

Why you came to UUMAN, why you are actively involved, and why you support UUMAN financially.

Testimonial by Dirk Bender - March 10, 2019

Memories play tricks on you. I distinctly recall coming here for the first time in 2004 with Ann, and a three-year-old Danielle, who fell asleep on my lap during service, on Saint Patrick's Day 2004. That's how I remember it.

Problem is, I looked it up and turns out? Saint Patty's Day fell on a Wednesday in 2004. So, take everything else I'm recalling from memory with the kind of ornery skepticism we UU folk are famous for.

That's the "when I came to UUMAN." But I'm supposed to tell the "why I came to UUMAN." And to tell that, I think I have to go back a few more years. To a time in the late 1990s when Ann and I had occasion to attend a Sunday church service with a family member, my dear, departed Aunt Dorothy, who we were visiting. This church service was a very traditional Mennonite affair with hymns and a sermon and prayers. I think it might've been the first time I'd set foot in a church voluntarily as an adult.

And Ann, she will be the first to tell you that she felt very little kinship with her family's Roman Catholic faith tradition, and I didn't expect her to feel much of a connection with my family's Mennonite faith tradition. And I was fine with that. Because I never chose to join my family's church when the formal opportunity arose.

But I did have mostly pleasant memories of a time when going to church service, attending Sunday School and forming friendships there with the kids my age, was just what I did every week with my family.

And I saw something pretty heartwarming as I listened to Ann later describing that Mennonite church service we attended. She spoke in glowing terms of the people in that shared space. I saw her feeling *connected* to the experience of religious gathering.

When we left Northern New Jersey and put down roots in Gwinnett County in 2001, I began to feel a more acute need for us to find that kind of *connection*, because this was a much more socially conservative new place for us, than the home we'd left.

There were the other motivators, perhaps familiar to some gathered here today. Like when you get the "where do you go to church" question, particularly in gatherings with parents of kids your own child's age. With the implicit "you aren't really just going to raise a *heathen* child are you?" that attends it. And the implicit "I don't know if I want my kids playing with a heathen kid" that likely attends it as well.

Now I don't know that we felt goaded into finding a church home so that my kid would have a religious upbringing. But finding a church home, it would at least put an end to *that* little chitchat with that glorious answer. "Oh we love our church home in Roswell. [say it with me] Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North! But we affectionately call it YOU-MUN!!" You can see those parents backing away, right?

And it didn't hurt that we had that meet-cute story that many of you heard but I'll tell it again. First time we visited, we did courageously stand up and say "who we are and where we're from." After service, a familiar fellow came up to us and said "I know you." And it was longtime, nay, legendary UUMAN member Kirk Bogue, who is Ann's first cousin. Who we'd last seen over a year previous, and we'd meant to re connect but never did, but, hey, here we are.

I was supposed to get this over and done in less than 6 minutes and so far I've only gotten to "why I came here". I'm supposed to throw in why I'm actively involved and why I financially support UUMAN. Well I'm involved because I have found the old saw about how "you get *back* what you put in", as a volunteer, is pretty apt.

I support it financially because that's what you *do* when you share living quarters with others, you kick in what you can to keep the lights on.

We've had our financial *downs*, and *ups*, and *downs* over the 15 years we've been here, but we've always budgeted as generous a financial pledge as we felt we could manage responsibly in a given year.

It's been a fine 15 years. Ann and I, we've gone from "wow, we're actually going to church nowadays!?" to "wow, I'm a Sunday School teacher now, who'd a thunk it!?" to not thinking any of that is weird at all. In fact, I am happy to tell anyone who'll listen, that the *best work* I ever did in my *professional* life wasn't anything at a paid position. Rather, it was my work with the six other Search Committee members--Michelle. Laura. Miriam. Joe. Phillip. Lyn--back in 2015 through 2016, when we took the pulse of the congregation, and then vetted some really appealing, very qualified ministerial candidates. And that work lead to us finding the absolutely best one of the lot, Reverend Dave. The *best work* I ever did.

I continue to find tremendous fulfillment with my Communications Committee obligations. And, of course, my work with the UUMAN Band. In fact, that's likely the best regular gig I think I'll ever have, coming here and playing the last Sunday of the month, for as long as they'll have us!

I'd be remiss in not at least mentioning how my own diagnosis of Multiple Myeloma brought the "why I'm actively involved" question into sharp focus. The Multiple Myeloma which damn near killed me in September 2016, and left me half a foot shorter. As soon as I was capable of standing upright again and moving around with a walker, in November 2016, this is where I wanted to be. Even if the most presentable things I could put on my swollen feet were some ratty old bedroom slippers. Even if it was still painful to sit in a car and ride, my elbows glued to the arm rests, bracing for every bump. I needed to come here. To *connect*. *Back* to my church home. *Back* to the people who'd come and visited me and fed me and nurtured me and reminded me that there was something still to live for, even with this grisly-seeming new normal. Because you really do get *back* what you put in.

Thanks for listening, and thanks for being there to provide Ann, Danielle, and me, with that connection we've sought, and that we continue to seek.