

# **Soulful Journeys**

## **The Faith of African American Unitarian Universalists**

*Edited by Mel Hoover and Jacqui James*

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" proclaims the first line of the song I learned in childhood as the Negro National Anthem. It is included in our Unitarian Universalist hymnal, but its wisdom is far too easy to overlook. Unitarian Universalism is a hymn in many parts.

In a faith community that is still predominantly white, the personal stories, the songs, of Unitarian Universalists of African, Asian, Native American, and Latina/o descent can be drowned out by the dominant melody. The risk is that those stories will remain unheard and invisible, encouraging our faith to hear its song as the song of white people only.

Unitarian Universalism is changing. There are more persons of color and Latina/o adults in our pews. And, thanks to adoption and blended families, our religious education programs are home to far more children whose lineage traces to Africa, Asia, South America, and the indigenous cultures of the United States.

We are committed to transforming this faith into one that is truly anti-oppressive and multicultural. The stories in this pamphlet are the faith journeys of African Americans who have found a home in this great liberal faith. We publish these stories with the hope that the UU choir will always include these voices.

"Lift every voice."

-- Rev. William G. Sinkford  
President  
Unitarian Universalist Association

I was born and raised in a National Baptist Convention church. At age three, I felt called to the ministry, but by age ten I experienced doubts about the nature of God and the purpose of humankind. I was active in the church and always asking questions. By age fifteen, I had been tried for heresy and convicted of sin, and the right hand of fellowship had been withdrawn. It was then that I joined the Universalist Church. With the Universalist Church of America's ecclesiastical endorsement, I entered college and then theological school -- a discontented theist with growing deistic leanings.

After completing theological school, I served a rural Universalist congregation part-time for three years, worked as a prison chaplain for seven years, worked with a Unitarian Universalist city mission agency for ten years, and am now serving as an interim minister. Religion is important to me as a way to understand existence. Humans exist to experience life and I am unsure and unaware of any ultimate purpose or design. I want to

enjoy life in the here and now, and the UU church is a place where I can, with self-respect and dignity, while exercising freedom and responsibility.

--Rev. Thomas Payne

When Christianity failed me, I had nowhere to turn. As a college student, I learned to question everything, even the most deeply held matters of religious faith. It seemed logical to me that whatever was true could stand up to the test of reason. No rational answers were forthcoming from my religious community, however, to questions concerning matters of faith. My cries of "why" and "why not" were answered by a wall of silence.

In my senior year, a friend convinced me to attend a Unitarian church service. At the end of that service I was convinced that here was a place I could explore my deepest questions, in company with others who had similar questions. I was ecstatic and could hardly wait to share this good feeling with others in the church, but the people immediately around me had each moved with a different group as they walked toward the exits. Thus, as the congregation moved out of the sanctuary, I was left standing alone, and no one seemed to notice or to care. For me, church has always been a community of belonging; I found no community there that day.

Years passed before I heard Rev. David Eaton speak and began attending All Souls Unitarian Universalist in Washington, DC. In my grandmother's church, we sang, "With God, all things are possible." This is the article of faith that allows me today to seek community among Unitarian Universalists and to seek Unitarian Universalists in the communities of my belonging. For, if God is One, we are one with God and with one another in the universe. For me, these are the true and logical meanings of the words Unitarian and Universalist.

--Rev. Yvonne Seon

I have come a long way from the Methodist church that first nurtured my religious growth. Unitarian Universalism has allowed me fuller growth and larger areas of service. I hope that my spiritual growth will continue, and that my ability and willingness to render service to others will likewise expand.

--Gladys M. McNatt

I met my wife, Rose Edington, in theological school in Rochester, New York. On the surface, we appeared to be opposites in many ways in terms of our backgrounds and birthplaces. Rose was an American Baptist from St. Albans, West Virginia. I was an Episcopalian from Columbus, Ohio. Whenever we were together it was a study of contrasts: male/female, city/country, free church/liturgical, and black male/white female.

Despite our differences, we were able to discover and explore, in our supportive, liberal seminary community, new theological and sociological worlds and to grow into them.

However, before finishing seminary school, we discovered that the community that supported us so well personally was no longer satisfying us spiritually. We were religious journeyers, seeking truth wherever it was to be found.

We became ministers and focused on ecumenical/interfaith/community ministry. We enjoyed our work but didn't feel we had a personal religious community. When our daughter, Melanie, was born she became a multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious child. We wanted for her what we had experienced while growing up: a religious community that nurtured and cared for her and her self-esteem, and accepted her for herself. We also wanted a faith that would expose her to values that promoted justice, equity, peace, and a concern for the whole of life.

After searching among a variety of faiths for a community in which our theology, sociology, and family reality could be affirmed, we decided that Unitarian Universalism was the right choice for our family. Although we would like to see more racial diversity throughout the Association, our UU Principles and Purposes affirm Melanie as a female and lift up the vision of a pluralistic world where difference is honored and respected.

I remember how good I felt when told about a conversation between Melanie and her friends. When asked what she would choose to be if she could select her own religion, Melanie proudly responded, "I am a UU and that's just what I want to be." We have found a home for our "multi-family" and believe others like us can be at home in Unitarian Universalism.

--Mel Hoover

I attended a social justice workshop where the discussion focused on "What can we do to attract more African Americans to our denomination?" I sensed eyes focusing on me, the only African American present. A woman from Savannah, Georgia, said that her fellowship placed ads in the papers and made attempts to attract African Americans to their group in 1958, but "nobody came." It gave me a sense of joy to tell her that "I came." It took me ten years to join a Unitarian Universalist group in Germany, and now, thirty-three years later, I am a UUA Board member from the district that includes Savannah. I remembered the ads and wondered who were those people called Uni-tarians and later Unitarian Universalists.

My hope, dream, and wish for us as Unitarian Universalists is that we can embrace pluralism as it is expressed in our Principles and Purposes. I believe that every step or effort toward this goal counts and makes a difference, even if it happens ten or thirty years later. I'm glad I came to Unitarian Universalism and that my friend in Savannah finally learned that her efforts did attract someone.

--Leon Spencer

The search for a religious community for my children, Tony and Jen, and myself is what led me to Unitarian Universalism. I wanted my children to have a religious education

experience that would allow them to determine their values and beliefs about ultimate reality, human nature, ethical behavior, and the meaning and purpose of their lives. I wanted them to be part of a faith community that would help them learn to incorporate their religious beliefs into their daily living.

We found a place where reason and rationality are honored, where there is a deep commitment to peace, liberty, and justice for all. We found a group of people who encourage open and honest searching about religion, are willing to explore many religious perspectives, and are committed to helping each of us grow in self-knowledge and interpersonal awareness. In Unitarian Universalism I found a religion for my children and myself.

--Jacqui James

When I was eight years old, my parents, Alan and Jacqui, joined the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, and I began my journey through a Unitarian Universalist religious education program.

One of the most lasting values I gained from that religious education process was a great appreciation for the diversity of systems of belief. I learned to accept, tolerate, and appreciate differences in people. In church school we were given a great deal of exposure to other religions so that we could always make an informed choice about what we were going to believe.

Growing up in a Unitarian Universalist religious education program was extremely helpful in developing and honing my powers of critical thinking. Because my religious education encouraged me to ask questions, I developed the ability to ask myself questions to clarify my values and functions as a mature individual in society. It is an ability that I cherish and employ every day.

The key ingredient to any human endeavor is the people who choose to participate. I was fortunate to have a number of excellent role models in my church school teachers. These members of the congregation volunteered to help educate the youth of the church community in what it meant to be Unitarian Universalist, and they were instrumental in shaping my religious outlook.

That I am still a Unitarian Universalist is largely due to my religious education experiences. As I made the transition from youth to adult, my understanding of the religion grew with me. I was able to redefine my values as I encountered situations in the real world that fundamentally challenged the belief structure I had developed while younger. Unitarian Universalism allowed me to grow and develop without encountering an unyielding dogma, thus enabling me to retain my intellectual curiosity about life and religion.

--Tony James

Unitarian Universalism for me places a high value on the freedom to choose, to question, to grow. I feel that I have come home to the spiritual part of my being.

--Bill Norris

In the Pentecostal church where I spent my early years, I worked hard to recruit children for Sunday school. I became disillusioned when this activity was more or less overlooked. One day the pastor, whom I considered "God," decided arbitrarily to leave our church and to return to the mother church. We were told we could follow. That meant we would have to go all the way from West Philadelphia to North Philadelphia.

I wondered why, when we weren't supposed to wear nail polish or wigs, the minister did so and justified it as a professional necessity. Why were movies so bad when she owned a television? She said she could monitor what she watched, as if we didn't know how to preview movies. Taking note of the frailties of the flesh and that my "God" had clay feet, I withdrew "in spirit" from this church. By this time I was in college and had read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. After reading the passage about getting to heaven and finding out that God is a white man, I became more skeptical about "the church" and what it meant to me.

Eventually I joined the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration. The warm reception by its members first attracted me. When I realized that "hell and damnation" and "guilt by association" were not preached there and that I was recognized as a rational human being, able to make wise choices and use good moral judgment, I continued to worship there. I believe in God, a power greater than myself. This enables me to maintain a sense of self, guides me to the right people when I need support, and helps me to make decisions and maintain my lifestyle.

--Marion L. Napper

I have come to be very grateful for the balanced marriage of cerebral searching and loving affirmation that is Unitarian Universalism. I still ask the "why" questions, but now I feel affirmed in asking, in prodding others to search the hidden corners of their lives as they inspire me to search mine.

--Lola E. Peters

My understanding of myself as a minister begins to emerge as, in faith, I begin to focus my life more upon my liberation than upon my oppression, seeking the places where I can include instead of focusing on the places where I am excluded. In the past few years, I have found tremendous meaning and sustaining power in my relationships with people whom the church and society have consistently devalued: incarcerated women, persons with AIDS and mental disabilities, lesbians, and gay men. It is in these relationships that I have begun to see the Spirit shaping a ministry of mutuality -- a ministry with, rather than a ministry to, which so easily becomes a ministry at. In the poorest quadrant of

Washington, DC, we provide nurture and challenge to any willing to affirm a simple covenant of love. Together, we seek and find joy in relationship and glory in struggle.

--Alma Faith Crawford

From an early age I found it difficult to get satisfying answers to my many religious questions. I am still trying to find answers, but I now realize that there is no specific religious persuasion to furnish me with answers. I must look within myself for the knowledge that satisfies my quest. Being a Unitarian Universalist, I don't feel stigmatized for asking questions. I enjoy the camaraderie of exchanging ideas and concepts with fellow Unitarian Universalists. My search for truth continues. It's more enjoyable, however, to be associated with others who are also seeking their own individual truths and answers.

--Dr. James A. Robinson

My spiritual journey began in a traditional black Baptist church where I attended Sunday school regularly and was a member of the Junior Choir and active in the Young People's Union. Until I was seventeen, I was a true believer of all that I was taught there. I never doubted; no crises of faith occurred. When I entered college, I learned of the many religions founded on beliefs in the hero god, the virgin mother, resurrection, and so forth, beliefs that I had thought belonged only to Christianity. Exposed to the history of religions, I found my unquestioning faith slipping away. The Holocaust destroyed the last vestiges of my belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, just, and merciful god. I stopped attending church. Nonetheless, I continued to feel a deep yearning for what I now recognize as spiritual community.

In 1950 I went to work as secretary to the minister of The Community Church of New York City. It was there that I discovered Unitarianism. I was overjoyed to find I could participate in worship services without leaving my thinking processes at the door. I waited a year before signing the membership book. I needed to experience the church's motto that it, "knowing not sect, class, nation, or race, welcomes each to the service of all," to see if it was a reality. When I was convinced that a sincere and genuine commitment by the members and ministers to live out this inspiring sentiment existed, I became an active member. From my vantage point, my spiritual journey has been long and arduous. It has also been deeply rewarding and fulfilling. And it is not yet over.

--Lillian C. Thomas

I feel strongly that if I am to be a good Unitarian Universalist, I should try to help make the Association more responsive to people like me. So far I find it difficult to think of being a member of any other church. What I miss most of all from the churches of my youth are the music, singing, and lots of black people in the congregation.

--Norma R. Poinsett

By most standards my Catholic education was liberal. I attended a Jesuit college and, surprisingly, found many parallels between liberal Jesuit philosophy and Unitarian Universalist philosophy. The Jesuits and the Oblates of Saint Francis De Sales in high school taught me the value of questioning. At the Church of the Restoration, I found a congregation where other views were welcomed and values were based on inquiry and practiced in daily life. My experience as a Unitarian Universalist has been gratifying; I've had ample opportunities for exploring religious and social values as well as altruistic activities. My family and I are attracted to the open and inclusive atmosphere. We've made friends in this congregation, gained much from the experience, and been able to integrate many of our former religious values.

At a regional Unitarian Universalist event I attended a few years ago, I was surprised to see such a small number of blacks and other minorities. I then learned that Restoration is not typical of most other Unitarian Universalist congregations. I am fortunate to belong to Restoration, which is located in a progressive multiracial neighborhood of Philadelphia, and shares many qualities with the neighborhood it serves. The congregation is diverse racially and socially; my experience there has been enriching. It is significant to me to be able to blend my previous religious values in a meaningful way, especially when I can do it in my own neighborhood.

--Tim Styer

When I was a child living with my family in Mount Pleasant, Texas, the world grew around my doorstep. It was a kind world and afforded me a glimpse of nature's grand works. With the help of Daisy, my paternal grandmother, I came to view nature as the depository of spiritual forces. Under her patient tutelage, I learned how to see God in all that was around me. I learned to recognize God's touch in the gentle shimmer of a flower petal, to see the outline of God's grand face in the colors of a sunset, and to feel God's breath in the gentleness of a soft breeze. They were lessons I've never forgotten. The white-painted church where my family worshipped stood on the edge of the woods. In the summer, the door was left open and you could look outside and see fireflies flicker and hear crickets scratch out their raspy notes and the distant hoot of an owl. It seemed to me that the sounds outside blended almost naturally with the singing and mournful prayers that came from inside. My early life was a fusion of organized religion and the spiritual forces associated with nature.

When my family and I moved to Boston in the mid-1950s, I lost most of my immediate contact with nature and very soon the concrete of urban life replaced the path between the trees. By the early 1960s, I had essentially abandoned the church and, like many young urban black people, had assumed a militant posture relative to what needed to be done to correct America's ills. Because so much of what I saw around me seemed so far from what seemed right, I became fully involved in the social movements of that time. In retrospect, I now know that I was looking for something that would allow me the room to express my spiritualness and at the same time pursue a social justice agenda. I found that something in Unitarian Universalism. This is not to say that good work is not being done in other denominations. One simply chooses that path that best suits one's journey. I

found my best path in Unitarian Universalism. What I am is an African American who is a Unitarian Universalist Christian. For some reason, I get the feeling that Daisy, who had practically no formal education, would understand my choice. She would probably wish me well, squint her eyes at the sun to see how much of the day was left, and then go back to her flower garden.

--Ted Thomas Jr.

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