

Linked Not Ranked

Odyssey presented by Judith A. Frediani

LREDA Fall Conference, San Diego, California, October 23, 2016

I was a Roman Catholic child. I believed it all; how could I not? My family, my neighbors, my public school, the air I breathed in my 1950s New England small town were all Christian. In my red brick grammar school, we started every day by reciting the Lord's Prayer in unison. We could tell who was Catholic and who was Protestant by who stopped at "but deliver us from evil" and who continued with "thine is the power and the glory." There were no other religions in the 1950s, just as there were no gays.

Kids didn't care who was Catholic and who was Protestant, but one day I learned that adults had certain sensitivities about religion when my Girl Scout troop, which was exactly half – half, was playing a boisterous game of Protestants versus Catholics on a troop field trip. It was the easiest way to divide ourselves evenly – eleven and eleven. The leaders approached us with that grim stone face grownups get when they disapprove, and they made us stop, and made us feel ashamed, and we really didn't know why.

So I was a devout Catholic believer as a child. I lived in fear of hell, not only for myself, but for my parents, who frankly, did not behave themselves as well as I did. So they were a real worry. When my first grandparent died, I asked my mother over and over, "Is Nona in heaven? She's in heaven, right?" But my mother never answered, and I was devastated. My Catholic friends and I talked often about whether what we were doing was a mortal sin or a venial sin so we would know whether we were going to hell or to purgatory if we got hit by a car before our next confession. Not that there was much difference between the two.

When I was 12, I lost the Catholic Church. I still believed in God. How could I not? Still saw God as anthropomorphic and masculine. How could I not? And I still felt the presence of this Supreme Being as a comforting companion whenever I was anxious or alone.

But the church had lost credibility with me. I really believed in the teachings of Jesus as I understood them: compassion, generosity, kindness to a fault. Love Your Neighbor as Yourself. What a challenge! I feared I could never love Pidgie Long the boy who lived next door, but I tried. I began to notice that the church community did not seem to try all that hard to live as Jesus taught. They told us that anyone not baptized in our faith would go to hell. Unbaptized infants would

go to purgatory (what a break!). I asked, “You mean all those Hindu and Buddhist children in India will go to hell because they are not Catholic?” “Sadly, yes,” I was told. I thought God would never burn innocent children. I also knew that people in my church were openly trying to keep African Americans from moving into our town. I knew Jesus would never do that. Remember the Good Samaritan?

In 1959, in the sixth grade, I wrote an essay which began, “I love all people, even Russians and Negroes.” I wince at the words now, but it was not a casual statement or empty sentiment. In my community – and to my surprise – it was a radical statement. It was my first anti-racism action, and it was based on my understanding of God’s universal love, and Jesus’ teachings, which I thought he had articulated quite clearly. Apparently, I was a junior Universalist without knowing it.

Soon I was to make my Confirmation, and I felt I had no faith to confirm. I didn’t want to be a hypocrite, so I made an appointment to talk to the priest about my dilemma. I biked to the rectory for an early appointment one Saturday morning feeling terrified. I was trembling when I told Father Thomas that my faith was gone; I didn’t believe in miracles or the Virgin Birth or most of what I was taught, so I couldn’t make my Confirmation. His response shocked me. “Oh, don’t worry

about it. Nobody believes all that.” That cynicism just confirmed that the Church had lost all credibility with me.

I made my confirmation for my father’s sake, and left the Church for good.

At 16, I lost God in one single intuitive moment. I lost that belief as easily as a dime falling through a hole in my pocket. I was walking home from a friend’s house when I suddenly stopped and thought, “There’s no such thing as God.” I saw clearly that the God of my childhood – that Supreme Being – was the creation of human imagination in the face of the unknown and the frightening. At that moment of revelation, the world around me literally brightened as if someone had turned on a giant celestial lightbulb. I felt a chill of recognition and a sense of loneliness and aloneness. Yet I felt physically lightened as well as enlightened. There was an almost palpable lifting of weight from my shoulders – the burden of guilt and fear and shame that had been so consistently laid on me since my preparation for First Communion. At first I missed having a divine companion looking after me, but once that belief evaporated, it was gone. Like when I realized my mother was Santa Claus. I couldn’t un-ring that bell. I accepted that I was an atheist and therefore set for life theologically. I also knew I

would never again go to church, because all religions that I was aware of taught exclusiveness and dogma to varying degrees.

My coming of age was in a time of great national turmoil – the 1960s. The violence of the Vietnam War and the modern Civil Rights Movement were exposing America’s hypocrisy and historical rankism: Americans over Vietnamese, whites over Blacks, men over women. Jesus and other prophets taught that we are all linked: my church of origin taught that faiths are ranked. Jesus taught that we are all neighbors, all linked. My country taught that we are actually all ranked by race, by religion, by gender, by class, by sexual orientation, by ability, by so many measures. An idealist youth, I preferred the wisdom, and frankly, the logic, of universal love. Faith theorist Sharon Deloz Parks defines faith as the human activity of making meaning. For me, meaning-making without a religion would be to work to make the world a better place. It was a deep spiritual yearning for all humanity to dwell together in peace and love. If you share that yearning, please join with me in singing, “We Would Be One.”

Song: We Would Be One

I found UUism because of a giant turtle shell. As I was picking up my infant son from a caretaker I could hardly miss the oversized cardboard ovals that she was painting. It turned out, she was a Unitarian and she was teaching Haunting House. She was very happy to tell me about this theologically Free Church. "It's not really a church," she said. We do not like to hear that now, but it was music to my ears then. As she described what they did and what they taught in the RE program, the contrast with my Catechism experience was almost unbelievable. I did not immediately run to the local UU church, but a year later, when my two-year-old told me we were going to hell, according to his little friend, I remembered the turtle shells, and I wondered...

Rev. Dick Gilbert and the late Rev. Bobbie Nelson have described religious education and social justice as branches of the same tree. As a young activist, I participated in many social justice rallies, pickets, boycotts and protests, and at almost every one, UU ministers spoke and UU lay leadership was evident. That engagement was a tipping point for me. I walked into a UU congregation as a 24-year-old young parent and was teaching Sunday school within a year. Little did I know religious education would become my calling and my career.

According to author Robert Fuller, who coined the term,

“Rankism is an assertion of superiority. It typically takes the form of putting others down. It’s what ‘Somebodies’ do to ‘nobodies.’ Or, more precisely, it is what people who think they’re Somebodies do to people they take for nobodies.”

We are familiar with many of what Fuller calls the “subspecies” of rankism; racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and so on. What is helpful about this new “ism” is its application to disrespectful relationships between people who largely share race, class and identities. It broadens our understanding of how oppression works. Fuller argues that whatever the roles or positions within institutions and society, “indignity and humiliation have no place in human relations.” In other words, you can have structural ranks, without rankism.

Now what could rankism possibly have to do with UU religious education?

Let me answer by comparing 1984, when I became a professional religious educator, and now.

In the mid-1980s, the average DRE salary was below \$5,000; but many DREs were unpaid, and those zeroes were not part of the average.

There were no guidelines for our salaries, and benefits were usually seen only in large congregations, if there.

“Professional” and “lay” were considered antonyms; if you weren’t ordained, you weren’t a professional.

DREs were part-time; but the work was always greater. When DREs were together, they practiced this ritual of lament: “How many hours do you work? How many hours do you get paid to work?” The tone of this conversation sounded defeatist, even demeaning. Many times I wanted to say, “If you want to work extra hours, do it and shut up about it. If you feel exploited, don’t work extra hours!” I knew it wasn’t that simple, and I never said that to religious educators, but Jeanellen Ryan did. “Stop whining!” she said, and that admonition planted a tiny seed of self-reflection, self-respect, and agency.

In many areas of the United States and Canada, religious educators were isolated from each other and from needed resources. Pioneering MREs like Barbara Marshman, Ann Fields, Peg Gooding, Elizabeth Anastos and Gene Navias worked tirelessly to link us and mentor us in small scattered groups gathered for

conferences and Renaissance modules. But “Director of Religious Education” could be a very lonely job.

There was rankism among religious educators. One had to have certain credentials, usually the rank of accreditation or ordination, to join LREDA. It was a small organization. The first LREDA Fall Conference I attended had only about twenty-eight participants. As I was not ordained, I could join only because of my position at the UUA, a position that some let me know should have gone to a minister of religious education.

Of course, MREs suffered from rankism within the ordained ministry, as religious education ministry was too often seen as a second class ministry.

When I was hired as Curriculum Manager at UUA headquarters in 1985, the RE Department was seen as a pleasant and useful group, but theologically and intellectually somewhat lightweight. After all, even if ordained, we weren't parish ministers, and parish ministers hold a higher rank in a religious organization. What did we know of the manly fields of theology, history and theory?

Throughout our Association, there continued to be a lack of recognition of the pioneering leadership of religious educators in anti-racism work, GLBTQ advocacy and support, spiritual development and practices, Unitarian Universalist identity formation, leadership development for all ages, multigenerational community building, use of multiple learning styles, pastoral care for children, youth and parents, and the centrality of social justice and service to our faith development and our faith. We did all this while directing lifespan programs of religious growth and learning, apparently without much learning ourselves (!?) You can't teach UUism to children, explain UUism to newcomers, conduct worship, mentor youth, and direct an educational program without the theology, theory, history and practice that we largely sought out ourselves and learned largely from each other in our professional gatherings, collaborations, and writings. Religious Educators like Barry Andrews, Liz Strong, and Frank Robertson quietly engaged in scholarship that demonstrated that RE history is UU history. It pained me to see from my vantage point at the UUA that our prophetic role was not visible. It pained me to see the micro aggressions directed at our profession in so many contexts.

To disrespect the religious educator is to disrespect the children and youth with whom we are linked. We not only ministered to families, we fought for them, too.

The culture of rankism was not just an expression of sexism, but of childism, a term coined in 1970 and described recently by political theorist and psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl in her 2012 book, *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children*. Young-Bruehl points to ample evidence of this institutionalized prejudice: the United States incarcerates more of its children than any nation in the world; Congress refuses to sign the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child that states that children do have rights; our society tolerates child abuse, child poverty and failed schools, and accepts the corporal punishment of children. Despite professions of love for children, Young-Bruehl argues that our culture ranks children below adults. Occupations linked with children are generally ranked lower in status and pay than comparable jobs with adults. “Religious Education” and “children” were synonymous in the 1980s when we began the slow drumroll of “lifespan religious growth and learning.”

What were we fighting for decades ago? Bread and roses. We wanted fair compensation – salaries and benefits – and we wanted respect, too – basic personal and professional respect. Respect does not cost money. We wanted to be welcomed at the table, heard, included, offered opportunities to grow professionally, have visibility in the congregation, and have collaborative relationships with the parish minister and lay leadership.

Let us acknowledge our struggle for bread and roses by singing a song inspired by the women-led textile workers strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, over one hundred years ago. These women invented the moving picket line so familiar today because if they stopped walking, they would be arrested for loitering.

Song: Bread and Roses

And where are we now?

We once had only the United States Postal Service and face-to-face gatherings to distribute resources, teach and learn together, and build community. Do you remember the REACH packets with color-coded paper to identify the various themes inside? Do you remember when you had to buy print curricula, and often did not have enough money to buy it or to buy every teacher their own copy? The REACH packet is now REACH-L, just one electronic example of how connected we can be to each other and to a world of resources through social media, blogs, websites, and online meeting and learning sites. REACH-L is not merely a communication tool. It is a community of wisdom. A religious educator writes for help when a congregant asks to lead a discussion against military recruitment with the congregation's high school youth. The response from colleagues is immediate. In a series of thoughtful and knowledgeable ideas, religious educators discuss the implication for our liberal faith, for youth empowerment, for congregational polity, and for our military families. Specific UU resources are cited, as well as an excellent suggestion that the religious educator sponsor a panel of young adults who made a variety of choices post-high school – including

workplace, higher education, and military service – to discuss how those choices have worked for them. That’s how we roll now.

And the UUA’s outstanding programs and other resources are free online – curricula written largely by LREDA members with the guiding hands of the UUA’s Curriculum Office. I will allow myself one brag: I hired Jessica York, Gail Forsyth-Vail, Susan Lawrence, Pat Kahn, Melanie Davis, and before their time, Rev. Pat Hoertdoerfer, Jacqui James, Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Aisha Hauser, Adrienne Ross, Tracey Hurd, Rev. Dr. Monica Cummings and Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh. (I included the titles because I am talking about rankism.) I am proud to have brought such gifted, dedicated and diverse women to the table that I served, and even prouder that they agreed to come and stay awhile.

The salaries of religious educators are substantially up. The UUA’s Compensation Guidelines – once only for ordained ministers – were broadened to include non-ordained religious educators, and later music directors and administrators. David Hubner, then Director of Ministry at the UUA, deserves credit for realizing this advancement, as well as the inclusion of a new credentialing office for lay RE professionals in the Ministry Department. Finally, we are referred to as *religious professionals*, and “lay” and “professional” are no longer antonyms. Both Presidents John Buehrens and Bill Singford lifted up RE. Buehrens welcomed the UUA’s Director of Religious Education, Makaanah Morriss, to the president’s leadership table, a first at the UUA. Singford continued that practice and supported religious education and religious educators in significant ways, earning him the Angus H. MacLean Award in 2009. I was honored to serve on that

Leadership Council for nine years, a time that was the highlight of my 28 years at headquarters. *The importance of being at the table cannot be underestimated.*

Religious educators have far more educational opportunities than were available just two decades ago, and we have created most of them. Racism and white privilege, ministry with youth of color and adopted youth, cutting edge sexuality education, interim religious educators training, faith development, history, theology and leadership all speak to the breadth of religious education practice today. We are practical theologians; we educate ourselves to serve others. When we see a need, we are there, or on the way.

A strong credentialing program for those who choose that route and an amazing Renaissance Program have helped congregations recognize the professionalism of our role. We have been supported generously by the Congregation at Shelter Rock, and we have seen the Fahs Center grow from an RE archive to a living center for the art and practice of religious education. We are at many more tables than even twenty years ago – three members of the twelve-member UUA Board of Trustees are religious educators – and the shared ministry projects with the UUMA and UUMN are of paramount importance.

The credit for this progress goes to religious educators themselves and your relentless march for dignity and worth. “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” Frederick Douglass. Every outranked community must lead its own liberation – it has always been so – even as allies also play a crucial role. I am grateful for the parish ministers who have been part of the struggle with us.

But it was LREDA who upped the ante, growing to a peak membership of 600 by recognizing the ministries of lay RE professionals and opening its doors wide. Stronger together, LREDA became an advocate to be reckoned with. A credible professional relationship grew out of the mutual respect between Pat Ellenwood, former LREDA president, and Gary Smith, former UUMA president, and that professional collaboration continues with our current president, Cathy Seggel, and the UUMA's Don Southworth. LREDA has grown not merely in numbers, but in expertise, professionalism, solidarity and dignity. In this community, we are linked, not ranked.

The patronizing atmosphere at the UUA that I experienced in 1985 started to change in the 1990s due to a number of factors, including the leadership of Reverend Makaanah Morriss. Makaanah approached me one day about being involved in the effort to create a new sexuality education curriculum. "I don't really know anything about sex ed," I said. "And it's not really an area of interest for me." "Judith," she said, "you're the *Curriculum Director*. You *have* to do this." In 1999-2000 we published 14 components of lifespan *Our Whole Lives* to great acclaim within and outside our Association. Respect for the RE department, soon to be the Faith Development Staff Group, rose. I was immediately called to direct a new curriculum era which we call Tapestry of Faith, the most comprehensive in our history, one that brought money into the UUA, not through sales, but through donations to the capital campaign. Money usually ranks high. Meanwhile, congregations were naming RE resources as the top service they received from the UUA. The upstairs/downstairs rankism vibe was fading at headquarters somewhat. Congregations knew that RE was crucial to their survival and growth, and they had to compete for qualified religious educators.

We have made significant progress in a couple of decades within a social construct built on sexism, childism, and rankism of every kind. We have changed faster than the culture that surrounds us. There have been setbacks. Reordering districts into regions has changed the way religious education is served, and restructuring staff groups at the UUA has removed the religious educator from the Leadership Council. The small size of the great majority of our congregations continues to mean that our ministry exceeds our compensation. And every DRE knows what upstairs/downstairs means.

But we have much to celebrate and honor.

We know who we are.

We know we make a difference.

We know who doesn't rank people by age. We know that, "For each child that's born, a morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are."

We know who saves lives with Our Whole Lives;

We know who is there when a child loses a pet, or a parent;

We know who keeps bringing up those unmentionables like sex, money, death, and racism to help parishioners of all ages find the faith to learn, reflect and act in the service of all that life calls us to do.

We know we connect people with their inner life and moral compass, and nurture a faith that refuses rankism.

We know we give life to the seven Principles, and help shape the future of Unitarian Universalism.

We know we must continue to be fearless, radiant and wise.

Finally, we know we are linked, not only to each other, but to ever widening circles of justice and love.

Consider Denise Levertov's words –

Intricate and untraceable

weaving and interweaving

dark strand with light;

Designed, beyond

All spiderly contrivance,

To link, not to entrap:

Elation, grief, joy, contrition,

entwined;

Shaking, changing, forever

forming and transforming:

All praise, all praise to the great web.

I am honored to be linked with you through friendship and collegueship over four transformative decades. I know you will take not one step back. Thank you.

Let us join to sing, "Come Sing a Song With Me."

