

## Letters to the Editors

*The Editors welcome letters from all our readers. Note: a special collection of letters in response to "Salvation by Character" by Davidson Loehr (and his reply) is presented separately in this issue.*

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RE: "Eco-Justice and Ministry" Carol Hepokoski (Vol. 2, No. 1)

I was glad to see Dr. Hepokoski's article on light pollution in the most recent issue of JLR. It reminded me of a quote from Sarah Williams we keep on the family refrigerator: "I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night."

For me, this quote describes the place where my theology and my activism meet. The connection is powerful and deep. If we never have a chance, as human beings, to experience the awesomeness of nature--both in its beauty and its power--how will we learn the great spiritual lessons? How will we come to form great theological questions? Without seeing the stars, can human beings really believe that there is anything greater than ourselves?

I applaud Dr. Hepokoski and JLR for helping make clear that liberal religion is truly a meeting of belief and practice. In saving our view of the stars, we may well save ourselves.

Sincerely,  
Sean Parker Dennison  
Interim Minister  
UU Church of Stockton, California

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RE: "Religious Humanism" by William Murry and "Reflections on Class" by David Bumbaugh (Vol. 1, No. 2.)

Thank you so very much for posting the very provocative talks delivered by Bumbaugh and Murry at the G.A. They are even better when read than I recall their being when I heard them. Are Thandeka's and Hepokoski's papers going to be posted? I'm particularly interested in Thandeka's because I recall its being the clearest and most accessible summary of her ideas I've heard to date.

Thanks again for your Journal. It's essential reading for lay folk such as I and for ministers.

Walter Herz  
Cincinnati, OH

*Editor's Note: Carol Hepokoski's paper, "Ecojustice and Ministry" is in Vol. 1, No. 2. Dr. Thandeka's GA address from 2000 is not online, although her 1999 address, "Why Anti-Racism Will Fail" is in Vol. 1, No. 1.*

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RE: "The Changing Ministry of Information" by John Weston (Vol. 1, No. 1)

What a wonderful article. I am so pleased with the new procedures for information sharing between ministerial candidates and congregations in search. I have been aware of the changes but I must admit that I had not read this article describing the philosophy behind the development of the procedure. I am even more pleased with the careful process of discernment that is evident from this article that was used in coming to this intentional process.

As a human resource manager, I find myself selling the process of carefully preparing for interviews/selection. I often tell our managers, "This is a pay me now or pay me more later world. If you don't do your work before you hire someone, you will surely do it after s/he is hired". What I mean when I talk with managers is, you better know what you want this person to do, what is the skill set needed to do it and what are the behaviors that indicate that the skill is present in that person. Once you know that you can ask the right questions of the candidate and their references that will give you a shot at getting the right person for your job--if every one tells the truth. Not everyone will so look for disconfirming information about your 1st impression look for incongruencies in the information that is shared.

This article helps sell the idea of thoughtful, honest (even if painful at the onset) self examination for both the congregation and the minister in preparation for the selection dance. I believe that ministers and congregations that take it to heart and do the work will get paid big dividends in the form of better placements.

I have in the last 2 years facilitated 3 Ministerial Search Committee retreats. Part of the reason I volunteer to do it is because for me the experience of being on the MSC 8 years ago was/is a high point of my congregational life. You can bet that I will be advocating a careful read of this section of the Resource Guide to the next MSC with whom I work-especially since it is for my own congregation.

Thanks for the good work.  
Martha Shore  
TJ District Compensation Consultant

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RE: "Religion Without A Soul" and "The Social Self" Vol. 1, No. 2

## The Value of Not Being Oneself: Comment on Susann Pangerl and Paul Razor

Paul Razor's article in the first issue of JLR online was stimulating, as was Susann Pangerl's response to it, not to mention the tension between the two. Razor argued that the identity crisis in UU religion "has to do with the problem of being able to say just who we are, religiously and theologically... a familiar problem for Unitarian Universalists." And it is indeed a problem.

Pangerl countered with the observation that "succinctly stating what you believe does not necessarily tell me who you are -- it gives me only words;" and this too is true. However, Pangerl does not mention the most serious shortcoming in Razor's provocative article.

The heart of his argument is that "the self emerges out of a process of intersubjective exchange that always takes place within a preexisting social context." This is an incontestable conclusion that has emerged out of social science: a human individual can only be created by sustained interaction with an existing community of individuals. However, this socially defined self, necessary though it is to the formation of individuality, often has severe limitations, many misconceptions and distortions of reality caught up in it.

For example, for centuries in our society, the intersubjective selves it created held a deep-seated conviction that women were by nature, by God's will, created inferior to men, and should therefore be subservient to males, should be excluded from positions of responsibility in society. All the best people took for granted that this was a description of reality. The suffering and deprivation, the stunted lives that resulted from this had a destructive impact on women, men, and society alike.

To take a more (perhaps the most) extreme example, the socially defined selves created by the tightly knit, intensely communal German society led by Adolf Hitler were plainly a hideous blight on our species.

Which is to say that the intersubjective self is often seriously flawed. It may contain crippling, demonic elements. So much so that a major goal for a significant minority in all religious traditions has been self-transcendence: that is, transcendence of the self conditioned into us by our intersubjective experience as we grew up among our people.

It true that we cannot become human in any way other than by living among other humans who are already living in an established social order. However, there is a subsequent step that many of us find ourselves called to undertake: that is, to transcend the socially created self. And, it is individuals who respond to this call who tend to find meaning and reward in UU religion.

They are individuals who experience revealed religion, not as stimulating, supportive and liberating but rather as a constraint. They do not feel at home in a long standing, revealed tradition. We UUs have a rich tradition of our own, but it is rewarding to individuals of this kind because it is open-ended, is committed to a lifelong quest for meaning and truth, in a community of similarly oriented seekers.

In short, the socially defined self, as Razor insists, while a necessary stage in the development of the individual is not its finished form. The liberated self will emerge as transcendence of the social self is achieved. This is, tacitly, one of the central goals of philosophical (as opposed to traditional, revealed) religion in all times and cultures. It is a key to understanding the nature of UU religion.

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RE: "Letters--George Kimmich Beach" Vol. 1, No. 1

Hurrah for a letter that uses a phrase I find apropos to the UU Church. We have become a church of "what we don't believe", "who we do not like" and why we are better than other churches.

Every sermon seems to have the same structure:

1. Description of current new issue
2. What the "others" or "mistaken" believe
3. What UU's properly believe
4. Why this is better than what "they" believe

Having crossed the divide by attending class in a Roman Catholic seminary I know that the UU attitude is destructive and limiting. The people in my classes were devoted to their religious beliefs without comparing them to other religions. The theology taught by the professors was leading edge; more than simply assault traditional values it applied contemporary scholarship in defining new views and understandings of religious history.

Reverend Thandeka's article "Why Anti-racism Will Fail" struck home in a similar fashion. We seem to believe that if we apply upper-middle class modes of thought and intellectualism then we will attract African-American adherents. What we will draw to us is upper-middle class African-Americans who practice the same intellectual gymnastics. The means to overcome racism is to go out into the middle of African-American religious culture and celebrate it for its own value. Meet the people and celebrate their holiness and stop looking down our noses at

their methods of worship. Stop talking about diversity and act in a diverse mode. The most depressing service of the year is the all-white celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday. We should close our lily white churches on that day and go to a companion African-American church and participate in their celebration.

There is an excellent description of UU's in the Alcoholics Anonymous book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. Under Step Two while describing the different types of non-believers they describe those "who felt that we could float above the others on brain power alone." Being an open-minded UU helped me in AA. Being a good AA helps me avoid the shortcomings of contemporary UU beliefs.

David Ashcraft  
Cincinnati, OH

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RE: "A Carefully-Loaded Ship" by Lynn Unger (Vol. 1, No. 1)

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I have only just found the *Journal of Liberal Religion*, and your first issue is great!

I had done a search on 'classism' and 'unitarian' and found *From Salvation to Self-Determination: Unitarian Universalism on the Michigan Frontier and Changed By What We Cannot Name: A Response to From Salvation to Self-Determination*.

As a member of the Committee on Ministry of Hopedale Unitarian Universalist Community (HUUC), in Oxford, OH, I often think about why our congregation, while the only one in our heavily populated county, can not seem to draw members and friends from beyond the Miami University community. I've made copies of both articles to distribute after this Sunday's service.

But then, I worked my way back to the journal's index page. Lynn Ungar's piece filled me with hope at a time when I'm feeling that mean-spiritedness is an ever present part of life in my faith community. In our town, there recently was a same-sex marriage ceremony as part of a Right to Marry observation organized by several university student groups. Our minister performed the ceremony as an ordained UU individual (not as a minister representing HUUC, in keeping with her beliefs, and the '96 GA Resolution of Immediate Witness. Much to the surprise of the Committee on Ministry, heated response to the ceremony is being generated within our membership. Not that members disagree with the right of same-sex partners to a ceremony of union, you understand (although some of the those voicing concern are not aware of the GA resolution), but because, since we are a congregation that is trying to grow itself, they are concerned with the image of

Unitarian Universalism the ceremony presents to our town.

Lynn, I and many others support your wishes for Mattea. We all "need a ship that is guided by a crew that loves to be out on the sea, that knows the tidal patterns and can follow the stars, that is ready for adventure and eager to be companion[s] on the voyage, which is truly the trip of a lifetime.

Bob Karrow