

G h o s t o f U U M A N P a s t

By Merri Beth Stephens

When I first started attending UUMAN in late 1992 I had just turned 30 years old. Shortly afterward, UUMAN's first two cradle UUs were born – Christopher Brown and Megan Wheeler. The congregation had just moved into its new rental space at the Roswell Business Park, where we could actually attach children's pictures on the walls. One Mr. Coffee machine could supply everybody with a cup of coffee after service. And if we got through a service without the Fire Marshall breathing down our necks for exceeding maximum capacity for the space, we considered ourselves blessed.

We owned 40 chairs, 15 hymnals, two folding tables, this pulpit and these three plastic stands. We also owned a few packs of magic markers and crayons, and paper. Our founding minister, Lauralyn Bellamy, donated the chalice, which she took with her when she left. We had no musical instrument. The worship leader would simply sound the first note of a song and everybody would jump in and try to hold on for dear life. It was simultaneously scary and liberating.

We did have this little thing called "Church in a Box", which was published by the UUA for small congregations that might have trouble filling the pulpit. I am proud to say I never had to use "Church in a Box." I did have a lay speaker cancel on me one Sunday morning at 8:30 a.m. but I just called Annette Pate and asked her if she could help me with some Emerson readings. She did, and we were a hit. See, people were a lot easier to please in those days. Expectations were lower. We were a lot more impromptu and homemade than we are now. If something like that happened now e-mails would fly, new sub-committees would be formed, and a task force commissioned to ensure it never happened again.

Lauralyn was often asked if she could wait for her salary. I honestly don't remember what her salary was, but let's just say that I'm glad she didn't depend on it to live. Lauralyn was a brand new minister. She hadn't yet been fellowshiped with the UUA when I came to UUMAN, but she was working on it. Her dream was to start a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the growing area of North Fulton County, and by golly, she put all of her energy into that task.

And here we are.

I look around and I'm amazed at what UUMAN has become. On the Wednesday before Christmas I came in for the Contemporary Decisions class and noticed the Christmas tree. It was a beautifully decorated tree, with bows and ribbons on it, and very nice ornaments. I couldn't get over it. And then I did that thing that old people do when they start reminiscing about the good old days. I started going on and on about how we used to have somebody's old thrown out Christmas tree, and donated ornaments that had seen better days, and how we had to prop the tree against the wall, because the Christmas tree stand only had two legs. Poor Suzanne Rezelman was the unwitting recipient of my ramblings. But she politely obliged me as I talked on about how poor we were in the old days. Finally, realizing how dull I must have sounded I just looked at her and said, "Well, I guess we are just attracting a better class of folks these days!"

Later that week I drove by here with my husband, on our way home from a party, and noticed the parking lot full of cars. There was even a City of Roswell police officer directing traffic! My mouth gaped open and I stared. Don said, "Honey, are they having another event at UUMAN that you don't know anything about?" And he laughed. But it was true. There was a time when there wasn't anything going on here that I didn't know about. Now more nights than not I drive by and there are people here. I continue to be amazed at what UUMAN's become.

Later that night I had a dream. I dreamed there were people all around me, most of them known to me, but some only by face and not by name. These people were in front of computers; they were typing. They didn't seem to notice me at all. I started looking over their shoulders. They were typing policies; they were typing procedures; they were typing permission slips and questionnaires. They were typing handbooks; they were typing policy manuals; they were typing flow charts and organizational charts; they were typing labels; they were typing notebooks and notebooks full of institutional documents. For a minute I thought I was at work. After all, law firms are all about massive amounts of documents. But then it dawned on me that these were UUMAN people, and they were writing these documents for this church. I started to sweat. I couldn't seem to get out from under the covers fast enough. What's happening? What's happening to my happy little family? AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!! It was then that I looked up and saw Cliff Brown in my bedroom.

Cliff: I beg your pardon. I am not Cliff Brown. I am the ghost of UUMAN's past.

MB: You sure look like Cliff Brown.

Cliff: Well, focus groups were held, surveys were sent out, and a task force was commissioned. The decision was finally made that the ghost of UUMAN's past should look like Cliff Brown, since most people recognize Cliff as a founding member of UUMAN. Besides, UUMA guidelines insist that we can't use any member of the clergy in this role without adequate compensation and an insurance bond large enough to cover possible damages.

MB: I see. That sounds like the UUMA – the ultimate bureaucracy.

We both laughed.

Cliff: Well, put your robe on and some shoes. We're going to take a trip. You might want to comb your hair too. You usually wear makeup, don't you? Actually, why don't I just wait outside for a few minutes while you get yourself together.

MB: Thanks, Cliff.

Cliff: I'm NOT Cliff.

A few minutes later we were standing in a room. It was very foggy in there and I couldn't see anything. But I could hear these godawful screeching sounds. What could this be? It was horrible!

MB: Get me out of here. This noise is killing me.

Cliff: Just wait a second. It will stop.

Sure enough, it did stop. And then I heard laughter. And a woman's voice saying, "Well, we tried. I guess we didn't know that one as well as we thought we did."

MB: Oh, my god. It can't be.

Cliff: Oh, yeah.

MB: That was the UUMAN congregation trying to sing!

Cliff: And that woman's voice. Did you recognize it?

MB: That was me.

Cliff: Right. Now, listen again....

I listened and I heard the woman's voice talking to some people in the Roswell Business Park after service. "One day we'll have our own space, with a grand piano, and somebody who can actually play it. And we'll have a music director and a choir. And we will make beautiful music." I was telling this to a visitor who had just walked in.

MB: We now have all that stuff.

Cliff: Right. Listen.

I heard the visitor say to me, "We have two teenagers. What kind of youth program do you have?" "Well, we don't really have any youth, except for Noah Saunders. And he just kinda hangs out here with us. But one day we'll have a youth group. They'll have their own space, and go on youth retreats, and have lock-ins, and do all those bonding things that young people do." The visitors looked at their shoes and politely nodded, and walked out. I don't think we ever saw them again.

Cliff: UUMAN has a youth group now, right?

MB: Right. Actually, I think they have a junior youth and a senior youth group. I don't know much about what they do, but I know that there are adolescents and young adults all over the place these days. I guess that dream has come true too. Okay, I get your point. I need to quit complaining about all the bureaucracy that has come about as a result of growth. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.

Cliff: Shh.... Listen.

MB: Oh god, it's me again. Am I still talking?

Cliff: My sources tell me that's what you do best.

MB: Where are we?

Cliff: We are in the basement of the current space. The time is March 1997.

MB: Oh, it's all starting to make sense to me now.

We were in a focus group about UUMAN's future. I was leading the group. It was becoming more and more clear to me that UUMAN's future growth and sustained health was going to depend on us making some major painful changes. I was starting to get very uncomfortable. I could hear voices of UUMAN members – "How can we ever grow when we won't allow different opinions to be heard? We'll never realize our full potential until we become real Unitarian Universalists and truly value theological diversity. We have never really been a part of the district or the denomination."

Cliff: Heard enough of that?

MB: Please. That brings back terrible memories of a very trying time when we parted company with our founding minister, Lauralyn Bellamy and embarked on our year of being a totally lay-led congregation. It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. I did my best as president of UUMAN, but I would have done some things differently now. Of course, having 52 lay-led services that year really held us together as a congregation.

Cliff: Indeed. Just as the congregation matured while Jim Saunders led them through a year of lay-led services, you also matured.

MB: Oh yeah, right, I've matured. Somebody told me not too long ago that I was staring down the barrel at 40, and not what I once was. Hmm.... Who told me that?

Cliff: Never mind that. What I meant was that you've matured spiritually. It's one of those paradoxical situations. The spiritual wisdom needed to take on a situation like that can only be obtained by going through the trying times and learning from them. And I mean that on the institutional and personal level. Those who went through that time came out of it personally

able to handle adversity better, better able to understand themselves theologically, and better equipped to explain exactly what this church and this denomination really means. UUMAN was baptized by fire.

MB: I am a different person now, I know that. But sometimes I wish I could do the whole thing over again, I mean the part with Lauralyn. I wish I had the chance to go back and be a better communicator with her.

Cliff: Okay, it's time to get over it.

MB: I am over it.

Cliff: Oh, you are?

MB: I most certainly am. I have definitely learned from that situation how to be in current and future relationships. Authenticity, you know... I strive for authenticity these days.

Cliff: I've heard. The new unedited Merri Beth meets with mixed reviews.

MB: At least people know where they stand with me. Ha!

Cliff: Okay, so you admit you've changed?

MB: Yes.

Cliff: And UUMAN has changed?

MB: Indeed it has.

Cliff: So why does that change bother you? Isn't change good?

MB: I don't think it's either good or bad; it's inevitable. I think it's a principle of physics. All things change.

Cliff: Right, sure, physics. Let's agree to let the scientific people discuss the scientific stuff, okay? I'm talking about your odd resistance to what you perceive as the new bureaucracy at UUMAN.

MB: It's about flip charts, Cliff. Don't you get it?

Cliff: I'm not Cliff.

MB: Whatever. My point is, I used to provide UUMAN with all its flip charts, back in the old days. I would get them cheap through work and bring them in when we got a shipment. It was sort of a silent part of my contribution. We all did that. We had to. Now I get yelled at for using flip charts that belong to a different department. Don't you see? Don't you?

Cliff: I see that you're nuts. Let me ask you this. Do you want to continue to supply UUMAN with all its flip charts?

MB: No. I can't do that anymore. We use too many.

Cliff: So get used to the way things are now. It's not about flip charts. It's about change.

MB: I guess.

Cliff: We have one more visit to make. Do you hear the applause?

MB: I do.

Cliff: Can you see it?

MB: I can.

The congregation had just overwhelmingly voted to call Greg Ward for settled ministry at UUMAN by a vote of 82 to 1. It was May of 1999. What an exciting day! We had called him back to the church on his cell phone and we were telling him the good news. All the long work the search committee had put in to find a settled minister had paid off. It was unbelievable, actually, that the 7 of us had agreed on who to present to UUMAN. Even more unbelievable was the fact that the UUMAN members agreed with us that he was the one they wanted. A truly stellar experience.

Cliff: Did you have any idea the changes he would bring?

MB: Odd you should ask that. I think I did and I didn't. I remember discussions while on the search committee. UUMAN definitely wanted

somebody vibrant and energetic. We wanted somebody who had the will to deal with some hard-headed people. We wanted somebody who had his own ideas. Greg was the perfect choice. So change was inevitable, wasn't it? I guess I am just not a visionary. I couldn't really see into the future very well. I mean, I know I wanted a church large enough to sustain a variety of programs. I wanted a church large enough to afford full time ministry, a church large enough to have a well paid Director of Religious Education, and an office staff. A church large enough to have a paid music director and paid pianist, with a choir and an excellent music program. I guess I just hadn't thought about the personal changes I would need to make within myself to stay here.

Cliff: Thus answering the question that is the title of this sermon, "Why am I still here?"

MB: Right. I guess what it boils down to is I need to be needed.

Cliff: You mean, it's not really about flip charts?

MB: Uh, right.

Cliff: So why are you still here?

MB: I don't know. The place is awfully close to my house.

Cliff: Roswell Assembly of God is closer.

MB: I'm trying to avoid your question. I am still here because so much of what I am right now is because of this place. I am not the same person that I was 9 years ago when I wandered into the Roswell Business Park location.

Cliff: So what's your beef?

MB: I don't really have a beef at all. I'm very proud of UUMAN and all it's become. I guess I just need to be needed, and UUMAN doesn't need me anymore. I used to feel indispensable.

Cliff: Honey, nobody is indispensable. This friend of mine, he started his own company, nurtured it and loved it and ran it for 10 years. Then he sold it. He continued to be employed there, but then the time came for him to

leave. That company is still around. See, nobody is indispensable. It's another paradox. We raise our kids to grow up to be independent people who can leave us and make their own lives. Then when that happens we grieve and want our lives back the way they used to be.

MB: You're right, ghost of UUMAN past. Sometimes I think we just can't be happy with the way things are. One thing is for sure and that's that I don't want to miss anything. You know, I would hate to leave here and then come back 10 years from now to find out that the whole congregation of UUMAN had been taken away in the rapture, and I was the only one left behind. I definitely don't want to be left behind. I kind of want to hang out and see how the whole thing turns out. I mean, wouldn't it be extremely cool if we learned that UU's are God's chosen people, and we're the only ones saved, and thus, the only ones going to heaven?

Cliff: Merri Beth, your theological premise is all wrong here. The very word Universalist means that we believe all are saved. How can you stand here and think how cool it would be if UU's got to go to heaven and everybody else went to hell?

MB: Oh, I don't want anybody to go to hell. I just want to see all their faces as they stand in front of the great white throne judgment at the judgment seat of Christ and hear the booming voice asking all Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists to get into the express lane to heaven.

Cliff: But what about all those who haven't had an opportunity to hear the words of Channing, Emerson, Campbell, Thoreau, Beuhrens, Sinkford or Ward? Should they just be cast into a lake of fire? I think you need more work on your UU principles.

MB: I guess I'm not fully enlightened yet, am I?

Cliff: I guess not.

MB: So I should stay here at least for a while, so I can become a better person. Good, the decision is made.

Cliff: So you need UUMAN?

MB: I guess so. My, how the tables have turned. UUMAN used to need me. Now I need UUMAN.

Cliff: Nothing has really changed. You are just now beginning to see things as they have always been. It's just that now you can no longer hide behind flip charts.

MB: Yeah, for me it was flip charts. For others, it's the religious education of their children. They claim they come here for their kids. They don't want to admit they need this place too.

Cliff: Is it the place they need?

MB: No, it's not the place. You're right. It has nothing to do with this space or this lot, or what building we're in. It's about what we are together, what we do together, and what we mean to each other.

Cliff: Well, I'm glad we could take this little trip into the past this morning.

MB: Yeah, me too.

Now, if somebody will go get a flip chart out of the closet in the hall, let's try to recap the major points of today's sermon. Just kidding. Seriously, though. Today's thoughts and opinions were mine alone, and do not represent those of the management of UUMAN, or any other member. I'd love to hear your thoughts though. Anyone?

Sermon reflection....