



MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County

May 2016

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Where every mind is free and every soul is welcome!

Spiritually Speaking: Reclaiming Krypton By Doug Muder

As a boy I watched cartoons and read comic books, and my heroes were orphans. Batman's murdered parents lived on only as a portrait above the fireplace and a gravestone on which to swear vengeance. Spider-Man's mother and father were also long dead, and even the uncle who raised him had to die to give him a proper superhero origin. But the most extreme case was my favorite hero, Superman: The whole planet of Krypton blew up behind his escaping rocket, and its shards became the deadly kryptonite.

Watch out for the past. It can kill you.

I was well into adulthood before I grew introspective about the orphan-hero fantasy and why it had been so attractive to me and my generation. For those growing up in the sixties, the wisdom of our elders was an oppression we longed to escape. They had survived the Depression and won the War, and we did not care.

A brave new world was out there now. No one could tell us how to live in it.

And so, the fantasy: On a farm outside of some distant Smallville, the old couple who found your rocket and raised you may still be driving tractors and baking pies. But they are not your people, not really, and what can they possibly tell you about saving Metropolis? That's something you'll have to figure out on your own.

I was not consciously thinking about superheroes when I came to Unitarian Universalism in the late eighties. But looking back, I can see how the fantasies of my youth foreshadowed both the virtues and vices of my adult religion.

The Unitarian Universalist church I joined in my thirties was an ideal place for orphans whose birth-planets had exploded. Its three

centuries of history were visible but ignorable, like a statue in the park whose plaque is never read. We might begin a service with a pithy quote from William Ellery Channing or Hosea Ballou, or bring the colonial silver out of its safe-deposit box once a year to reenact communion. But we never seriously engaged with the Christian worldviews of those Unitarian and Universalist giants or with the rituals they found meaningful.

Instead, we called ourselves heretics and reveled in our rebellion. We framed our history as a series of exploded birth-planets: UU Buddhists and Pagans had escaped from Humanism, Humanists from liberal Christianity, liberal Christians from Calvinism, Calvin and Luther from Catholicism, Catholics from Judaism, Jews from Paganism . . . it was rocket ships and sole survivors all the way back. And whatever planet you had come from, the shards of its explosion were deadly kryptonite now.



Unitarian Universalism appealed to me then not as a heritage I could carry forward into the future, but as a place to start over. Sheltered from the lethal radiation of the past, I could build my own theology from scratch and figure out for myself how to save Metropolis.

Unlike most in my generation, I kept paying attention to cartoons and comics as I got older. So I got to observe how the underlying mythology of superheroes changed as a new generation reached adolescence.

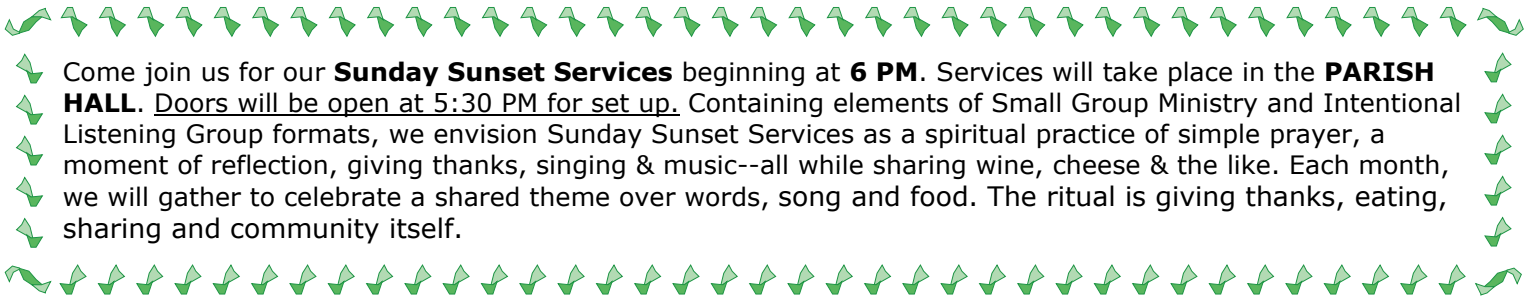
In the late Seventies, X-Men rose out of its previous obscurity to become the era-defining comic. Teams of superheroes were not new—I had grown up with Justice League, The

MARK IT DOWN

- ◆ Metro NY District Annual Meeting, 6-7 May, Hyatt Morristown
- ◆ Board of Trustees, Thursday, 12 May, 7 PM, Sonen Room
- ◆ Sunset Service, Sunday, 15 May, 6 PM, Parish Hall
- ◆ Annual Congregational Meeting, Sunday, 5 June, 3 PM, Parish Hall

Sunday Sunset Services

Services in Parish Hall start at 6 PM



Come join us for our **Sunday Sunset Services** beginning at **6 PM**. Services will take place in the **PARISH HALL**. Doors will be open at 5:30 PM for set up. Containing elements of Small Group Ministry and Intentional Listening Group formats, we envision Sunday Sunset Services as a spiritual practice of simple prayer, a moment of reflection, giving thanks, singing & music--all while sharing wine, cheese & the like. Each month, we will gather to celebrate a shared theme over words, song and food. The ritual is giving thanks, eating, sharing and community itself.

DATE THEME

- 15 May** *Parents* Coordinators & Hosts — Darcy Hall & Greg Giacobe Musician - Bill Stafford, Usher - Wayne Eastman
- 12 Jun** *Blessings* Coordinators & Hosts — Darcy Hall & Greg Giacobe Musician - TBA, Usher - Wayne Eastman



Spiritually Speaking [cont.]

Avengers, and The Fantastic Four—but the X-Men had something different: Professor Xavier, a mentor.

That changed everything. X-Men’s ascendancy ended the era of orphan heroes figuring it out on their own. Just about every successful superhero created after 1980 has had a mentor. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles had Splinter, their sensei. The Power Rangers had Zordon. Buffy the Vampire Slayer had Giles. Some heroes had even more to live up to than the vision of a single mentor: Lineages of vampire slayers and Witchblade-wielders stretched back into the misty past. (The Tick, a spoof about a super-powered simpleton whose sidekick always has to save the day, is the unmentored exception that proves the rule.) The hero-mentor relationship might be stormy, and at times the hero might have to ignore the mentor’s advice and improvise. But the new generation’s heroes were never completely adrift. That wasn’t part of the fantasy anymore.

The older superhero myths adjusted to the trend. In each retelling, the once clueless or absent older generation played a larger role: Alfred, Aunt Mae, the Kents—they got stronger, wiser, and more supportive. Even geography changed to bring them closer to the action. In the current Smallville TV series, you can bop out to Metropolis for dinner and be home in time for bed.

When a next-generation Batman cartoon (*Batman Beyond*) was created in 1999, the advice-giving old man was Bruce Wayne himself. Even Batman was no longer a role you made up on your own; it had become a legacy to live up to.

The generation that is now in young adulthood has grown up with an expectation—or maybe just a hope—that would have been foreign to me as a boy: Somewhere, someone ought to have a wisdom worth passing on, a legacy worth living up to.

As that generation shows up on the doorsteps of UU churches (with their toddlers in tow) what kind of Unitarian Universalism will they be looking for?

Nowhere in the Unitarian Universalist movement is the generational issue more serious and central than among the Humanists. The generation that remembers the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 and founded institutions like the American Humanist Association is dying off. They started or led many congregations during an era when Unitarianism (and then Unitarian Universalism) was almost synonymous with Humanism. But they lived long enough to see the Unitarian Universalist Association’s energy (first the energy of young ministers and later of UUA leadership) focused elsewhere—promoting spirituality and reclaiming a language of reverence that many Humanists found meaningless or perhaps even sinister. Now UU Humanists of all ages worry that Humanist history is not taught in our churches and the Humanist legacy is in danger.

At the same time, the larger culture is seeing a surge of interest in areas related to Humanism. Polls show ever-increasing numbers of young people to be skeptical of traditional religion. Books by the so-called New Atheists have hit the bestseller list. Harvard’s Humanist chaplain Greg Epstein (author of the recent *Good Without God* and a speaker at last summer’s UUA General Assembly in Minneapolis) sees a rare opportunity: A revival of the Humanist tradition could channel this tide of anti-religion, anti-God energy into a more positive, humanity-affirming, society-changing movement.

But whether that revival will happen, and whether it will happen inside Unitarian Universalism, are still open questions. And so it is easy to imagine either that UU Humanism is on the verge of an upswing, or that it is about to become a seldom-read chapter of our history.

An ideal place to examine those questions was the Humanist Homecoming, an all-day celebration of Unitarian Universalist Humanism that I attended on the Saturday of General Assembly this past June. The Homecoming was held a twenty-minute walk away from the Convention Center, in the sanctuary of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis.

**FAITH + WORKS:
The Church at The Heart of the Community**

What are the roles of churches in their communities today? What new roles can they play in the changing social, political, economic, and religious climate we find ourselves in? These are two of the questions shaping the work happening at the HUUB, a new initiative at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County. With the support of the congregation, FUUCE's Board of Trustees launched the HUUB to open the buildings' doors as a resource to the entire Orange community and to bring UU values out into the city through events and projects aiming to advance social justice causes.

I was brought on as the Managing Director of the HUUB in mid-November 2015. And so, five months into the work, I'm writing to introduce myself and this new initiative at FUUCE.

I'm a builder and urbanist with roots in upstate New York, a place with a similar history of post-industrial disinvestment as Orange. My professional background is broad, ranging from energy and resource efficiency contracting, to non-profit management and Geographic Information Systems consulting. Most importantly, though, I'm a husband and a father, married to my best friend from high school with whom I'm raising a 10 month old baby boy. My passion for the work happening at FUUCE grows directly out of who I am: helping to turn a 125 year old sticks and bricks resource into an energy efficient community space where diverse people come together to make their city a better place to live and raise their families.

Over the last five months, I have been working with the HUUB Board of Directors to explore and plan the role our initiative can play in the city. The board is made up of a diverse group of both UUs and non-UUs that bring an impressive breadth of experience to the table. Two board members are from the FUUCE congregation, one is from the neighboring Montclair congregation, and two are non-UUs, but very familiar with and active in Orange.

We have been actively thinking about and working to answer the two questions above, and we've achieved a good amount since November. We've been addressing immediate issues with the church buildings and property while at the same time developing a plan for longer term capital projects, upkeep, and maintenance.

I have been meeting and working with folks from other organizations, sharing our ideas and extending the invitation for people to use the Sanctuary, Parish Hall, and Hale House for meetings, events, and organizing. We have co-hosted a number of events and panels, most recently a youth-organized and led forum for the candidates in Orange's important mayoral election later this year.

Additionally, we have been developing new programs and projects that would help bring people into the church. We have written and submitted a handful of grants requesting support for them and are continually looking into additional funding resources.

We are excited about and energized by the positive responses we have had to the work we are doing. I will be co-leading a workshop at this year's Metro NY District Annual Meeting talking about our experience so far and our plans looking forward. I also plan to continue writing a regular or semi-regular update of the works and happenings at the HUUB in future newsletters, so keep an eye out. I would love to hear from folks with ideas or questions about what we're doing, and I can be reached at OrangeHUUB@gmail.com.

Charlie Wirene
Managing Director | The HUUB



**Annual Congregational Meeting
5 June 2016 at 3 PM**



The First UU Church of Essex County's Annual Congregational Meeting will be held Sunday, 5 June 2016 at 3:00 PM in the Parish Hall. Among the items planned to be presented are:

- Approval of the minutes of the 2015 Annual Congregational Meeting, and the 18 October 2015 Special Congregational Meeting. The text is available for review on the church website, www.essexuu.org. Hard copies will be available in limited supply at the Annual Meeting. We urge those with web access to review these minutes and send any corrections, additions or omissions to the Secretary at secretary@essexuu.org by 6 PM Monday, 29 May 2016.
- Reports from Officers, staff and committee chairs. These will be combined in an Annual Report that will also be available on the church website no later than 31 May 2016. Please review periodically for updates.
- Approval of the budget for the 2016/17 church year.
- Presentation of the Nominating Committee's slate for the 2016/17 Church Year.
- Election of Officers, Trustees and Nominating Committee members.

If you have any questions, please the church office at 973-674-0010, or e-mail at office@essexuu.org.

May 2016

| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|---|-----|-----|-----|---|-----|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 Board of Trustees Sonen Room 7 PM | 13 | 14 |
| 15 SUNSET SERVICE: Parents Parish Hall, 6 PM | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| 29 | 30 | 31 | | | | |

Spiritually Speaking [cont.]

Perhaps only First Unitarian could get away with billing itself as a “home” Humanists could come back to. Sometimes referred to as the flagship congregation of Humanism in the UUA, First Unitarian’s ministry is a Humanist lineage stretching from the Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons back to the Rev. John Dietrich, who served the congregation from 1916 to 1938 and whom historian Mason Olds has called “the father of religious humanism.”

Dietrich’s legacy, and what might or might not become of it in the future, was one of the Homecoming’s recurring themes.

It’s hard to imagine a figure like John Dietrich today. He preached a freshly written hour-long sermon every week, a career output that could fill more than 100 volumes. And in the era of Babe Ruth, when television was still a laboratory curiosity and fifteen-second commercials inconceivable, listeners flocked to hear him. His services regularly drew over a thousand people and had to be moved to a downtown theater. They were broadcast to the masses via the innovative high-tech media of the day: radio.

Today’s Humanists fight a stereotype of being arid and academic, but when I have read chunks of Dietrich’s 1925 sermon “Unitarianism and Humanism” out loud, they have fallen into rabble-raising cadences. It is hard not to pound the pulpit and gesture with more animation than is typically my style. (After his Homecoming lecture on Dietrich, I asked Olds if that animation was historically accurate, and he said that it probably was.)

That sermon’s message is a still-innocent modernism—pre-Depression, pre-Holocaust, pre-Hiroshima—when the gulags were just rumors and the League of Nations seemed to foreshadow a world commonwealth of peace and justice. Old superstitions may have frozen humanity into unjust and counterproductive systems, but Dietrich could see a worldwide thaw starting to liberate human energy for the great work of creating the perfect society.

Today, that message sounds naïve, but it is also too inspiring to walk away from. Someone—maybe lots of us—should be shoring up its foundations and installing postmodern plumbing. Instead, Dietrich is in danger of being forgotten. Last year, I mentioned Dietrich to a newly minted young UU minister. The name did not ring a bell.

The Homecoming’s most challenging talk came from one of its youngest speakers. Daniel Schlorff, the director of religious education at the Unitarian Society of New Haven, Connecticut, warned people my age and older not to expect his millennial generation to respond to the same messages that had appealed to us. He described today’s young adults as a generation “in rebellion against rebellion,” looking to reclaim and revitalize traditional forms rather than reject them. What is being rejected, he claimed, is the principle of “anything goes.”

I didn’t ask Schlorff which superheroes he grew up admiring. But to me he was describing the generation shaped by the X-Men and Buffy, a generation of Power Rangers looking to unite into a Megazord rather than face the monsters alone. Needing to figure out how to save Metropolis from scratch, with no received wisdom to build on, isn’t a fantasy anymore. It’s a nightmare.

The previous day, I had attended a very different event at General Assembly: a UU Christian Fellowship discussion about setting up Bible-study groups. Coincidentally, we read what might be the original carrying-forward-a-legacy story: II Kings, chapter 2, in which Elisha witnesses Elijah’s ascent to Heaven and then picks up his teacher’s fallen mantle to begin his own career as a prophet of Israel.

In the discussion that followed, I chose not to bring up Batman Beyond or to relate the prophet’s mantle to the hero’s cape and cowl. It is hard to make such comparisons without sounding disrespectful. But whether we grow up with stories from ancient scrolls or from video games, our unconscious expectations are shaped accordingly. Children in every generation want to become heroes, but each generation has its own vision of what a hero is.

In my generation, the Elisha story fell flat. How dare our elders style themselves as Elijah and give us a mantle to carry forward? We would find our own garments, thank you very much.

But today’s young adults may be reading that story differently. And if so, maybe my generation has stumbled into more good luck than we deserve. We see mantles falling to the ground unclaimed and legacies being forgotten. How fortunate it would be if Elishas were knocking at the door.

I believe they are.

But are the Elishas and the mantles going to find each other? Or will the rising generation wander through our churches, find no Elijahs here, and go on to look elsewhere?

That question challenges my generation in two very different ways. First, can we fill a mentor role that didn’t exist in our own generational mythology? Now that it’s getting too late to be Spider-Man, can we look inside ourselves and find a Professor Xavier?

But an even greater challenge is to heal our own relationship with the past, so that we have a deeper and richer legacy to offer our prospective successors. A history that begins with us—with our own precious rocket ships escaping the detonation of Krypton—will ring hollow to the rising generation. They are looking for more than that.

And we have more, if only we make peace with it. The places we come from, both individually and as a movement, gave us not just what we reject and rebel against, but also the potentials that we develop. It is time, I think, to reassemble all those exploded birth-planets into a living heritage.

Imagine a Unitarian Universalism in which Buddhists and Pagans celebrated the Humanist insights they have built upon. Picture John Dietrich not just as the father of religious humanism, but also as a son whose nontheistic message fulfilled potentials that had been growing in Unitarianism since before the days of Channing. Picture UU Christians honoring their orthodox inheritance . . . and back and back and back.

That mantle—the complete Unitarian Universalist mantle, with stitches going back to the beginning of humankind—is the one that Elisha is going to want.

Doug Muder is a contributing editor and columnist for UU World. His articles have also appeared in [Religious Humanism](#), [The Humanist](#), and [Public Eye](#). He blogs at [The Weekly Sift and Free and Responsible Search](#), and is a member of First Parish in

We are on the web: essexuu.org

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

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**Acting President: Mindy
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**Vice President Pro Temp:
Frank Barszcz**

Treasurer: Bill Slezak

Secretary: Greg Giacobe

Administrator: Greg Giacobe

Sexton: Tony A Jones

**HUUB Director: Charlie
Wirene**

WE VALUE: Community...
Exploration... Fellowship...
Spirituality... Liberal Religious
Education... Diversity... Freedom...
and Action.

OUR VISION: To be a life-
affirming liberal religious
community where people of
diverse beliefs, ideas and
background come together to
provide spiritual and intellectual
growth to one another and to work
together in Orange, New Jersey
for a greater good in the world.

OUR MISSION: To study and
practice religion in freedom and
fellowship. To provide support
and care for our community and
the community at large.

Founded in Orange in 1890 as
the First Unitarian Church of
Essex County, the congregation
has worshipped in the present
Sanctuary since its construction
in 1892-3. The Church continues
the ministry of the Union
Universalist Society (also known
as the Church of the Redeemer),
founded as the First Universalist
Society of Newark in 1834.



**First Unitarian Universalist
Church of Essex County**

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