

Draft

**“BECOMING A MEMBER”**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**November 14, 2010**

Good morning again. Thank you for being here today and helping us celebrate our newest members.

Some of you know that many years ago I did a one year interim ministry in Alton, Illinois. It's an old river town on the Mississippi River and the church has been around for many years. They're good folks and I think of them often. I wanted to share with you a story from that time.

After I accepted the interim position in 1993, they got to work finding me a place to live in downtown Alton near the church. It turned out that one of the members of the church was the wife of a local landlord. He wasn't a member of the congregation though his wife had been urging him to join for years. He thought Unitarian Universalism was just a little strange. Anyway, one of his properties was conveniently close to the church and seemed ideal. I rented it and moved in.

Now, some of you know that I cook. In fact, I helped Sandra and others for the annual Ministers Cook-off this Thursday. I enjoy cooking Asian food and it's been very much an educational experience over the years. Anyway, a few weeks later after moving in I decided to do some cooking. I'd always wanted to try one of the hardest recipes in Chinese cooking – Peking Duck.

My first problem was finding a duck. I finally went to a store and bought one of those frozen ones. After thawing it, I cleaned out the cavity and began the preparations. The skin had to be separated from the flesh and then a special marinate took some time to prepare. Finally, I covered the duck in the marinate sauce. The next directions posed a dilemma. They specified that the duck had to be thoroughly dried before cooking. I thought and thought. Finally I came up with a perfectly logical solution.

I took some string and hung the duck from the shower nozzle in the bathtub. To facilitate drying, I got a fan and starting blowing air over said duck as it gently swayed in the shower. Task done, I walked over to church to work for a couple of hours until the next phase of the duck project.

I'd totally forgotten that the landlord had called me and said he was coming to the apartment to fix a leaky faucet in the bathroom.

It would be an understatement to say that he was surprised when he walked into the bathroom and saw the duck rotating in the wind below the shower nozzle.

He never joined the church.

One might even say he had decided we were a bunch of odd ducks. I suspect in many ways we are just that. Consider these points: many and perhaps most of us come from other religious backgrounds; backgrounds that for various reasons no longer worked as successful value systems. We didn't want a rigid doctrine or creed to tie us down from intellectual questioning or spiritual enlargement. We wanted a safe place to question values that everyone else seemed to take for granted.

I'm sure we know all these points and more because we have come to this place and this liberal religion from many paths. Now we have welcomed a new generation of members to this congregation. You continue a tradition that goes back for over 50 years at this fellowship.

"Signing the book" may seem like almost a formality nowadays. Consider, though, how profound it must have meant to our religious ancestors who were heretics like you. To sign the church membership book of a Universalist church a hundred years ago was to squarely face the cruel theology of Calvinism and the potential condemnation of the community in which you lived. To say you were a Universalist would literally be fighting words in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. By signing the membership book, you were asserting that a loving God could not and would not condemn most to Hell and a few pre-selected to Heaven. This faith ran counter to all religious orthodoxy and at times landed Universalists in jail or banishment. Last week I read part of an article on "the Search for Truth" by a man named George W. Julian who lived in Santa Fe in 1888. He commented about an old Universalist minister of his childhood. He writes about him as a person **"then well known in Eastern Indiana, and soundly hated by all orthodox people. His name was Jonathan Kidwell. He was a man almost wholly without education, but possessed a broad and vigorous grasp of mind, was a natural lover of controversy, and a perfect master of invective."** Universalists signing membership books were much like him in spirit and determination.

Our Unitarian religious ancestor who decided to sign the membership book fared somewhat better. Someone years ago joked that Unitarians in New England were like Episcopalians without either much incense or ritual. This wasn't strictly true. Unitarians from the beginning of their growth in the American colonies faced religious persecution for their insistence on Unitarian rather than Trinitarian faith. Our historical struggle to break the

bonds between church and state was a radical step toward individual religious freedom. By signing the membership book in the 1840's, you would have entered the deep struggle about abolition and freedom of all people.

One of our religious ancestors signing the membership book in the 1950's might well have been condemned by neighbors as being a suspected Communist or at least a liberal.

For much of our religious history, signing the membership book has been a solemn commitment to take a different religious path – a path that entailed some risk, much searching out of values, and a determined effort to create a better world. By signing the book, we set ourselves in a small way to change the world just as those who signed the Declaration of Independence so many years ago. We do not sign in invisible ink. We're right there to be seen.

Membership says that we're ready to roll up our sleeves and do what we can to make this liberal religious community the best it can be.

In a couple of years, hopefully, you'll welcome a new settled minister to your congregation. This person will want to have an installation to formalize the covenant between you and them. It will be a solemn and joyful ceremony where you and the minister lay out your hopes. A part of that ceremony is called the "Charge to the Congregation". It's a way of laying out the best hopes for how the congregation and minister will work together.

I'd like to offer a short "Charge to New Members" though it's really for all of us to consider:

First, do your best to become involved in the life of this community. Whether it's helping with coffee on Sunday morning, working with the children and youth, attending a monthly workparty or anything else...these things not only help the church but help to build friendships.

Second, never be afraid to ask "why". You bring a fresh perspective. You're the new generation of members and we need you to ask why we do the things we do in church life. You see us through new eyes and hear us with new ears. We need your perspective and promise to listen.

Third, as we promise to try and give you the tools to increase your spiritual practice and intellectual ideas, please give us the benefit of your gifts of creativity and ideas. Suggest, attend and teach workshops, as you are able. Our Adult RE program is expanding and we would love your input as to how to make it even better.

Fourth, please remember also that the church is a business. We support a physical building, staff, programming, advertising, and outreach just to name a few. Your support in time or money as you are able is

essential to the continued work of this community. We never ask you to tithe but we do ask that you find ways to help build the best liberal religious community in this area.

Finally, I want to return to something mentioned during the conversation time last Sunday after my sermon “Reverence for Mind”. Someone mentioned that there were many people like the author of “A Search for Truth” out there in Clemson, Seneca, Easley and Anderson. They were out there but had no idea we were here to welcome and to nurture their lives. Why?

Here’s another story from someone from the last church I served and who came into my office about a year ago. We sat and chatted for awhile. Then she told me about the struggles she was having about telling her parents and other relatives about the secret. She knew it would cause despair on the part of at least one relative who would then pray for her. Other family members might even stop talking to her because of it. What was the painful secret hidden from her family? It was “I joined a Unitarian Universalist Church.” That family of origin worried about the children not being taught right morals. There was fear that this family would go to Hell and so prayers would be offered up every day.

In the reading this morning, Dr. King said that the purpose of a church was more than entertainment, or food or a social club. He reminds us that, **“church is dealing with ultimate concern. Sunday after Sunday, week after week, people come to church with broken hearts. They need a word of hope.... The church heals the broken-hearted.”**

Do people come here to this church with broken hearts each week? Of course we do. We can hear it in the sorrows people share each Sunday. We can imagine it when we see silent candles lit and wonder what sorrow people are expressing there. We might share it with someone who we trust in a conversation before or after church. The door of our heart opens among those we trust and even love. The closet of our isolation is gently unlocked and opened to the fresh air and daylight of community.

But that’s not enough. I think one reason Joys and Sorrows candles are so important in our churches is not only to share the sorrows but to appreciate the reality that joy is part of our life as well. We do not have the doctrine of faith in future redemption and salvation that many churches do. That includes Dr. King’s Baptist church where he spoke all those years ago. What we do have here is a willingness to look uncertainty straight in the eye and perhaps make it blink – because sharing joy is part of healing the broken heart.

A shared salvation of healing is one reason why we gather Sundays.

But that's not enough, either. The closets of isolation are so large. They might include our next door neighbor who struggles with financial issues or children who cannot be still. They might be those who with deep guilt wish that their parents were dead and out of pain. They might include the person in front of us on the highway who is angry at being late.

Dr. King went on in his sermon to say, **“the role of the church is to free people, people who are slaves to prejudices, slaves to fear. The church is called to set free those that are captive, to set free those that are victims of the slavery of segregation and discrimination and those caught up in the slavery of fear and prejudice.”** For this time, this generation, and this place, I would change his words to say that the role of this church is also to welcome those who seek a faith that is open to the mystery that is spirituality without dogma based on some ancient scripture.

Spiritual isolation is a killer of hope and questioning. It drains us over time and we cannot blossom.

Prejudice takes many forms. It resulted in the isolation for George Julian those many generations ago in New Mexico. Prejudice in that woman's family who prayed for her daily took an insidious form of love turned inside out.

How many people out there do you know who are captives to religious prejudice that says “you go to that church? Oh dear.”

How many people are your friends and co-workers who in their secret moments wish there was a Sunday service without the bells and whistles of traditional religion?

How many of them could be here just as our new members have done and why aren't they here today?

You know them.

What are you and we waiting for?

Lives and spiritual deepening are at stake. There is no time to lose.

New members, welcome. Veteran members, thank you for all you have done.

Everyone, bring the lost home.

This is their home, too.