



# THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST HISTORY AND HERITAGE SOCIETY BULLETIN



## A Message from our Journal Editor Kathleen Parker

Two weeks ago, many of us gathered for the third triennial UU History Convocation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The quality of the work presented was superb – very promising for inclusion in next year’s Convo-based issue of the journal, Vol. 41. Just as important as the quality was the vitality and depth of meaning found in each paper.

Our sermon contest winner, the Rev. Karen Johnston, deserves special mention for her outstanding sermon delivered at the Convo Sunday worship service, “Illuminating the Ministry of Joshua Young Still Preaches Today.” The story of Joshua Young is based on Johnston’s original research of a nineteenth-century abolitionist Unitarian minister, Joshua Young, who officiated at the funeral for John Brown. Young’s work on behalf of freedom for black citizens can inspire us still as we are challenged to recognize racial oppression around us and work with integrity to eliminate it. This Convo worship service was an uplifting way to conclude what had been a wonderful time of shared study and reflection, connecting with friends, and renewing of spirit.

Meanwhile, the articles you will see next spring (2017) in Vol. 40 include a wonderful mix of histories: an examination of Servetus’s anti-Trinitarian theology in sixteenth-century Europe, an untangling of the marital history of Hopton Haynes in nineteenth-century England, the Unitarian struggle over free speech in America during the Great War, and a closer look at Thomas Mann’s Unitarian experience with Stephen Fritchman in post-World War II California. One other submission is still a possibility!

Finally, having served as editor of our UU history journal since 2010, I want to add a personal note of remembrance for Rev. Dr. Neil Gerdes, who was for many years a wonderful source of support and encouragement to me. When Meadville Lombard agreed to publish *Sacred Service in Civic Space*, Neil served as my editor. He pointed out what was missing, and urged me to read, for example, George Huntston Williams’s edited history of the Harvard Divinity School (which I did!). Neil became a colleague and a friend, and his sudden passing is a shock and sadness to me, as I know it is for so many whose lives he touched. How lucky we were to have known this kind and generous teacher, a supportive companion to students young and old. We will miss him.



**Left:** Kendyl Gibbons, Senior Minister at All Souls UU Church in Kansas City performed 'Radicals on the Prairie: A Story of Universalist Heresy.' **Right:** Thursday evening re-enactment. Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, Co-Minister of Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, Minnesota - talked to Convo participants about the Ames Chapel and Unity minister Frederick May Eliot. Part of the pre-conference tour.



## Making history in the cloud

by Jim Nugent

Much of the work of the history and heritage society is communication and nowadays a good portion of that communication takes place on the internet. Most members reading this newsletter are reading it on their computers, tablets, or smart phones; only a few members still get paper copies. We use free internet video conferencing for board meetings, we post on Facebook, over 260 folks take part in our UUHHS-chat list serve, membership dues are collected using PayPal, Tweets are tweeted, and our websites are visited by people from around the world.

The history and heritage society has a number of web based services:

- \* uuhhs.org -- is our primary website with information, links, and connections to all of the society activities
- \* uudb.org -- has about 400 biographies of notable Unitarians and Universalists
- \* uuconvo.org -- holds papers and photographs from Convo2010 & Convo2013 and will soon be updated to cover Convo2016.
- \* uuhistoryandheritagesociety -- on Facebook has the latest news
- \* @UUHistorySoc -- for the latest Tweets
- \* juuh.org -- web domain set aside for possible future use of the Journal of UU History
- \* uuhs-chat -- history & heritage list serve open to all UU history buffs
- \* e-mail -- we use it for newsletters, surveys, board work, newsletters, and notices. It's ubiquitous.

If you are skilled in the technologies that make these services possible then we would like to hear from you. We're always on the lookout for UU history buffs who are also writers, content editors, fact checkers, IT geeks, coders, or social media mavens. If you are interested in learning more, send an e-mail to Jim Nugent at: [editor@uudb.org](mailto:editor@uudb.org)

If you have server and Information Technology skills, you might want to volunteer (approx. 20 hours a year) to oversee our annual domain name registrations and web hosting. Writers and editors are always needed to compose, revise and proof pages to any and all of our websites. If you know your code and html you might want to volunteer to oversee the UU Convo website which gets updated every three years.



### CONVO HYMN CONTEST



Congratulations to Elizabeth Alexander, winner of the 2016 Hymn Contest, which has become a tradition at Convo. Her submission was chosen from nearly twenty pieces, which were judged in a completely blind process by three members of the UU Musicians Network who volunteered considerable time to the task.

Elizabeth wrote both music and lyrics to her composition entitled "As We Sing Our Joyful Songs." She and her husband attended the opening session of Convo on Thursday evening, where she both led and accompanied her hymn's first performance. Elizabeth is a member of Unity Church – Unitarian in St. Paul, so she didn't have to travel far, and we were glad she could be there. The hymn was also sung as part of the Sunday morning worship service.

## IN MEMORIAM

*Over the last few months the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage community has lost a number of friends and family. It is with love and heavy hearts that we honor their memory.*

### IN MEMORIAM

DEEDEE AGEE SPRECHER  
1946-2016

Deedee was the daughter of the writer James Agee and Mia Agee and the beloved wife of the Reverend Paul Sprecher, minister of the First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist in Bridgewater. She passed away at her home in Scituate on October 1 after a four-month struggle with cancer, surrounded by her husband and sons. A memorial service was held at the Old Ship Church in Hingham, MA on October 15.

Deedee was born Julia Teresa Agee on November 7, 1946. Her grandmother called her “Chickadee” and her rendering – “Deedee” – became the name she used for the rest of her life. She was both a visual artist and writer, with a long list of honors and accomplishments in each. Pictures of some of her works are on-line at [www.DeedeeAgee.com](http://www.DeedeeAgee.com)

The UUHHS extends our deepest sympathy to Deedee’s family and in particular her husband Paul, who was a devoted and faithful member of our Board for most of the last decade, keeping both the financial and membership records in good order and contributing in countless other ways.

“There's no contradiction in painful regret and deep gratitude existing in the same space.”

- Deedee Agee Sprecher

### IN MEMORIAM

EVANGELINE R. COEYMAN  
1921-2016

Evangeline graduated from St. Luke's Hospital School of Nursing in 1945 and very soon thereafter served in the Army Nurse Corps in Europe during World War II. She experienced the horrors of battle in settings such as the Battle of the Bulge, Paris just after liberation, and concentration camps in Austria and Germany. On return from the War, she enjoyed a thirty-five year career as a nurse and nursing instructor at her Alma Mater. About ten years ago the Alumni Association of the School established a scholarship for a graduating senior student in her name. A resident of the Allentown, PA area her entire life, she was active in Veterans Affairs in eastern PA and served other community organizations. She had a generous heart and an incredible memory for remembering names of not only all her students, but their spouses and children.



### IN MEMORIAM

NEIL W. GERDES  
1943-2016

Neil was found dead at his home on Sunday, November 6, age 73. He was Professor Emeritus of Meadville Lombard Theological School. Its President, Lee Barker, wrote of his passing: “Neil was Unitarian Universalism's librarian extraordinaire, having served on the faculty of Meadville for 40 years prior to his retirement in 2013. He was a wonderful mentor to students, a lover of books and information, a passionate spokesperson for tradition and academic protocol, an erudite conversationalist, a man of very goofy humor, and a champion for liberal theological education. He gave much to our school and our students and to our movement. His is a profound loss.”

Neil was also a key leader of Collegium from its founding in 1975. He was in attendance at the 2016 Convocation in the Twin Cities just a week before his death, though mostly confined to his room feeling poorly. Services were held on November 20th in Chicago at the First Unitarian Church, where Neil was a member for more than 30 years. Memorials may be made to Meadville Lombard Theological School.



**Canadian Notes** from Rev. John Marsh

The Unitarian Universalist Historical Society of Canada had their annual Mark DeWolfe lecture webcast on October 23. The subject was Lotta Hitschmanova, the founder of the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada. There was a panel of three presenters: Clyde Sanger, author of a biography on Lotta; Joyce Thierry, author of the entry in the online Historical Dictionary of Biography, and David Rains, a former employee of Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, who is now the volunteer coordinator of the effort to have Lotta's image placed on the Canadian \$50 bill.

Next year's essay will be on Mark DeWolfe and the struggle to have openly gay ministers accepted in our movement. It will be presented by Mark Belletini on October 22, 2017.



**Left:** Collegium Distinguished Scholar Rosemary Bray McNatt, President of Starr King and Sofia Betancourt, during Sunday morning presentation.

*For me my most meaningful and profound learning has come from the pages of books, often guided by great teachers. For me the most critical task of theological education is the spiritual formation of men and women into ministers. Thus my job of providing the best theological libraries I can and of teaching spiritual direction whenever possible has been one of my life's primary pleasures and commitments.*

— Neil W. Gerdes

**Right:** Theme speaker, Tisa Wenger, religious history professor at Yale University, during her Saturday morning talk.



**PRESIDENT'S POST**

CONVO 2016 has come and gone. The long weekend was jam-packed program-wise, from the Thursday bus tour of UU sites to the worship and concluding sessions on Sunday plus two very full days between, with events from 8:30 in the morning to late in the evening. All-in-all it was a spirited, rich and rewarding experience with many highlights.

Those who were unable to attend can look forward to reading on-line or in our next annual *Journal of UU History* some of the many very fine lectures and papers. Unfortunately, there is no way to capture the personal interactions and interesting Q and A that make gatherings like this so meaningful.

Of course this all didn't "just happen." Planning began more than a year ago and in earnest the last few months. The "Convo Team" took advantage of ZOOM to "meet" virtually, across four time zones, and with increasing frequency as the event neared. The Team was made up of representatives from the Boards of both UUHHS (Kathy Parker, Barbara Coeyman, Helen Zidowecki and myself) and Collegium (Jay Atkinson, John Leeker and Stephanie May). Fortuitously, the UUA Midwest Region has its own History and Heritage Committee (the only such region to have one, I believe), and the Chair of that Committee, Victor Urbanowicz, joined with us actively in the early planning. Eventually were added two more its members (Carol Jackson and David Conradi-Jones) to form what became the Local Committee. Especially in the last few weeks before Convo commenced the Local Committee handled innumerable tasks – expected and unexpected – with enthusiasm and grace. We could not thank them enough.

In preparation now is an Evaluation Survey, to be sent soon to all attendees at this year's Convo. Please respond if you are among them!

Other ongoing efforts include making documents from this Convo as accessible as possible to others. And even now we have begun discussions about Convo 2019, including location, theme and even consideration of whether we might try a springtime Convo next. Whether or not you attended this year, I would be happy to hear from you if you have thoughts about these or any other issues relating to Convo or UUHHS.

Earl Holt  
(EarlHolt@aol.com)



## Channing Grave

I have been conducting tours of Mt. Auburn Cemetery for many years. My clientele has included my own church members, neighboring congregations, Coming of Age groups, Universalist heritage tours, and seminarians, among others. I became interested in Mt. Auburn after I began to serve as minister in Watertown, MA. Over 90% of the cemetery land is located in Watertown, but the front gate is in Cambridge, so the Cemetery has the privilege of a more revered real estate address. These tours invariably end with the monument that was erected to William Ellery Channing soon after he died in 1842. As soon as you approach the marble monument, you notice the severe deterioration caused by pollution. I guess we would call it acid rain. You can barely read the inscription to Channing now.

Please see the UUHHS website for information about our fundraising effort to restore this important monument, and to download a copy of the brochure outlining the project. We expect to launch a Faithify fund raising effort very soon. Altogether we need \$15,000 to restore the monument. Please support our effort to "Bring Channing Back," and make your check out to UUHHS (with Channing Monument in the memo line), and mail to our UUHHS address in Dedham, MA. Every time I finish a tour I feel very sad to see the slow decline of this monument to a person who is so central to our history. Please consider a contribution today.

-Mark Harris

## 2017 Tour to Unitarian Sites in Poland

Join Jay Atkinson for this 2017 historical study tour of Unitarian sites in Poland. This tour will start in Kraków followed by stops in what was once (1560-1640) the Unitarian heartland of Poland. We will stay for two-days at a conference and resort hotel near the town of Raków—the Polish Brethren's intellectual center from 1598 to 1638. We'll make a day-trip to Raków and then to historic sites of Polish Brethren worship, some preserved or restored, others sadly neglected and in ruins. Returning to Kraków for two nights and a full day, we will end the tour with Sunday morning worship, followed by departure for home. Local Unitarian leaders will be our hosts.

Tour organizer, retired UU minister Jay Atkinson, taught UU history at Starr King and Meadville Lombard, and is now a research scholar at Starr King School for the Ministry. He visited Poland in 2004, 2006, and 2014, and has written on the history, ecclesiology, and social ethics of the Polish Brethren as well as on precursors of humanism, religious tolerance, and interfaith pluralism in Poland.

Jay hopes to keep the price of this tour under \$1000, not including travel to and from Poland. Full cost and registration information will be available by early December 2016. For questions, and to put your name on the list to receive further information and tour updates contact Jay Atkinson: [jayatk40@gmail.com](mailto:jayatk40@gmail.com).





## UUs, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, and “DEFYING THE NAZIS: THE SHARP’S WAR”

Unitarian Universalist history made it to national television this fall with Ken Burns’ newest project “Defying the Nazis: The Sharp’s War.” The program, which aired on PBS on September 20, 2016, featured the story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp, a Unitarian minister and his wife who followed the call of the American Unitarian Association to run refugee efforts in Czechoslovakia right before and during World War II. The documentary followed the daring journey of the Sharps from their home in Wellesley, Massachusetts to the crumbling Czechoslovak Republic, which the Nazis invaded through the Sudetenland in 1938. Through photographs, maps and interviews millions of viewers learned about the risks and travels of the Sharps, drawing parallels between the refugee crisis of World War II and the refugee crisis of today.

The documentary keeps its focus on the Sharps as Americans in the midst of foreign crisis, but does give a brief context of the presence of Unitarians in Czechoslovakia. Some viewers may have wondered whether the Unitarian church in Prague survived through the war and the Soviet occupation that followed, a point not discussed in the film. According to the Unitaria website, the Unitarian church in Prague, Unitarianism began to grow as a religion in Czechoslovakia in the early 1920s. The first president, Tomáš Masaryk, had recently come into office, bringing with him his American-born wife, Charlotte Garrigue who was a Unitarian. The 1920s were prosperous for the liberal minded church, drawing a large congregation to their church next to Charles Bridge under the leadership of Norbert Čapek, the creator of the Flower Communion practiced at many UU churches around the world.

The Nazis arrested Čapek for his radically liberal preaching and sent him to Dachau, one of their many concentration camps, where he died in 1942. After Čapek passed away and the Soviets came into power, Unitaria became labeled as a “philosophical society” and names were taken down of those that came to meetings. One congregant I interviewed described these as dark times, saying that she stopped going to the church so as not to risk her children’s safety. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, a term used to label the throwing aside of Soviet Rule and creating the democratic nations of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the church leased out its large spaces near Charles Bridge to businesses, like the black light theatre there today. The facade is still up though, the same one that the Sharps likely saw 75 years ago. The church picked up in population, gaining many congregants that left the church in the Soviet period as well as young congregants. Today the church runs services every Sunday, and a Vespers service every Wednesday, to their growing population one block from their original site under the ministry of Rev. Petr Smojeský. To find out more about this vibrant and historic congregation, visit <http://www.unitaria.cz/>.

-Phoebe Cos



Right: The original entrance to Unitaria, the Unitarian church near Charles Bridge in Prague.