

NAUA
What's it about? Where's it at? Where is it going?

By
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Carl Sagan once said, “You have to study the past in order to understand the present.” I think this principle explains why I’m often so long-winded, because, as a logical person, I try to trace the historical trail of breadcrumbs that led to whatever I’m talking about. As philosopher George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” It is also true that by forgetting or ignoring the past we can get lost while journeying toward the future; lost like little Hansel and Gretel did after the birds ate the breadcrumbs that they left on the ground to help guide their way home. Without the breadcrumbs, without history, we may know *where* we want to end up, but we have no way of knowing *how* to get there. We know the end but can’t remember the means. We’ve lost our way.

In Unitarianism Universalism, Enlightenment liberalism is our ideological home, and its principles—reason, freedom, and tolerance, rooted in our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person—are the breadcrumbs that guide us in any direction by reminding us of where we come from. They are the principles that will get us where we want to go. They are the means to our ends. They are our Way.

Several years ago, I began noticing many in the Unitarian Universalist Association weren’t necessarily adhering to these values anymore. They weren’t going about things in a liberal way, and the more I noticed it, the worse it got. This began, not in our pews, but among the leaders of our Association, both its ministers and some of those heading the Association. It was subtle at first. There was less tolerance for different thoughts, and some, especially older white males, felt increasingly unwelcome to speak freely at collegial gatherings. At its gatherings, the UUA began focusing mostly on a particular brand of antiracism at the exclusion of additionally important matters. Then, in 2017, after a job applicant claimed she wasn’t hired by the UUA because of white supremacy, the Association went berserk, acting as if the absurd and unsubstantiated claim must be true and that rooting out white supremacy from our congregations was now the only and entire point of our religion.

That was the impetus for me writing *The Gadfly Papers*, which documented the worst instances of illiberal and un-UU behavior I was aware of, while reminding us of our true history and historic values, while tracing the breadcrumbs. My intention was to make those in our pews aware of what was happening so we might make a course correction before things got out of hand. My plan was to give the book to at least one member of every congregation represented at the UUA General Assembly that took place here in Spokane that year (2019). And my hope was this might help slowly spread the word about what was happening. Instead, within just a few hours, I was banned from returning to the Assembly. Within a day, two letters were signed by hundreds of ministers calling me and my book racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and classist, without citing a sentence. Within a month, I was fired from Meadville-Lombard as an adjunct professor (where I earned my

Doctorate), without explanation, and was censured by the UU Ministers Association, and by the end of the year I was disfellowshipped (our term for being excommunicated from the official order of UU ministers) by the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee. As difficult as all of this was to go through, the shocking and kneejerk response to my book proved its points far better than anything I'd written in it, and helped make *The Gadfly Papers* the bestselling book among Unitarian Universalists ever.

Alas, my expectation that such awareness would have restored sanity to our Association has since been dashed. At one point in my book, I ask the UUA to "be transparent about this 'institutional change,' so those who may fundamentally differ with this approach can offer their dissent or, at least, decide if they wish to remain a part of it." Up to that point, their efforts to rudimentarily change our religion into its opposite had been clandestine and secretive. But since *The Gadfly Papers*, after years of trying to discredit me and my book, they have begun doing exactly as I asked, they have come clean about their intention to fundamentally transform our liberal religion into something else. Sadly, these intentions remain shielded from any meaningful criticism or serious discussion.

In *The Gadfly Papers*, I also predicted an almost inevitable split by those "deciding to abandon a faith that has abandoned them." Although the serious tone was a call to prevent this likelihood, I ended my book by saying, "I hope it doesn't come to this, but if it's the only way to remember and recommit to our once cherished principles of reason, freedom of conscience, and common humanity, we may have no other choice."

For me the final straw came in the Spring of 2022, after it became apparent the UUA had abandoned our commitment to democratic processes, not only by stifling dissenting opinions, but by holding sham elections the outcomes of which had already been orchestrated, including what would effectively be the appointment of the next UUA president by only a handful of individuals. Shortly thereafter, as I had also previously predicted, the UUA leadership announced their intention to remove our seven principles from its bylaws, some versions of which had been around since the Association was formed in 1961. At that point, after nearly four years of pushing back, reminding the UUA of our historic values, and appealing to the better angels of their leadership's nature, it became obvious things had only worsened and that we were wasting our time and energy. So, in December of 2022, in a sermon entitled, "The End of an Era," I announced the formation of the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA).

Although it took a bit longer than expected, by March our steering committee had received our articles of incorporation from Washington State, we had our preliminary website up and were able to receive members, 37 of whom joined the first day. We could accept contributions (thanks to everyone who has supported us so far) and we could already provide a few basic services, including NAUA Academy courses, a monthly worship service, a monthly clergy support gathering, and our excellent digital magazine, *Liberal Beacon*. Shortly thereafter, we formed a provisional Board of Trustees that went to work creating a

provisional set of bylaws. These are both considered provisional until we have our first annual meeting when our members can officially elect Board members and approve official bylaws.

Between members and subscribers, we currently have over seven hundred individuals involved with NAUA. We have many who have joined as individuals, although the larger portion of our members were included when their organizations joined. To date, we have four organizational members, the UU Congregation of the Shoals, the Hayward NAUA Fellowship, the UU Church of Spokane, and UUMUAC—the acronym for the UU Multiracial Unity Action Council, an organization founded by the recently deceased, Rev. Dr. Finley C. Campbell, that exists for the purpose of uniting the light-skinned and dark-skinned people of the world.

When an institution joins, all its members become our members unless an individual requests to be removed from our membership list. Unlike the UUA, everyone who is a member will have a vote in our elections and other important matters. This is the 21st century and technology now exists to make this happen. Unfettered democracy is essential to any organization claiming to be liberal. This is why NAUA is committed to providing a ballot in every box. We will not send out virtue signaling emails complaining about voter suppression in our wider society while our own Association is stifling dissent and orchestrating the outcome of elections. We hope to have our first annual meeting within the first year to year-and-a-half of our existence.

We now have enough devoted members to have begun pulling together various committees and teams of volunteers. Having reached such a point only a few months after launching is more than I could have hoped for. Building a solid committee infrastructure will ensure that NAUA is sustainable and not dependent upon the efforts of a small group of people who can only do so much and are subject to burnout. To date, in addition to our provisional Board of Trustees, we have a Membership Committee, a Worship Committee, an NAUA Clergy Support Committee, an NAUA Academy Committee, a Website Committee, a Editorial Board, and a Ministerial Services Committee, with several more in the works, like a Finance Committee, International Ministries Committee, and an Annual Meeting Committee, among others. Please let us know if you are interested in joining one of our committees.

Ministerial services is another major area in which NAUA will differ substantially and philosophically from the UUA. I've been a Unitarian Universalist long enough to know that most of our members, including many of our ministers and ministerial aspirants, falsely believe a person becomes a minister once they are approved by the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the MFC. This belief is not only wrong but is also an affront to our liberal tradition. The UUA website currently states that "The Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) has jurisdiction over all phases of ministerial credentialing." They wish! And they have fooled a lot of us into believing this is so. Here's what the UUA Bylaws actually say in Article XI, "Each member congregation has the exclusive right to call and

ordain its own minister or ministers, *but* the Association has the exclusive right to admit ministers to ministerial fellowship with the Association.” I have always found it remarkable that the UUA chose to contradict the centuries old right of our congregations in the very same sentence in which they affirm it. Congregations have the exclusive right to ordain ministers, *but* the Association has the exclusive right to admit them into Ministerial Fellowship.

To understand its significance, this is an instance in which we need to trace the historic breadcrumbs, in this case to the Reformation when our peculiar ministerial tradition began. Prior to then, ministers and priests were ordained and placed by the authorities. Congregations had no choice about who their ministers would be, nor who would become a minister. But during the Reformation and the Renaissance it led to, during which an emphasis on human welfare and individual dignity began to emerge, “There were those—,” as Unitarian historian Charlse Howe says, “and their numbers were large—who were seeking a religious community of free spirits, one with no set standards of belief, little formal organization, and no prescribed forms of worship.”¹ Although they were “hard to define because of their diversity,” Howe says, “these people became known as Anabaptists,”² a name that means re-baptizers.

They earned this nickname because they deeply believed religion should not be forced on anyone but should be a matter of individual choice. So, they rejected the validity of infant baptism since infants had no choice in the matter. They would only accept those who had freely chosen to be baptized again as adults. The idea was considered heresy by both the Catholics and other Reformers, who persecuted the Anabaptists out of existence, although their remnants went on to become Baptists, Mennonites, and us—Unitarians. In fact, “It was among these Anabaptists,” Howe says, “that the Unitarian heresy (and, incidentally, the Universalist heresy as well) first broke out during the early years of the Reformation.”³

To this day, Baptist and Unitarian churches are autonomous and, as the UUA bylaws admit, have “the exclusive right to call and ordain [their] own minister or ministers.” *But*, as these bylaws also indicate, the UUA has fashioned a work around, which leads them to believe, in their own words, they have “jurisdiction over all phases of ministerial credentialing.” This presumptive overreach, which should be considered the antithesis of the free religion our theological ancestors died for, has allowed the UUA to strictly control the flow of ministers to our congregations and given them the final say, not us, in who gets ordained. And, in recent years, those aspirants who don’t ascribe to the Association’s particular beliefs don’t get credentialed and our congregations never know they even existed. And, increasingly, those like me, who got through the MFC before all this began, are having our credentials stripped and our names placed on the UUA website telling the world we are abusive bullies who are ethically unfit for ministry.

This illiberal, unjust, and destructive chain of ministerial supply unnecessarily costs our congregations thousands of dollars in what is a very restricted and controlled ministerial

search process. In my opinion, it has also resulted in the worrisome ministerial shortage the UUA is now experiencing. In what it called “a bellwether moment,” a May 2023 UUA communication to members of the UU Ministers Association explained that “For years, the Transitions Office would hear from about 25-30 newly fellowshipped ministers looking to consider congregational ministry. The last two years it’s been 5 ministers, then 8.” That’s an alarming shortage that has left dozens of congregations unable even to find interim ministers. There may be many reasons for this shortage, but I believe the UUA’s authoritarian and illiberal approach toward ministry must be partly to blame.

In our attempt to restore liberalism to our liberal religion, NAUA will handle ministerial supply much differently. We’re going to get rid of the “but.” There is no “but.” NAUA recognizes the exclusive right of our congregations to not only ordain, call, and install their ministers, but also to decide what credentials they will require. Some may require less experience and education than others. It’s up to them. Ours is a tradition in which many of our greatest ministerial figures came to us directly from another religion. I myself was an ordained Southern Baptist minister when I began speaking at a Unitarian church. This is why NAUA will not erect a gateway between ministers and our congregations. Ours will be a clearing house, in which congregations and ministers in search can easily see and contact each other any time of the year, free of charge. In this way, we will enrich and diversify our pool of ministers.

This particular service is a work in process, but already NAUA has done much to restore the kind of welcoming, openminded, and supportive community its members were once accustomed to, by allowing us to work with, and learn with, and visit with, and worship with other Unitarians and Universalists during our many regular gatherings. I believe this is the sort of community and atmosphere that will continue drawing others to us, including ministers wishing to serve communities that genuinely respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our liberal tradition began with the Anabaptists’ profound belief in the necessity and right of adults to make their own decisions, including choosing their own ministers, and this remains the deepest belief of NAUA. We are here to serve and support our members, not to govern them.

It is this commitment to our first and guiding principle that I will end with. Until recently, I had suggested NAUA members maintain membership in the UUA. That’s still your choice. But a couple of weeks ago, during our most recent NAUA Academy offering, “Left vs. Left: What’s Happening Ain’t Exactly Clear,” the brilliant Ken Ing showed a line from a UUA Study Action Issue approved in 2018, stating, “Decentering whiteness calls us to decenter individual dignity for our collective liberation.” There’s a lot packed into this indigestible word salad. Firstly, “decentering whiteness,” is a euphemism that conceals an approach that seeks to level the playing field by bringing some people down instead of lifting everyone up. The term “collective liberation” likewise conceals the postmodern doctrine of collectivism that believes individuals must be sacrificed for the sake of the community, state, and authorities. And, most disturbing of all is this “call” to eliminate “individual dignity,” the

very core of what it means to be liberal. If the UUA is no longer committed to this principle above all, it is no longer a liberal religion and no longer shares my values.

So, I've decided that I can no longer, in good conscience, remain a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In rejecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, no matter their color or status in the world, it has adopted a destructive, divisive, and harmful ideology that I cannot be part of. This week, I will send a personal correspondence to the UUA asking to be removed from its membership rolls. This is a huge decision, but because NAUA now exists, I lose nothing by doing so. In leaving the UUA, I won't lose my spiritual community, my values, nor my ability to continue making a meaningful difference in the world. In walking away from the UUA, I don't have to walk away from my religion. But I must walk away. If the UUA someday turns around, we will be here with open arms, but, for now, I can no longer justify being part of an organization that I believe has become a harmful and dehumanizing presence in the world.

From this point forward, I am not interested in the UUA. I will focus my attention and energies on the good work NAUA is doing and all we shall continue to accomplish to help liberal religion survive and thrive. I close with deep gratitude for the members of this congregation who have continued to support me through all that we have gone through together, and for the many of those, near and far, who have joined NAUA and are now volunteering to help our budding Association become an important and meaningful presence in our lives and in our world. NAUA would be nothing without you!

So let me close with another brief anecdote, in the Brothers Grimm story of Hansel and Gretel, it isn't just breadcrumbs that the twins drop to find their way home, crumbs that easily get snatched up by birds. They also drop shiny stones on the ground, which don't show up very easily during the day, but at night, during their darkest hour, the moonlight shines upon them to illuminate their way. Today Unitarian Universalism is experiencing one of its darkest hours ever, yet we too have shiny stones to illuminate our path. We call these stones freedom, reason, and tolerance—rooted in what remains our central commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Some may succeed in snatching away a few of the crumbs we've dropped along the way, but these values remain solid and shall continue to guide us. For this is our Way.

¹ Howe, Charles A., *For Faith and Freedom*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1997, p. 13.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.