

## A Funny Thing Happened to Me on My Way to Retirement!

For Sunday, 30 August 2009

Cambria UU Church

Good morning! And thank you for inviting me to be with you this morning. It's very exciting to be present in the first year of a new Unitarian Universalist congregation! You all are way ahead of the game in having a fine meeting place for now, in a real, honest to goodness church. My home congregation, the Conejo Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in eastern Ventura County (think Thousand Oaks, and pronounced CVUUF, as Dolores probably remembers!), has been gathered for some 47 years, and after being wanderers from place to place in rented facilities for all those years ~ it was only last September of 2008 ~ a year ago ~ when we finally moved into and dedicated our own beautiful new Conejo Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship buildings in Newbury Park, right off the #101 at Wendy Drive. As a Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Candidate, I have brought a pastoral presence into Liliana's life,

We serve a really important function in that part of California, which is a very sleepy, quite conservative bedroom community near Los Angeles that I often refer to as a hotbed of social rest! We are not only the voice of liberal religion in that eastern part of Ventura County, but we offer many opportunities to engage with controversial issues not often heard about in that larger conservative Christian community, such as the CVUUF presentation of the play *The Vagina Monologues* in our church sanctuary... sold out and to standing room only, BTW!

Personally, it took me a very long time to find my way into any formal religion. I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, and finally left that for a long encounter with Existentialism when I was 18. Even though I was basically a spiritual person, I, like Moses and the Israelites, wandered for nearly 40 years ~ but my desert was a state of aggrieved atheism, suspicious of organized religion, as well as deeply concerned about fundamentalist Christianity's negative impact upon our society. (And ironically, I turned out to be a UU Christian ~ but that's a story for another day!)

So it was with some considerable skepticism that I first wandered in the door of a UU congregation, only to discover healthy religion for the first time in my life. Here I discovered a safe place to explore religious possibilities in community with many other searchers, and to be encouraged and supported on that path. I was so grateful to find kindred souls ~ that after a few years of getting familiar with all things UU, my first newsletter column as board president was entitled: *The Church with the Unlisted Phone Number*, because I was actually mildly annoyed that ~ up until then ~ I had never known about the existence of non-oppressive religion.

And not only that, but the bonus for me was that social justice activism was not only possible ~ it was a part of the Unitarian Universalist spiritual stance in the world! In fact, it's so much a part of who we are, that as many of you can affirm, it would be hard to be a "card-carrying" UU and not be involved in some way with social justice issues.

Several of our Seven UU Principles, which the association of member congregations do covenant to affirm and promote ~ lead us to act in accordance with the call to social justice as a religious imperative:

- The inherent dignity and worth of every person ~ leads naturally to supporting minority rights such as marriage equality
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations ~ engages us to act on behalf of those whose voices are not well heard in the public arena
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all ~ asks us to act beyond our own personal interests and beyond our own borders
- Respect for the Interdependent Web of all Existence, of which we are a part ~ acknowledges that we are to live simply so that others may simply live. This strongly suggests that we work on behalf of the health of the planet and all its living things.

In my middle 50s, I had only just begun to contemplate the concept of retirement. At the same time, I was suddenly beginning to become very intrigued with this Unitarian Universalist way of being in the world, since it incorporated so many facets of my life. During that time, I remember thinking how perfect the timing, as I now would have more leisure time to look into this deeply ~ so ~ fair warning! I allowed myself to become immersed in Unitarian Universalism. During the mid-to-late 1990s, it felt to me as though I were making up for lost time, because even though at that point I was only in my mid-to-late 50s, the vast area of philosophy and spiritual development had always been of interest to me, but ~ up until then ~ I had scrupulously avoided anything even remotely resembling traditional religion.

Credit must be given to two wonderful UU friends for introducing me to the depths and the possibilities of this faith tradition: the Rev. Lex Crane (Minister Emeritus of the Santa Barbara Unitarian Society) and Lex's spouse, Ginnie. Early on, I had noticed that Lex spoke at the CVUUF on alternate Sundays, so I made very sure to get there then. After several Sunday mornings, I was rather startled when I was asked if I'd like to sign the Membership Book. "Oh ~ you wouldn't want me!" I replied. "I'm an atheist!" Imagine my shock when the minister said to me, "That's OK ~ so am I!" Ginnie then added that many years before, Lex had briefly trained to become a Roman Catholic priest. This news was so intriguing to

me as a Recovering Catholic, that I signed the membership book on the spot, and the rest, as they say, is history.

UU World magazine was a great resource for me as a newbie, and we also had a traveling church library, but as an inveterate maker of marginalia, I soon wanted to get my own books, so I became familiar with our own Unitarian Universalist publishing house Beacon Press, as well as the UUA Bookstore. UUs were early into the Internet, too; did you know that the originator of the World Wide Web is a Unitarian from England, now at MIT, and also a major supporter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee ~ Sir Tim Berners-Lee?

Through a friend in my home congregation, I learned about General Assembly ~ held in a different city every year ~ and I begged to be a delegate to GA at Spokane, WA in June 1995. I instantly recognized GA as a sort of UU seminar ~ a way to learn about the denomination intensely over a four day period, and for the next 12 years, I went to every one: Spokane, Indianapolis, Phoenix, Rochester NY, Salt Lake City, Nashville (Gina Whitaker and I were roommates!), Cleveland, Quebec City, Boston, Long Beach CA, Fort Worth, and St. Louis. I only missed the last two due to moving households, but I hope to be at GA in Minneapolis next June in 2010.

Early on, I too, became involved with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, with all its human rights concerns, and eventually spent several years on that board, going back east several times a year to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Once my younger son began going to college in southern Massachusetts, I made several trips east a year, and of course visited our HQ at #25 Beacon Street, in Boston ~ right next to the State Capitol, and stayed at Elliot Pickett House, our historic UU Bed & Breakfast Inn on Beacon Hill, right in back of the UUA.

At each one of these travel opportunities, there were always chances to interact with local UUs, and to learn about their history in their own hometowns. We also have a wonderful way to travel via HOMECOMINGS, at <http://www.uurehome.com/about.html> a UU Bed & Breakfast travel guidebook, where one can find congenial spots to stay and to learn about local communities when traveling. That way, we can meet other UUs in their homes, and discover how other congregations hold their worship services. Gradually, I began to recognize that I had accidentally stumbled into a wealth of spiritual richness.

As I eventually became better informed about Unitarian Universalism, I also began to appreciate what a positive influence all of this was having on my life, and the joy of vital involvement with all life through caring commitment to others. I was learning how to live in a spiritual community, and learning to not be afraid of gentle confrontation. Covenantal relationships were a new concept to me, so it took some practice getting used to. Along the way, in the Fall of the year 1997, I spent 6 days on retreat with Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (I and about 2,000 others!) and that became a significant influence on my spiritual development. As this all became more and more compelling, I found myself motivated to finish an undergrad degree, and quickly went on into Starr King School for the Ministry, a UU seminary at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Five years later, I returned to Ventura County with a Master of Divinity degree, to work in Community Ministry, and suddenly became involved

with the New Sanctuary Movement. I almost immediately found myself deeply engaged with the family of Liliana Santuario ~ a New Sanctuary Movement mother living in sanctuary for two years now at the United Church of Christ-Simi Valley. UCC-Simi has a large parish house where Liliana has lived for the past two years with her hard-working spouse (he holds two jobs) Gerardo and their three children: Jerry, Susy, and Pablito ~ along with the remarkable UCC minister June Goudy and her spouse, Anne.

In the beginning of our relationship, in order to live up to and engage our 2nd Principle of Justice, Equity and Compassion in human relations in a concrete and personally meaningful way, I needed to learn more about Lilia's unusual circumstances, which were dire ~ and I needed to better understand her legal situation, which was precarious, to say the least.

As our First Principle encourages, I soon found myself recognizing the dignity and worth of every person ~ in this case ~ of an undocumented immigrant woman from southern Mexico. Her story goes like this: Lilia, then age 17, was an undocumented woman from Michoacan. Though now married for more than 10 years to Gerardo, an American citizen, with three US citizen children: Jerry, then age 7, Susy, 5, and Pablito, then 3 months old ~ originally ~ at the time of her entry, only age 17, in order to join her parents and older siblings, Lilia had tried to enter the US with borrowed documents. When turned away, she then crossed the border without permission ~ a misdemeanor, not a felony. At first, Lilia joined her family living in Ventura County and working in the strawberry fields.

Fast forward eight years to her application to the US Department of Homeland Security, when she applied for a Green Card after the birth of her third child in 2007. That simple act put her in grave jeopardy.

Thinking that her 10-year marriage to Gerardo, a Green Card would give her life a sense of security, Lilia had no idea that in fact her life was about to become a nightmare.

After an early morning encounter with ICE (Immigration and Customs enforcement) at her home with the three little ones in the Spring of 2007, Lilia fled with Pablito to St. Luke's, an Episcopal church in Long Beach, where she and her infant son lived in the church offices for 3 months. While she was very grateful for the hospitality they offered, it was less than ideal, since it was 76 miles one way for her family to visit, and only had a church office for her to live in with Pablito, who was still nursing. No one else was there at night or weekends, except on Sunday mornings.

Also, the Minute Men ~ self-appointed patriots whose vision of safety and security leads them to cut off from engaging in a positive way anyone they view as the Other ~ the Minute Men are now patrolling our southern borders with loaded semi-automatic weapons. The Minute Men decided to make a very big deal of their public opposition to the undocumented, so they and their supporters kept up an unholy noisy vigil right outside those church doors, 24/7, with throngs of chanting protestors angry with the church for hosting her, and bullhorns going night and day. It was very frightening for Lilia, all alone in those empty rooms at night and on weekends with her infant.

Finally, after 3 months in Long Beach, it was decided that Lilia and Pablito would be moved to the United Church of Christ in Simi Valley, which had a real parish house sitting unused, and located only 30

miles from her family home. That small UCC congregation of around 100 members (nearly half of whom are retired!) held a thorough process of discernment, and after much thoughtful discussion, were prepared to offer to become an official New Sanctuary Movement congregation.

And that's when I came into the picture. The UCC folks had determined to accompany Liliana and Pablito literally, 24/7. They were witnessing for their faith in the most fundamental way possible. I was honored to be the first person chosen to spend the first night there with the family, and I don't mind telling you that I hardly slept at all that night; I heard every noise! Soon it was my pleasure to volunteer to visit Liliana 3 times a week to give her English lessons. Getting to know her a little, I gradually learned her story, and marveled at her poise and serenity in the midst of chaos. Her spouse and children have that same sense of calm in the middle of stormy times, but the children have of course suffered much in this long process.

One aspect of the shadowy world of the undocumented that I learned of from working with Liliana is that ~ out of fear ~ it's often the case that they hardly ever venture out of the relative safety of the migrant community, which in this situation is almost all Spanish-speaking.

That explains why Liliana and others in this predicament are not yet fully English-speakers, although she is now quite able to hold her own, and as a bonus, my Spanish has improved considerably!

It's my great pleasure to share Liliana's story with you, in hopes of bringing greater understanding to the discussion around immigration reform, and to offer resources for connecting with the wider community doing that holy work. And I would like to affirm that for me, engaging in social justice work as an act of faith brings enormous personal rewards of joy and meaning into my life. For over two years now, while helping Liliana to become proficient in English, as a Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Candidate, it has also been an honor for me to bring a pastoral presence into her life.

May we all remain mindful, that since the earliest beginnings of our nation, unless we are 100% Native American, we all came from somewhere else. May we continue to work for peace, liberty, and justice for all.

I guess retirement will just have to wait. There's too much work to be done! My work engaging our Principles has been more than gratifying for me. So let me leave you with a question:

How might YOU engage our Seven Principles?

Amen, Blessed Be, and May It Be So....

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OoS Suggestions? Opening Words/Closing Words

Music, Hymns ("Wanderers, Worshipers", "I'm on My way!") Readings, Meditation, Benediction (inspiration!)

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For Community Ministry

"But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Amos 5:24