

Living With History
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Prayer from Little Gidding, T.S. Eliot

In this time when we may take a breath of relief, when some sense of normality has been restored, when some semblance of sanity has prevailed, we share in some immortal words from the poet T.S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not know, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Benediction Joel Miller

Let our lives be a prayer
That waters dry souls
Mends broken hearts
Refuses to be terrorized
Seeks this world's beauty
And carries us through its storms

Sermon

Hello, UUCA! It feels like forever since I've been here with you. And indeed, it's been since Christmas. What with a holiday vacation, a requisite holiday cold, Mother Nature's snowstorm, and a long planned weekend off, a conspiracy of events has kept me away for over a month. But I'm glad to see you again!

And what a month it has been. God knows what the history books are going to make of this stalemate we have just emerged from, and which we hope will not happen again in 3 weeks time. I know many of you have suffered, and indeed our whole country has suffered the effects of a broken government. I think about what history will make of it because I've been rather obsessed with history lately.

While I was in Texas with family I spent quite a bit of time reflecting on the past. I delved into the fascinations of [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) where you can reconstruct a family tree going back a multitude of generations in just a few hours. I was able to trace certain branches of my family back to 14th century England. And of course I was thrilled to see that there were quite a few lords and ladies among my ancestors. I'm thinking about going across the pond soon to claim rights to a castle or two.

I also visited Mt. Vernon for the first time as an adult (and let me just ask, why do we always wait to do these things when we have visitors in town? It's like there's a rule or something!) I was pleased to see that they are doing a much better job now of telling a more complex story about Washington including an extensive exhibition about his slaves and what they must have experienced on his plantation.

And then I've been delving into the history of this congregation. We're just past the 70th anniversary of its formal founding, and I was

curious to learn what the past might be able to reveal about the present and help lead us to in the future.

All of these investigations brought me up against the challenges of talking about history.

One is the question of whose history we are talking about. When I was investigating my family history I was only able to go that far back on my father's father's line, who were generally well-to-do landed gentry who came over, literally, on the Mayflower, to see what they could make of this new country. My father's mother's family, on the other hand, were poor Irish farmers. I could only trace one line of her ancestors back further than the 19th century - clearly her grandfather had some how got lucky and landed a privileged woman for a wife. One does wonder about how a poor Irish farmer snagged her. I'm sure there's a salacious tale in there somewhere. All my grandmother ever said about her was that she spent most of her time waiting to be waited upon. Knowing my grandmother, I bet she waited a long time. I'm glad to see so many attempts these days to tell the untold stories of the disenfranchised and the marginalized, but it's a recent trend indeed.

Another challenge is the question of interpretation. For the study of history is only in small part a history of facts. There is interpretation and selective telling through the eye of the historian at every step of the way. As I said, Mt. Vernon is doing a better job at telling a fuller story about Washington. But our tour guide must have said a hundred times that Washington stood out among his early American president peers because he granted his slaves freedom upon his wife Martha's death. It was only when pressed that he admitted that in fact only half the slaves were freed because the other half were owned by his wife's first husband's family. Nor

did he make any provision for those he freed. So that meant that at the time of Martha's death, those that were freed were turned out without homes or livelihoods and they likely had to leave family members behind, as surely the slaves from both sides of the family must have intermarried.

And lastly, there's the problem of perspective. When telling history people either want to concentrate mostly on the good and laudatory, or to expose the bad and corrupt. It's hard to hold the good and the bad together in tension with one another and not feel that you have to choose sides. But as someone said to me recently, the mark of wisdom is to be able to hold opposite ideas in your mind at the same time and know both of them to be true.

So as I tell you what I've been learning about the history of UUCA, I'm trying to keep all these cautions in mind: that I will at best be telling an exceedingly incomplete story, including those events that early historians of the church thought were important, and mostly oral history about much of the rest. Each of those tellers, written or verbal, had their own interpretation and selection process. I don't know how many of you were able to see the posters in the hall a few months ago asking about people's history with church governance. People were asked to put up stickie notes with their experiences at particular points in time. And almost every section had completely opposite experiences stuck up side by side. Remember, wisdom is about holding two opposite ideas in your mind and knowing them both to be true.

So let me tell you the mostly glowing tales of things to be proud of in this congregation's history, and then we'll talk about some not so glowing tales.

Officially founded in 1948, what was then called the Unitarian Church of Arlington, was an offshoot of All Souls Unitarian Church in DC. As the deprivations of WWII set in, people in Arlington often weren't able to even find gasoline to be able to drive in to church. A. Powell Davies, the minister of All Souls around this time was a great evangelizer for the faith, and he encouraged many new congregations to form in the cities and towns around DC and this was the first. An assistant minister was loaned to the group and they got underway fairly quickly. Within ten years the congregation went from 40 or so who gathered in someone's home, to almost 800 adults and, get this, 660 children - the largest Unitarian church school in the country. They had to rent schools on Sundays to find space for them all, and even had to cap the membership at one point.

From the very beginning, UCA was at the forefront of the struggle for integration. Starting in 1949 they held summer workshops that brought together black and white young people. They had to call them workshops because if they called it a school the state would have shut them down, since integrated schools were illegal in Virginia. These workshops continued every year until 1965. They offered social time but also tutoring and advanced academic offerings recognizing that students from the black schools would have been seriously underprepared. In 1959 the church youth group received a national award for helping to pave the way to integration.

When Hungarian freedom fighters rioted against the communists in 1956, the church sent two tons — two tons! - of clothing and \$2000 dollars in aid to the refugees. They took in several of these refugees and supported them until they were able to be on their own. These refugees continued to come to church even after they were independent. One said,

“We like to come here. It is such a happy church. In your church all are the same. You know that the mechanic is needed, just as the doctor or professor.”

In 1957 they held large picnics in public parks. One of the couples in the church, the Eldridges, were African American, and when the police saw Mrs. Eldridge sitting on a picnic bench with white people they arrested her because her very presence was “tending to incite a riot.” The church rallied to her defense and the charges were soon thrown out with the judge saying, “Clearly Mrs. Eldridge is neither disorderly or turbulent.” The Eldridge’s son was one of the first black students in one of Arlington’s white schools.

They pushed the boundaries in other ways. They had one of the first sex education classes in a church school, though they called it, I love this, a class for “sex problems.” At one point the minister invited a Rabbi to come speak and someone phoned in a bomb threat. They canceled the service only to find there was no bomb, and so they held the service the next day with a standing room only crowd. Laypeople took turns standing guard at the church for months after. That same minister, Ross Weston, rapidly gained a reputation as a rabble rouser and soon a segregationist group circulated a flyer naming him that said “hunting with firearms or bow and arrow is prohibited in Arlington county. But the use of the horsewhip is still legal and most effective.”

What’s rather remarkable about this church is that it wasn’t just the ministers who were radical. People were attracted to this church *because* of its progressive attitudes and members showed up in large numbers for protest events. Members housed hundreds of people who came for the Martin Luther King, Jr.’s People’s March. They spoke up for cause after

cause. They formed the first senior housing project called Culpepper Gardens. Culpepper was a member of the church who donated his large house and grounds for the building and they organized a non-profit corporation in the face of multitudes of barriers.

I love the way some of these historical stories are written. Ruth Tryon, one of the congregations founders and stalwart lay leader wrote the first published account in 1974. The minister at the time ended his forward by saying: “A handsome woman is a jewel; a good woman is a treasure. Ruth Tryon is both.” Clearly the me-too movement was not yet born. Ruth writes with pride about congregational member Joseph Fisher, who was elected Moderator of the UUA in 1964 and served twelve years in that position, despite what Ruth called the “tumultuous years of racial, feminist and youth ferment.”

The church had an outstanding choir director beginning in 1952 named Vera Tilson, who stayed for 30 years. She took the choir on tour all over Europe, summer to summer. In each section of the history Ruth Tryon would write something like: “UCA started the Arlington cooperative pre-school, one of the first of its kind. And the choir toured Scandinavia.” The church supported refugees from Vietnam and El Salvador and became a sanctuary congregation for undocumented refugees in Central America. And the choir toured in Spain. UCA helped develop the congregations in Fairfax, Alexandria and Accotink. And the choir toured in Belgium. Prominent members of the congregation were instrumental in child welfare reform. And the choir toured in England.

The burgeoning growth in the congregation prompted the building of this award winning sanctuary and some of the current constituent parts in 1964. And in 1994 significant renovations and additions took place. And in

more recent years, recognizing the desire to be a community gathering place and not just a church, the Center and the Activity Room were added.

The activism continued. In the 80's and 90's the church was involved with homeless shelters and feeding the hungry, supported the UU Beacon House Community Ministry in DC, helped found the Unitarian Universalist Affordable Housing Corporation, held leadership in the Arlington Gay and Lesbian Alliance, called for peace and disarmament, attended to the AIDS crisis, advocated for hospice care, constant and countless environmental causes, and hundreds of other activities and concerns I couldn't begin to list.

In 1992 UUCA became the first UU congregation in the mid-atlantic region to vote to become an official Welcoming Congregation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer peoples. When the Virginia House proposed explicitly making gay marriage illegal, UUCA held mass public commitment ceremonies for hundreds of gay and lesbian couples. In the early part of this century UUCA was a foundational force in creating VOICE, Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, a church based community organizing effort that has had huge success in advocating for social change collaboratively with other faith groups. The congregation has long consciously struggled to address its lack of racial and cultural diversity. And all you have to do is walk over to Fellowship Hall after the service to see the multitude of social action initiatives we are currently involved in.

It hasn't only been social justice, though. UUCA people have long known how to have fun. One of the early social groups was called CLAMS: Chowder, Liquor and Marching Society. One wonders how they marched in their liquored up condition! This was soon changed to a more

decorously named Chatter, Laughter and Munching Society. Educational events and groups have been ubiquitous; from the Day Alliance to the Layman's League and every other kind of discussion group to be imagined. Religious Education has always been one of the strongest parts of congregational life, with innovative programming and cooperative leadership. There were innovations in worship as well, with a liturgical dance program that was known denominationally. Chalice Theatre, a multigenerational community theatre, was founded 22 years ago and is still going strong. And, of course, the choir that toured internationally.

By necessity of time and space I have left out enormous numbers of other achievements and activities. I'm sure the long-time members among us will be telling me about the ones I've left out later. But one thing that truly stands out for me in the entirety of this history is the enormous time, talent and resources that lay people have given to this enterprise over the decades. This is not a history of ministers. It is a history of ministries, not just supported by but enacted by strong lay leaders and members. Case in point: in the 50th Anniversary edition of the history of the church, there is a picture of the finance officers, including Gene Mulligan and Bob Gayer. Gene and Bob continue in that capacity to this very day. You'll find them in the office counting the collection.

And I must also make time for telling about some of the challenges and difficulties. As I said in the beginning, nothing is all good or all bad, and our real experience lies somewhere in between.

The very first called minister of the church, wildly popular and charismatic, had to be let go when he left his wife, who was beloved by the church, for a member of the congregation. The second minister, a transfer from Methodism, was almost fired in his first year because they

thought he was preaching “old fashioned New England Unitarianism and even Methodism” Thus begins a long practice here of holding ministers to a precarious standard of being “not too religious.” Easy for a minister to do.

Like any other UU congregation I’ve ever seen, there have been the requisite share of arguments and divisions among the lay people. A trustee in the late ’60’s dubbed UUCA the Church of the Perpetual Crisis, saying the people are “vigorous and articulate in supporting their individual views, whether that be the budget, the minister’s theology, or the color of the outdoor church sign.” But I’m sure some of these arguments were not so benign, and many people have been deeply hurt over time by thoughtlessness and sometimes cruelty. Again, like every other congregation.

There have been ongoing struggles with financial resources, despite the relative wealth of the membership. There has almost never been a time in the congregation’s history when it didn’t carry significant debt.

Despite the overt and sincere efforts over the years at bringing about integration in Virginia and other civil rights and examining its own racism, the church has never achieved any significant membership of people of color. Public support of equal marriage did not make the church immune from its own discords over homophobia.

There have been ongoing challenges with ministers. Kim Beach, minister from 1978 to 1996 was forced out by a petition calling for his resignation. Several assistant and associate ministers have left without real transparency over the reasons. And, of course, most recently, your very popular and charismatic minister, Aaron McEmreys, was forced to resign

his ministry here and his fellowship in the denomination because of his sexual misconduct in this congregation.

Lest this leaves us with a sour taste in our mouth, I want you to look around and see what a strong and committed congregation this clearly is. We are all the sum total of good and difficult histories. The question is what do we learn from them and take with us. There is no such thing as a pure and safe place. Resiliency is the greatest test of health.

One of my colleagues who served as interim in a church that had suffered sexual misconduct wrote this in a beautiful sermon:

“People, the world is filled with churches who’ve experienced misconduct, broken covenant and broken hearts. And the choice before all of them is always whether they will ... strive to mend the hurts, accept the truths that help you heal, and become the congregation you were born to be.

Believe me, if you become THAT congregation — one that has discovered how to build relationship from discord, care from conflict, love from broken trust... If you become THAT congregation you will have people beating down your door to be part of what’s going on here.”

In my time with you in just these short months I know that you can be that congregation. You have been in the past. And you will be in the future. You are not the sum total of your ministers achievements or misdeeds. You are the congregation that has, does and will own its ministry in this church, in this community, and in the world.