

A Grand UU Gathering©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on February 3, 2019

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask: "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

We gather together here today because all of us assume that many others share our dreams. At the same time, each of us is here for our own particular reasons. Our dreams are what we care about. and from our individual dreams this community discovers its common cares. Some of us care about finding connection and community. Some of us care about learning and growing. Some are drawn by the chance to join with others in supporting and engaging in social justice issues. Some are here because this congregation respects and supports their values and their personhood. Some find this a safe and supportive community for themselves and their children. Each of us has our own unique reasons for being part of this Fellowship.

My sense is that while our particular reasons may differ, we all share a common reason for being here. In some way, being here, being part of this community, makes a positive difference in our lives and in the lives of others. As Unitarian Universalists, we focus our attention and our energy on this world, on this life, and on making this world and this life the best we can possibly make it. We gather together because our experience has shown us that doing so increases our opportunities and our efforts to make a positive difference.

Those of you who read the sermon announcement know that the upcoming Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, or GA for short, is my focus today. You might be wondering then what my purpose is in bringing up why we gather together here, at UUFB. Gathering in Bozeman, close to where we live, is very different than gathering in Spokane, Washington, which is 400 miles away and the location for this year's GA. I want to answer that question directly and honestly. This sermon is an unapologetic sales pitch. I know that most of you who are present here today haven't considered for a moment traveling 400 miles just to attend a grand gathering of Unitarian Universalists that occurs over a five day time span. My hope is that by the end of my sermon at least a few of you will seriously think about making the trip. And beyond that, I hope that even more of you will begin to consider how you might observe, or even participate in, portions of GA from here in Bozeman. Anyone can live-stream several of the GA programs. It is also possible to register for GA as an off-site participant which allows real time access to most of the programs online. Early registration, when the cost is the lowest, is from March 1st through April 30th. So as I share about what can and does occur at GA, I encourage you to think about what might motivate you to be part of this upcoming grand gathering of UU's.

Before I talk in more detail about this year's GA, I would like to get a sense of how many of you have attended a GA at some point in the past. Raise your hand if you have been to a General Assembly. And to give people an idea about where GA's are held, I would ask you to tell us location of the GA you attended. (Call on people with

their hands up.) Thank you for sharing. As the list of cities you just heard makes clear, it isn't very often that GA is held as close to Bozeman as it will be this year. And in an effort to make getting there easier, I have been in contact with Board members from our sister Fellowships in Billings, Helena, and Missoula about the possibility of a group of our members traveling to Spokane together.

So what is GA and what goes on there. It is a gathering of UU's from most and sometime all of the 50 states of this country. There are also Unitarians and/or Universalists from Canada, Mexico and other countries around the world. And it is truly a grand gathering. Here at UUFB during the month of January we averaged about 110 adults per Sunday service. At GA one or more of the services frequently draw well over 1000, sometimes 2000 or more. Like our service this morning, there is music at GA. Our choir this morning included fewer than 20 people. The choir at GA typically numbers 60 to 100. People in attendance typically belt out the hymns, clap their hands, and sometimes dance in the aisles. I have even heard an "Amen" or "right on" shouted out more than a few times.

Community worship occurs every day at GA, sometimes several times a day. But there is much more than worship that happens there. This year there will be over 100 programmed events. The first event for most participants will be the very grand Welcoming Ceremony. At this ceremony representatives of the hundreds of congregations represented will unfurl their banners and parade through the gathering of attendees. Throughout this "banner parade," upbeat music is played and those in attendance cheer on the folks carrying their banners. It is quite the spectacle. Beginning the following morning, workshops, lectures and panel discussions on a wide array of topics will be offered. These programs might focus on church management and finances, or religious education, or UU history, or environmental & social justice issues to name just a few of the topics that are commonly addressed.

Speaking of environmental and social justice, every year at GA there is a public witness event. This year's event hasn't been announced so I can't tell you what it will be. I can, however tell you about some that I have attended in the past. At the 2012 GA in Phoenix, Arizona, I joined with over 1000 UU's who participated in the "Interfaith Witness for Human Rights: Candlelight Vigil at Tent City Jail." This event included numerous other faith organizations and occurred outside the chainlink fence surrounding a tent city jail established by the notorious Sheriff Joe Arpaio. There were over 2000 inmates inside the fence, many of them undocumented immigrants. The temperature when we arrived at 8:00 pm was almost 100 degrees. We sang and held up battery operated candles. We did this to show our compassion for the inmates and to demonstrate our disagreement with their inhumane, and for many, unjust incarceration. We could see some of the inmates and they could see us. They cheered and waved their arms in the air as we sang to them. At the 2015 GA in Portland, Oregon, the public witness was titled, "A Sacred Public Witness: Commit2Respond to Climate Change." It featured leaders of an indigenous tribe of the area, the Lummi Nation. They shared wisdom with us from their tradition. Wisdom regarding living in harmony with nature. They also spoke of the dire consequences to their people as well as to all of us, if we continue our current ways. It was a sobering and also an inspiring public witness event.

And then there is the Ware Lecture. The Ware Lecture was held for the first time in 1922 almost 40 years before the Unitarians and the Universalists merged. Previous

Ware Lecturers included such luminaries as Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, Cornel West, Eboo Patel, Mary Oliver, Karen Armstrong, and Winona LaDuke to name only a few. This year's Ware Lecture will be given by Richard Blanco, who was selected by President Obama as the fifth inaugural poet in U.S. history. Blanco was the youngest, and the first Latino immigrant and gay person to serve in such a role.

So you can expect music, worship, workshops, panel discussions, lectures and social justice activities at GA. But you can expect more than that. You can also expect to make connections you never would have imagined. And you need to be open to the unexpected, even the amazingly unexpected. I can't predict what the unexpected might be. I can tell you though about a very unexpected and delightful experience I had several years ago that might give you an idea of what I am talking about.

This particular unexpected experience occurred at one of the worship services during a GA several years ago. The service included a folk band whose music spoke clearly and eloquently to UU values and principles. Prior to the band performing their first song the very large screen monitors in the hall displayed the title and the author of the song to be played. I had never heard of the band previously so the title was unfamiliar to me. I did, however, recognize the author's name. That caught me by surprise because it was an uncommon name. I hadn't had contact with the person I knew by that name in decades. As I sat listening to the band, I began to wonder. Was it possible the author of the song was the person I had known years ago? And could it be possible that the author of the song was one of the band members?

With my curiosity piqued, I decided to find out. After the service ended, I made my way to the back of the stage, which was no simple task since I was going the opposite direction than the 1500+ other people in attendance. When I finally got to the back of the stage, two of the band members were standing there talking. I approached and greeted them and let them know how much I appreciated their music. I then asked if the person who wrote the song was a member of the band. One of them informed me that he had written the song. I then mentioned three names and asked if they meant anything to him. He said yes, those were the names of his parents and one of his brothers. He then asked how I knew the names of his family members. I began my reply stating, "I am Duffy Peet." Before I could say anything else he gave wrapped his arms around me in a big hug and said, "you changed my life." Both of our questions were answered. I had known his parents because they took a canoeing class I taught and his brother and I had worked together at an agency in town.

Standing in that cavernous hall, the two of us were reconnecting after more than 30 years and over a 1000 miles distant from where we first met. When we knew each other before, he was a grade school student being raised in a Roman Catholic family. At that moment, next to the stage, I was looking into the eyes of a grown man who was now a successful musician and performer. The last time I had seen him he was struggling to cope with being bullied at school. Back then I had listened intently to his struggles and his pain. I had offered him compassion, caring and gentle suggestions that I hoped would be of beneficial to him. I hadn't known until that moment whether what I had offered made any difference at all. That evening he let me know that it had. Neither of us had the time or the energy that evening to catch up on each other's lives the way we wanted to. We agreed to get together again during the remaining time at GA so we could get to know one another again. We only had an hour or two in total. Our

short time together had a significant impact on my life. I think there is a good chance he would probably say the same.

As I said earlier, if you go to GA you need to be open to the unexpected. The unexpected can happen at any moment when you are there, or when you are anywhere. With that in mind, I encourage all of us to heed the words of Margaret Wheatley that we heard earlier, “expect to be surprised.” Expect to be surprised because “There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.” May all of us here at UUFB, and all of those who participate in GA, seek to discover what we, as a community, care about. May we “invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.” And may we strive to actualize the dreams we hold in common, and there are many such dreams. Together we have the power to bring dreams alive. Together we have the power to learn, to grow, and to share as we work to make the world a better place—a better place for us, and a better place for the generations that will come after us.

May it be so.