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### **Standing on the Side of Love in Salt Lake City**

I have one word to describe this year's Unitarian Universalist General Assembly: "Inspiration." I came away from our gathering in Salt Lake City feeling inspired, feeling energized, feeling proud to be part of this Unitarian Universalist movement. Each day brought a talk, or an event, that moved me, that made me think, that reminded me why we are together in community. Let me share a few of them with you.

Each year at General Assembly we hold an event that we call our "public witness." This year our theme was "Standing on the Side of Love." This refers of course to our ongoing support of full rights and dignity for our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters. But this year, we extended our focus to include the people who do the work that others don't want to do – gardening, construction work, house-cleaning, care of children and elders. Many of them came to this country to earn a living, but without proper legal documentation. So we hosted a rally in a central square in downtown Salt Lake to protest a Utah statute that has just gone into effect that deputizes state and local law enforcement officials to enforce federal immigration laws. Speakers included the local Catholic and Episcopal bishops, and our president Bill Sinkford, but most movingly, local people, Mormons, who have been affected by harsh, even brutal, enforcement of our immigration laws. So we affirmed our belief that, in religious terms, we are all children of God; that we are all brothers and sisters; that there is no such thing as an "illegal" person. In front of local television cameras, we affirmed our commitment to "stand on the side of love" with those "crime" is that they came here in order to support their families.

At our Sunday morning worship, we heard from the Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, minister of the UU congregation in Clearwater, FL. He spoke of growing up in Southern India, the son of a Muslim father and Hindu mother, of discovering Unitarian Universalism in Bangalore, and then of coming to the US to study for the ministry. Through much of his life, he felt like a visitor from outer space, like someone who never seemed quite to fit in. And he related his story to the Hindu myth of Trisanku, who ended up suspended by the gods between heaven and earth.

As a leader of people of color within the UU movement, Rev. Janamanchi spoke of his frustration that sometimes our commitment to diversity feels more like an aspiration than a reality. And yet he stays, despite his doubt and ambivalence, because, he says “Unitarian Universalism is the way I want to live my life.” And he called on us to stick it out too, because our strength lies in our ability to welcome the stranger, in our commitment to difference rather than similarity. “In our faith,” he said “the margins hold the center.” Our good news is that we prefer the pluralism of a world of strangers to the uniformity of a rigid set of beliefs, that we love differences rather than sameness, entering our lives through the presence of the stranger. We are called to create holy communities where strangers are not only welcome, but where we do the work of healing and transformation by wrestling with the strangers within ourselves.

And he closed by calling on us to breathe life into a shared future of mutual openness – accepting others in all their differentness while affirming our common humanity.

At each general assembly, we host a prominent speaker at what we call our “Ware Lecture.” Our speaker this year also spoke of diversity. Dr. Melissa Harris-

Lacewell is a professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton University; she is a life-long Unitarian Universalist; and she is the daughter of an African-American father and a white Mormon mother. She spoke of her study of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; of her disappointment in her country as the world saw black people being allowed to starve on their television screens. She spoke of hope that began to rise again in her as New Orleans began to rebuild and as a man of mixed African and white descent campaigned for and won the presidency of this country.

And she spoke of all the problems facing the country and the world, as the campaign ends and the hard work of governing begins – a global economic meltdown; hatred, war, and violence as prevalent as ever; a growing gap between rich and poor; a climate crisis that threatens to change our planet home irrevocably; and so much more. As UUs, we put a great deal of emphasis on reason, perhaps too much. And she reminded us that we need to temper our reason with faith – faith that, in spite of the evidence, together we can change things, we can make the world fairer and more just. Faith is a different way of knowing; it is a practice in intellectual humility. Faith is what tells us that we are not alone and that we can build a great movement. Black churches gave people faith that there was a way of justice for them when there seemed so little reason to hope, when all the evidence seemed to suggest otherwise

Unitarian Universalists, said Dr. Harris-Lacewell make the most audacious faith claim of all – that we can join together to make a world that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of every single human being, and the way we do that is through the power of Love.

The service at which our UU clergy advance in their ministries is called the Service of the Living Tradition. Our speaker for that service was Rev. Dr. Mary Harrington, whose words I used for our reading this morning. Rev. Harrington also spoke of our basic human need for faith. In her mid-50s, and in the midst of an active ministry, she was stricken with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. A person who had always led a vigorous outdoor life, she had to give this talk while seated, and she entered and exited the stage in a motorized cart. After recounting her shock at learning of her diagnosis and of the seismic shift it made in her life, she said this:

It's still hard to talk about. But this is what I know for sure.  
We are so lucky. Somehow we got here, each of sitting here tonight; somehow we got a body, got to have a life. . . . How amazing that we are here, right now, that there *is* a "here." As Meister Eckhart, the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Christian mystic, wrote: "If the only prayer you say in your entire life is 'Thank You,' that would suffice."

And despite everything, Rev. Harrington called on us to be aware of the beauty of the world all around us, and of our own inner beauty. We have a "communal responsibility to share our treasure with others." This is our "holy work."

When all is said and done, it's a vast and endless Mystery.

Life is astounding; it is beautiful; "It is enough."

We are in good hands – love is all around us and inside us. Love underlies everything.

So – those are a few of the reasons that I felt inspired by General Assembly this year. We are fortunate to be part of a movement that makes the most audacious claim of all –

that together we can make a world that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity  
of every human being;

A world that glories in the beauty, the wonder, the mystery of this precious life;

And that the way we do this is through the power of love.