

Rev. Audrey Brooks - In her Own Words



Born: 1940, Carragana ,Sask.

Places lived: Porcupine Plains, SK, then to Kipling; then Flin Flon, Man.; from there to Merriton, Ont., where both parents worked in a munitions factory during the war; to Stratton Ont., Red Lake, Ont. Back to Manitoba: Winnipeg, Selkirk, Steinbach, Flin Flon, Brandon and back to Winnipeg; to Dartmouth, N. S., then to Flin Flon, to Edmonton to go to U of A; to Bangor, Maine and finally, to Edmonton, never to move again!

Children: (5) Kimberly, Larry, Jay, Joel and Jordan

Grandchildren: (12) Michael, Ben, Kiernan and Sarah Lang; Becky, Kirsten, Lauren, Sol Madden; Tanesia and Cadman Brooks; Wolfgang and Luther Brooks.

Great Grandchildren: (8) Jorden , Dillen; Faith, Lyrik, Liam; Danielle; Aiyana , Kacen

Extended Family: Becky/Ben Hogenson, Andrea Steinwand and other students ... Nicole, Barry, Angie, Rob, Christine, Seamus, Marilyn, and anyone who walks in the door!

Education and Career: B.Ed., Grad Dip Ed., M. Ed. U of Alberta, English Major in Education, with minor in Educational psychology and counselling; Taught junior and senior high school, adult ESL, remedial reading, and pastoral work for 20 years with Ed. Public Schools. Master in Divinity, 1985 Bangor Theological Seminary – ordained to Unitarian Community Ministry in 1988 by Unitarian Church of Bangor, Maine. May 2013 marks 25 years in this ministry.

The Early Years and Family Memories

My family of origin were of Jewish Hungarian and German Catholic origins; both big families with 12 living children – some with the same names, which added to the confusion. Ours was an open door family; we never knew who was coming for Sunday dinner, or to stay when between jobs. The kitchen was the communion

table, set with European dishes that were out of this world. As a child I remember coming home in winter from school, in the heated Caboose sleigh, walking in the door and smelling hot soup and fresh bread, smells to quicken the taste buds to be sure! As children, we were treated equally in the family. If we had a story to tell or a song to sing in our very musical family, we had everyone's attention. When an uncle or aunt came home, they always brought something for us; there was laughter and lots of fooling around.

Of course there were hard times, too, when Dad drank and the bills weren't paid, with Mother holding two jobs to make ends meet. Nevertheless, I don't remember feeling poor, except when I had to take too many fried egg or strawberry jam sandwiches to school. Mom had two hobbies: sewing and cooking. She would stay up at night to finish a dress for me, would wind my scraggy hair in rags to make me look good, and offer special desserts when she had flown off the handle at me, as she never knew how to apologize.

We had quite a few one-sided battles while I was growing up. Yet when I separated from my husband in Flin Flon in 1969, it was Mom who offered her basement to my kids and me to live in while I attended the University of Alberta as an adult student. I was the first in our big family to go beyond high school, though my daughter Kimberly and my two brothers, Lorne and Dwight, followed later. So did several cousins, three of whom are also teachers.

As time passed, Mom and I mended our differences, and we became very close. Later, when she was older, she would phone me from Calgary where she and my stepdad retired, and she would say, "Come and get me, I have a bad case of cabin fever!" So we would go and get her, and she would enjoy going "window shopping" at the malls. We planned her memorial service, as she insisted she was not to be buried with my stepfather, but wanted to be buried in Winnipeg with my oldest brother, who was killed in a traffic accident on VE day in May 1945. I told her she had better let me record this on tape, because there was sure to be a reaction, so she did! When she died four years later, I sang her to sleep with step sister Judy and brothers Lorne and Dwight as she requested, and saw to it that she was buried by her son, Allan Joseph Berkner.

I honour her strength, work ethic, sense of duty to her jobs and her family, and her talents in cooking and sewing. Like her mother Barbara, who was the only midwife in Whitewood, Sask. in the early 1900's, she has passed down to her daughter and grand-daughters the "never give up" attitude that has characterized the women in our family to this day.

Curiously, it was “granny-mommy” Barbara who held a big secret in our family. She and her husband Steve Kocsi came as immigrants from Hungary in 1908. They told their children they were orphans who met on a farm, and decided to come to Canada as homesteaders. Their oldest daughter, also Barbara, born in 1900, remembered that they were not orphans, and later found out that the reason her parents came to Canada was because Granny-mommy was Jewish, and Grandpa Steve was a Presbyterian, so they were both cast out of their families and came to Canada. In 1982, my aunt and my mother made a trip to Hungary to visit relatives that are still there, and who corroborated this story. Who knew?

Something you may not know about me...

As a result of discovering our Jewish heritage, in 2005, my daughter Kimberly and I made a trip to visit Jewish sites in Hungary, Prague, Munich, Frankfurt and Vienna. We also visited Dachau and Theresienstadt concentration camps. When we came home, I decided to dedicate a dry riverbed landscape in my yard to the Holocaust. I was looking out the front window at the riverbed when I heard a CBC newscast telling of the Congolese army raping virgin women and little girls to have power in battle, and to protect themselves from AIDS. I could not believe my ears. This was 2008!

After crying over this, I recalled Somalia, Darfur, Bosnia, Serbia, Vietnam, Guatemala, Hiroshima and so many other places where innocent people died because of war, violence and deliberate ethnic cleansing, so I dedicated that garden to all victims of genocide. Each year, on the third Sunday of July, at 1 p.m. after church, we have an interfaith ceremony that stands as witness to genocide, where stones with names of victims are placed in the dry riverbed. This event is sponsored by UCE, and the Edmonton Interfaith Centre, led by Rev. Brian Kiely and myself, with speakers from other faith groups. In 2013, we will have the 5th anniversary of this event, with the possibility of a film being made as part of a John Humphrey Centre for Human Rights and Peace curriculum for high school students in Edmonton.

How I discovered the Unitarian Church

I met a wonderful woman in the Waskahegan walking club in 1978, Corry Rensing, who was a member of UCE. As we walked, we shared stories of our lives, including faith journeys. Corry told me of her life in Holland and of her family, and I shared stories of mine. In 1980, she invited me to the Unitarian Church of Edmonton as a guest for “Bring a Friend Sunday,” where I heard Rev. Rob

Brownlee talk about the foundations and principles of Unitarian Universalism. As a Roman Catholic dissenter with many prickly memories, I was both comforted and inspired by what I heard that day, and became a member immediately. I also joined the Singles Group, some of whose members are still around and remember the fun times we had together.

Three years later, when attending a *Building Your Own Theology* class, two unusual incidents led me toward becoming a Unitarian Community Minister. The first was the suggestion from Rob that a good place to explore my faith would be to take the Master of Divinity program at the same seminary he graduated from, Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine, which was a second-career institution, with small classes and individual attention.

Then, while I was teaching school at Victoria Composite High School, I was approached by Don Chomyc of the board, who told me I was eligible for a paid two-year sabbatical. The two events came together, and I spent those two years at Bangor Theological busting my butt doing a three-year program in two years. At that time Community Ministry was not a route that the UUA in Boston sanctioned, so I was ordained as a Community Minister in 1988 by the Unitarian Church of Bangor, Maine, where I had served as lector for the two years I was at seminary. I came back to Edmonton, paid back the time I was away from school, and took on the role of pastoral care giver in the school, and well as the community.

As of May in 2013, I will have celebrated 25 years as a Community Minister, and 20 years as a senior high teacher of English, ESL and Adult Education with Edmonton Public Schools.

On Oct. 15, 2006, at UCE, I was installed as Unitarian Chaplain with the Interfaith Chaplains Association at the U of Alberta, where I minister from my tradition to students, staff and faculty. I serve on the academic Senate of St. Stephen's College at the university, and taught a *Building Your Own Theology* there with Rabbi David Kunin. I also sit on the board of the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Advocacy. I served with and presented spiritual workshops with the Women's Wellness Advisory group at Grey Nuns Community Hospital since 1991, sponsors of the annual Prime Time for Women Conferences

Opportunities and Challenges for UCE

Wherever I go, I carry a card containing the UU principles and sources. I am often asked about my faith, and have many chances on campus to articulate this: as

panellist and moderator at International Week, at the Institute for Sexual Minorities, teaching at Camp Firefly, Aboriginal ceremonies, International Day to End Racial Discrimination; other social justice events at City Hall, and with the Raging Grannies at protests. Students, staff and colleagues ask faith questions; we also have interfaith Bible studies where a UU perspective draws attention to what we believe.

Often at hospital pastoral calls I am asked what a Unitarian is, as people look at my ID card. I make visits to Victoria School to present Unitarian Universalism as a course in World Religions, present myself as a Unitarian at the inner city Mustard Seed Church and at the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, where I help serve Christmas Dinner, and also participate in the Aboriginal ceremonies and marches for the Missing and Murdered Women of Alberta.

There are thousands of people like me who hold views about the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and who want justice and compassion for all, with the right of conscience and the democratic process as a rule for governance within the church and in the world. The challenge for UCE is to link into the “techie” stream of communication to connect with all those people who are like us, but who haven’t made it to our door. It is encouraging to see the young people in our congregation who are dynamic, intelligent and powerful, taking leadership roles in the daily operation of the church. We know more of them are out there.

I am optimistic that in time, what we believe will be what more and more people come to understand and believe, so that our community and the larger world have what most people of good will want for our world. I think each person in our congregation mirrors our UU faith. I wish we had the funds to have a regular TV program or podcast that would bring our message to the great public so that there would be an alternative to the misinformation that is out there now. Just saying! I wish there was an honourable way to have a financial windfall without having to buy a lottery ticket and dream on it!

What I do in my spare time

What nourishes my spirit mostly is singing in our UCE Choralis Choir with Karen Mills and Gordon Ritchie, who are the happiest, most supportive directors I ever had. I also sing with an intentional community of a cappella women singers called In Her Voices, who do chanting, singing and drumming. I sing protest songs with the Raging Grannies, am a member of Carolyn McDade Sacred Web singers who meet periodically to make CDs based on the Earth Charter and social justice.

Recently, several of us members of UCE joined a Wednesday morning choir directed by Jordan van Biert, which is proving to be very enjoyable.

I also play an electronic guitar with the Hawaiian Treasures band, and play some other musical instruments, by ear, enthusiastically if not accurately. I am a poet with the Stroll of Poets, and a writing facilitator for anyone who comes up the pike and asks for some input.

All in all, my life is full, as it should be, with two nine-year-old tabby cats, lots of house guests, a wonderful Chalice group, and visiting animal type persons who honour me with their presence on occasion.

Life is Short...

I am 72 years old, with the aches and pains of someone my age, yet I am having a great time at UCE, with people who accept me as I am; on campus and in the larger community. Life is good. I have miles to go before I sleep!

~ Audrey Brooks