

**Reflections on the Essex Conversations: a Unitarian Universalist Response to the  
"Final Test"  
Ginger Luke**

**Introduction**

If you are interested in the future of religious education within the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*, published by the Skinner House Press in 2001, contains voices for you to hear and heed.

In April of 1999 and 2000 thirty-two Unitarian Universalist religious leaders representing academia; various different sized societies; the Unitarian Universalist Association, ministers of religious education, directors of religious education, parish ministers, theological students, and youth met at a retreat center in Massachusetts on one of these two dates "to imagine and articulate the core of Unitarian Universalist religious education from various perspectives at the dawn of the twenty-first century." Each participant was asked to submit a paper addressing three questions:

- As we enter the twenty-first century, what is the core of our evolving Unitarian Universalist faith?
- What is your vision of the goals of our lifespan religious education?
- What are the vital components for Unitarian Universalist curricula?

The papers were read before the gathering and presented and discussed when the group gathered. These papers were published in April 2001 by Skinner House Press as *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*.

I was a participant in the 1999 April gathering of the Essex Conversations. As I read the entire collection of papers within the book, I felt a need for some reflection on the entire work and I felt a desire to make the book accessible to all those who care about Unitarian Universalist religious education. I offer the following reflections to invite you into some of these essays and to invite you to create your own essays—orally in study groups, in committee meetings or as a personal discipline. Wisdom and challenge are found in these essays. There is great variety of style and content. It is very unlikely that you will agree with everything written within this book. It is even more unlikely that you could read any part of it without growing yourself. There are gifts within the pages of *Essex Conversations*. I invite you to explore and receive them.

**What Do We All Want?**

The religious educators of the Essex Conversations all want to be part of a process which helps people of all ages grow into wholeness. They have all made a decision to do that within a chosen community—the Unitarian Universalist Association. Throughout

the thirty-one essays there are some common images of what growing into wholeness might mean.

Growing into wholeness includes knowing our worth. This means knowing our story—our history, our Unitarian Universalist history. It means claiming the context of our lives—our race, our socio-economic circumstances, our education, our relationships, all our life experiences—the sorrows and the joys.

Growing into wholeness includes nurturing a zest and reverence for life. This includes being with and a part of the physical world. It includes discovering and feeding ones "inner soul." It demands the inclusion of *everyone's* life in that term "reverence for life." It includes respecting and admiring the old and being willing to experiment. It includes holding up "imagination" as an important gift, tool, virtue.

Growing into wholeness includes belonging to a community and both giving and receiving within that community. Relationships are what make up that community. And that community turns out to be a community within another larger community until the "us" and "them" feeds into "we." It requires transforming injustices. For some the goal becomes "heaven on earth." For others it might simply be called "home."

### **There is a Final Test**

There is a final test in this field of religious education. The questions all come under the category of "Living-Your-Life." The questions are theological questions:

What do you trust? Your senses, the scientific method, scholarship, reason, experience, the people—certain people, nature, yourself?

Who are you? What helps you celebrate the rising of the sun? What sustains you when those you love most hurt and you can't make it go away? What gives you confidence to trust your own experience-- to listen to your own feelings?

What do you do? Not, how do you earn money, but really what do you do? How do you spend your waking hours?

What do you care about? What do you care about enough to alter the way your are living to address it?

What do you long for? What would make you and your world more complete?

What is there in Unitarian Universalism that enables us to get at these theological questions? You can bring Catholicism or commitment to the scientific method or public policy concerns to Unitarian Universalism. What of Unitarian Universalism do you take to the scientific method or public policy concerns or even another religion should you decide to follow one? What is the Unitarian Universalist "worldview" that helps you live your life?

How has Unitarian Universalism helped shape your world view? What has it reinforced in your ideas and actions? What new ideas has it introduced? What has it challenged?

How has Unitarian Universalism helped you know yourself?

How has Unitarian Universalism helped you be in the world?

What do you see as your unfinished work?

The questions are, of course, very interrelated. If we could each answer them and then share those answers, I think we could more clearly understand what the role religious education is playing today.

Horace Bushnell says, "We live ourselves into religious thinking, more than we think our way into religious living." Answering the above questions will help us take a look at the ways we live ourselves into religious thinking.

Let me personally try to look at the ways I have been living myself into religious thinking.

**How has Unitarian Universalism helped shape my world view?**

*It has taken my already "pretty wide and deep" world view and made it wider and deeper. I think Unitarian Universalism offers all a chance to stretch both deep into themselves and reach out beyond anywhere they have gone in their trying to make meaning and be a part of the world. Before I came to Unitarian Universalism I was a liberal Protestant, who had studied world religions and been active in social justice causes. But I had done those things because my heart had pulled me in those directions. It was all right with my religious institution, but there was no on-going support for me as I moved in that direction. And I was never encouraged in my prior religious affiliation to explore ideas of ultimate reality—what we meant by "God". Professor Harvey Pottoff, of the Iliff School of Theology once said to me, "You Unitarians spend more time talking about God than any other group I know, and you aren't even sure there is one." It is in my Unitarian Universalist community that I have been able to explore without restraints what I think and what I mean by the world "god." And I have evolved throughout the years as I have participated in this thinking and talking. The fact that I have done some of it alone and much of it with others has been deeply valuable to me. And I am looking forward to doing more of it as the years go by.*

**So is there a Unitarian Universalist world view?** *I think so. It is a world view which encourages and supports people as they explore deeply and stretch widely as people of faith in this universe. It often invites you to open your eyes to what you have been ignoring in yourself and in your society.*

*It is a world view of living in the present realizing that the present only exists as a part of the past and part of the future.*

*It is a world view which claims individuals in community, working together, can create meaning and change the world in ways a single person alone cannot. And it chooses community.*

*It is a world view which is just learning to be more discerning—to be cautious of the dangers of relativism—to realize that if all truth is truth then there is no truth. For instance, for years our traditions tried to identify the positive aspects of world religions. We lived in a culture which often demeaned religions other than Christianity and Judaism and Unitarian Universalists made an effort to lift up values and history of the religions of the world which supported or connected with our own values. One of the gifts of postmodernism has been to challenge us to be more discerning—to identify our differences and articulate them as well as some of our similarities. We are beginning to do with the religions of the world what we have for years done with Christianity and Judaism. We have articulated what was consistent with our values and what we interpreted as in conflict with our values—even as some of us claim to be Christian Unitarian Universalists and Unitarian Universalists of Jewish Awareness. Just because it is different does not mean it is good, it means it is worthy of study and more understanding.*

*The Unitarian Universalist world view has truths which make us different from most other religious faiths. Our concept of religious freedom invites us to define for ourselves what ultimate reality means to us. Most other faiths that support religious freedom still expect some kind of common understanding of God or ultimate reality.*

*We think gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people have the same worth and dignity as all other people. This sets us apart from all but about three other religions (United Church of Christ, Episcopal and Reformed Judaism).*

*We do not presume to be the only truth for anyone. Our religion is a process—a way—rather than an absolute belief. It is organic and changeable even as it always "is."*

**How has Unitarian Universalism helped you know yourself?** *It has helped me discover that I need community and that I feel best about myself when I am successfully nurturing community. It has given me the opportunity to explore being a woman in a religious setting without a theologically constricting structure. It has given me a community of common values to support me as I ask, "am I living out my values?" It has given me a chance to make changes and alter my course and still be a part of the community. It has given me a chance to explore religious free expression in the arts.*

**How has Unitarian Universalism helped you be in the world?** *I am aware of more lifestyles and have increased my understanding of sexual orientation. The religious tradition I came from is still arguing about whether some of these orientations are appropriate rather than exploring to understanding what it is to be a sexual being in our world. My anti-racism training and exposure has made me again more aware of where I stand in the world and more aware of the many other people standing in my world. I have had the opportunity to talk within a religious context about economic justice and world religions within my immediate community. Unitarian Universalism has helped me*

*find my voice as I speak out against injustice and for world community. It has given me the chance to help young and old appreciate each other. It has given me a chance within my religious community to claim the entire universe as part of my world—to stretch beyond the human.*

**What do you see as your unfinished work?** *I would like to be more intentional and more articulate about my spiritual discipline. I would like to live the concept of sabbath. I would like my religious community to help me become more discerning and focused in my social justice work and in the community's social justice work. I would like to spend more time focused on families, youth and young adults.*

My answers to the above questions strongly influence how I hope to shape religious education in my Unitarian Universalist environments. But none of us creates a religious education program or environment by ourselves. It takes children, youth and adults. It takes religious education committees, curriculum taskforces, youth/adult committees, social justice councils, program councils, boards, ministers and congregations to create the whole religious education program. It takes **all** those people answering the above questions and then responding to the answers. There will be some variety in the responses, but I predict an amazing commonality will become apparent. I think there is a Unitarian Universalist worldview. A process of answering these questions, will define what that is. Part of our Unitarian Universalist worldview provides space for the complexity of life and the many ways people articulate that. To hold in sacred space conflicting ideas all with integrity is part of our worldview. To claim the worth of each of us and the interdependence of each of us is part of our worldview. And to ask again and again, "just what does all that mean?" is part of our worldview. And then to say, "as a community we can live out this worldview more wholly (holy) than we can simply as individuals," is part of our Unitarian Universalist worldview. And then to do just that—to act on what we say or imply, is part of our Unitarian Universalist worldview

How we prepare people for the "living-your-life" test is the way we create the entire religious community experience. It is an all-church activity. It is an ongoing, never ending activity. Because living is a process and religion is a process, we take this "living-your-life" test everyday. We try to keep all we hold "holy" in balance and we are continually readjusting to needs and circumstances of the entire world around us. And our Unitarian Universalist worldview supports as we do that.

### **The "Being With" Test**

There is another test which needs our attention. I want to call it the "being with" test. Ideal circumstances would have anyone, who has especially assigned responsibility to be part of the religious education program participating in this "being with" test. This includes the Sunday School teachers, parents and any paid staff of the religious education program and any volunteers who are supporting the religious education program.. The questions are:

What opportunities have been offered to you by your religious community to develop your skills concerning your religious education commitment?

How have your spiritual growth needs been met?

How and by whom have you been appreciated?

What do you need?

The way we support our religious educators in the congregation is one of if not the strongest tool for shaping Unitarian Universalist religious education we have today. Yet, we spend much more time on curricula than on training religious educators, professional or lay. There are some important exceptions to this statement, like our Renaissance Module continuing education series, Meadville/Lombard Winter Institute and the special trainings which go on in many of our districts. We know that in those areas where we demand more training, such as our OWL (Our Whole Lives human sexuality curriculum), we create some of the most important learning experiences of people's lives. The Essex essays by Rev. Roberta Nelson and Pat Ellenwood speak to this issue articulately.

Rev. Roberta Nelson strongly urges us to understand that the teacher is the curriculum. Our teachers are spiritual guides. She says, "at the heart of teaching must be an invitation for all persons to engage in a process of transformation, the process of moving over, going beyond, across, or through real or imagined limits." Further she writes, "Teaching from the heart is revering others in their wholeness and brokenness, in their joys and sorrows, in their contemplation and action." (109).

Pat Ellenwood asks us to see the "crucial ministry of religious educators within our congregations" and asks to focus on specific plans "that will establish a real, active and lasting commitment to religious education." She claims this will require "a shift in the culture of our congregations"(43-44). She asks us to encourage covenantal leadership, develop a coherent curriculum plan, establish a model for intergenerational faith communities and recognize the contributions of LREDA (Liberal Religious Educators Association).

All those who nurture professional religious educators, church volunteers and church leaders, need to pay attention to the answers to this "being with" test. And we need to juxtapose the answers from these questions with the answers from the "living-your-life" test They all fit together.

### **What Did We Leave Out of the Essex Conversations?**

As we look toward the future we have a tendency to allocate more time and energy on what we did wrong in the past than what we did right. Many of us are in that "fix-it" mode. The methods, focus and curricula of our past were developed within the context of the times. Often we don't critique past accomplishments within the field of religious education for what they did so much as we critique them for what they did not

do. It was what they left out, that we wish for. Their focus often ignored issues and circumstances we find so vital today. It is appropriate though to thank all those past religious educators for their work, even as we recognize, the past did not do all we need today. For a moment let us critique the critiquing process. In the process of the Essex Conversations, what did the voices leave out?

Thomas Groome, at the 2001 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, asked where was our concern or focus on family in these essays. He pointed out there was a noticeable absence of conversation about the family or support for the family within these essays. His point deserves attention.

What happened to music? With the exception of John Tolley's essay, we hardly mentioned the creative arts. In many ways this mirrors the stoic and intellectual Protestant legacy which is apparent in most of our societies today. I learned my Protestant theology from the words to the songs we sang every Sunday. What are the common songs our children are learning? Are there any? Are they singing? Paul Robeson said, "I... feel things rather than comprehend them... I hear my way through the world."

Otto Frank says the human creative drive is stronger than the human sex drive. How are we making a place for creativity in our religious education programs? "Creativity is just a process or method," some might say. I say involving creativity is a way of being, not just a method and it needs more attention. Rev. Rebecca Parker mentioned creativity in a list of forces which make education a religious activity (208). She is right.

What happened to imagination? We can articulate its use in social justice and in organization and even in claiming our heritage. We have forgotten it in the arts. We have locked up imagination into only a few rooms of our house.

What happened to miracles? What happened to our celebration of the natural world? A few of the essays mentioned awe and wonder, but how can we shape a religious education without demanding at the core that we engage with and stand in awe of the physical world? Pat Hoertdoerfer mentioned "The earth is our only source of material sustenance as well as a major source of our spiritual nurturance. In our learning communities and religious education programming let us aim for a deep reverence for the earth and a greater understanding of human interdependence with the whole of nature"(129). But I'm talking about joy, sheer joy and wonder.

Where is the joy in being alive? Where is the conversation about celebration? We all know the value of play. Rev. Tom Owen-Towle mentioned it when he talked about "recreative pilgrims"(200-202). Why didn't we talk about it more? Meg Riley mentions dancing, talent shows and singing together in her childhood church (124).

One answer could be because we are already addressing all these things, but I don't think so. I think we were so much in our heads that we ignored our feelings. Our

longing for inclusiveness, community, being able to articulate our history and our identity, our desire to be able to organize neatly carried us away from the inner strength—our creative potential and our place in the physical world—which would allow us to address those issues we look to so longingly. Is it a wonder that we hear out there a cry for spirituality?

### **How Do We Take Heed of these Voices of Wisdom?**

In her introduction, Rev. Lena Breen cites fourteen different ways to use this book. They are good suggestions including focus groups, adult education opportunities, forums, sermons, personal study, continuing education, youth discussions, teacher trainings, and professional meeting topics. As you try some of her ideas let me suggest a few areas of focus.

If you want to focus on community, take a look at the essays from Rev. Susan Davison Archer, Rev. Susan Suchocki Brown, Elizabeth Motonder Jones, Ginger Luke, Rev. Fran Manly, Rev. Meg Riley, Rev. Gary Smith, and Laura Wilkerson Spencer.

If you want to focus on social justice take a look at the essays from Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Rev. Dr. Tracey Robinson-Harris, Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, and Dr. Jacqui James, Laura Wilkerson Spencer, Rev. Susan Suchocki Brown, and Rev. Meg Riley.

If you want to focus on curricula, take a look at the essays from Rev. Dr. Barry M. Andrews, Pat Ellenwood, Judith A. Frediani, Daniel Harper, Jen Harrison, Rev. Patricia Hoertdoerfer, Rev. John Newcomb Marsh, Rev. Makaanah Elizabeth Morriss, Kathy M. Silver (especially on adult education), Rev. Greg Stewart, Rev. Dr. Elizabeth M. Strong, Rev. Dr. John W. Tolley, and Rev. Dr. Tom Yondorf.

If you want to focus on youth, start with the essays from Logan Harris and Jen Harrison and then take a look at some of those in the community category.

If you want to focus on spirituality start with essays from Rev. Dr. Robert Nelson and Rev. Dr. Tom Owen-Towle.

If you want to focus on leadership start with the essay from Rev. Jeannellen Ryan.

If you want to focus on contemporary challenges to religious education start with the essay from Rev. Dr. M. Susan Harlow.

If you want to focus on the role of art, read the essay from Rev. Dr. John W. Tolley.

One way to begin is to invite your group to participate in the "Group Exercise for Processing the Living-Your-Life Test" found at the end of this essay.

### **In Conclusion**

The mission of the Essex Conversations was to "imagine and articulate the core of Unitarian Universalist religious education." We have done that and more. We have begun moving into the twenty-first century. This essay is an invitation for more Unitarian Universalists to join the Essex Conversations in your societies and in your retreats and in



your professional groups. Continuing to ask the questions is part of our Unitarian Universalist world view.

## Processing the Essex Conversations

### Opening:

*The church exists to proclaim the gospel that each human being is infinitely precious, that the meaning of our lives lies hidden in our interactions with each other. The challenge we confront is to be a church which does not bury that great truth beneath all our business, but which enables us to encounter each other with wonder and appreciation and expectation, to call out of each other strengths and wisdom and compassion we never knew we had.*

Revs Beverly and David Bumbaugh

For groups focusing on social justice I suggest:

*We live ourselves into religious thinking, more than we think our way into religious living.*

*Horace Bushnell*

### Introductions of Each Other

#### Brief Explanation of What the Essex Conversations Are

In April of 1999 and 2000 thirty-two Unitarian Universalist religious leaders representing academia; various different sized societies; the Unitarian Universalist Association, ministers of religious education, directors of religious education, parish ministers, theological students, and youth met at a retreat center in Massachusetts on one of these two dates "to imagine and articulate the core of Unitarian Universalist religious education from various perspectives at the dawn of the twenty-first century." Each participant was asked to submit a paper addressing three questions:

- As we enter the twenty-first century, what is the core of our evolving Unitarian Universalist faith?
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(More information may be found in Rev. Lena Breen's background and process sections of the *Essex Papers* "Introduction.")

## **Group Exercise for Processing the "Living-Your-Life" Test**

(I think this exercise would be especially valuable if used with Sunday School teachers (facilitators or leaders) and religious education committees because it would help them understand a broad role of religious education and see how their work fits into a larger picture. It could more clearly define their purpose as religious educators. I'd like to see church professional staff, board members, program council members and parents examine those questions in light of Unitarian Universalism. We all might begin to see our roles in a more interdependent way and with a more interdependent outcome. )

*What do you trust? Your senses, the scientific method, scholarship, reason, experience, the people –certain people, nature, yourself?*

*Who are you? What helps you celebrate the rising of the sun? What sustains you when those you love most hurt and you can't make it go away? What gives you confidence to trust your own experience-- to listen to your own feelings?*

*What do you do? Not, how do you earn money, but really what do you do? How do you spend your waking hours?*

*What do you care about? What do you care about enough to alter the way your are living to address it?*

Reflect on your answers to the above questions. Jot down a word or two or a sentence if it is easier. Now go back to the questions and mark the ideas which have been influenced by your experience with Unitarian Universalism. That's what we are teaching our children, because who we are and what we do is the loudest curriculum of all.

Go back to your list of answers again and take a look at what you didn't check. I don't expect Unitarian Universalism to meet everyone's absolute needs, but I do expect that you have identified some areas or issues, in which Unitarian Universalism has been a support or an influence. What are the ways that Unitarian Universalism could more clearly support you in those unchecked areas? If Unitarian Universalism isn't present in what you trust, and who you are, and what you do and care about and what you long for, then I don't think it is serving you very well as a religion.

Some of the unchecked issues we may already be addressing with our children and youth programs. If that is so, we should be addressing those issues with our adults too. Why would we think we should be dealing with issues or topics or experiences with children that we shouldn't also be addressing with adults? Granted our process would need to be age appropriate and we would need to be especially sensitive to the prior

knowledge and experience of our adults. Most people come to Unitarian Universalism as adults. What would they have missed, not growing up as UU children?

### **Conversation About the Exercise**

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

### **Closing:**

*The purpose of education is humanization in the context of dehumanizing forces and realities, and the abiding presence of healing, sustaining, and transforming grace.*

*Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker*

For groups focusing on social justice, I suggest:

*When practiced as a dialogical, democratic, interdisciplinary process of questioning, study and action, by people whose questions are the voice of their humanistic concern, education is the embodiment of love.*

*Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker*