

Moderator's Report to the 2005 General Assembly
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It's GA Monday. We have been witness to a plethora of outstanding reports, a collection of sermons that stoke the fire and feed the soul. This year in particular, our assembly has been blessed, blessed by the words of Patrick O'Neill and Larry Ladd, the UUA Board and Rebecca Parker, Rob Hardies and Bill Sinkford, and I could go on. This year, in particular, we are the recipients of inspiration in abundance, inspiration that we did not earn, but joyfully accept.

It's GA Monday, and here is the Moderator's Lament: why, oh why, did I put the Moderator's report on Monday after all this fine preaching? What was I thinking? What is left to be said? I wrote a report for the annual reports collection. Perhaps I could read it to you. Perhaps we could read it responsively. Perhaps you could take turns reading it to me, much like a children's story. We could sit on the floor and have milk and cookies.

That's an attractive notion. But the milk and cookies remind me that there is, after all, one more thing to say. I was honored to meet UU minister and author the Reverend Robert Fulghum earlier this year, and like Robert, much of what I need to know I learned in kindergarten. So I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about manners - the manners we all learned (or were supposed to have learned) as very young children. I want to lift up three simple phrases: Please, Thank You, and You're Welcome.

So let us begin with please. Please find a ministry of abundance. Lay or ordained, youth or adult, find your ministry, a ministry that feeds the world we are in, a ministry that feeds our beloved Unitarian Universalist movement. Please find a way to give your time and talents.

Find a ministry, claim a ministry, answer a ministry that makes you and us catch fire. Yet this ministry must not just be a ministry that feeds the world around you, that furthers the things we love. Please make sure that the ministry you find feeds you, too. We do not need more sacrificial lambs, more martyrs to a cause. We do not need people whose egos stand in the way, who are more fascinated with being a victim than with the transformation going on in their own soul. We need people whose ministry makes their hearts sing, that brings out the best in them—we need that ministry in you. A ministry that not only satisfies the world, but one that brightens your own internal flame. For me, it is being moderator. The privilege to serve you in this capacity feeds my soul.

Catching fire, though, is not always what we want to do. There is in every one of us a bit of that reluctant prophet. Remember Jonah, who tried so hard to not answer the call? At first he just wanted to let that phone ring. He'd checked the caller ID, and he knew he didn't want to talk to Yahweh—people who do that kind of thing only get in trouble. He knew that answering that call would be hard. Answering that call meant that he'd have to put aside his boasting and bragging and narcissistic thoughts about what he wanted to do. Answering the

call meant that sometimes he would have to tell hard truth to people, do hard work on himself, allow himself to be transformed.

Well, we all know how that story ended. Jonah as got gobbled up by that big ole fish, and Yahweh spit him out on the beach only when he finally agreed to answer that call. Not only did he smell pretty bad for a long time, but there were other things that changed. Some big, some small. Jonah found a way to be God's messenger. That's the stuff that people saw. But there was also more. Inside himself, Jonah came alive. While he never again ordered fish and chips, he lived his days more fully, not in fear of what might happen, but looking forward to how he could transform the world.

That's what we need—people who answer the call. People who find a ministry that feeds not only the world, but themselves. That marries your gifts with the world's need, with what it is that makes you catch on fire. The job worth doing well, as we keep on saying and hearing, needs to be well done. So give it your best, make yourself come alive, and transform the world.

And just one more please: don't hold onto a job forever. When it is time for new leadership—and you all know what I mean—when it is time for new leadership, please, please, please move out of the way and leave space for others. For if a ministry, a call, a job, ends with us, it will end forever. Please, lovingly, move out of the way, and help another ministry come alive.

And now, let us move to Thank You. Where do I even begin? Let me begin by thanking my partner in shared leadership, the Reverend Bill Sinkford. It is no secret that I love working with Bill. I love his humility, his integrity, his willingness to be edgy. Even more, I love his willingness to trust my edginess. Bill once sent me a card with an image of a tight rope walker, walking on solid rope while playing out the other end - the end yet to be walked on -- into the void. We have a permission-giving partnership because Bill is a wise and strong and gentle partner.

I want to thank all of you who have showered my path here with kind words and useful feedback. Some of you say "you make running plenary seem so easy". Moderating plenary is the easy part. The hard part is the preparation, and that takes an entire crew. Please join me in thanking my crew chief, Nancy Lawrence, Assistant to the Executive Vice-President and the person who catches all my loose edges at General Assembly. And I need to thank another group of people who have worked into the wee hours of the morning so that I could serve you well: Deb Weiner, Nancy Pierce, Emily Mitchell, Rev. Lisa Presley, Nancy Lawrence, Annette Marquis, and Rev. Ned Wight. It takes an entire crew.

And there is a stunning group of leaders sitting to your right, the UUA Board of Trustees. If we're in plenary, they're in plenary. And they are busy at GA. Trustees conduct workshops, hold hearings, represent the Board in conversation with congregations and other groups, and wear themselves to a nubbin because they are accountable to our congregations and they just can't get enough of you. I moderate the meetings of the UUA Board, but your

Board is self directed, self led because they are all leaders. Please join me in thanking the members of **your** UUA Board of Trustees.

Thank you is critical. My day job is as an information technology consultant, and I work with an incredibly brilliant team - some of the smartest people I've ever met. I know smart, and I know leadership. As moderator, I have the pleasure of working with outstanding leaders: our committees and commissions, our districts, our congregations are all peopled with shining examples of leadership. Earlier this year, I was amazed by one particular example of grace under fire, leadership in difficult circumstances. I sent this leader - one of your leaders, a congregational leader, a district leader, a national leader - a small gift with a thank you note to recognize his leadership on behalf of our faith. The email I received in response speaks volumes: Gini: Thank you. This is the first time I've received a gift to thank me for my UU work.

Friends, we must do better. We must be generous and unstinting in our gratitude for service given. This is a low cost, high impact proposition. It is so easy that our failure to be grateful, to be thankful, is a sin even in our theology. So let's practice. Are there any religious professionals in the house? Are there any congregational presidents in the house? Here are our front line leaders, the people most directly responsible for leading our congregations into the future. Let's give them a resounding **thank you**.

Take this back to your congregation. If you leave a meeting without thanking the chair, without thanking the members who gave of their time and talents, shame on you. Thank those who teach RE, those who garden, those who visit. No one owes us their time, their money, their love, their faithfulness. Be unstinting and generous with your gratitude. Say thank you.

And finally, You're welcome. There are thousands upon thousands of people who need the redeeming message of this faith. It is our job to bring them all home, every last one of them. Every Sunday morning, hundreds of people use the "Find a Congregation Near You" pages on uua.org. And they visit. You know they visit. If you're a come-inner, remember the first time you visited a Unitarian Universalist congregation. You probably didn't visit in ignorance. You knew something about us before you arrived.

The people coming to your congregation this Sunday know about us, too. To double our growth rate, we need only keep a larger percentage of the visitors we already attract. And we need to be able to welcome them, to say **you're welcome**. When they show up at our doors, we need to greet them like the long lost cousins they are. We need to open our hearts and pour out our welcome. Those who join us will be Euro American and Latino and Latina and African American and Asian American and Native American and rich and poor and middle class. These, our new members are straight, gay, bisexual, transgender, undecided, and indeterminate and they will come walking on feet or with crutches or rolling through our doors. They are our brothers, our sisters, our cousins, trying to find a religious home that stands on the side of love and we will be jubilant that they have found us. And we're going to practice this skill, too. In just a moment, I'm going to ask you to find someone nearby who you have never met before. Maybe they're right next to you, or behind you. Maybe you need

to get out of your chair and move to another row. I will want you to go find this person quietly, and not use this time as an excuse to greet your best friend in the next row. Pretend it's tomorrow morning, and you're meeting this person in the sanctuary or social hall of your congregation. When you find your perfect stranger, I want you to greet them.....Not so fast. They may not want to be hugged. They're your cousin, not your therapist. Walk up to them and figure out what they need to feel welcome, and provide it. When you're done, return to your seat.

How was that? Close your eyes for a minute and tell me about the person you greeted. What color were their eyes? If you don't know, next time make sure you notice. You can't tell what color a person's eyes are unless you look at them. It's a good self-check.

OK, open your eyes and give me some feedback. Raise your hand if greeting someone you didn't know made you uncomfortable. Raise your hand if you were more pleased than you expected to be. Raise your hand if you want to try this again. Raise your hand if you greet visitors this way every Sunday morning. You can't miss a Sunday. 75% of new members surveyed decided that a church was right for them the first time they visited. That's 3 out of 4 of the folks who joined. What happened to the many who didn't join?

I'm going to say something radical here: if they don't find what they need in our congregation, we are called to send them to another UU congregation that will meet their needs. We should give them a map and driving directions, even offer to drive them to another church the next Sunday if need be. We should send their visitor information to the neighboring congregation so they'll be ready to welcome them with open arms. If there's not another UU congregation in our community, we need to connect them to the Church of the Larger Fellowship. Joe Sullivan, the district president of the Southwest Conference, put it far better than I can. At the November meeting of the District President's Association Joe pointed out that while we know that all of our congregations are different, visitors don't know that. "If they visit a congregation in Texas and we don't take care of them," Joe said, "they won't go look for another UU congregation when they move to New York or California, they'll just go away."

We need to look beyond growing our own singular congregation and work to build the one faith, one communion that is reclaiming its position as the preeminent liberal religious voice in North America. One faith that stands on the line between church and state and boldly states "you will not take this beloved democracy and corrupt it into a theocracy!" One religious community that is committed to saving the next generation from ignorance and shame-based education and isn't afraid to provide whole life education about human sexuality. One religion that proclaims that Universalist gospel that all will be saved, one church that works in fits and starts but works doggedly nonetheless to create the beloved community where are all welcome and all have dignity. One church that stands on the side of love, and that compels those who believe to turn their belief to action to create a better world. This is Unitarian Universalism, the religion claimed by over a half million people who aren't in our congregations, the faith that a million more are looking for.

So do the simple things: **please** find your ministry and help others find theirs. **Thank** those who serve. Spread the news that all are **welcome**. Please. Thank you. You're welcome. Thus endeth the Moderator's report. Let the congregation say Amen.