

Odyssey Presented by Gaia Brown, CRE-ML, at Fall Conference 2011, Portland, OR

When Ruth [Owen, who introduced me] and I were discussing this evening's talk a few weeks ago she told me that she always considered the Odyssey to be an after dinner speech. I hadn't thought of it quite like that before, but I always value Ruth's insights. Now an after dinner speech, at least as far as I'm concerned, is maybe supposed to edify but certainly is supposed to entertain the assembled guests. So tonight's odyssey will be somewhat of a performance.

Back when I was a DRE writing semi-monthly newsletter columns, I sometimes did a self interview, just to liven things up and keep the reader with me to the end. I would be both the interviewer and the interviewee.

So here I am before you, with a bunch of questions for -- for me! Let's get started.

Say . . . is this one of those phony interviews when you ask yourself self-serving questions and then respond to them with well rehearsed answers that only seem to be spontaneous?

Wow! That's a pretty harsh question right out of the chute. But, yeah.

Have you ever had an epiphany, and if so, could you please describe it for us.

You mean more than an "aha" moment, don't you? Do you mean an actual experience with god? Because, yes, I have, in kind of a reverse way. I have to start with the back story. I was raised in a very loving, patriarchal, autocratic home, what I assume was a fairly typical 50's environment. At least, it was the kind you saw on television. And in this home, I was taught that god was much like my father -- loving, patriarchal, autocratic. And my mother taught me to pray to this god, which I did from the time I was a small tyke until I was nearly 20 years old, asking him to help me be a good girl. As time went on, the prayers became pretty much the same thing, begging god for A's on tests that were already taken or papers already turned in. I had rashes, headaches and stomach aches over the years, manifestations of the stress I felt in trying to be the perfect girl that my father told me he expected me to be and that I assumed god expected of me as well. And then one night, it was during my sophomore year of college, as I was lying in bed praying, I felt something -- tingly, or releasing -- washing over my body. Don't know. Maybe it's the way Mary felt when the holy spirit had his way with her. Anyhow, in that instant, I knew that all those years I had been praying, I had only been talking to myself. No spirit had heard me. There was no god. My emotional response was one of relief. I felt so free. Then my rational brain piped up, "But I'm a very religious person! What do I do now?" Well, I did quit going to church every week, since that was now a waste of time. But I knew I would have to wait for the answer.

How did you find Unitarian Universalism?

Oh, what a perfect follow up question. Great!!

This happened the August before my senior year. My family lived in suburban Minneapolis, where I was raised, and I attended Macalester College in St. Paul, 9 miles and a world away from home. I was home for summer vacation when I got a call that Dr. Livingston was dead, and dead by his own hand. Now, Dr. Livingston had been a humanities professor, and during my freshman year I had taken a life-changing literature class from him. The theme was how humanity confronts the beast -- the beast was whatever obstacle kept a person from fully realizing his or her own human potential -- for love, for liberty, for artistic accomplishment -- you name it. We read *Dr. Zhivago* and Schwartz-Bart's *Last of the Just*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The class had upended my ideas of what was of value in life. And now Dr. Livingston had hung himself, leaving behind a young widow and two small children, a boy and a girl. Who knows what beast he had been confronting.

I went to his memorial service. It was held at Unity Unitarian Church in St. Paul. The place was packed, and there was no minister present. (This was, after all, August in the 60's, when almost all UU churches were 10-month operations.) Instead, Dr. Livingston's colleagues, one by one, approached the lectern as he had, arms filled with heavy books with small scraps of paper jammed in them. And they opened the books to the marked pages and read, just as Dr. Livingston had each day. I don't remember what they read. I just remember feeling like Dr. Livingston was still there among us. And then, at the close of the service, everyone in that crowded sanctuary joined hands, raised them in the air, and snake-danced out into the blue sky of the Minnesota afternoon. Everyone -- including the young widow and her two small children. I wondered how people could have such grace in the midst of such agony and sorrow. And I knew I had found my religious home.

I've heard rumor that you're almost pathologically shy. How have you managed to stand up in front of hundreds of people so often over so many years? Did it ever get easier?

In general, have I gotten better about being shy? No. I'm terrified of approaching people I don't know in a social situation and I often just avoid it. Work related situations are different--you have to do it! And you know, you just sort of put on your mask, and go for it.

I was helped a lot by an experience early on in my DRE career. I was leading an intergenerational worship that was not going smoothly. It wasn't a disaster, but there had not been sufficient rehearsal. I was really getting panicky when it suddenly occurred to me that the people in the congregation wished me well. They wanted me to succeed. They had both a hope and an expectation that the service would be just fine. Suddenly things got better. Or at least I perceived that they did. I've held on to that lesson. Of course, part of that lesson is prepare, prepare, over prepare.

How come you never became a minister?

Are you kidding? I'm getting that question in 2011? You have to be called to the ministry. That's not the call I got. I have to admit, in the early 80's there was a real push for DRE's to become MRE's or parish ministers. People would say to me, "You're such a great DRE, haven't you thought about being a minister?" I found that an insult to my work as a DRE. At the same time, as more and more of my colleagues followed that path, I did sometimes feel left behind, often by women who had started in the field well after I did, women I sort of felt I had taken in tow or mentored.

And there seemed to be a convergence of divorce and the decision to enter ministry. Women found themselves, left their marriages and headed off to seminary. Or, they headed off to seminary, found themselves, and left their marriages. When I separated from my husband in 1987 my friends said, "Surely *now* you're going to become a minister!" What? What did leaving a broken marriage have to do with my career choice? But I did then have to leave my position as DRE, because there was no way I could support my kids on \$7700 a year. Six years later, now living on the north shore of Chicago because of my second husband's career, I had the opportunity to get back into religious education, and there was nothing I wanted more than to do that. I truly felt called, called to be a *lay* religious educator.

How did you start writing curricula?

Well, when I started as a DRE in the mid-70's we were using those boxed curricula. *Man the Meaning Maker, Decision Making, Haunting House*. They seemed quite rich and complete, but within a few years, I found all of them -- except *Haunting House* -- to just not be working. (When I later learned that the UUA had hoped to be able to also sell this curricula for use in the public schools, it became clear why it had not been successful in a church setting.) Fortunately, Barbara Marshman and Ann Fields and Charlene Brotman published their gems -- *Holidays and Holy Days, Why Do Bad Things Happen* and *How Can I Know What to Believe?* And we had *Stepping Stone Year*, which took Sophia Fahs' *Beginnings* stories and added a few activities.

When I got to my congregation in Illinois, and now it was in the 1990's, there seemed to be even fewer options than there had been 15 years earlier. The many boxed curricula had been succeeded by only a handful of titles. And by this time, even the Brotman Marshfield curricula were getting dated. So I took what I could from existing curricula and during the summer, working on one curriculum each year, I re-wrote it for our congregation. It took me eight years to get everything in place, and had I stayed in that position longer, I probably would have started rewriting again.

The curriculum I loved the most I called "Super Heroes." It began with a song my friend John Simon had written for his pupils when he was student teaching second grade. "I'm a super hero -- there's none like me, you see." I learned the song from John when we worked together at a camp in the Adirondacks. I was the camp cook for 50 adolescents in an outdoor kitchen that had to be bear proofed after each meal. But that's another story.

Fifteen years later there was a happy convergence of that song and one of the old boxed curricula. Slowly *The Adventures of God's Folk* metamorphosed into *Super Heroes*. I added more people from the Bible and swapped out the American folklore characters like Mike Fink and Johnny Appleseed for famous UU's. I completely dropped the esoteric rationale behind "God's Folk" -- something about how these people -- both fictional and real -- "moved through realms of being", whatever that meant. And I centered the goals of the curriculum on our UU Principles, which did not even exist when "God's Folk" was written.

We used *Super Heroes* every year in our second grades. And when I went by that classroom and peeked through the window in the door, the teachers and the children always seemed to be smiling at each other. The only complaint I got from the teachers was that sometimes it was hard to get the children to go rejoin their parents -- especially

the day that the story left poor Joseph trapped in a pit while his father sobbed over the bloody coat that the brothers had brought home.

Here's what I learned--at least in that era: if curricula is compelling, you'll get your teachers and you'll get good attendance from your kids. By "compelling" for the teachers, I mean that the curriculum has to teach them first, because most of them are not familiar with the material. They're learning along with the children. Also, because you generally don't have professional teachers in the classroom, you have to help those adults know how to convey the ideas. Every session has to be viewed as a teacher training along with being of interest to children. I think it was the strength of the curricula that helped grow that RE program from 120 to 325 in eight years.

When I retired to Reno, I finally had the necessary time to make *Super Heroes* more universal. Up until then, I had been writing for the program I directed, the teachers I knew and spoke with each week. Now I had to write for unknown children and teachers in unknown situations. It is an arduous process. You can't assume a thing.

So that's how I started -- with *Super Heroes*, *Bible People*. I did *UU Super Heroes* later, since there were so many newly written sessions and I wanted them field tested.

With *Treasure Hunting*, *Take Two*, I really have to thank the author of the original *Treasure Hunting*, Ellen Schneider. She had written a great curriculum, but the formatting and the artwork were not in league with the excellent content, and so much of the content had become dated. Among other things, this curriculum, too, preceded the adoption of our Principles, and we weren't yet focused on how many different ways there were to create families. Ellie was not interested in doing a revision herself, but it was understandably hard for her to hand "her baby" over to someone else so they could alter it. But she did, although every addition and change required her approval in what were lengthy and sometimes quite spirited weekly phone calls.

And then *Compass Points* was a totally different process. Michelle Richards and I had talked about using parts of *How Can I Know What to Believe*, an old curriculum that we both felt still had a lot of good stuff, as a springboard for a really great, timely curriculum for middle school. And we got verbal permission for this from one of the original authors. But before we got very far, things changed, and now our permission was to update things technologically -- like have a video instead of the filmstrip on the Bible -- but not to really change the content. Well, it was 2004, and we didn't think that sessions about the Ayatollah Khomeini and nuclear disarmament were going to resonate with 12 year olds. So we went back to the drawing board and asked religious educators -- you - - what was wanted in a middle school curriculum. We got your feedback and developed goals for the curriculum. Michelle came up with the concept "Compass Points" and we were ready to roll. We spent the first year researching and writing the sessions. The second year those sessions were field tested and rewritten. Terry Stafford added her excellent artwork and by the summer of 2006 we had our completed project.

By the way, with the exception of *Treasure Hunting Take Two*, all those curricula had funding help from the Unitarian Sunday School Society, and I would like to thank the late Rev. Jean Brown for encouraging me to apply for that.

Anyone to whom you should give a shout out?

Hmmmm. I guess I really should thank Helen Bishop, who as District Executive in the Central Midwest mediated the difficult situation I had with my supervisor in Illinois. He continually berated me about my being an atheist, saying it was an adolescent rebellion in response to my fundamentalist father. Well, my father was not a fundamentalist and my faith--because it is .a faith--my had been hard won. Nor did my personal faith get in the way of my performing my professional duties. I had one foot out the door of my job after only about 6 months, when Helen came to talk with us. She had to brave a growing snowstorm to keep the appointment.

As I had watched the clouds roll in and the flakes start to fall faster and thicker, I had been so sure she wouldn't be able to make the drive up from Oak Park and the trek across our perilous parking lot. I loved my job so much, but I didn't know how I could get through the pain of another day. I remember watching Helen get out of her van and make her way through the flurries to the church's front door. I was so grateful for her presence, even though I had no idea what would happen next. I'm fuzzy on the particulars, but I do remember Helen's stern admonishment: "You're her supervisor! You can't talk like that to her!" Helen couldn't make the situation change, but I held in my heart the mantra, "He can't talk to me like that!" even though he still did. And I was able to adjust my attitude and ride it out for another 7 1/2 years.

Did you ever do anything so stupidly unprofessional that it would embarrass you and this audience too much for you to even mention it?

Yes.

In your biographical information, sometimes you say you served the Ridgewood Unitarian Society from 1975 to 1987 and other times you say you served it for 10 years. Are you that bad in math, or is there a story here?

Of course there's a story. If I start at the beginning, I was pregnant with my second child in 1975 when the president of the congregation said, "Now that you've finished your Masters in Education, how about coming and being our DRE?" I had been working part time in the public schools, but with a second child on the way, I was ready to be at home, so I said yes. This was, after all, a job I was expected to do at home. There was no office for me at church.

No one had told me how many hours I was expected to work a week, and I suppose folks thought it was mainly a matter of showing up on Sunday morning. I'm not sure if the woman I replaced had done much more than that. But there were 120 kids. It was not a small operation. And there was such potential. I worked about 20 hours a week. The pay was \$900 annually, so when I hired a 13-year-old baby sitter at \$1 an hour so I could work uninterrupted, I was paying her more than I earned.

This church had its worship building on one side of the street and its R.E. building across the street in an old victorian house. And that street was, not surprisingly, a symbolic as well as a physical divide. One of the first things I did was have hundreds of buttons made that said "RE -- It's for Everybody" and I handed those buttons out to everyone at coffee hour each week.

But really, R.E. was only two people, me and the chair. The church leadership, having taken care of its responsibility by securing an R.E. chairperson and a "paid" DRE had divested itself and the congregation of any further concern for religious education. What

most of the parents said they wanted from R.E. was a way for their children to find out about other religions so when they were grown they could make an informed choice among them. And they wanted their children to be able to successfully complete the New York Times crossword puzzles. This was, after all, a bedroom community for Manhattan.

Now the R.E. chair -- well, he was a great guy named Frank. Frank had walked into the Ridgewood Unitarian Society one Sunday and mentioned that he had been involved in R.E. in his former congregation. Before coffee hour ended that day, Frank was R.E. chair. True story. The very day he walked in.

Frank and I had taught *Haunting House* together in 1974, my first introduction to UU R.E. His theory of religious education was called "fill the glass." You had an hour of time, you made sure there were enough activities to keep the kids occupied during that hour, and that was the measure of success. What I was looking for for my baby son was a community of shared values that would support him over the years so that he would grow up to be loving and kind and would realize his full human potential. The wonderful *Haunting House* curriculum was exactly what I wanted, although Frank looked at it from the perspective of "full glass" and I looked at it from the perspective of "full person."

Now, Frank had a fine looking rostrum of R.E. committee members, some 15 or so names. But there were never any meetings. It was the Frank and Gaia show, and things continued that way for two years. At the end of the second year I told the board president that Frank had not been successful in assembling a functioning R.E. committee and that if there was not a new chairperson, the following year would be my last. (If you're wondering where the minister was, well, the minister was Kenneth Patton, an icon of the 50's and 60's and if you don't know who he was, you're not up on your UU history. But during my entire time in Ridgewood, he and I had this many [zero] conversations about religious education.)

Come September, Frank was still chair, so I told him this would be my final year as DRE. It was not that I wanted to quit doing what I loved doing, but I felt that I could not advocate for the religious education program while I was being paid, no matter how little that payment was. Well, actually, by my third year, the pay had increased to \$1200. But I'd have to quit the job so I could advocate from the outside.

That year I gave the job my all. I started adult discussion groups, created a month's worth of peace curricula across all the age groups, created a wildly successful intergenerational overnight in our education building and presented four terrific (if I do say so myself) intergenerational services. In fact, I did such a great job that in February of that program year the Board raised my annual salary to \$1600.

It was May of that year, 1978, when for some reason I attended my very first Board meeting. And at that meeting I mentioned about my not continuing as DRE. I can still hear the reaction, the clatter of the folding chair scraping the floor as one of the board members jumped up and lunged towards me. I thought he was going to deck me, but someone restrained him. He accused me of taking that raise "under false pretenses" since I knew I was going to be quitting. I replied that I had told Frank in September it would be my last year. Frank was there, too, and all eyes turned to him. "I was hoping she'd change her mind," he said.

Well, now, of course, look how late it was in the year. How, the Board wondered, would they find someone else who would do so much so well for so little? And I was charged with finding my own replacement. And I'm rather chagrined to say, I did. Actually, Frank and I made numerous inquiries among women in the congregation, all of which were promptly rebuffed. Finally, I told my good friend Barbara that if she would be DRE, I would be R.E. chair. I would continue to do all the curriculum work, I would help with intergenerational services, etc. etc. In other words, I promised to continue doing about half of what I had been doing, only I would be behind the scenes. And I would build a real R.E. committee. Which I did.

Two years later Barbara was ready to move on to something else. It surprised me how much I wanted that job back. And gee, the salary was now a whopping \$2300. So I reclaimed the position for an additional seven years, which brings me to twelve years of service, although I held the title and was paid for ten years.

The 70's. Polyester pant suits. The UUA's "Extended Family" program that resulted in couples in many congregations switching partners, sometimes permanently. GA late night dances that were auditions for whom you were going to sleep with that night, whether you were partnered or single. Older male ministers, some of them with national prominence, who thought it was just fine to hit on young DRE's in public as well as in private. . . . Were you there?

Well, yes. Although I never owned a polyester pant suit. And I was far too shy to ever attend a dance at GA.

Are there any heartwarming stories about your adult children and the faith they were raised in?

Yes, I'd say there were. At my church in Illinois, space became such an issue as the program grew, and at one point we considered dividing our largest classroom. Doing so would have meant we could no longer do *Haunting House* because it really needs a ton of room for the children's activities. And my daughter Katherine, then in her early 20's, said, "But Mom, you can't do that! I wouldn't be the person I am today if I hadn't done "Haunting House." And my son Shane and his wife Jennifer -- they attend a very liberal UCC church in Boulder, CO, and the religious educator there, not having any idea Shane was my son, ordered a copy of *Bible People*. And Shane and Jennifer have taught that curriculum in their church, which I found pretty special. My grandsons Brady and Davis attend the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, NJ, along with their mom, my step daughter Stephanie, and that helps me keep my sense of connection with Ridgewood, which is, as I like to say, the congregation of my heart.

Just how adorable are your grandchildren? You have six, right?

See for yourself. Their pictures are there on the altar, along with pictures of other family members and my wonderful husband, Lloyd.

As a religious educator, what has been your most humiliating experience?

As a religious educator -- not personal, right? So you're not asking me about the time I inadvertently appeared naked in front of a bunch of British construction workers, an incident which, I have to admit, I could have handled better. Okay, but I'd really rather

talk about that one, because it's pretty funny, while the other incident . . . it was SUCH a painful experience that my stomach still knots up 35 years later.

It was 1976. I was at the Metro District Annual Meeting with my daughter Katherine, a nursing infant, only two months old. There was an R.E. workshop led by the Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Holden Baker. If you don't know who she was, you need to read this book, *Giving Birth to Ourselves*, that fills you in on the first 50 years of LREDA. She was a stout, white-haired, to me rather elderly and fierce looking woman. Of course, I was in my 20's. With the exception of Eugene Navias, all the religious educators I met at that time seemed like elderly, fierce women.

So there was this sort of generic R.E. workshop you might find at an annual meeting. Betty handed out those ubiquitous 3X5 cards and asked each of us to write down what we wanted to get out of our time together. I wrote something like, "Gee, I'm just a first year DRE and I'll be grateful for whatever I learn here." And, baby in arms, I posted it up on the bulletin board along with all the other cards.

In time, Betty retrieved the cards and glanced through them. And then, I guess, she came to mine. Her eyes narrowed and she snapped out, "Well, I don't know who wrote this one, but you have no right to call yourself a DRE!" She probably said more, but I was so crushed I could hear nothing but the blood pounding in my head. I buried my face in my baby's sweet neck and wished myself anyplace on the planet but there.

In time I learned that Betty was absolutely correct. I did not have the right to call myself a DRE. LREDA reserved the term "Director of Religious Education" for those who had received a certificate of accreditation from the UUA. The accreditation program had begun in 1967 and it was the result of lengthy and painful struggle for recognition. It was a struggle typical for its time, when a male clergy had little interest in sharing power with women. But less than 10 years later, LREDA had already lost the battle to keep the term "DRE" as an exclusive earned title rather than the name for a job being performed. My church certainly didn't know the difference. They'd hired me to be their "DRE."

But I was not a professional Director of Religious Education, and while I came to understand why those elderly, stern women appeared to be so angry, I still remember that they did not find a way to offer hospitality to me and to dozens of other religious educators who were excluded from their inner circle. At the time of my dressing down from Betty Baker, I had not even heard of LREDA, much less been informed that religious education offered a professional role to which one could aspire. By 1984, when there were rumors that LREDA was going to open its fall conference to non members, I didn't consider going. I'm a shy person. I don't need to be snubbed twice.

Okay, so now that you've let us know that you can hold grudges for an interminable amount of time, can you name anyone who did something right?

I'd be glad to. There was Fred Ward, a minister who met with the New Jersey religious educators--Susan Archer was in the group at that time. We all were a rather beleaguered bunch of women, most of us young mothers, who got little pay and less support in our jobs. We met monthly and might have become a coffee and kvetching group without Fred. He was an MRE and his ministry was a counseling service that offered a UU perspective. Eventually I served as president of the board of that

organization. Anyhow, Fred treated us with such respect and encouraged us to respect ourselves.

And then there's Ann Fields, who was so instrumental in the creation and implementation of the Renaissance program. I cannot tell you what a sea change those modules brought to DREs. Ann was a champion of people like me. When she was head of the religious education department in the early 80's I sort of saw her enthroned at the UUA, and when I called her there, she'd take my call and talk to me so warmly. She'd encourage me to submit things I was doing for the REACH packet -- that was a package of 50 or 60 pages that came out to all the churches four times a year, and it was like Christmas when all those colorful pages filled with great ideas and resources arrived. And some of those resources were bylined with my name! Ann saw the professional religious educator I had the potential to be, and her vision helped me attain my vision.

So is all this what spurred your passion for credentialing?

Oh, you better believe it. When I returned to a religious education position after a six-year hiatus, I joined LREDA. I was determined to be seen as a professional and, if possible, to make sure that new DREs did get support in their professionalism. That was 1993. I joined a group Chicago area religious educators and students who met at the Fahs Center at Meadville Lombard every month or so, and while learning from people like Jean Starr Williams, I was able to help new DREs learn the basics.

Liz Jones tells me that the first discussions about professional standards took place at the infamous Fall Conference in San Antonio in 1997 (ask someone about it!), but it wasn't until Salt Lake City in 1998 that I heard about the idea of credentialing religious educators. Maybe 15 of us or so gathered around a table and started to dream. Ten of us were selected or self selected to become a task force for further exploration. Liz was our chair. We met in Boston the following January, negotiating a very icy Beacon Hill and trying to imagine what credentialing would look like. We were trying so hard to not be hierarchical, but three separate groups envisioned what it might be, and we all came up with three levels. We called them aardvark 1, aardvark 2, aardvark 3, using the term aardvark so we wouldn't contaminate our ideas with preconceptions. While we were there, Leena Breen, who was then head of RE at the UUA, told us that the UUA would never be part of the credentialing process. Never. LREDA was going to have to do it all.

In August the ten of us met again in San Diego. Things were starting to gel. The idea of mentors was added in. Then at General Assembly 2000, we were informed that credentialing would be handled by the UUA, with LREDA just responsible for the mentoring. That was such a surprise to me, at first it seemed to deny the value of all the hard work we had done, but you know, it was just what we needed. There was going to be much more credibility in a credential from the UUA than one from LREDA.

I have no idea how much work went into the formation of the RE Credentialing Committee, but it had to be a formidable amount. Kudos to Liz Jones, who first chaired that committee. All of a sudden there was a path to follow to credentialing, and in 2001 I started on that path. I was retired, no longer working for a congregation. I had put in 18 or 20 years as a DRE (depending on how you want to do the math). Now I had to take graduate courses in UU history and UU polity and I had to prove an equivalency in UU RE history. (This isn't history, I told Beth Williams. It's the story of my life!) I had

to put together a portfolio and read or review scores of books. And in February of 2004 I had to appear in front of the RECC, the very first person to do so.

I walked in and saw all these people with stone faces. I knew most of them, some of them quite well. And my mind absolutely went blank. Trying to recover my poise, I stammered, "You probably can see I'm very nervous. Could I please start again?" And the wonderful RECC, which always opens doors and invites you to be your best self, said "yes." So I began again. And at GA that year I got to "walk" at the Service of the Living Tradition and receive my RE credential, Master Level. Prior to that service, Helen Bishop, Betsy Darr, Eva Cescava and I joined our hands and lifted up the names of those people who had paved the way for us.

People have asked me why I would have gone to all that work and expense when my career was ending. And here are some of my reasons.

I did it for myself. I learned so much. I so wish I had known all the UU history and understood all the UU polity early in my career. But I know it now. It helped me with my curriculum writing and it helps me be a better LREDA mentor and a better UU parishioner. Creating my portfolio confirmed the value of a lifetime worth of work. Also, even though I'm no longer serving as a DRE, I still have an identity as a UU religious educator -- I am a retired credentialed religious educator, my name appears in the annual UUA directory, just as it would if I were a retired minister.

And I did it for you and for our profession. How could I have advocated for credentialing if I wouldn't participate in it? I want lay religious educators to be honored in our movement. I want UU congregants and parish ministers to realize that DREs are so much more than the people with the juice and attendance sheets on Sunday morning. They are committed, they are skilled, they are educated, they are a blessing to the children and adults of the congregation, they transform lives.

What are you doing now to use all the skills you learned as a DRE?

Well, first of all, I have to admit I don't always use all those skills. It's a relief to not be a staff person and not have to keep my mouth shut about congregational politics. But I did chair our search committee several years ago and I now chair the committee on ministries. That UU polity course comes in handy. I also serve as a CASA, a court appointed special advocate for neglected and abused children. It's a good use of my listening and caring skills. And of course, I'm a LREDA mentor. It's thrilling to walk that path with dedicated religious educators, and it's so affirming to know how worthwhile they find the credentialing program, both for themselves and for the congregations they serve. It is a life-changing experience. And I get to watch it happen, over and over.

As someone who's been in the field for more than 1/3 of a century, is there any advice you'd give to new DREs?

Well, I hope it has been evident. If you don't really feel like you're a professional religious educator, act your way into it. Just take up the mantle like you own it, then work to justify that action. Find the balance between giving it your all, which will probably mean working more hours than you are paid for, and opening yourself up to exploitation, as I certainly did through much of my career.

Know that giving service to your profession will make you much more of a professional. When I was asked to serve on the Metro District R.E. Committee, or the Meadville Winter Institute Committee, or the LREDA Board, my first thought always was, who, me? I don't have what it takes to do that! But each time, I quickly grew into my new role. You will, too.

And listen for your calling. If you are called to ordained ministry, then go for it. But realize that there is great validity in being called to lay ministry. And if that is your calling, then get credentialed.

You know, since LREDA opened up to folks like me about 25 years ago, there have been four non-ordained religious educators who have been asked to give their odysseys.* I'm only the fourth. You out there -- young lay religious educator -- I'm looking forward to hearing your odyssey at some point in the future.

* Other lay religious educators who presented Odysseys: Eleanor Hunting (1991), Helen Bishop (2003), Jacqui James (2006)

Any parting words for this group tonight?

As a matter of fact, I did bring something with me. It's the very last column that I wrote as a DRE, 10 years ago. It's entitled, "The Person we Should Thank."

In the early part of the last century, Sophia Fahs (1876-1978), daughter of Methodist missionaries, did something revolutionary: she listened to her children. And listening to them, she found the courage to leave the faith of her parents, to overcome the protestations of her husband, and to alter the religious education not only of her own children, but of every Unitarian and/or Universalist child who has come along in the last 60+ years.

Starting with the Beginnings of Earth and Sky in 1937, she developed curricula that honored children as inherently spiritual beings and acknowledged that wondering, asking questions, was one of the holiest of endeavors. She battled the male establishment that was threatened by her insistence that much of what children were being taught about God and the Bible was simply inappropriate to their developmental levels -- or maybe inappropriate, period. She insisted that the church listen to the children when they said they wanted the readings and songs in worship to make sense to them.

When Fahs couldn't find curricula, or a curriculum writer, to meet children's needs, she wrote the curricula herself. Every worthy R.E. curriculum that I have ever seen, UUA published or not, owes its existence to Fahs' influence. Sophia's wisdom has been the foundation of [our congregation's] religious education program since it began almost 50 years ago, and it has been my inspiration for the past 25 years. (Now 35 years, of course.)

To quote Sophia Fahs,

Life becomes religious whenever we make it so:
when some new light is seen,
when some deeper appreciation is felt,
when some larger outlook is gained,

when some nobler purpose is formed,
when some task is well done.
The function of the church . . . is not to give us on Sunday certain
religious kinds of experience . . . [but] rather to teach us how to put
religious and ethical qualities into all kinds of experiences.

So thank you, Sophia.

And thank you, dear colleagues.