

Editor's Preface

Most issues of this Journal come together as an eclectic collection of individual submissions and solicitations, and if there is a *theme* apparent, it usually emerges only after the editing process is pretty much complete—that is, about the time I start to write this prefatory section.

This issue is a little different—I made a call for papers four months ago, around two possible themes: either liberal religion and the arts (one that I quite frankly had been wanting to write on for a while), or Naturalism—dictated by the increasing interest in a reformulation of UU humanism, both institutionally and philosophically, to be more welcoming to religious naturalists. And I wanted to see if a general call with some guidance as to broad areas of interest would produce more response than the frequent individual hemming and hawing that comes with deciding to submit—either to the editing process, or a finished piece.

The challenge was that whichever topic garnered the larger number of usable articles would set the content for this issue (spring, 2011) and the other for the fall, 2011 issue due out around the holidays. What came in were a few articles in each camp, but also several that combine the two. A cynic would say that UUs just refuse to make hard choices, but I prefer to propose that naturalism and the arts, intertwined, may well be what sums up the uniqueness of UU religiosity.

That certainly seems to be part of what the authors in this issue suggest: even Lynn Hunt's horror movie retrospective showcasing the image of the monster, perhaps the most un-natural, as opposed to super-natural force, in modern storytelling, "Hauntings" begs for and benefits from a movie-like reading—take it in fast the first time, without breaks, then go back and digest bits of it, and let the images linger; chances are some of these movies are on your personal guilty pleasures list. Third perusal—make some popcorn — and be open to the buttery possibility that art can include the oft-derided "schlock" genre of movies as an opening into deep sociological and psychological analysis. Like the movies she "presents" and the monsters she brings "on screen," Lynn's text lurches (appropriately) a little—from image to image, from subplot to subplot. And it is never fully clear how her title is to be taken, despite being invoked several times... like a good movie title, it encourages you to buy a ticket, then leaves you wondering if you should go back for another viewing, in case you missed something.

This piece began life as a Halloween Sunday sermon. It's been mutated (starring Lynn as Dr. Frankenstein in the pulpit, and me as the editorially inclined lab assistant) into a cinematic article about the role of the "other." As my favorite movie monster, Droog-in-chief Alex from Clockwork Orange would say, "real 'orrorshow."

Bill Murry's art form of choice is the poetry of Ken Patton, Universalist preacher, religious humanist and naturalist, who wove a fascination with world religions and religious art into a new fabric of Universalism beyond universal salvation, in the years preceding the AUA/UCA merger. Bill's own forte is the scholarly compilation of different influences and directions into a new picture; in "Rediscovering Kenneth Patton for Today," he attempts this with Patton's poetry, prose and practice of social justice in religious community. The only p-word missing in that clergy job description is pastoral care, at which, Bill points out, Patton was, well, definitely not an artist!

Is there something in the make-up of a parson who thrills from the pulpit, charms on

the printed page, and creates a new style of congregation on the strength of his personality, that makes it difficult to also care well for people? Murry hints at this, but prefers to focus on Patton's contributions to an evolving religious humanism, rather than his pastoral shortcomings. As such we have an incomplete biography, but a more powerful challenge, for Murry suggests neither we, nor those who would have wished Patton more "warm and cuddly," have done anywhere near enough with his rich and varied legacy.

Kent Hemmens Saleska clearly wants to do more with that legacy, and wants us all to do the same. His father, Charles Saleska, during a long and ultimately fatal illness, penned a Religious Humanist rewrite of the Twenty-Third Psalm. Kent offered it to all his colleagues on the UU Minister's chat line, for use in worship services. I asked if I could publish it here, along with much of the sermon through which Kent introduced the work to his own Minnesota congregation. Worship itself is clearly a broad art form for Kent, and he begins with Ken Patton's "Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips; let us love the world through heart and mind and body." In this centennial year of Patton's birth, Saleska challenges us to get past the questions regarding worship in his title: "To Whom? For What?" in order to focus on what Patton kept central—the how of "falling in love with life."

I recall Kent's father walking across the stage at General Assembly to receive fellowship, not long before his death. He wasn't the kind of person who would have wanted a fuss made, so many did not recognize the significance of that brief transit, but there was still a quiet ripple of applause. That walk was an act of worship, a man loving the world, being in love with life, through the simple motion of his body. I'm delighted his son has put words to his father's walk, and carried it forward in his own words and practice of worship.

How we worship in the moment was the inspiration for asking Chip Roush's permission to reprint his brief prayer for Mother's Day, 2011, released as this issue was nearing completion. Scheduling a semi-annual publication usually means that time sensitive pieces seem stale when they finally get into print. But the question of how we handle as religious liberals, in worshipping communities, the day's headlines, is always fresh. Chip has a longer article that will appear in the next issue; this brief offering needs no other introduction.

Jim Scott and I have talked many times, before and after concerts I've attended or helped him put on, following a harrowing week of promoting our respective and overlapping world views at General Assembly, and as house guest and host. He's garrulous and opinionated, and can be teased into a gentle cynicism. But when he sings, it's a celebration, even of the hard things, and much like he's carrying on (and easing you into) two or three conversations at once. What an unexpected delight then to notice how spare and stripped down his printed lyrics are on the page. Without the tune, without the guitar, without the beguiling of the audience—a surprise of simplicity. This submission is a work in progress—a series (cycle?) of songs riffing on and reverencing the UUA Principles. Written over a number of years and now being pulled together, I'd like to hear the finished work—I trust some of you who sing in or lead choirs will get in touch with Jim, to move this possibility forward.

As stunned as I was at the simplicity of Jim's lyrics, I was not at all surprised how central that reflection was for me. The article I wrote for this issue suggests that surprise,

negative and positive, rather than awe, wonder or any other form of appreciation, is what makes Religious Humanism *religious*. Just as Jim's performance style continues to catch me unawares, given my experience of his conversational side, so do many artist's performances surprise me, far more often than say the written output of poets or essayists.

My religious connection to people comes from the unexpected in our interaction, and nothing sets that up so well as being an audience for a performer. My take on this may strike you as a little dismissive of the impact of natural beauty and grandeur that other writers in this issue lift up as being at the heart of Religious Humanism, but I think of it more as a cautionary note—we need to be sure that we are actually motivated to be and act differently by what we revere, not simply uplifted by it.

David Breeden is familiar with the motivation arising from the “pure joy” of creativity that comes with making poetry. In religion, he claims poetics is the proof that the alleged vanquishing of mythology by rationality is never complete, as new myths are constantly created. That is a phenomenon both out of our control, and subject to our very human nature as story tellers. We, “who have experienced all things,” are artists using the mystery of existence as our medium; as poets we are the God creators.

Carol Floyd completes this volume by taking up her new position as book review editor, offering a critical look at Sam Harris' *The Moral Landscape*, wondering if the author has studied in sufficient detail the US religious landscape, beyond fundamentalist Christianity, and whether he is open to aspects of religion that might increase human well being.

So I've done my Jackson Pollock thing with art and liberal religion, and tossed a variety of things up on the canvas—your turn. Get up close and involved with the articles, then step back and tell me what you think.

Roger Brewin, editor