

I see friends shaking hands, sayin', "How do you do?" They're really sayin', "I love you." George David Weiss, George Douglas, Bob Thiele (but sung by Louie Armstrong)

It was about 10 years ago that Louisiana's UU ministers met on a Thursday and had a wide-ranging discussion on local issues but nobody mentioned Katrina. On the very next day the storm's clouds had covered the Gulf and its winds had shifted direction. Our city, the center of jazz, gumbo, Mardi Gras, and *joie de vivre* could only surrender when the levee failures let loose a surge of water.

I recall when the National Guard allowed us back in to see the devastation. The Reverend Aaron Payson of the UU Trauma Ministry Team accompanied me on my first return to the city. We already knew that 80% of the homes were flooded but it was so difficult to see the water surrounding the homes in the neighborhood of our church.

The National Guard allowed people back to the city 60 days later and we learned that UU church membership was halved and our buildings were all damaged. Many UUs rebuilt their homes as they rebuilt their churches. The rebuilding focus led to the establishment of the Greater New Orleans Unitarian Universalist (GNOUU) cluster, a special gift that continues to gain strength over the years.

I serve at Community Church Unitarian Universalist. Its members met in three churches and a synagogue from 2005 to 2007 before buying and saving the house next door. We worshipped in this "annex" for four years while raising money and making our plans for rebuilding. Church members gave much but could not do it all. They are most grateful for the help of UUs around the country. The magnificent results of the special collection thrilled us. But we share a special thanks to our partner congregations: Fox Valley UU Fellowship, Appleton, WI; Community Church of New York UU, New York, NY; UU Congregation at Montclair, Montclair, NJ; Universalist Church of West Hartford, West Hartford, CT; Williamsburg UUs, Williamsburg, VA; and Pacific Unitarian Church, Ranchos Palos Verdes, CA. Their members helped CCUU build a passive solar, solar-powered, 21st century building—a church that is very close to net zero in energy use.

There is much more to church life than rebuilding although rebuilding seemed a major concern at all three of our congregations until our churches were serviceable. But those at CCUU noticed three vexations in our struggle toward justice and equity: patriarchy, heterosexism, and racism. We looked for people to help whose needs were greater than ours, found community partners, and supported the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal. Here are a few of our partners:

- The Greater Seventh Ward Social Aid and Pleasure Club—we helped their youth spend after school hours sewing Mardi Gras Indian costumes, keeping them off our city's streets.
- The Days for Girls program helps young African women—we sew and send sanitary kits to young women who want to go to school through an entire month.
- The music program in Mamou, LA—we helped fund their school band.
- Unity for the Homeless—we assist in their efforts to reduce homelessness in New Orleans.
- The Shepherd Center—our tenants, who provide activities for senior citizens.
- The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond—for their anti-racism training.
- Justice and Beyond—where we join African American leaders in dialogue on justice

and righteousness for all citizens.

- The Louisiana Transgender Association—where we support members in its leadership.
- Saturday breakfasts for day laborers—where members bring food, assistance, and leadership.
- The League of Women Voters—continuing to provide information and voter registration.
- Planned Parenthood—where several have joined in work their valiant effort to erect a new health care clinic.

Despite the federal flood of 2005, and a swarm of difficulties that have followed, we are grateful for the journey. Those gray clouds led to a silver lining. Our commitment—to “live loving; love living”—guides us as we engage with this interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. And we still love the City of New Orleans, the Birthplace of Jazz, sight of Plessy v. Ferguson, where we are now involved in efforts to remove Confederate monuments.

There is work that remains here, yes there is. But one of the benefits to our Unitarian Universalist community is that you have supported a group of UUs who are joining in the fight. We appreciate your help whether it was through a donation or time at the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal. Your support has allowed us the precious gift of revitalizing our churches, our lives, our city, and our world.

Most gratefully yours,
Rev. Jim VanderWeele