

GA Stands for Justice

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

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I love General Assembly, the annual convocation of Unitarian Universalists from across the continent.

Every June in a different city, we gather at GA to sing and dance, to pray and meditate, to learn and deliberate how to grow and deepen this unique religious movement. I love the pageantry, the liturgy, the workshops, even the debates when they don't devolve into sanctimonious pettifogging. I love the exhibition booths of advocacy organizations and vendors of books, music, crafts, and what can only be called UU tchotchkes. I love immersing myself in the history, theology, justice-making, and joy of Unitarian Universalism.

But in the spring of 2010, as I looked forward to our General Assembly in Minneapolis, I felt not my usual eager anticipation but a deepening dread.

Months before, the Unitarian Universalist Association had scheduled its 2012 General Assembly for Phoenix, Arizona. Then in April, 2010, Arizona enacted SB 1070, the law many of us felt targeted immigrants from Latin America for harassment and intimidation. Immigrant advocates in Arizona called for a national boycott of the state. Some Latino Unitarian Universalists and UUs of color said they could not attend a GA in Phoenix because their safety would be threatened. Even though the UUA would have to forfeit more than half a million dollars in cancellation fees, many UUs believed that our values compelled us to honor the boycott and move General Assembly away from Arizona.

I was one of them. When a clergy colleague set up a website accepting financial pledges to offset the UUA's losses from a change of venue, I immediately signed up.

But then I began to hear from Unitarian Universalists in Arizona exhorting us not to abandon them in their struggle for immigrant justice. UUA President Peter Morales, our first Latino president, wrote a letter urging us to meet in Phoenix and confront SB1070. Two leading Latino advocacy groups, Puente and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, had invited us, he argued, and we should honor their requests. "I believe we are called to go to Phoenix and create a GA like no previous GA," Morales wrote. "I want us to experience the reality of life for immigrants. I want us to learn and to bear witness. I dream of a GA where we reflect theologically upon what it means to be a faith that can cross the borders of race, class, and culture."

The debate, much of it online, grew heated, personal, and sometimes nasty. White anti-racists assailed our first Latino president as a sell-out. Boycott proponents suggested that Puente and NDLO had been duped into inviting a convention they knew nothing about. Opponents argued that moving GA would be just a feel-good substitute for the hard work of education, activism, and alliance-building for immigrant justice.

Looming over the debate was the long shadow of the Empowerment Controversy of the late 1960s, when Unitarian Universalism was riven by conflict over black power, white hegemony, and the meaning of democracy. Speakers were heckled, microphones seized, delegates spat upon. The acrimony destroyed friendships, poisoned trust, and shattered our Association's illusions of racial harmony.

It's taken over four decades to heal those wounds—and some of them will never heal. We've learned so much since then about power, privilege, and right relations, but we still have

so much more to learn. Would the controversy over GA 2012 mark our passage into greater wisdom and commitment, or hurtle us backward into recrimination, distrust, and despair?

This time, at our 2010 General Assembly in Minneapolis, we were determined to do better.

In hopes of averting a bitter floor fight, delegates were invited to two mini-assemblies on the Phoenix issue. More than three hundred packed the first one on Thursday. That night, leaders on opposing sides sat down for a marathon conversation.

Mindful always of each other's inherent worth and dignity and the interdependent web of all existence, they set aside their prideful need to be right in favor of a faithful commitment to compassion, respect, and sacrifice for the greater good. Together, they crafted an agreement that honored and redeemed our movement.

Rev. Wendy von Zirpolo, minister of the UU Church of Marblehead, Mass., and president of Allies for Racial Equity, will never forget the "hours of deep listening, tears, and prayer" of that long night. "The entire experience felt sacred," she says. "Hard truths about racism within our own faith community had to be owned if we were to risk placing UUs in harm's way to work for justice in Arizona. . . . Just as the human rights violations in Arizona are part of a national agenda of othering, during the deliberations we were called to address our own history of oppression. . . . Had the majority white culture of our faith chosen to ignore or minimize the risks to those among us who risk targeting should they travel to Arizona or forgo participating in our GA, the cost would have been beyond measure."

Rev. Mitra Rahnema of DRUUMM (Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries) adds, "[P]art of the hope was to raise the level of conversation and solidarity among UUs about the racism that people of color experience so that we can be in better relationship with all people on the margins."

The final agreement provided for a justice-oriented General Assembly in Phoenix in 2012 with a business agenda limited to the minimum allowed by the bylaws. It called upon the UUA to establish an Arizona immigration ministry; to work in accountable relationships with stakeholder organizations for the safety of historically marginalized groups going to Phoenix; to direct economic transactions during the 2012 GA towards partners and allies; and to provide resources to build the capacity of Unitarian Universalists to stand in opposition to systemic racism. Delegates passed the resolution by an overwhelming majority.

It was an historic moment for our movement—a moment of exhilaration, relief, and gratitude.

Now comes the hard work of creating a Justice GA worthy of breaking the Arizona boycott.

Last week, the GA Planning Committee released its preliminary schedule for GA 2012. The schedule cuts back on plenaries and workshops to afford greater opportunities for public witness, worship, and education about immigration, racism, and economic justice. Familiar elements include the Opening Celebration and Banner Parade, Service of the Living Tradition, Ware Lecture, and Closing Celebration featuring the GA Choir.

"There is no piece of GA that will be the same as it always was," reports Moderator Gini Courter. Instead of one major public witness event, there will be a variety of events. "You might go with a hundred other people and bear witness on a street corner," she said. "And we might hold some kind of citizenship fair. Another idea is to assemble kits for schoolchildren—resources to help lower-income families." Our Arizona partners will have a leading role in determining our witness events.

Powerful public witness demands powerful worship to sustain it. "We want people to have a rich enough worship experience," says Courter, "to go out and do witness work." There will be

spiritually nourishing small group ministry, as well. “We want people to have someone to check in with every day.”

Rev. Dr. Walt Wieder, GA Planning Committee Chair, observes, “This is about how we carry forth our message into the world. We don’t want to yell it once on the floor of plenary and then disappear. We want people to take what we do in Phoenix home.”

Wendy von Zirpolo reminds us, “We now carr[y] the sacred obligation of making good on our promises. This [has to be] a GA like none other. We [can never] lose sight of the prices paid and the faith that was laid in our hands to make this ‘not business as usual’ but a GA worth breaking a boycott and worth risks carried by those among us already historically marginalized (too often by [Unitarian Universalists ourselves]). It remains to be seen whether we will deliver on those promises. I have faith we will,” she says. “I have to.”

Some worry that the whole idea of a Justice GA will scare off some white, middle-class Unitarian Universalists—the afflicted comfortable to whom the word “justice” sounds less like universal salvation and more like personal reproach. If attendance drops at GA2012, will that call into question the seriousness of the Unitarian Universalist commitment to justice—the only value proclaimed not once but twice in our seven principles?

My prayer is that rather than depressing attendance, this justice-centered GA will attract record numbers of us, including many who have never attended before.

One week ago I preached that the purpose of authentic religion is not social activism but spiritual transformation in which we surrender our egos and embrace our transcendent unity. But even as we pray and practice for spiritual transformation, we cannot ignore the cries of sisters and brothers who are persecuted and oppressed. We cannot pass by, like the priest and the Levite on the road to Jericho, ignoring the stranger beaten and robbed on the side of the road. Like the Samaritan, we must lift him up and bind his wounds.

“What good is it,” demands the Book of James, “if you say you have faith but do not have works? . . . If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. . . . Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”

Not all of us can travel to Phoenix this June. But some of us can. Let’s send the largest First Parish contingent ever to General Assembly 2012—not just our half-dozen voting delegates but dozens of us—Standing Committee members and Deacons and choir singers and Tuesday Meals volunteers and religious educators and youth and young adults and elders.

GA registration information will be available later this month. But we needn’t wait to dream and plan and prepare. Put it on your calendar: June 20th to 24th, 2012. Let’s start a Facebook page for folks in our congregation who’d like to go. First Parish subsidizes our delegates, and the UUA offers scholarships for others who need them, especially youth and young adults. And we’ll need to raise more funds to enable all of us to attend who wish to.

Meanwhile, we can educate ourselves about immigration issues, not just in Arizona, but here in Massachusetts. We can volunteer at Centro Presente. We can read *The Death of Josseline: Immigrant Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands*, last year’s UUA Common Read selection. We can work on improving our Spanish. ¡Si yo puedo hacerlo, tú puedes hacerlo!

And whether or not we go to Phoenix next June, may each of us listen and learn and sing and pray for the Beloved Community.

May each of us bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

May we stand on the side of love.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction

Adapted from Keri Hulme, *The Bone People*

We were nothing more than people by ourselves.

Even paired, any pairing, we would have been nothing more than people by ourselves.

But all together we have become the heart and muscle and mind of something perilous and new,
something [marvelous] and growing and great.

Together, all together, we are the instruments of change.