

“Reflections on General Assembly 2020”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Every year the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA, holds an annual meeting in June to conduct the official business of the Association. These meetings are referred to as General Assembly, or GA for short. General Assembly has been held every year since 1961. That was the year the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged to become the UUA. While the business of the Association is an important and essential aspect of what occurs at GA, it is by no means the only thing that happens. GA also includes worship services, workshops and public witness events as well as opportunities for socializing and connecting with Unitarian Universalists from across the United States as well as countries near and far.

My first GA was in 2009 in Salt Lake City. I was attending theological school at the time studying to become a UU minister. I understand that there was a significant contingent from this Fellowship who went to Salt Lake City for GA that year, possibly even more than the number who attended GA in Spokane in 2019.

Every GA is unique. From my experience, this year’s GA was exceptionally unique. This year, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, major changes had to be made in order to even hold GA. This year, for the very first time, there were no people physically present at the location where GA was originally planned to take place—the Rhode Island Convention Center in Providence. Instead of an in-person event, GA was held exclusively online. In past years the cost of attending, including registration fees, travel and lodging expenses, and meals, could run from several hundred dollars to well over a thousand. The cost this year was limited to just the registration fee, which was \$150. The virtual format and the significantly lower cost meant that people who otherwise may not have been able to attend could participate. As a result, this year’s GA attendance, at just over 4,900 registrants, was the third highest in the 59 year history of the event. I know of 8 UUFB members, friends and staff who registered and participated in various elements of GA 2020, and it is quite possible there were more than that.

Every year GA has a title which serves also as its theme. The title this year was “Rooted, Inspired, Ready.” The “Rooted” portion of this theme encouraged participants to focus on our Association’s as well as our nation’s history. In nearly every GA program or meeting I participated in the roots of bias, prejudice, discrimination and injustice were brought up for examination and consideration. The recent protests and demonstrations that have been occurring in many cities across our country and around the world meant that this focus was both highly relevant and very pertinent to what is taking place today. This focus encouraged all of us to delve into how we got to where we are now. The focus also asked us to go beyond the history that most of us learned throughout our lifetimes to discover the parts that got left out or glossed over.

I haven't studied U.S. history in depth but I have done enough reading to learn that what I was taught in school was seriously skewed and decidedly deficient when it came to issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, elitism and colonialism to name just a few of the isms that are currently prevalent in this country. My more in-depth studies of Unitarian, Universalist and Unitarian Universalist history have helped me recognize that our faith tradition has had a role in fostering each of the isms I just mentioned as well as a good number of others. So the focus on our roots, our history, helped open my eyes and my heart even more to those who today continue to struggle against the bias, the prejudice, and the discrimination that has roots in the dominant culture and the dominant narrative of our country, and our Association. One of the GA speakers suggested a new way of thinking about the history we have been taught through the course of our life. Howard Bryant, who is an author, journalist and radio and television personality brought up the old saying which asserts that history is written by the victors. He stated that if that old saying is true, then it would be reasonable to say that history, as it is written, could and possibly should be considered to be propaganda. I wonder how history teachers and scholars might respond to his assertion.

As I thought about this idea of history as propaganda I thought back to two workshops I had attended earlier that same day. The first workshop I attended that morning was titled "Colonialism's Impact on Palestinians and Indigenous North Americans." During that workshop one of the presenters used a word I had never heard before. Kia Bordner, a woman who traces her ancestry back to Native peoples of this continent, spoke of the epistemicide that has been and continues to be forced on the native peoples of this land. Don't bother trying to look that word up in your dictionary because it isn't there. She defined epistemicide as the eradication or "killing" of the epistemology of native peoples. In other words, those who arrived here from Europe attempted to wipe out all aspects of native knowledge and replace it with their own. This reminded me of a phrase I have read numerous times in books, including the one I am reading currently by Robin Wall Kimmerer, titled *Braiding Sweetgrass*. The phrase I am referring to is "kill the Indian to save the man." This phrase describes how Indian Boarding Schools that existed across this country did their best to erase the culture, the religion, the language and the knowledge of the Native children in their care.

And the word epistemicide seemed to describe much of what was talked about in the workshop titled, "Settler Colonialism and a History of Erasure and Exclusion." Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz was the presenter for this workshop. She is a historian and author of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, which is the UUA's "common read" book for 2020. The workshop description speaks volumes to the concepts of history as propaganda and of epistemicide. Here is how this workshop was described in the GA program book.

The concept of "A Nation of Immigrants" comprises a revised origin story of the United States. The common, almost official ideology, obscures the settler-colonial history that precedes and follows the founding of the state, although it does not succeed in erasing the policies of dispossession, genocide and chattel slavery.

The discussion about roots wasn't just about the past though, it was also about how those roots are connected to the present moment. Today multitudes of people are demanding that the systems of oppression that have been present since the founding of this country be dismantled. Many of these systems of oppression are based on racist beliefs and perspectives that have become entrenched and are often invisible to people who do not experience their impact directly.

Racism is something that the UUA has been cognizant of and attempting to address for years. For example, at General Assemblies in 1994 and 1997 delegates adopted resolutions calling on the UUA to become an anti-racist, multicultural faith community. Since the passage of those resolutions, studies have been done and reports written about the steps that our Association and our congregations need to take to accomplish the goals set out in these resolutions. Yet in spite of the resolutions, the studies and the reports, the congregations that make up the UUA continue to be significantly less racially diverse than most other religious groups in this country. And the percentage of UUA staff members, ordained UU clergy and religious educators who are people of color continues to be lower than that of the general population of our country. After 20-plus years of focus on this issue, we still have significant work to do.

The work that is still needed got significant attention at this year's GA. One of the ways it was attended to was by putting people of color as well as others who have been under-represented or discriminated against in our faith tradition, front and center. By doing this, the organizers of GA were actively working to de-center whiteness. If we, as a faith tradition, want to be more welcoming and inclusive, especially to people of color, then we need to demonstrate that they deserve to be front and center and they belong in leadership, not just sitting in the pews. As I said just a minute ago, as a faith tradition, we still have significant work to do.

I hope this gives you a general sense of what GA participants were exploring and learning about in regards to the roots portion of the theme. But roots was only one of three aspects of GA's focus. I would love to be able to share with you how inspiring various elements of GA were but I have to admit that I just don't have the ability to do that. I could tell you about my experiences and feelings, but doing so would be woefully inadequate. Attempting to convey via words the inspiration I found during GA would be a waste of my time and yours. Instead of telling you about the inspiration that I experienced at GA last month, I would like to invite you to experience it yourself. Even if you didn't participate in GA 2020 you can watch recordings of all of the business sessions as well as three of the numerous worship services that were held. You can find these recordings by going to the UUA website, uua.org, and type "General Assembly 2020 online events for public viewing" in the search box at the top of the page. Since I want you to get a sense of what was inspiring about GA I would offer the following suggestion. Unless long and involved committee meetings thrill you to no end, don't click on and watch the business meetings. I attended all of them and will admit that I did not find them inspiring even though I was grateful for some of what was accomplished in them. I would encourage you

instead to click on the link titled, “Sunday Morning Worship.” I found that service, which was the closing worship service for GA, to be very moving. I am confident that you will, too. For those of you who enjoy singing in or even just listening to a choir, I am certain you will appreciate the rendition of the opening hymn of our service this morning, “We Are....”

But what about the last word of the GA 2020 title—“ready.” I have to admit that I am not sure we are truly ready. I believe we want to see an end to the bias, prejudice and discrimination that is imbedded throughout our culture. I believe that we want to live in a world where our First, Second and Sixth Principles are tangible realities in the world. These three Principles lift up “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” call for “justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” and set forth “the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.” I know that I am, and many of you are, committed to living into these Principles. And we are willing to do what we can to dismantle systems of oppression. But are we ready—fully ready to do the work that will be needed? I would like to be able to say we are, but after so many years of falling short of even the goals set forth in the 1994 and 1997 resolutions I mentioned earlier, I have to be honest and say that I don’t know if we are ready. What I will say, however, is that if there has ever been a time when we needed to make ourselves ready, that time is now. The time has come for all of us to delve deeply into our roots, to seek and find the inspiration that will be needed to face the challenges ahead, and to ready ourselves for the important work that needs to be done. The time is ripe today. Together, let us find a way.

May it be so.