

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
REFLECTIONS**

**FROM THE MEMBERS
OF
FIRST PARISH UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST, CANTON**

MARCH 16, 1997

INTRODUCTION

My favorite words for beginning a Sunday worship service are, “Into this community of memory and hope we gather...” The future is, of course, where a congregation needs to keep its vision focused. Memories, however, form and define our commitment to a community; they remind us why we are here and what we hold dearest.

At times, then, it's inspiring, and fun, to pull out our memories, like dear photos on a shelf, and share them. They offer the gift of understanding and insight to others in their own journeys, while they also warm our hearts and sharpen our minds.

Recently, I asked members of First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Canton to share important memories of their experiences in this congregation. Some told stories of why and how they became Unitarian Universalists. Others recall events that deepened their commitment. The reflections are compiled here for your enjoyment and understanding.

The opening words I like continue, “We do not always do all that our hearts command, but life gives us new opportunities to love. We gather to stretch our minds, deepen our spirits, and give and receive comfort and hope.” Memories may help us find the important things we have done, felt, and been.

May the flaming chalice of our free religion burn bright and strong for all generations to come.

The Rev. M. Susan Milnor
Interim Minister
March 16, 1997

From Our Members

I had rejected the teachings of the Quaker Church in which I grew up as well as all other religions. Then our six year old son asked, “Why don't I go to Sunday School like the other kids?” I had heard a neighbor speak of the “liberal” Unitarian church, just around the corner where we lived in Reading. On investigation, I found the church I had never known existed, one that invited questions and offered some answers that make sense.

I am here in First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Canton because my little boy asked where he belonged. *I found out that the Unitarian Universalist church, wherever it is located, is my church.*

Pat Gould

I am at First Parish Canton because of my Unitarian Universalist experiences in Reading, MA. My early background was as a Boston suburban Congregationalist. Why? Because my parents sent me there; they did not attend church.

When our children reached first grade they wanted to know why they didn't go to Sunday School. At that point my wife and I had decided that her Quaker background and my Congregational background were not for us, we inquired as to a liberal church. A neighbor told us about her church, the Reading Unitarian Church.

We quickly became active there and immediately discovered a truism. *What you get out of anything had a direct bearing on what you put into it.*

Harry Gould

I grew up in a Congregational Church in South Weymouth, Mass., but I doubted so much of what they taught, such as miracles. I had several aunts who were real Bible readers and quoters, whom I loved and respected, but I hesitated to argue with them because of my respect.

I met my husband at art school, visited his religion and voila! Home at last!!! No more guilt of “non-believing.” Unitarian Universalism is for me!

Elaine K. Lowry

We've been Unitarian Universalists for over 50 years, but have only lived in Canton for a little under three years. Bern's work as foreign correspondent kept us abroad in South America and Europe for about 35 years. After 12 years in Brookline, where I joined my first church that had a building, we reached a point where we were looking around for a retirement community. One of the most important factors in helping us make our decision was the presence of a Unitarian Universalist community. Talking with Brad Cullin [former minister] and Betsy Gavastos [member] seemed reassuring.

One of the things I learned from moving around in foreign countries was that you don't make friends overnight. I found that almost always I had to make the first step. People are already involved in their professional, home and community lives when you come into the picture. So first you have to get into the picture.

What I found soon here at First Parish was that there were, early on, three or four and Brad who talked with us and found ways to invite us in.

One of the key factors necessary for me to be a part of the community where, to paraphrase our recently dear departed interim minister, Larry McGinty, the individual freely searches for a set of beliefs about the nature of the human being, human society and the universe. This, I find, as Larry so well said, "serves to give one's life, the whole of it and the day-to-day living of it, a sense of worth and significance.

Towards that end I participate in the life of this parish, through work with the Membership Committee. It is through this participation that I hope to learn more about each person who must feel as I do that *Unitarian Universalism is a necessary part of my life ... And to put it simply: when you give, you get.*

Joan Redmont

Early in my association with the Church, someone conceived of having a Sunday service built around men's stories. I think we were supposed to talk about some particularly singular events in our lives. The participants included Ray Seaver, Don Messinger (who moved to Norwell about ten years ago), Bob Nanson (who moved to Scituate), myself, and perhaps one or two others I can't

recall. We met two or three times to plan the service. In those meetings, we not only planned, we also got to know each other. Each of us described the incidents in our lives that we might present in the service, and we shared our thoughts and feelings about them.

As least some of us, including myself, were doubtful we had a story worth telling. By sharing the ones we had in mind, we validated each other's stories, and helped each other realize the value in their telling.

I remember being astonished in the experience that one of the men eventually used in the program. As an adult, he seemed to me to be a capable, experienced church leader, strong and confident. But his story portrayed a less confident youth, who (as I recall) had some trouble with bullies. It was an experience I can relate to, and his willingness to talk about it was a special form of courage.

The service went well, and the congregation seemed to respond positively. But, for me, what was most important turned out to be the bonding we did in that planning effort. That may seem trite, but I can think of no better way to describe the powerful emotions I felt while sharing those fairly revealing, personal stories. In the planning process, we found common ground.

To me this demonstrates that this church is a safe place to be your true self, and the we respect, value, and support each other.

David Bryant

(The piece below was written by Bob and the late Mary Lou Stocker's daughter about her parents' involvement in First Parish.)

Bob Stocker was raised a Congregationalist. Early on he discovered he couldn't accept the party line, so he made tracks about as soon as he could. College, World War II, and marriage happened. Mary Lou, his wife (and long-time member of First Parish until she died in 1995) was raised in a Methodist church, where she liked the close knit community, good cooking, and singing, but had trouble believing in the Gospel truth. As luck would have it, a close friend of Mary Lou's family occasionally brought her to a Unitarian church, where she had her first exposure to liberal religion.

Before too long Bob and Mary Lou had three children who needed some religious education. Abington, MA, where they lived, had a Universalist church, which fit the bill. They might still be there today (although the church itself is long defunct) if the railroad hadn't closed the train station in Abington. Bob was determined not to join the multitudes traveling the roads to Boston, so in 1954 the family moved to Canton to be near the Route 128 train station. I believe Mary Lou actually scouted out the new church for the family. She chose this church largely because it was a liberal church and she liked the Sunday school. The Stockers have attended this church religiously, so to speak, ever since.

Through the years Bob and Mary Lou made countless friends in the church family. Both were leaders in the community. Bob served as Treasurer, President, and Chair of the Social Concerns Committee, among other things (I can't remember them all). Mary Lou was active in the Sunday School, teaching, leading

chapel services, writing Christmas plays for the children to perform every year, and directing the children's choir. She also edited the church newsletter for many years.

Over twenty years ago, Bob was instrumental in starting a series of forums, which featured experts addressing and debating various timely and controversial subjects. If my member serves me, the first forum was about euthanasia. Around the same time, Bob had also started the practice of polling the congregation on timely and often controversial questions each Sunday, a practice that continued for several years. The questions took a Yes/No form. For example, "Do you believe that abortion should be legal?" might have been a question around the time of *Roe v. Wade*. Ushers distributed poll question ballots with the Sunday program. Votes were tallied after the service and results published in the newsletter. Occasionally poll question results would find their way into the Canton newspaper, which sometimes caused a stir.

Perhaps the memory that most exemplifies my parents' devotion to the church and to each other is the hymn Mary Lou wrote as a Christmas gift for Bob many years ago. My father loved the tune of the song "Come Sundown" by Kris Kristofferson, and he always felt it would make a great hymn to the right words. Around the time the Unitarian and Universalist churches in Canton consolidated, my mother wrote some words to fit the Kristofferson tune. The result was "Our Church is More than Framework," a song that reflected my mother's feeling of the two churches pulling together as one family. *Family is what they found here during the last 40 years or so: "...people close in spirit who by sharing worship well."*

Sylvia Stocker