

Unitarian Universalists & Interweave

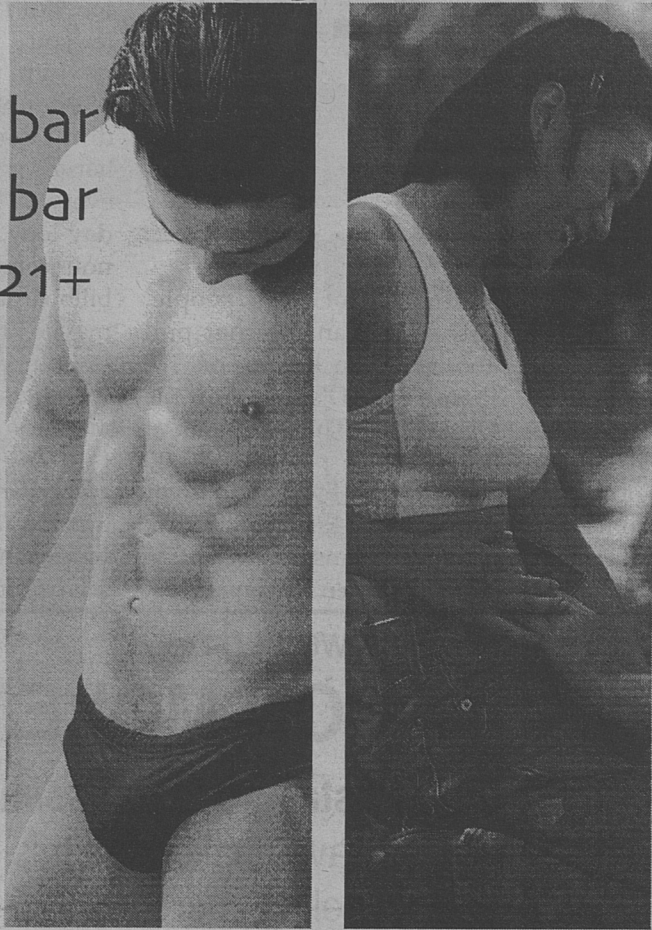
BY JOHN BEYER

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The Unitarians and Universalists have been annoying people in power for several hundred years. Had I known this earlier, I might have walked through the doors far sooner than I eventually did.

I was asked to write an article about the Burlington UU and Interweave, the UU group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. I soon realized, of course, that I can't speak for the UU nor for all the gbt people in the congregation. So, I'll write about my experience as a gay man at the UU, a little history, Interweave itself and about some of the experiences which others have shared with to me.

The Unitarians had been at odds with the establishment for more than 500 years when they officially broke from Orthodoxy in 1568. The Universalists began to upset people in the mid-eighteenth century by advancing the radical notion that no loving god could condemn anyone to eternal damnation. Both groups were made up of people who could be called religious liberals.

Many Unitarians were martyred, tortured or otherwise harassed by the Christian Church before and during the Protestant Reformation. They questioned the decision in 325AD to make the divinity of Jesus creed. They also took issue with another decision a half century later to make the Trinity, (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) doctrine. The first Unitarian congregation was formed in 1568 at Koloszvar, Transylvania.

Universalism took hold simultaneously in Europe and colonial America in the late 1700's. In New England, there was considerable controversy between people sympathetic to Puritan values and seemingly as many of a more liberal disposition. Contrary to what modern right wing extremists would have us believe, colonial America was not uniformly religious. In Burlington, for instance, there was no church building and no resident clergy as late as 1800, though the area was taken over by white settlers decades before. Unitarianism and Universalism became especially widespread in New England and Pennsylvania in the early 1800's. In fact, the oldest Pilgrim congregation, founded in Plymouth in 1620, voted to become Unitarian in 1802.

Coexisting for more than 200 years, Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalists Association. The Burlington UU congregates in the church at the top of Church Street, at 152 Pearl. The meeting house was completed in 1816 and is the oldest house of worship in Burlington. It's construction took place amidst some controversy between liberals and conservatives. The conservatives ended up building their own church elsewhere (on North Winooski Avenue).

Even this brief history sheds some light on why Unitarian Universalism has been called a refuge for rebels, heretics and skeptics. But what is Unitarian Universalism and why is the Burlington UU a place which would attract me, a non-Christian, gay man with little tolerance for groups of people endeavoring to 'tolerate' homosexual, bisexual and transgender people?

I was brought up Catholic, though I have spent most of my adult life as an atheist. I know now that I don't need to be a

theist to be spiritual, though for a long time I was neither. I went to a funeral at the UU in Albany, NY at some point during the late 80's. I noticed that it was really different from anything I had known. For instance, the text in the hymnal had been changed to remove the many sexist references. I made a mental note and continued a generally happy but spiritually vacuous life. Beginning in 1992 I decided to explore the direction of my life and by 1994 I began attending services at the Burlington UU to see what it was about.

In the UU publication which is the source for most of my historical information, Jack Mendelsohn offers an anecdote about liberals coming to a fork in the road. One sign says "to Heaven", the other points to "A discussion about Heaven". Unitarian Universalists, it's said, head instinctively to the debate. Howard Russell, a UU for ten years, made an interesting observation about this. As lgbt people, he notes, we are forced at some point in our lives to think. We must, in order to survive, come to a point where we look what we've been told is truth right in the eye and challenge it. He found that the religion of his childhood not only discouraged but virtually forbade thinking and challenging. He feels that there must often be a fundamental dissonance for btlg people, having already devoted so much time and energy to challenging and questioning, to thrive in religious communities where such pursuits are uncommon.

Unitarian Universalism is, at its core, a hotbed of questioning. The Burlington UU is neither Christian nor Jewish, Buddhist nor pagan. The congregation, however, includes all of these and more. Rather than doctrines, UU's believe in basic principles. These focus on human dignity, freedom of expression and thought, democracy and the right of all to pursue their own spiritual direction, whatever that may be. This UU congregation has consistently shown me, a skeptic, that it lives up to these principles.

The Director of Religious Education at the Burlington UU is Lisa Rubin. She came out as a lesbian in 1993, after having been in her position since 1980. She says that during her first 13 years at the UU she had developed a faith that the people did indeed try to live by the principles and because of this she felt safe in coming out. She was not disappointed. She has found that it is a safe place to grow and challenge and to feel supported in the effort.

Homosexual, bisexual and transgender people have been visible at the Burlington UU for quite a while. As near as the people I talked to can remember, the first worship service specifically devoted to btlg issues took place about ten years ago. Mr. Russell remembers that it was greeted with some trepidation by the congregation at large. It may be that people just didn't know what to expect. There were no negative comments, nor protest, but quite a bit of silence. This is quite a contrast to what I have experienced these last couple of years. It is really rare if the human rights issues confronting queer people are not mentioned in some way during any given service.

Gary Kowalski is one of the ministers at the congregation. He points out that the UU has been supportive of Pride Day from

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Gay Television in Vermont

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Out in the Mountains. Viewers can look forward to an interview with Tami Eldridge, Executive Director of Outright Vt. in March.

Blatant Homophobia and Heterosexism exists, not only across the country but unfortunately in our own neighborhoods. "The Vermont Rainbow Connection" is a program devoted to educating the public on L/G/B/T issues and in doing so, will help combat negative images and promote the celebration of diversity. In addition, through the television medium, we hope to reach people in need of resources...a true "Rainbow Connection". aimed at making Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people feel less alone.