

“The Mayonnaise Boat: Reflections on Growing Up UU” by Live Oak member (and Board President) Elizabeth Teare

It’s a truism in the English business to say that there are only two plots: the ones in which someone goes on a journey, and the ones in which a stranger comes to town. It’s a fun party game to think of examples of each: in Westerns, for example, there’s the journey story of “Stagecoach” and the stranger story of “Shane.” Spiritual versions of these plots often feature literal pilgrimages (journeys) or visitations by holy strangers. Some stories blend both plots: think of the Buddha or of Moses or Mary, all of whom meet the Holy Spirit in some form and then set out, willingly or not, on journeys. It can get complicated.

In 2004, Rev. Victoria Safford wrote in *UU World* that the most common plot for Unitarian Universalists is the journey: specifically, that most of our spiritual stories are of a metaphorical exodus, where finding a home in a UU congregation comes at the end of a journey of exile, even of despair. But for a few of us, there isn’t a journey. We are the so-called “cradle Unitarian Universalists,” people born into UU families and congregations. It’s a very different kind of story—here are some snapshots from mine.

I’m a fifth-generation “U” of one kind or another. The first I know of is my Universalist great-great-grandmother, **Susan Netts Schaefer of Springfield, Ohio**. The family remembers her as a “quiet, serene matriarch,” the mother of eight, so strong a pacifist that she refused to watch the college football games in which her son was the star running back. Her Universalist congregation was so liberal that they had a female minister back in the 1880s or 90s, and when she offered to take in the three children of close friends who died in an accident, the local Lutheran clergy were so horrified at the thought of children growing up in such a free-thinking household that they blocked the adoption.

Susan Schaefer was also a lifelong spiritual seeker. Her granddaughter, my grandmother, remembered her as “always reading, studying, or attending lectures.” This is a woman with eight children and no electricity! In her 70s she audited a world religions course at Wittenburg College. She also patronized fortune-tellers, but that’s another story. She was never a journeyer in the literal sense, but it seems she ventured far and wide in spirit.

If we jump forward to the 1940s and northward to Cleveland, we find a determined group of Unitarians setting up a new congregation in the western suburbs. Sound familiar? Susan Schaefer’s granddaughter and her husband, my grandparents, helped found the West Shore Unitarian church. My father and aunt grew up deeply enmeshed there—my aunt recently told me the church “helped make adolescence survivable.” In college my dad was helping plan a Unitarian youth-group excursion to Europe when he met the dark-haired daughter of a Baltimore family who had “emigrated” to Unitarianism from Judaism. Richard Teare and Jeanie Walter were married at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore in 1959.

I was born in 1963 in Manila, just when Dana Greeley, the new president of the newly merged Unitarians and Universalists, was visiting congregations in Asia. (Incidentally, the UUA announced this week that our new president, Peter Morales, will be visiting the Philippines later this month.) I don't know if Greeley counts as a stranger who came to town, but my resourceful parents lured him to our house with cocktails and home-roasted peanuts, boiled some tap water, poured it into **this** silver bowl, a wedding present they used as a mayonnaise boat, and got me dedicated. Apparently my appearance was brief, but my credentials as a cradle UU were well and truly established. I was ready to embody the "cradle-UU" story.

Unfortunately, the plot kind of ends there: no more spiritual journeys, no more mysterious stranger. While I'd love to say that growing up UU provided me with some special insights, it didn't. I was always aware that I was a UU, but because my dad worked for the State Department we often lived overseas where it was difficult or impossible to find a congregation. I have only one memory of a childhood church visit, from one of our sojourns in Washington, DC: I remember clutching a bouquet of the dark, velvety roses that climbed our garage, taking them to a flower communion.

We did attend the West Shore church regularly during long summer visits to my grandparents. I have lots of physical memories of the wide, sloping sanctuary aisles; of the rack filled with nametags; and of the hot parking lot, where we'd sometimes go weed and water the planted strips. At the time, though, I actually preferred to go to church with my Episcopalian great aunt. Her old-fashioned stone church had wooden pews and pictorial stained glass, and I loved folding down and using the kneelers. I didn't really notice the differences in theology, except that by junior high I knew enough to skip parts of some prayers and agonize over whether it would be too much of a lie to take communion.

In fact, one of the most lasting effects for me of growing up a Unitarian Universalist is that I've never really learned our theology. It was just there. As a result, I was often a bit jittery during conversations at General Assembly this June—I kept worrying that someone would order me to drop and give them 7 principles. Since I got back, anyone up on the chancel may have noticed me scribbling in the margins of my order of service. The reason is that I've been quizzing myself on the principles, trying to write them in order from memory. So far it works best if I start with #4, then fill in the more "private" 1 through 3 and then the more "public" 5 through 7. I have the most trouble remembering number 3, which is odd, since "acceptance of one another" is one of the most basic principles by which I live my life.

I'm getting through the principles, though. Then I'm going to move on to the sources.

Anyway, I've been feeling pretty bad that my unique story was turning out to be no story at all. In my spiritual life, there haven't been any stagecoach robberies, any Indian attacks, any shootouts at high noon. No journeys, no strangers. No black-and-white, weekend-matinee heroes or villains.

But then, I realized, my no-story story is a story on its own. I may not be able to recite the principles, but I also can't see the air I breathe. I grew up surrounded by people who embodied the principles: just, compassionate, accepting. Growing up UU means taking for granted a world filled with people who, like my great-great-grandmother, exemplify the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” (that’s number 4, for those of you who are scoring).

The best illustration of what I mean is **my grandmother**—Susan Schaefer’s granddaughter—the one who helped found the West Shore church.

Dorothy Schaefer Teare—we called her Grandot—was an amazing woman. After college at Oberlin—where she was outraged when a friend’s mother called her a “flapper”—she earned a master’s degree in English at Radcliffe, taught for a while, and then settled down to a life of incredibly effective civic activism. She was a true-blue Roosevelt democrat, and I’ve always thought she looked a bit like Eleanor. She was president of the League of Women Voters and of the local school board, as well as helping found her church. Most important, she was the founding president of the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival, which began as an idea for using the new high-school auditorium in the summer and has developed into one of Cleveland’s most important cultural institutions. She was all about those “public” UU principles (numbers 5 through 7) of democratic participation and bringing about a better world of peace, justice, and a thorough knowledge of Shakespeare.

Grandot never explicitly laid out her religious beliefs, but if she had a god, it was Shakespeare. To her, he represented the best of the human spirit in all its breadth and depth, its innate worth and dignity (principle 1!). She took me to my first play—*Twelfth Night*—when I was seven, and my memories of that production are more vivid than any I have of going to church. As each of her five granddaughters graduated from high school, she gave us copies of her favorite Shakespeare anthology, illustrated by Rockwell Kent. She was always easy to shop for at Christmas time: if you got her a new book about Shakespeare, she would disappear into it immediately, completely oblivious to the paper-tearing, ribbon-tossing frenzy around her. At the end of her long life, she was almost immobilized by arthritis, but she would willingly make an agonizing car trip to see a play. You can see why she was, and remains, my model of a life spent searching for truth and meaning.

Grandot was also an opinionated and informed UU. Although she was a committed feminist—a fan of Hillary, a donor to EMILY’S list—she hated the revised Bibles and hymnals with gender-inclusive language. If the King James Version was good enough for Shakespeare . . .

When in her last decade Grandot moved into an assisted-living apartment and I unpacked the couple of hundred books, I found that they made a portrait of Unitarian Universalist intellectual life. Besides her beloved Shakespeare and the 19th-century novelists she had studied and taught, there was a pantheon of UU forebears: Emerson.

Thoreau. Elizabeth Gaskell. Carl Sandburg. Also a handful of books about “liberal religion” in the mid twentieth century, like this 35-cent “**Pocket Guide** to Unitarianism” from 1954, with chapters like “How do Unitarians Teach Their Children?” and “How Strong Is Unitarianism?”

As far as I know, Grandot never once looked at these books after I arranged them on the shelves, and no one else did either. But she thought they were important to save. She relished visits from Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, the current ministers at West Shore. When she died at 96, we held her memorial service in the sanctuary of the church she built, the sanctuary my architect grandfather helped design.

At the time Grandot died I was commuting between Dayton, where I lived five blocks from the UU church, and Chicago, where the Hyde Park congregation and Meadville-Lombard seminary were more like 2 and 1/2 blocks away. I never set foot in either building. My Unitarian Universalism was dormant. What woke it up was my Dorothy and my urgent feeling that I wanted her to grow up among the kind of people I did. She hasn't been dedicated yet, so I don't know if she'll officially be a “cradle UU” herself, but she knows her principles. Right now she's all about “the interdependent web of all existence” (number 7), especially as it has revealed itself to her and Lura in the drainage ditch below the new parking lot.

I found Live Oak the first week we moved to Goleta, and if I didn't cry during that first service, I certainly cried during the second. The sense of coming home was that powerful. In some way, then, I turned out to be both the journeyer and the stranger who came to town in my own story.

Those of you who know me well—or pretty well, or even a little—will not be surprised to hear that I cried several times at General Assembly in Minneapolis. You might be surprised, as I was, by the occasion of my first tears. It was after the panel on which Erika spoke about innovation in worship, in a crowded, featureless, windowless conference room. One of the other panelists was Wayne Arnason, my grandmother's minister. When I went up to congratulate Erika, I re-introduced myself to Wayne. Without saying a word, he reached out and hugged me. He told me he thinks of my grandmother every day, when he walks past some pictures we donated to the church when she died. Standing there between my minister and my grandmother's minister, even in a cheerless conference room, was as memorable as those childhood roses. My spiritual journey has been neither exciting nor dramatic, but that's okay.