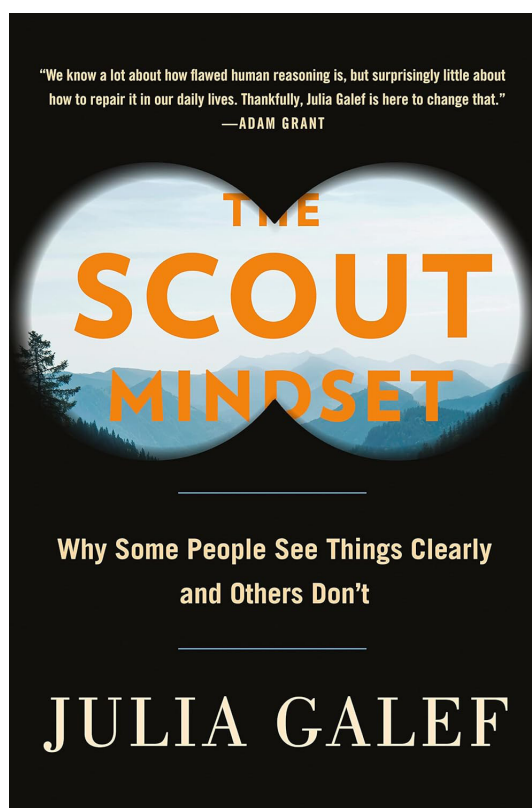
This book, of course, is not written specifically for UUs, but it aligns so beautifully with our liberal values that you are sure to find valuable insights in it to enhance your intellectual, spiri-

tual, and ethical growth. Galef begins her book by introducing the concept of the "scout mindset," a mindset that approaches information and beliefs as if they were territories to be explored,

rather than battlegrounds to be defended. She challenges the reader to adopt a mindset that seeks truth and understanding over ego or identity-driven biases. One could just as easily describe the "scout mindset" as the aim of any committed scientist, scholar, or in our case, religious liberal—people who are driven in pursuit of the truth. By seeking, searching, and sharing ideas and evidence, they frequently discover where they are wrong about any given hypothesis. The champions of a scout mindset are those who actually welcome seeing where they are wrong because this information gets them one step closer to the

clearest truth or the best working theory they can develop.

One of the most profound aspects of *The Scout Mindset* is its exploration of the psychology of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. Galef illustrates how our minds often default to the "soldier mindset," (the opposite of the scout mindset) where we protect our existing beliefs at all costs,



especially when we feel strongly convinced on a topic or when those beliefs are tightly woven into our identity. She asserts that rethinking our identities and “holding them lightly” are crucial skills for clear thinking and developing a scout mindset.

Changing our minds when new evidence arises or sound arguments are presented can be extraordinarily difficult, if not downright painful, for some people. Galef recognizes this. By shedding light on cognitive biases and the emotional barriers to changing our beliefs, she helps readers become aware of the struggle within themselves and others. Galef eases some of the challenge of discarding our soldier mindset by thinking of adopting new information as an “update”—like a computer program or your favorite app on your phone—getting some of the kinks out to become a better version of itself. However, she also reminds us that acquiring a scout mindset is not an instant transformation. It is best done by taking incremental steps with intention and requires practice, practice, and more practice. Hmm... doesn't everything worth doing??

So how does this tie into being a Unitarian Universalist? Well, despite near daily encounters

with flawed human reasoning, on our website at the UU Church of Spokane we describe ourselves as “brave, curious, and compassionate thinkers and doers—Diverse in faith, ethnicity, history, and spirituality but aligned in our desire to make a difference for the good.” We profess to be “self-motivated spiritual people who think for ourselves.” UUs everywhere claim to value open-mindedness, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals. Our churches sport banners that proclaim, “All are welcome here.” We do not shy away from topics considered taboo in other settings. We do not ban books. We have no forbidden questions or ideas. We eschew dogma. Lastly, there is my favorite joke about us: Unitarian Universalism is where you go to get your answers questioned.

It appears we are already claiming to be people with a scout mindset. Therefore, we have an obligation to ourselves, to each other, to those who may be interested in joining our liberal faith, and to the wider world to be who we say we are. If we cannot do that, it is time for practice, practice, and more practice. This book can help lead the way if you're up for the challenge. As for me, I plan to keep “updating...”

Letters to the Editor

A few letters got lost in the shuffle when I took over as editor in August. We love to hear from you, so we're printing them now. Better late than never! —Kevin McCulloch

I just finished reading the June issue and am writing to commend you on getting the NAUA off the ground and for publishing a very informative and welcoming newsletter. I particularly enjoyed Bruce's interview and his mention of Rev. Manish Mishra. I interviewed Manish when he was a junior minister in Westport, CT in the early-mid 2000s, and published it in an Indian-American magazine that I was running at the time.

I attended the Saturday service last month and after a years-long gap was able to feel the deep spiritual and intellectual connection that UU services can provide. Needless to say, I look forward to watching future Saturday services. Keep up the good work!

*Ann Pandya
Oakland, CA*

I just finished reading the 3rd issue of *Liberal Beacon* and thoroughly enjoyed it. I used to enjoy reading the *UU World* magazine when it came out monthly, but lately I barely even open the twice annual edition because there's so little of interest to me. I'm glad to be part of a new religious tradition that is growing every day as more people find out about us, enjoy having their minds stimulated and feel free to fully express themselves without fear of retribution.

When I think back to my career in high tech, my favorite positions were always those at startups where we were creating something new, frantically hiring, with everybody forced to wear many hats, and all having the common goal of trying to produce a product that would change the world. Doesn't this sound a lot like what's happening at the NAUA? My least favorite jobs were with companies that were struggling financially as their products were no longer what people wanted and they were forced to lay off people and close offices. Doesn't this sound like what's happening at the UUA? I'm glad to be part of an organization that's growing, not shrinking, and so am looking forward to the exciting things that will happen with the NAUA in the future!

*Bob Simoni
Hayward, CA*

When I joined my UU church twenty years ago, it wasn't because the seven principles were new to me. It was because I found a community that had codified a version of the principles I had always believed in. "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" filled my bookcase and informed my education long before I encountered it as the fourth principle of UUism. As someone who had always questioned authority and sought my own spiritual path, what finally hooked me was that I finally was encountering a community that I might be able to belong to without sacrificing my hard won independent spirit. The principles and sources communicated quite clearly to me that I had found a spiritual home.

Now, I feel like I am being forcibly evicted from my spiritual home by ideologues who are promoting a mean-spirited identity essentialism; ideologues that appear to have no respect for the seven principles and, consequently, no respect for the way I have lived my life and the principles I continue to follow as I have always done. "Whiteness" has become an original sin. This new theological vandalism appears to be founded upon vengeance which it proclaims as a new kind of "justice" based upon moralistic, presentist distortions of history.

I see little difference from traditional fundamentalism in this new ideology. Sin, confession of sin, penitence, obedience—all appear to be prerequisites for someone who looks like me to be allowed to continue to reside in what I once thought was my spiritual home. I cannot and will not swear obedience to this new, deeply distorted version of UUism. I am, and have always been, "out of covenant" with such mean-spirited theology. A theology in which, simply because I belong to a particular identity group—for shallow reasons that have nothing to do with my character—my accomplishments are being diminished and my suffering is being minimized.

It was deeply disturbing to watch an overwhelming majority of UU delegates vote to eliminate the principles and sources at GA 2023. The "democracy" claimed for this yearly gathering is nothing of the sort. It is, rather, an echo chamber; a convention of True Believers who view disagreement with their ideology as an indicator of personal moral failure; True Believers in a *bien pensant* ideology which divides UUism, and the wider world, between morally righteous victims and morally degenerate oppressors. This division has accelerated a deeply painful schism that shows every sign of destroying what was once an honorable liberal religious tradition.

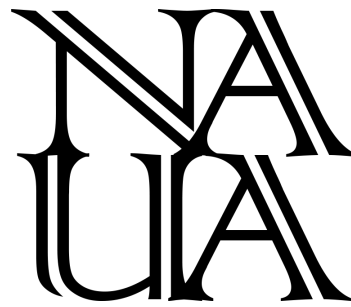
*Jim Anderson
Snohomish, WA*

NAUA Academy News

The Academy program for September was a presentation by Ken Ing entitled “Left vs. Left: What’s Happening Here Ain’t Exactly Clear.” Ken described in detail the roots of the ideological differences that have caused rifts within many Unitarian Universalist congregations and the denomination as a whole. He focused on the key elements of the identity-centric movement, its belief system, its origins and consequences. He contrasted identity-centric concepts to those of traditional liberalism. Ken’s presentation was nothing less than a “tour de force.” Over 100 people watched the program on Zoom. There was an interesting question and answer session following the presentation, as well as breakout rooms, many of which remained open for almost two hours. If you missed the program, you can [view it here](#). You are encouraged to share the video with friends who may be interested in this topic.

The October NAUA Academy program will take place on October 17th at 4:30 p.m. Pacific (7:30 p.m. Eastern). Our speaker will be Kevin McCulloch and the title of his presentation is “Revisiting the Broad Church: Lessons from the Unitarian Quest for Consensus, 1865-1895.” Since we are living through another period in which there is a lack of consensus on what Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism are all about, we will revisit an earlier conflict within Unitarianism to see what lessons it holds for us today. Our speaker Kevin McCulloch is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. He holds a Master’s of Theological Studies from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, where he studied American religious history. He most recently taught Unitarian Universalist history as a member of the adult religious education committee at All Souls Church Unitarian in Washington, DC. Kevin is also the editor of NAUA’s *Liberal Beacon*. You can learn more about this program and register for it [here](#).

Stephen Polmar



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.nauunitarians.org.

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