

## **The Road to *The Gadfly Papers* and Beyond**

By

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It's difficult for me to pinpoint when my controversial book *The Gadfly Papers* began. In some ways, I think it goes back to the first time one person tried to forcefully prevent someone else from honestly expressing themselves. It surely goes back to the first self-proclaimed gadfly, Socrates, who made a life out of asking challenging questions, which eventually got him killed by the authorities. It most certainly goes back to 1553 when Unitarianism's founder, Michael Servetus was burned alive for questioning established church doctrine, his own heretical writings used to fuel the flames that took his life. It also goes back to 1568, when Hungarian King John Sigismund passed the Edict of Torda, humanity's first religious toleration law, the first freedom of the pulpit law, guaranteeing, "no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching."

*The Gadfly Papers* also began in 1887, when the Spokane Unitarian Society was founded, adopting bylaws explicitly stating, "The authority of its belief is reason, the method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion," and its, "First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy."<sup>1</sup> It began when this church called its first minister, Rev. Edwin Wheelock, who came with a bounty on his head, "Wanted: Dead or Alive," by the State of Virginia for preaching favorably of abolition. It began each time a heretical minister was welcomed into this pulpit, like John H. Dietrich, the father of religious humanism, who, in 1911, became our minister immediately after being convicted of heresy by the Dutch Reform Church. It began when his successor, M.M. Mangasarian stepped into our pulpit, author of the controversial book, *The Truth about Jesus*, declaring him but a myth. A few years earlier, in 1900, Mangasarian, founder of the Rationalist movement, started the Independent Religious Society of Chicago, which had so much in common with Unitarianism that it joined the Western Unitarian Conference in 1922. That's right, American rationalism merged with American Unitarianism 41 years before the Unitarians merged with the Universalists.

My own heretical book had another starting point each time our congregation has upheld its founding principle of inviting rationalist, humanistic, heretical ministers to occupy its pulpit, like humanist Rudy Gilbert, our minister from the late 50s to early 70s, who once said, "Freedom is, in theory and practice, basic to all other beliefs held by Unitarians, individually or in groups... A society, Church, state, or political party, may get a progressive idea or plan for the moment, but unless it incorporates the basic principle of freedom, it will sooner or

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<sup>1</sup> McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.

later become an instrument of reaction....”<sup>2</sup> It also began when another of our humanist ministers, Rev. William H. Houff, immediately following in Gilbert’s footsteps, dared to take on the Federal Government to prove the Hanford Nuclear Reactor was leaking radiation. In a 1998 sermon, Rev. Houff pointed out that when the American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825, “the great majority of Unitarians... generally accepted that reason, not emotion or sentiment, would be used to test all religious beliefs and practices.”<sup>3</sup> (I appreciate the spirits of Rudy and Bill serendipitously butting in this week while preparing my sermon.)

*The Gadfly Papers* began in 1980 through the decade that followed, as I watched my former religious organization, the Southern Baptist Convention, go through what the Unitarian Universalist Association is going through today, the takeover of its institutions by authoritarianism and extremism. Just this week I received a communication from another UU minister who was a Southern Baptist during the takeover. “Given our backgrounds,” he said, “I think we can appreciate more than many UUs the dangerous road we are headed down. It feels all too familiar... It feels like the *Twilight Zone*... I find myself in agreement with much of the content of our current anti-racism talk, but the harsh, condemning, blaming, calling-out tone of the White Supremacy Culture feels like I’m back in the Southern Baptist Convention.”

Most importantly, it began when I became an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister in 1999, and in 2011 when I was called to be your minister, which partly means upholding and protecting our liberal religious tradition by promoting reason, freedom of conscience, and humanistic ethics, no matter who disapproves of it. So, as far as I’m concerned, in so boldly standing up for our faith and the future of our church, writing and distributing *The Gadfly Papers* was part of my responsibility as your minister.

Indeed, I’ve been expressing my growing alarm over the abandonment of our traditional Unitarian values ever since I came here, like in 2013 when I said, “at some point during the past 50 years we’ve come to define Unitarian Universalism mostly by its inclusivity, while often forgetting that we are primarily heretics and that our openness and inclusivity is born of our heresy...” In this sermon, entitled “A Tale of Two Heresies: 50 Years of Learning to Keep Our Opinions to Ourselves, or Not,” I went on to say:

And in the confusion of our identity with a muddled, diluted, preposterous concoction of all faiths, our tolerant religion seems more an idolatrous religion of Tolerance. Too often we sacrifice reason and honesty upon the altar of this peculiar fetish in the holy name of not offending others. For tolerance, in our age of political correctness, has been spun on its head to mean we mustn’t say anything others might disagree with. Although ours is no longer a

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, Rudolph W., *Unitarianism—The Word and the Witness*, Made available through the publishing fund of The Unitarian Church, 1870 Broadway, Denver, CO, Feb. 1953, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Houff, William Harper, *The Struggle for the Soul of our Movement*, January 1998.

theocracy that outlaws and burns heretics, too many treat those they disagree with as if they are disagreeable. They blame those they don't wish to tolerate as if *they* are intolerant.<sup>4</sup>

I've repeated this concern many times over the years, including in my 2017 sermon, "It's Not the Thought that Counts," in which I said;

...the culture of Political Correctness, a philosophy of some social progressives who think nobody should get away with saying things they find offensive... [is] a philosophy akin to that of people like Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Glenn Beck, who seem to think they have a right not to have to listen to opinions they disagree with, that they have every right to publicly demonize, humiliate, and silence anyone who says something they don't like.<sup>5</sup>

And in my 2018 sermon, "Protest and the Measure of All Things," I said, "I disagree that it's okay to silence or drown out the speech of my adversaries, a tactic deployed alike by rightwing pundits on Fox News and progressive protestors on our streets and college campuses... To me, banishing one from my community, saying they don't belong, that they have no right to be seen or heard, is to protest their very existence, their right to live and be, which violates the law of love in every way."<sup>6</sup> Some may recall the sermon I gave just prior to the 2017 General Assembly, entitled, "Chilled: PC, Misappropriation, Microaggressions, and Other Forms of Neo-Fascism," during which I broke down trying to explain, "Tomorrow I will be heading to New Orleans to attend the Unitarian Universalist Association's Annual Meeting, and I leave with a heavy heart." This was so, I said, because I had been part of the Assembly's Worship Arts Team, an endeavor that ended up being one of the most soulless and stifling experiences of my life. The hymns I wanted to use in the service I was responsible for were forbidden, like, "One More Step," because it's considered ableist by some, or, "We'll Build a Land," because it might be offensive to Native Americans, even though it's based upon the Hebrew scripture, "Come build a land where sisters and brothers, anointed by God, may then create peace: where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever flowing stream."

That's when I also learned white males aren't allowed to discuss social justice issues on UUA stages because it's not possible for them to relate to injustice. But the most heartbreaking experience of all was when, even after assigning the participants I had been instructed to include, I was still told, "Your service is the whitest of them all. What can we do about that?" I was dumbfounded and began listing the different ethnicities of my seven participants, only one of whom was a white male. Upon doing so, I explained, "I found myself becoming sick to my stomach, for I am not accustomed to speaking of human beings in these terms, as numbers and colors, yet realized, by making sure I had three African American participants

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<sup>4</sup> Eklof, Todd F., "A Tale of Two Heresies: 50 Years of Learning to Keep our Opinions to Ourselves, or Not," June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Eklof, Todd F., "It's Not the Thought that Counts: Transforming the World by Changing the Rules," October 22, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Eklof, Todd F., "Protest and the Measure of All Things," September 2, 2018.

and a Latino teenager, that I had let this process cause me to tokenize others based on their race." I allowed myself to go along to get along, demeaning the personhoods of others in the process.

That's also when, "Let's Be Reasonable," was born, the third essay in my controversial book, though the first written. The idea came against the backdrop of a hiring decision that resulted in widespread accusations Unitarian Universalism is a white supremacist organization, which the UUA leadership then took for granted, and is, for all practical purposes, all the Assembly focused on, even though it was occurring only a few months past Trump's election, and many of us had additional concerns, like Global Warming, we wished were also addressed. I reasoned, because Unitarian Universalists claim, as is written in our Associational bylaws, since reason is one of our major sources of inspiration, to help us avoid, "idolatries of the mind and spirit," that by modeling its use in response to this difficult issue, we might use it to be more honest, understanding, and compassionate with each other. Boy did I ever get that wrong! You can imagine my shock when less than 24 hours after giving my book away a letter signed by over 300 of my colleagues condemning it, stating, "zealous commitment to 'logic' and 'reason' over all forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture," and when, two months later, the UU Ministers Association's censured me, similarly claiming, "we cannot ignore the fact that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture to stifle dissent, minimize expressions of harm, and to require those who suffer to prove the harm by that culture's standards."

Although I don't fully disagree and would encourage you to read Ibram X. Kendi's remarkable 500-year history of white supremacy, *Stamped from the Beginning*, for solid examples of how logic, as well as science and philosophy, have been used to uphold racist beliefs, the UUMA's letter of censure gave no examples of how *my* use of logic has done so. I suppose, having no commitment to using reason at all, its emotionally reactive members don't recognize the most common fallacy in their thinking, *affirming the consequent*. It's like saying all rainbows contain the color purple. The bouquet contains the color purple. Therefore, the bouquet is a rainbow. Using logic isn't necessarily racist any more than using ships or roadways are racist, though both were used in the slave trade.

What's not to be missed, however, more so than the unsoundness of this surprising claim any use of logic is a form of racism, is that we now have two historic documents in existence, one signed by hundreds of UU ministers, and the other a letter of censure from the UU Ministers Association, both explicitly renouncing the use of reason, that which our Associational bylaws still lists as a source of our spiritual growth, and that the founders of our own congregation established as the "Authority of its belief."

The essay, placed first in my book, *The Coddling of the Unitarian Universalist Mind*, was inspired by the 2018 book, of similar title, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, critiquing Safetyism, the belief ideas can be harmful and are, therefore, dangerous, and it's our moral

obligation to protect others from hearing things they disagree with, sometimes violently, but always by sacrificing free speech. No wonder the Ministers' letter of refutation also makes the astonishing claim that freedom of speech is itself a form of oppression. When I read *Coddling*, I realized what it described happening on college campuses these days, in the name of protecting students from harmful ideas, is precisely what I've seen going on in the UUA. I won't go into my essay's content now, but I will mention some of the questions I hope its content provoke.

For instance, are all the white males in our congregations, and all over the world for that matter, really the embodiment of white supremacy and patriarchy, as the UUA now seems to believe? If so, were they destined to be so before conception? The moment of conception? At birth? In kindergarten when they began being enculturated? What is the age of accountability for this new form of original sin? Are their mere images really so offensive that we are not to even allow their pictures to appear in our publications and promotional materials anymore? Is it true they can't empathize with others or understand injustice?

And what of the use of language as metaphor? If we can no longer use "stand," or "blinded," what of words like *see*, and *hear*, and *walk*? Is "Let it be a Dance We Do," now on our banned list of hymns? What's next? Who decides? Who will let us know? I heard of one greeter at the General Assembly here in Spokane, an older volunteer who was "called out" simply for using the word "welcome," accused of implying those she greeted needed her welcome because they weren't welcome to begin with. Must we now be afraid to speak to each other for fear of "harming" someone with the smallest unintentional slight? Must we fear even saying, "welcome?"

Has the use of reason, once fundamental to Unitarianism, really become anathema in our Association? Is truth really culturally relative? Is there nothing objective about it? Is truth private and personal? Does tolerance mean not saying things others disagree with, or does it still mean having the ability to hear things *we* disagree with? I can tell you, if the new definition safety means never hearing things we disagree with, then nobody is safe in this church as long as I'm its minister, nor safe anywhere else in the world for that matter.

The second chapter of my book, *I Want a Divorce: A Case for Splitting the Unitarian Universalist Association*, speaks of the identity crisis I believe has plagued us since the merger of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961. As I point out earlier in the book, humanism, like reason and freedom, has always been foundational to the Unitarian side of our tradition, beginning with the earliest Unitarians who, though still theists, held a humanistic Christology, the belief Jesus was only human. Just five years after the 1961 merger, the new Association surveyed its member to identify their typical profile. Of the 12,000 members surveyed, from 800 congregations, less than 3 percent claimed to believe in a "supernatural being," 28 percent considered God "an irrelevant concept," 57 percent did not consider theirs

a “Christian” religion, and 52 percent preferred “a distinctive humanistic religion.”<sup>7</sup> When a similar study occurred more recently, in 2005, UUA members no longer had a clue what our religion is about. One claimed, “It’s the support network.”<sup>8</sup> Another saw “the UU movement as an interreligious dialogue,”<sup>9</sup> Another said it’s comprised of “people who didn’t fit in,”<sup>10</sup> while others complained its members share little in common. “This is where the UUA falls down,” one said, “and why you have CUUPS and the Buddhists and the Christians and all these little subgroups—because we offer the hope of a spiritual journey, and we offer no tools to do it with.”<sup>11</sup> The report on the survey concluded, “Despite consensus within the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important in this troubled world, we find it difficult to articulate that message clearly.”<sup>12</sup>

This identity crisis in our religion, I argue, is the result of unresolved tensions between Unitarianism and Universalism. In his previously mentioned 1998 sermon, “The Struggle for the Soul of our Movement,” Rev. Bill Houff said we can view this “as a power struggle for dominance. Or we can view it as an opportunity to come up with a new and more creative synthesis.”<sup>13</sup> I hope so, but he also warned that we “never forget that humanism’s emphasis on human experience and rationality is essential to living in a sane world. Emotional experience and religious enthusiasm are essential to a moral and rich world, but divorced from reason, they easily run amok, leading to error and even barbarism.”<sup>14</sup> This, in my opinion, is what’s happening now, the complete abandonment of our traditional Unitarian principles—reason, freedom, and humanism.

Consider this, during a 2012 UU Ministerial Conference, keynote speaker, Rev. Frederic Muir referred to the “trinity of errors” he believes is stymying our religion, “a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism... Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news... [and] our allergy to authority and power.” Muir goes on to say we need to establish “something that has eluded Unitarian Universalism: a doctrine of church,” that, “We cannot do both covenant and individualism,” that we must move beyond the concept of an “iChurch,” that the four pillars of the new church doctrine must be, “Multiculturalism, environmental justice, sexual and family values, right relationships,” and that Unitarianism’s humanistic turn has “arrested” our “theological creativity.”

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, UUA, Boston, MA, May 2005, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Houff, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In 2019 *UU World* article entitled “The Power of We,” just prior to the recent General Assembly, our Association’s current President cited Muir’s trinity of errors—individualism, exceptionalism, and our allergy to authority—repeating his blueprint forward, that we need to move from an iChurch to a beloved community, from *individualism* to *interdependence*. Most recently, in October, a Pacific Northwest UU Region newsletter was sent out with an article further promoting the shift in our congregations from “I” to “We.” I think all three articles makes some good points and are well meaning, but they also create a false dichotomy, that there’s either “I” or “we,” either the “individual” or the “community,” when both must exist for humans and societies to be healthy. Without the strong commitment to individuality, we easily succumb the kind of groupthink and fascism overtaking our entire nation today, which is why UU leaders disparaging exceptionalism and antiauthoritarianism trouble me. If we see equality as meaning that we must all think, and speak, and act alike, without exception, without freedom, we end up like the former USSR, where everyone is equally miserable. And it is only by eliminating individualism, without exception, as the UUA is now suggesting, that authoritarianism can thrive. If this is what Unitarian Universalism now means, I can’t be a part of it, because I consider individualism, exceptionalism, and our aversion to authority our strengths, not our errors.

Last year, prior to my book, another UU minister wrote a Facebook post stating, in part, “I have reservations about current UU racial-justice ideology, and would like to find a place to discuss them with colleagues (of all races). I can’t imagine that our moderators would allow such a discussion here. Can anyone suggest a place?” For this, he too was censured by the UU Ministers Association, accusing him of violating our Covenant and Code of Conduct. I knew, because of the “cancel culture” now amok in the UUA, there was no way I could openly talk about my concerns either; or get “permission” to give my book away, not that I needed it. So here I am now, the hero of a story to some and its villain to others. I hope it’s worth it when the story ends.

As I see it, our turmoiled religion now has three options. We can continue down the course we’re on, watching our traditional Unitarian values evaporate into oblivion. We can split, as I say in my book may be inevitable if we’re not allowed to talk about our concerns. Or we can have genuine, respectful, open dialogue about what’s going on and figure out a way to move forward together, maintaining our common values and shared goals, including the goals of ending racism and other forms of oppression everywhere. I’ll end this longer than usual sermon as Bill Houff ended his 1998 sermon about this mounting conflict, “Maybe this time around, we can have a continuing and creative dialogue instead of a divisive and destructive struggle for dominance. But we need to keep the dialogue open and civil! And we need to get started pronto!”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Houff, *ibid.*