

Wells We Did Not Dig

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Feb. 23, 2003
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

Last summer - just prior to our family's move from Columbus to Cincinnati, while Jennifer was here in town, job-hunting - I took our son Patrick on a pilgrimage. The dictionary defines "pilgrimage" as "a journey to a sacred place or shrine" - and so it was that Patrick and I packed a week's worth of swim gear, bug spray, sunscreen and camera film, and headed south to attend Family Camp at The Mountain - a Unitarian Universalist retreat center tucked away in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.

After a two-day drive full of adventure and more than a little car-sickness, we arrived - exhausted, hungry and grumpy - steering our mud-splattered station wagon up the final mile or so of narrow, winding, almost vertical road to emerge atop a peak that can only be described as spectacular. We quickly parked, checked in at the main office, and headed to the dining hall - just in time for dinner.

We were greeted by warm and friendly faces, treated to a warm and nourishing meal, and soon began to unwind after our long journey. I leaned back in my chair and, for the first time, really took in my surroundings - all the while sipping a glass of cool, clean mountain water. It was then that I noticed the hand-carved wooden plaque hanging over the doorway.

It read: "We drink from wells we did not dig."

All week long - every time I ate a meal, every time I drank that fresh Mountain water, every time I relaxed in the dining hall enjoying a conversation with other parents as we watched our children chasing one

another around the room - I saw the words that came to define my experience at The Mountain - "We drink from wells we did not dig."

As I considered the significance of those words, I came to reflect upon what The Mountain really means to me, and to my family. Prior to this past year, it had been more than a decade since I had made the pilgrimage to The Mountain. Back then, the road to the top was unpaved. Most of the cabins were unheated, and the bathrooms were - shall we say - rustic.

In the past dozen years, all that has changed - all, that is, except the stunning vista that greets the visitor at the top of The Mountain - a timeless view that spans three states.

I say the accommodations have changed, because on this visit, Patrick and I slept in a well-appointed room in a brand new lodge. We played games and attended workshops in a comfortable, renovated meeting hall. I led intergenerational worship services in a spacious fireside room. We sat in hand-made wooden rocking chairs on a gorgeous new deck, gazing for miles across the tops of the trees as the rush of mountain air fanned our faces.

It seems The Mountain's supporters had been hard at work; the place was hardly recognizable compared to the facility I had known as a young adult.

One of those Mountain supporters was a man I knew well - my former brother-in-law, the person who had introduced me not only to The Mountain, but also to SUUSI, the Southeast UU Summer Institute. Wink Lucas was what is known as a "life member" of The Mountain, and as such he put not only lots of hard-earned money into the place, but plenty of "sweat equity" as well - helping remodel cabins, clear trails, and dig trenches during many of the popular "work weekends" held there each summer.

Wink died a couple of years ago on the way home from our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly - and so it was that, one afternoon during our visit, I took Patrick on another sort of pilgrimage - a hike, to pay our respects at The Mountain's Memorial Garden. Rounding a bend on the well-worn path, entering the garden where the ashes of deceased Mountain members and friends have been scattered, my mind was flooded with memories: Memories of meals in The Mountain dining hall - Thanksgiving dinners shared with Wink and my niece and nephew. Memories of long walks and

spirited conversations. Memories of laughter and tears and all the stuff that makes for "family."

It was there - in that Memorial Garden - that I knew why I had brought my son to this sacred spot, to this gathering called Family Camp: So that he - so that we, together - could drink from wells we did not dig.

The Mountain holds a special place in many hearts - not only because of its natural beauty and welcoming accommodations, but also because of the memories shared by its people. In that respect, it is much like this congregation - a place made sacred by those who have lovingly built it. People who had a vision of spreading the message of Universalism in Cincinnati, way back 175 years ago. People like the Carrey sisters and Rev. Ulysses Milburn, people like Alice Holabird, who carved the beautiful communion table we now use as our sanctuary altar. People whose handiwork is reflected in this pulpit, and the collection plates we pass each week.

And people, some of whom are among us this morning, who just a generation ago imagined a growing, modern, vibrant congregation - and thus brought to fruition this very building in which we worship.

I took the opportunity last Sunday, during the great snowstorm, to watch a videotape made by Keith and Helen Armstrong in honor of the retirement of my predecessor, Elinor Artman. As I watched, I was struck by images of the groundbreaking for this building, on July 7, 1985; by images of beams and bricks, with a child playing among them; images depicting the circular window that defines this sanctuary, and our worship experience, slowly taking shape - from a rough wooden frame, to a graceful circle, to glass - and to people lovingly cleaning that glass.

The visionaries of the early 19th century, the visionaries of the late 20th century - all had something in common: they gave of themselves to dig a well that would not only quench the thirst in their own souls, but would also stand the test of time, to wet the lips of others yet to come. Like the simple shepherd Elzeard, they had the faith to plant seeds that - over time - became a verdant, life-giving forest.

And now the living tradition that is Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church includes each of us, who have gathered here on a cold, snowy, late-winter

morning for the purpose of renewing our commitment to this unique community, this congregation which still stands as the voice of Universalism in Cincinnati.

What we are asking of you this morning - the Board of Trustees, the Finance Committee, Bob Naugle, and I - is to reflect - as I did, in that memorial garden at The Mountain - reflect on the legacy of those who have gone before, those who dug the well from which you now drink. To consider how you might help sustain that tradition - how we might, together, dig the wells that will serve our children and grandchildren, and those whom we may never know.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "Life is no brief candle to me. Rather, it is a splendid torch that I must hold up, if only for a moment. I want to make it burn as brightly as possible, before handing it on to future generations." Those words capture, for me, the essence of what we mean when we say "stewardship."

Yes, there is uncertainty about the future. The world we live in is a dangerous one; our times are colored by economic anxiety and international conflict, religious strife and rampant injustice.

But friends, that doesn't dissuade me from the commitment I've made to this congregation. If anything, it deepens my commitment - because it strengthens my sense of what is truly important. Now, more than ever, we - and the world - need the message of universal love which is the spirit of this church.

There are many reasons I'm a Unitarian Universalist, many reasons I have dedicated my life's work to helping strengthen the institutions of our free faith. Today, on what would have been my father's 88th birthday, I want to share with you just one such reason.

Early one Saturday morning several years ago, when I was a seminary student in California, I was walking out the door of my apartment, when the telephone rang. I remember debating whether or not to even answer it - but something told me I should pick up the phone.

It was my step-mother. She was calling to tell me that my father had died. Just like that, my plans changed, my life changed - and within 15 minutes, I

was on my way to the airport, making arrangements for a cross-country flight to attend my dad's funeral.

My destination was the tiny town of Johnson City, Tennessee, but I soon learned that the best the airline could do on such short notice was to fly me into Roanoke, Virginia. I would spend the night in a hotel there, then drive a rental car the rest of the way home the next day.

When at last I tumbled into my hotel room later that night, numb with jetlag and still reeling from the shock of the news of my father's death, I sought the comfort of something familiar. Almost without thinking, I began searching in the yellow pages under "churches," to see if there was a Unitarian Universalist congregation in town. I was delighted to discover that there was - and I called the number. I got a tape-recorded message that gave me the time of the service and directions to the church.

The following morning, in a Unitarian Universalist church I had never seen, with a hundred or so people I had never met, I felt the unmistakable connection that makes us liberal religious people one. In another 24 hours, I would be attending my father's very Southern Baptist funeral - but here, for one bittersweet Sunday morning, no one spoke to me about heaven or the afterlife, no one sought to comfort me with platitudes, or pass judgment on my very personal feelings about my father's death. Instead, as I lit a candle and shared my story, I felt the emotional embrace of an entire congregation. I experienced the compassion of fellow travelers on this path of life, and my tears flowed freely. It is a moment I will never forget.

I was not a member of that church, and I have never been there since. I did not spend one dime to build its sanctuary, or to pay for its Sunday School materials or its light bill. But others - others whom I will never know - had already done just that ... and so, that church was there for me, when I needed it.

Today - as we consider the importance of Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church in our lives - let us keep in mind not only the need of our children for an open-minded religious education, not only our own need for fellowship and spiritual growth - let us keep in mind also the traveler who may, one Sunday morning, come through that door, having just learned of his father's death. The visitor who may, some Sunday, come seeking a

church, only to discover that she has found a home. The people who, some day hence, will drink from the wells that we now dig.

Today - as we begin our Stewardship Campaign - let us also remember in gratitude those who came before us to build the living tradition that is the foundation of our free faith. Let us celebrate those who planted the seeds and dug the wells, those who did the work and - yes, those who paid for the work - that has created this wonderful church we call Heritage.

May we joyfully take up the torch - pledging to give to those who will follow us, those who have yet even to walk through our door, an inclusive, welcoming sanctuary for the spirit, a religious home where each may find what he or she needs - whether for a morning, or for a lifetime.

So may it be. Blessed be. And amen.