

Where have all the UUs Gone?

Stan Jewett, Siena Shennum, and Rev. Laura Shennum

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Each year in June, thousands of Unitarian Universalists from the U.S. and around the world gather at General Assembly.

This morning, we are joined by Stan Jewett. Stan has brought GA Chalice and invitation to join him at this year's General Assembly in Portland, OR. He's a longtime member of First Church in Portland, he's been active in cluster and district organizations, and he helped lead volunteers at GA when it was last held in Portland, in 2007. Stan, would you please come forward?

Stan: Crowds are fun, as many of us know from attending entertainment in large venues. When folks in the crowd share similar, deeply held values, we can move beyond fun to an uplifting spiritual experience. Try this: bring to mind a memorable worship service you've attended here. Broaden it. Deepen it. Imagine it impacting your life to a larger extent. That's what can happen at General Assembly.

Our next GA will take place June 24 – 28, 2015 in Portland.

At GA that feeling of oneness with everyone else starts dramatically Wednesday night with the banner parade. About 350 banners are carried by UUs from all across the US. They just keep coming, with closeups shown on large, live video screens. And your congregation's banner is among them.

That feeling of oneness comes up for me again during the other GA ceremonies. For instance, a well-known speaker, usually not a UU, whose public work reflects our values, presents the Ware Lecture. If you come to Portland next June, you'll hear author and activist Cornel West.

Another GA ceremony is the Service of the Living Tradition. Ministerial milestones are honored, and a memorable sermon is delivered. Then on Sunday morning you'll share worship with 6000 of your closest friends.

Yes, it's quite likely you will have made new friends by Sunday morning. Your name badge, with its colorful attachments, is a great conversation-starter. There's an opportunity to sing with a very special choir. In Portland your hosts will offer small group dinners, another venue for meeting new folks. We gather for bonding.

And we gather to share best practices. UUs are involved in an immense variety of church-related activities. At GA you'll find workshops offered by ministers, lay leaders, like-minded social action groups, identity-based groups, and more. Whether you want to hone your skills in an area you have some experience with, or take on a new challenge in church work, you'll find a workshop or other event to meet your need. Imagine the challenge you'll face: which nine workshops shall I attend, from among the 160 offered?

We gather to make the world a better place, speaking and acting as One Strong Body. That's an important one, so we do it in several different ways. During GA we'll stage a Public Witness event, with press coverage, to address an issue of broad concern to UUs. We'll re-engage in a continuous process that coordinates our social justice work at the congregational level between GAs. Finally, we'll work with and donate money to an organization whose social justice impact will be felt locally, long after we extinguish the GA chalice and move on.

We gather to govern. UUs are committed to democracy, as expressed by our fifth principle. But what does that look like? The current UUA board has been asking many of us that question lately. Here's another: how can we make GA accessible and affordable for more of us? These lively discussions will continue in Portland.

You can demonstrate your personal commitment to our governance process by volunteering to represent this congregation as a delegate to GA.

I find it fascinating to watch our UUA moderator, Jim Key, orchestrate the business meetings. He lightheartedly finishes on time, never veers from Robert's Rules of Order, and smoothly manages the numerous verbose and sometimes unherdable cats who approach the microphone.

Clearly, GA is a huge undertaking. Thousands of staff and volunteer hours are invested each year to make it happen. That work this year will focus on our theme, Building a New Way.

I'll be available after the service to tell you more, or to carry your questions back to those who can answer them better than I.

Thanks for your attention.

Our next speaker will be Siena Shennum. Siena has had the opportunity to attend two General Assemblies and would like to specifically talk about her experience as a youth. Siena, would you please come forward?

Siena: In summer 2012 General Assembly was in Pheonix, Arizona. My mom and I went together, I don't remember the reason, I just remember how excited I was. The day we arrived there was a dinner and introduction ceremony and then we all went back to our hotels to sleep before the first full day of activities. I could barely sleep that night because of how excited I was. I knew that the Justice Camp, the camp I was scheduled to be in for youth going into grades 6 through 8, would have to walk most places in 101 degree dry heat at least, but I still didn't care. I couldn't wait.

I remember walking in on the first day and being the second person to be there. The other person was a girl whose name I have forgotten by now was sitting in the chairs fashioned in a oval. The person who walked in after I did was a guy named Christopher, he looked friendly, so naturally me being pretty extroverted, I said hi and we instantly became friends. That week, I also made 3 other close friends, Liam, William, and Charlotte.

I was asked to write about the highlights for me of that week, but oh my gosh, there are so many! There was a museum, peacefully protesting, swimming pool, movies, ice cream, and those are only a few that come to mind right off the bat. But I will choose my top three to talk about. The museum on the last day, bag monsters, and peacefully protesting outside of tent city.

Let's start with the bag monsters because that was the first thing on the timeline. On the second day of camp the morning activity was learning about recycling in the hotel, which everyone already knew about and the teachers knew that so to make it fun, when we got back they had an enormous amount of produce bags, not grocery bags, produce bags. The pile of them came to at least my knee. We walked in and we were looking at each other extremely confused. Then the teachers said that we were going to make bag monsters. Basically, using only safety pins and produce bags we had to dress up one person from each group, naturally it was boys against girls, into a bag monster. I was chosen to be the one dressed up in my group because I was the one who wasn't afraid of letting people close to me with pointy things and things that could suffocate me.

WE had twenty minutes to completely transform the people into bag monsters. By the end of the challenge, I was doubled over laughing with tears in my eyes. I had produce bags on me fashioned to be shoes, a shirt, skirt, and hat. The guys had just pinned bags onto the kids shirt they chose. No one could stop laughing. After everyone calmed down, the girls were named the champions. Honestly I wish I had a picture of that day because I probably looked absolutely ridiculous.

Next the museum on the last day of camp. I'm saving the most powerful highlight for last. The museum we went to was the Musical Instrument Museum in Pheonix. I am a huge music person so naturally this would be a highlight of mine. It was amazing. It was two floors of the history of music basically. The friends I had made at GA were huge fans of music in general too. So it was an amazing experience. But the reason I chose this for on of my highlights was because of the ride back to the convention center.

WE all knew that once we got back, our parents would be picking us up and that would be the end of camp. None of us said it but the on edge, hoping all of our parents showed up late was tangible in the air. When we got back to the convention, we all noticeably slowed down, trying to have this go by slower. Then when we got back, it was a huge mass exchange of phone nmbers, emails, and adresses. Then of course everyone got out their cameras and trying to get pictures of everybody at once. Then the first parent came and we all visibly let out a big sigh of disappointment that it went by so fast. There were hugs galore and nobody got left out. WE made sure of it. And then it was over and we all went our seperate ways.

Now, the peaceful protest outside of tent city. I know we have all seen the protests where there are signs and a lot of yelling and bad words thrown out. That wasn't how we protested that night. Instead under the stars we sang, cried, laughed, and held candles. We didn't try to bring Sheriff Joe Arpaio down, instead we tried to lift the people who had to be outside 365 days, 24/7, up. We were standing on the side of love, and that hit me. I was against what was going on inside those gates, but I was on the side of love, and honestly, that felt a freaking lot better than stading on the side of hate. That's the biggest experience I brought back home to Nebraska from that week.

In my opinion, everyone should go to General Assembly. It's an amazing experience. Also, in my opinion, youth, especially teenagers should go because it's a nice change from school. In school there's always something else going on other than classes and learning. There's always gossip and rumors. Nasty rumors and gossip that hurt.

At GA everyone's so accepting and they don't judge at all, unlike at school. There isn't gossip or rumors, it's teens being there to have fun and experience the group they are a part of. There's no outside agenda, just being in the moment. And for me, going there after a year full of nasty rumors that spread like wildfire through the school about me, it was nice to get away for a week. I still talk to the friends I have from that GA, and they helped a lot when I moved here. William was there for me to be able to talk about anything, Christopher would listen, Charlotte was there for my girl talk, and Liam was there for a more innocent but wise point of view.

So while, you have a week to really get to know these people, it doesn't just end there. It carries on through gossip and rumors at school and you always have someone who knows you for you and haven't heard the rumors. It's amazing. So parents, I will appeal to you now. Not only do you have classes and workshops to go to for you, but your youth will also have peers who won't judge anything they say and it's a stress free environment where they can go to anyone to talk to and they will listen to them and not turn them away. And for us teens, we don't get that chance as often as you would think we do. So when we have a whole week to open up. It's extremely amazing. Not just that but also, it's a nice bonding experience, my mom and I shared a hotel room that week alone, which we don't get often and we could talk as much as we like. Last year I wouldn't have admitted it but I loved having my mom a bed away if I needed her.

Okay, so let's recap, shall we? Youth, you should go to GA because it's a stress free environment where you can go to anyone to talk and not get turned away. And you won't get judged for anything you say. Sounds nice, right? Now parents, you should bring your youth along with you to GA because it's a nice bonding experience, and they get a vacation from the gossip and rumors and the things they hate most about school. Sounds like a win win to me.

As you can tell from Stan and Siena, General Assembly can be an enriching experience. For me, each year I attend I am reminded of the greater vision of Unitarian Universalism and how many people across the country and world are a part of it. This past June in Rhode Island the theme was Reaching Out in Love. There were two voices, which held messages of hope and renewal for me.

The first was Sister Simone Campbell. Now, Sister Simone knows what it means to be fierce and compassionate with her love. She belongs to a community of nuns, which were censured by the Vatican in 2012 because they were promoting 'radical feminist themes.' And instead of bowing down to the powers that be, she and her fellow sisters got on a bus and toured the United States to listen to people's stories and promote, not radical feminist themes, but to promote economic justice.

In her lecture, she challenged UUs to a radical, open, and accepting love. She invited us to not just be witnesses to injustice, but to walk into and towards trouble.

She suggested we open ourselves to listening with curiosity the stories of the people around us and she suggested this be a daily spiritual practice of our faith. She insisted that when we walk towards trouble, we will find hope, hope in relationship and connections to others.

Fiercely, she stated, "we live in an unpatriotic lie that our country is based in individualism, when in fact, the beginning of the declaration of independence, says 'We the People, not I the person.' This means we are consistently invited into building and walking together in community. We are expected to look at problems and issues with everyone's story in mind, not just the elite or the few. Not just those we agree with. Not just those we can hear, but everyone's story. She advised that when we open up and walk together in community, we get closer to the truth and that truth is enriched with our different stories, and ultimately it can evolve into similar understandings.

When we are radically open and keep meeting each person, no matter who they are and what they believe, with love, then it can start to work its way into a truth that allows us to see the person in front of us and allows them to see us as well.

The other voice that spoke to me and expanded on the power of love was colleague and friend, Rev. Mark Stringer. In his sermon during the Sunday Morning worship service, Mark relayed the importance behind the hymnal reading #683, Be ours a religion which like sunshine, goes everywhere. Its temple, all space. Its shrine, the good heart. Its creed, all truth. Its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living.

Many hear the words and think they are sweet and superficial or as one member told Mark saccharine. However, as Mark points out, once we remember their origin, we start to see a different picture. He shares:

*The words are from Theodore Parker, the 19th century Unitarian minister, abolitionist, reformer and activist, who preached the prophetic imperative as much as any other minister in our liberal religious history.*

*It was Parker, after all, who first spoke about the moral arc of the universe being long, but bending toward justice, words that have been echoed by many from Reverend Doctor King to President Obama.*

*When Parker proclaimed be ours a religion which like sunshine, goes everywhere, he was not preaching saccharine. And he was not being hippie-dippie, as another member recently described the hymn to me. He was encouraging us to let our religion infuse everything we do, so that we will better serve the common life that we share.*

This means we are called each and every day to live our principles in every act, in every relationship, and in every breath we take. It should not matter the person you are interacting with is a Presbyterian or a UU. It should not matter if a person is a Republican or Democrat. In other words, the sun shines on every person on this planet and so we are each called to embrace our values and let them shine on whoever we meet.

Ultimately, each General Assembly I am reminded of the most important message of all, that although our Fellowship may seem to be a small drop in the bucket, we are part of something so much larger and with that comes the realization our work is important no matter where we are because we have a life-saving message to offer that teaches our hearts to hope and our hands to serve. And our faith is powered by the strongest force, a force that even Martin Luther King Jr embraced and said it was the only thing that could drive out hate in our world, that power is love.

I encourage each and every one of you to consider attending General Assembly this year. Not just for the worship or to hear Cornel West or to meet new people, but because it connects you to that larger force of love in ways you cannot begin to imagine and reminds you to greet the world with open hands, not fists.