

Biographical Introduction

Rev. Lilia Cuervo

I was the only child of Darío Cuervo and María Gómez. My father died when I was three years old. My mother raised me as a single parent and although we did not have many material possessions, we were rich in love and aspirations and I never felt poor or deprived. On the contrary, my mother always had words of gratitude for life and all its riches, and words of encouragement and inspiration for me. She was a government nurse, often stationed in small towns around Colombia, helping open health post for the poorest of the poor. Her pioneer-like spirit instilled in me high ideals of service to humanity and love for learning and adventure.

My mother's desire to give me the best education possible meant that we were separated during the major part of the year while I attended boarding school with the nuns. Since childhood, and up to the time I started my working career, I helped my mother during my vacations from school dispensing milk for children, and medicines for the sick, and accompanying her in her rounds to visit the sick, and the mothers whose babies she had helped to deliver. I saw the first person dying when I was about five years old.

I was baptized and raised Catholic. I practiced Catholicism until my late teens. However, even as a child, I always had many doubts as to the veracity of the church teachings and always had suspicions about all the prohibitions against reading certain books and mingling with certain people like the Jews and the Protestants, of which they very few when I was growing up. At one point in high school I felt I wanted to be a nun, but I was not accepted on the grounds that I was too vivacious, and besides I was the only child of a poor mother who needed me to support her in her old age. In college I renounced Catholicism and went through a period very detached of all things religious.

Ever since I was a child, I was fascinated by the stars and other celestial bodies, so much so that I wanted to be an astronomer. After consulting with the Director of the Colombian National Observatory, who advised me to study Mathematics and Physics as the first step towards astronomy, I went to the National Teachers College where I obtained my BA as Professor of Math & Physics. By the end of college, I was not sure Astronomy was the best choice for me. After a year of working with the Department of Education I was offered a two-year United Nations scholarship to study Demography in Chile. There, I received a Licentiate degree in Demography. Once back to Colombia, I worked as a Socio-Demographic Researcher at the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota. In 1964, I received a dual invitation to come to the University of California at Berkeley as an Exchange Visiting Assistant Professor of Demography, and as a Sociology Research and Analyst with the International Population and Urban Research Institute. There I met Jose, my ex-husband, a Sociologist who had come to administer a grant for AID in Latin America. Shortly after our marriage, we moved to Brazil, where we lived for four and a half years while he was the Population Advisor for the Ford Foundation and I was a Lecturer and Researcher with the Universities of Sao Paulo and the Maternidade Escola in Rio de Janeiro. In 1966, our son, Xavier, was born in Rio de Janeiro. Being a mother was an exhilarating experience. In 1970, we moved to Tucson, Arizona, where

Jose was a Sociology professor at the University of Arizona and where I did demographic research, with several organizations. Our two daughters, Nilza and Shani, were born in Tucson. The years there were some of the best for all of us.

In 1974 we moved to Washington, D.C. There Jose was the Director of the Department of Women and Minorities at the Civil Rights Commission. I attended Georgetown University, where I received an MA in Demography. In 1977, we moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Jose became a professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin. It was in Milwaukee that two very important things happened in my life. First, our marriage was ended after he came out of the closet as a gay man. Now I was a single parent of three young children and living in poverty -- for a good period of time we depended on food stamps and a meager allowance ordered by the Court. Second, I became a Unitarian Universalist at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Brookville, Wisconsin. Thanks to the insistence of a good UU woman, whose husband had also come out of the closet, after much resistance, I decided to visit her church. The first Sunday I attended a UU service, the Rev. Robert Latham was preaching on Physics and Religion. I couldn't believe my ears, for having studied Math. and Physics myself, I loved the fact that science and religion could be combined in a spiritual path. I owe much to the Brookfield congregation since, at that time, being a Latina woman whose husband had come out of the closet was a very shameful and harrowing experience. In that church, I learned to value myself as a woman, joined in all sorts of workshops and retreats, and started to feel liberated and to come alive mentally and spiritually. Little by little my enthusiasm for helping others and for relating to the Divine came back.

In 1980 I moved to New York where I worked as the Evaluation and Research Associate for the International Planned Parenthood Federation, This was a demanding and gratifying job. Several times a year I went to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to train the Evaluation officers and to observe the functioning of the family planning clinics. Soon after my children and I moved to New York visited several UU churches and decided to join the North Shore Unitarian Society, now the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock (UUCSR). I had been a member at UUCSR for several years when, in 1990, I was included in the group that was going to UNILEAD, the District's leadership school. On Wednesday morning of leadership school I heard this voice calling me to change course, and to experience once more the excitement of embarking on a new journey. The voice said clearly, "if worship services can move people the way we have been moved this week, I want to do this for the rest of my life". I was very scared that the call might be real, therefore compelling me to rise to new levels of trust, both in the internal voice calling and in my own resources. After UNILEAD, I became involved in several committees at the church; I also was trained and served as a Pastoral Associate and as meditation leader and also became a volunteer with Hospice Care of Long Island. In 1994 I applied to Starr King School for the Ministry and was accepted.

Despite some early theological and religious disappointments, my seminary years were some of the best of my life. I did many things outside the normal curriculum. At the end of my Clinical Pastoral Education at Summit Medical Center I was hired there as an evening Chaplain. I traveled to San Jose every month to preach and help with the creation of the UUHH, the Spanish-speaking Unitarian Universalist Latinos/as. I also co-led "Rise Up and Call Her Name" three times; once at San Jose and twice at SKSM. I went to Alaska for an eleven-day women's

retreat and I hiked and camped in Death Valley. I co-led the Welcoming Congregation workshops at the UU Fellowship in Berkeley and taught a course on Meditation at SKSM. I belonged to the Worship Committee of the school and to the District's Membership Committee. It was in seminary that a colleague defined me as a woman "with the mind of a scholar and the heart of a mystic".

I did my internship in Wheeling, West Virginia, at the Ohio Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation. The Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland was the consulting minister; he came once a month to preach and to tend to the affairs of the congregation. I was the Intern Minister preaching twice a month and acting as their de facto minister during the week. This internship was a tremendous experience in many regards; one of the most salient having to live my liberal faith in an area influenced by religious conservatives and the KKK.

At the end of my internship I was called by the First Unitarian Church of San Jose to be their Extension Minister for outreach to the Latino population. I was there for five and a half years as the Extension Minister and an additional year as their Assistant Minister. I was ordained in this church and there I found my prophetic voice. The challenges of starting Unitarian Universalist Spanish-speaking ministries (SSM) were many and difficult. These pioneer ministries were created within the larger context of a well-established congregation. My vision was to help create "a community of hope, love, and responsibility", avoiding at all costs the natural tendencies to grow separate or to have the relationship of a benefactor to a beneficiary. When I left, standing proud of being Unitarian Universalist, was a small vibrant group of Latinos and Latinas amidst a religious community whose majority has grown to appreciate their presence and contributions. A witness to that was their promise to stand firm in their support to make the Spanish Ministry a permanent program of the church. The Latinos, for their part, grew to take full responsibility for several aspects of lay ministry, including worship services.

My ministerial duties and responsibilities did not end with the Spanish Speaking Ministries however; they extended to the entire congregation. I enjoyed the challenge of balancing time and energy to serve the religious and spiritual needs of such different coexisting cultures. I feel a sense of accomplishment having made possible the following for the entire congregation:

1. Meditation sessions. I trained two committed leaders and among the three of us provided weekly meditation opportunities for more than four years.
2. Monthly SSM potluck suppers in my home and other people's homes. At the last potluck in my home we had 47 people ranging in ages from three to 81. Twenty-two were non-Latinos. On these occasions we played musical instruments, sang popular American and Latino songs, ate ethnic food, recited poetry, and learned to enjoy and appreciate each other's cultures.
3. When our senior minister resigned and the Board was apprehensive about what to do for the English worship life of the congregation, I offered to take responsibility for it. For the seven months we were without an Interim Senior Minister, I supported and mentored the worship associates. On several occasions, I was also the worship associate for guest preachers in the Spanish and the English services.

4. During this time, I convened brainstorming and planning meetings to try to create a music program. I also promoted the idea of training Music Associates to help, along with the Worship Associates, in the preparation and delivery of the worship services.
5. The Blessing of the Animals worship service - this was a bilingual, inter-generational, and "inter-species" service. It became one of the most moving and fun services, and a favorite of animal lovers.
6. Periodic art shows in my office, according to chosen themes - members and friends of the church, including young adults and children, contributed the art.
7. I attended, as often as possible, the "Dances of Universal Peace" and the "Covenant of UU Pagans" and for several years I was part of the "Labyrinth Guild". Leaders and participants of these groups told me how meaningful my ministerial presence and support was for them. I attended these activities both to offer support to the lay leaders who so generously offered their talents and time and because I benefited personally from those spiritual practices.
8. The creation of an Aesthetics Committee whose function was to make sure that the interior of the church building was aesthetically inviting and free of eyesores.
9. I helped organize the hiking group, which offered outings on Wednesday and Saturday. The group had an excellent leader and I believe the hikes continue to this day. I participated in the hikes as often as time allowed.
10. On Thanksgiving Day, I prepared a turkey, and those congregants and friends wanting to share the meal, brought side dishes and desserts. We gathered at the church, and we had a great time setting the table, eating, talking, singing, and cleaning afterwards.
11. Before leaving San Jose, I trained a cadre of six lay leaders responsible for keeping the SSM in place before the new senior Minister arrived; one of them was subsequently hired as the SSM Coordinator and to this day remains in that position.

After my contract expired, on July 7, 2005, I returned to my home in New York. I was exhausted after all those years of intensive work without taking time for recreation (as my contract provided). I must accept full responsibility for this inconsistency between what I advised others to do, namely to take time for restoring and nurturing mind, soul, and body, and what I did not do myself.

In early 2006, the New York Metro District representative suggested that I considered being the Consultant Minister for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Bellport, NY. I accepted the position and was there for ten months. I had a satisfying ministry for the most part, trying, as the District representative and some members of the Board mandated, to help them move ahead with their goals for growth in numbers and in religious depth.

I was a Chaplain with the Hospice Care Network of Long Island, especially hired to serve the Latino families in the program. This was a challenging and extremely rewarding job. I was

been able to appreciate different aspects of the Latino population that were not readily visible when I was in San Jose. I am the Radical Hospitality Minister and a member of the Program Committee for the UU Metro District. I am also the Affiliate Minister at UUCSR. I have been invited by that congregation, and by several others in the area, to preach and to perform weddings, memorial services, and dedications of children.

I am engaged to Sam, a long time UU Lay Leader. My three children, Xavier, Nilza, and Shani and their respective wife and partners live fairly close to New York. Sam's daughter Beth and her husband live in California and his other daughter, Nancy, her husband and children live on Long Island.

I consider it a high priority and an honor to mentor students and young people in the practice of Unitarian Universalist ministry. I hold worship very near to my heart. For me worship is not a separate activity for church or special occasions; it is living in reverent and grateful connection with the Holy. Intentionally and by example, I helped develop lay leadership of worship, emphasizing UU democratic values. The SSM were often exposed to new approaches and elements during the Sunday services and during rituals and ceremonies. They were invited to actively participate on those occasions and to risk offering their ideas and talents, for the first time for some, in front of people.

One of my permanent concerns is to "advance counter-oppressive education" in our denomination and in any place I may find myself. I preach awareness, vigilance, and compassion as means to get both to the roots of, and to eradicate the effects of, cultural and institutional oppressive environments. I use my prophetic voice for this purpose, from the pulpit, in workshops and retreats, and at every appropriate exchange with congregants and the public. Like worship, education for me is a way of living. It is my conviction that modeling how we should treat others and encouraging others to follow our example is one of the best ways to educate those around us.

My social activism was awakened and facilitated by the many opportunities available in the congregations where I have been a member or a minister. Whenever possible, I like to march for causes I believe in, such as peace, combating world hunger, the Pro-choice movement, women's rights, and representing my church in gay parades. I have signed numerous petitions and contributed regularly to causes such as: Mothers against Drunk Driving, Gun Control, Nature Conservancy and the like.

My life has been one of relating to different kinds of peoples and learning to live in many kinds of cultural and physical environments. The frequent mobility, the variety of human relations I had, and the many events I have witnessed or participated in, helped me develop, at an early age, a sense of universality and a good deal of understanding of the human condition. When I die, I want my epitaph to say: "In her presence I could be myself". This sense of belonging to the world rather than to a specific country or place was expressed in the dedication of my master's thesis to my mother, thus: "I dedicate this thesis to my dearest mother, as a tribute of filial love. My mother with her words and frequently with her heroic actions teaches me that there are no barriers of language, religion or customs for those whose ideals are to serve

those in need, providing relief for their physical and moral hurts. My mother with her ever alert spirit and her thirst for understanding of the human experience has inculcated in me the desire to become more than a good Colombian, a good citizen of the world."

I want to end this biography expressing some thoughts about ministry. My concept of ministry and of the qualities desirable in a Unitarian Universalist professional or religious leader has evolved through the years. It has been influenced by observing the conduct of those in charge of leading the different congregations I have attended, as well as that of the chairs of the different committees I have belonged to, and particularly by what I have experienced in caring for others as a Ministerial Assistant, Chaplain, and lately, as a Minister myself. The following are the qualities I consider desirable in a Unitarian Universalist professional religious leader:

Openness - the liberal essence of Unitarian Universalism, and the changing nature of its congregations as they embrace more and more minority groups, makes imperative that the minds and hearts of their leaders be wide open and not just tolerant but all-accepting. Openness is also important to establish connections, and to be able to share one's joys and pains with others, so that they can feel free to share their own.

Compassion - to be able to relate to, and to minister to, those in need, from the heart and out of the experience of a common humanity.

Humility - to recognize the awesome power and responsibility of the calling, and to realize that one is, or could be, an instrument of the Holy.

Joy and sense of humor - a joyful attitude when serving others is important in order to create an atmosphere of acceptance and to help lighten the spirit. Once in a while, a hearty laugh is all one needs to release tension and to put things in perspective.

Thirst for knowledge and learning - with the ever-growing amounts of sophisticated inventions and discoveries in the physical, as well as in the spiritual and psychological realms, this quality is essential if one is to keep appropriately informed.

Ability to organize and to be a good manager - we live in a society that floods us with solicited and unsolicited written materials; that pulls our minds and senses in many directions. The life of a minister can get even more complex and saturated with the demands of his/her personal life, with the management of the church, and with ministering to the congregants. Unless the minister sets priorities and manages time, material, and human resources well, there is the risk of becoming ineffective. A most important aspect of time management is to be able to recognize and act upon the need of allowing time for one's self, to be quiet, to enjoy some hobby, to connect with family and friends.

Sense of awe and wonder - there is nothing more refreshing than the company of those who have been able to preserve their childhood sense of awe and wonder and who are able to perceive the world at large, those around them, and themselves, as unfolding miracles.

Ability to lead and to inspire - as a person with high visibility within a congregation - which has the right to expect guidance and inspiration from its religious leaders - the Unitarian Universalist minister has the charter to lead and inspire both from the pulpit and away from it.

Personal integrity - professional religious leaders must be able to advise and lead others drawing from the inner strength resulting from living according to their own convictions.

Courage and endurance - in the present day, when instant communications bring natural disasters and sometimes the worst of other fellow humans into our lives, it is difficult to keep perspective and to live with courage and optimism. By the very nature of the work, a care-giver needs courage to endure loneliness, negative criticisms, and despair. Also endurance to go the distance required, when it is difficult to see the desired results of one's efforts in sight.

Ability to listen and to communicate - these qualities are of paramount importance in any care-giver and much more in a religious leader. They are at the heart of compassion because without them, the giving, the healing, and the understanding would be impaired, if not impossible.

Through the years, I have tried to acquire and develop most of the qualities described above, with varying degrees of success. At present, I believe I possess a well rounded personality. I enjoy equally team work and self-directed projects. I like to undertake tasks with enthusiasm, keeping a positive perspective, but at the same time being realistic about what can be expected, given the constraints of time and other resources. For the most part, I have learned to concentrate in the moment, to work with clear objectives in mind, and to forego the results of my actions. Although I do not always succeed, when I do, surrendering the results of my actions and efforts to the Universal Wisdom has brought much inner peace and joy.
