



UU Sangha

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Late Winter 2009

A PILGRIM'S GLIMPSE OF THE BIRTHPLACE OF SOTO ZEN

By Junko Davis

The now familiar recorded crisp female voice states simply in Japanese, “The next is in front of *Eihei-ji*” (*Eihei-ji Mae*), relieving my anxiety about when to get off. I disembark, carrying a Japan Rail Pass, *The Lonely Planet Guide Book*, a note of encouragement and tips from a friend from Sonoma Mountain Zen Center in Santa Rosa, California, and a faxed acceptance slip from *Eihei-ji*, all tucked away in my trusty Eagle Creek travel back pack. I’m recalling with trepidation the words of surprise and looks of concern from my aunts and cousins in Tokyo. They could not believe that the little girl who left Japan at the age of 10 has returned this time to “do Zen” at *Eihei-ji*. They know me as a Unitarian Universalist with a committed Buddhist practice, but they question whether I am prepared for one of the most rigorous Zen training centers in all of Japan

The grounds and the buildings, even from a distance, are stunningly impressive. The ancient Japanese-style sloped roofed temples majestically lie among the stately, upright Japanese cypress trees standing straight and tall like a regiment at attention against the mountain side. I announce to the staff at the gate that I am here to do the four-day monastic practice. They bow deeply towards me as they make a respectful sound like “Ahaah,” making me wonder what I have gotten into. I bow back just as deeply. They graciously direct me away from the day-trippers down a hall to an area with small lockers. I am asked to take my shoes off, put on a pair of slippers, replace my shoes in the

locker, and close its door. My mind flashes through movie scenes of someone being taken to jail, and I feel a fleeting sense of panic.

I sit in a designated area in a large foyer with several other people, all Japanese, who are obviously in the same situation as I am and probably feeling a little insecure. A young monk, or *o-bosan*, walks up to me and offers to be my translator, for which I am immensely grateful, but soon we both realize that my simple Japanese is better than his English. Thus we decide that he would translate difficult concepts or vocabulary words into a simpler form of Japanese for the language skills of a 10 year old. Names are called, credentials inspected, and we are escorted up several walk-up flights of stairs to a large Japanese-style *tatami* (woven mat floor) dormitory room for us eight women, ranging in ages from 20's to 80's. The eight men go to another presumably similar room. The only place we are given permission to break silence is in this dormitory room. We are given beddings and directed to change into gray Japanese-style long gauchu pants (*hakama*) and a *kimono*-style short black top. We wear this outfit throughout our stay, only to change into



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Notes from the Editor

Greetings.

Spring has arrived, and along with it, your Late Winter issue of the *UU Sangha*. We're pleased to present a new voice on her pilgrimage to the birthplace of Soto Zen, a haiku poet who has been away for a while, some insight from a prisoner, and some advice. We hope you enjoy this issue. Once again, we invite you to send your thoughts in articles, poems, and letters. We especially extend this invitation to the incarcerated.

Please join us in welcoming the new President of the UUBF, Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright, settled minister of First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist of Northborough, Massachusetts. Judith considers herself a Unitarian Universalist Buddhist. She is on the Tibetan Buddhist path and has received The Kalachakra Teachings from His Holiness, the XIV Dalai Lama. She originally studied Vipassana Buddhism and for about eight years was a student at The Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York. Her favorite Buddhist quote is from Kalu Rinpoche

*We live in illusion
And the appearance of things.
There is a reality.
We are that reality.
When you understand this,
You see that you are nothing.
And being nothing,
You are everything.
That is all.*

We also thank Rev. Wayne Arnason, our past president, who remains on the Board. And to Rev. Dr. Arvid Straub for organizing our first Convocation on the West Coast, and, for the many years he served on the Board, we deeply bow in gratitude. You can read about our Convocation with Shinzen Young in the next issue!

The UUBF will be at General Assembly again this year. Look for us in the Exhibit Hall near the UUA Book Store. Besides our usual table, we're sharing a large space with the UU Mystics and the UU Christian Fellowship where we will offer informal workshops. See the flyer on page 7.

Gassho,

Robert Ertman, Editor

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our own work clothes twice a day during the work periods.

A young, energetic *o-bosan* running through the hallway, bell in hand, sounds the wake-up call at 3:30 a.m. The last meditation sitting or *zazen* ends at 9:00 p.m. Other than these two times, I was uncertain of the hour, since all personal timepieces were confiscated, and we are not given any written schedule. The day passes with several *zazen* periods, three highly formalized meals, work periods, and about an hour of luxurious, silent, somewhat ritualized *o-furo* (hot-tub bath). The *o-furo* time is a much appreciated compensation for the daily agony of lack of sleep, aching body, and the unruly mind.

Soon after our arrival, we are taken to the *zendo*, the place where we do *zazen* and eat, where our individual spots are designated by a large plaque with our name. But first we must be instructed how to get on the *tan* (a *tatami* platform about 2 1/2 feet high with a 10 inch forward wooden margin) without touching, sitting, or placing our hands or buttocks on the margin. This practice keeps sacrosanct the margin area where we place our eating bowls during the ritualized meal time. We each learn to cheat in our own way, as it takes considerable strength, flexibility, and agility to "fly" over the margin without touching it and to land gracefully as close to the *zafu* (round meditation cushion) as possible. The *o-bosan* are kind enough to look the other way, unless someone unthinkingly sits directly on the wooden margin of the *tan*, in which case she is told in a neutral tone to please not to sit on the margin. One of the first conversation topics we have in our dormitory room is about the most effective way of hopping onto the *tan*. We share our respective strategies with giggly enthusiasm.

I must say, *zazen* feels universal whether done in an ancient monastery in Japan, in a major California Zen center, in our small neighborhood *zendo*, or in one's own home. It truly is simply to "just sit" wherever one is, and it was a welcome respite of familiarity.

The meals are highly ritualized in the

Zen tradition of *oryoki* using four bowls. An *o-bosan* gives us step-by-step direction at each meal with all the minute details. While my concentration was mostly on my own performance, I must say I was aware of sounds of falling objects and lots of discreet verbal corrections down the line. One of the first questions people pose to me after returning home about my *Eihei-ji* experience is, "How was the food?" My sincere answer is that the food tasted neither good nor bad, but I do remember reminding myself to take my vitamins and calcium because the diet was strictly vegan, consisting of rice, mountain herbs and soy products, with little variety. The need for supplements struck me as a strange thought to be having.

The work period is well organized. We are instructed to clean the hallways, the *zendo*, or our own dormitory room. We clean them just the way I've seen done in films and in scenes from my childhood in Japan, with a meticulously sewn together dampened rag in our hands as we scamper down the runways with our seats in the air like a bunch of frightened beetles. My fellow participants seem to know exactly how to do it--I do my best to learn quickly.

The morning service is done in the big "Buddha Hall" with about 350 to 400 monks. We walk down the flights of staircase, past an enormous kitchen area, numerous historically commemorated elaborate rooms and arrive at a spacious Hall already filled with monks and priests in their traditional robes. I am embarrassed to report that I thought to myself, "They seem to be copying the robes, chants and rituals as we have in California," momentarily forgetting that the tradition comes from this very temple founded in the 13th century by Dogen Zenji, the founder of *Soto* Zen tradition.

We are instructed to sit with legs folded under with buttocks on our feet, or *seiza*, directly on the *tatami* mat without any cushions, during more than one hour service, creating the sensation that the mat is cutting one's shins, an experience that even my fellow Japanese practitioners found difficult. Having noticed us squirming around, the monks observed to us later, in a gentle, non-judgmental tone, that we

have become "soft and weak" in this modern 21st century. On our last day, we were invited to offer individual incense before the altar. It seemed such a special privileged moment that I made an effort to include everyone in my thoughts.

The monks and I agree that I will not be able to grasp the difficult vocabulary words and nuanced teachings that take place during the Japanese teaching sessions; therefore, I will have a private meeting with an English-speaking teacher. The Rev. Kuroyanagi, who speaks colorful, sophisticated English, is a delightful teacher with a twinkle in his eyes, a quick sense of humor, a gentle manner, and a heart and mind rich with wisdom. Our first meeting begins with an introduction, green tea and small morsels of sweets. He then asks me if I have read the book or have seen the movie, *The Da Vinci Code*. I am taken aback, especially because I had done neither at the time. He suggests that I do so because the story shows us that Jesus was a human being, thus informing Christians and everyone else that all humans have the capacity to do as Jesus lived and taught. I remind myself to rent the DVD when I get home. He shared with me his life process towards becoming a Buddhist priest and remarked about the need to be careful not to become a dogmatic Buddhist, becoming attached to the "idea" of Buddhism. I understood that to mean that one must not just espouse teachings and philosophy in an abstract way, but to make it come alive in one's life.

By the second day, all of us lay practitioners are exhausted and find ourselves in the usual tumultuous state of mind of the second-day retreatants, so much so that even those more polite and cordial among us are no longer speaking or looking at each other. Possibly because of our state, the obviously highly-evolved schedule varies on this afternoon. In place of our afternoon work period, we are escorted to a wooded path on the grounds for a long, vigorous walk. Our *o-bosan* surprisingly can chat with us. We learn a little about their lives and family. We are taken to an area of large platform where a huge bell is hanging, the only bell we are allowed to ring, as all the other bells give significant signals to the *o-bosan* scattered throughout the temple

grounds. We each have a try at it. It brings forth a tremendous sound resonating throughout the entire grounds. In this casual atmosphere, I unthinkingly reveal to one of the *o-bosan* that I am willing to tolerate anything that is demanded of me here if I can only have a cup of coffee. After the hour of brief reprieve, we return to our monastic quietude as though nothing unusual has happened.

The next day, in the midst of my meeting with the Rev. Kuroyanagi, the young *o-bosan* enters the room with a tray of English bone-China cups, coffee in a filter coffee maker, and a plate of French *millefeuille* cookies. I am shocked and delighted while Rev. Kuroyanagi seems amused. The *o-bosan* quickly explains about my remark of the previous day. The Rev. Kuroyanagi smiles, invites the *o-bosan* to have some coffee and cookies with us, and returns to the teaching session. He pointed out that the manner in which one places shoes at the door reflects one's working of mind and character. He tells a charming personal story culminating in the teaching that there is no such thing as a single event occurring independently--that one action affects another--and that this is part of what constitutes *karma*.

On the third day of my stay, I am singled out of the herd (more anxiety) and escorted down to a room on the lower floor where I have the privilege of meeting Hoitsu Suzuki-roshi, presently the head practice teacher at *Eihei-Ji* and the son of Suzuki-roshi, the founding Abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center. His wife, Chitose-san, had informed him previously that I would be coming to do the four-day stay at *Eihei-ji*, that I practice in Arcata and at Sonoma Mountain Zen Center where Jakusho Kwong-roshi is my teacher. I had met Chitose-san and their daughters the week before in the village of Yaizu at *Rinso-ji*, the original temple of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi and now of Hoitsu Suzuki-roshi. In meeting him at *Eihei-ji*, I felt some concern that I would feel like an exemplar of "American lay practitioner" and a reflection on Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. As it turned out, I felt no judgment, no scrutiny--simply the presence of a kind and warm-hearted person who took the time in the midst of his demanding schedule to meet

with me. He was on his way to a short visit to his home temple that very afternoon, and consequently we had only a brief meeting.

Of the ensuing days, I have a clear memory of being absorbed in each momentary experience, whether eating, cleaning, bathing, or *zazen* with increasing ease and contentment. Thus, by the third and the fourth day, I am surprised to find I actually sort of like this place, but at the same time I start to look forward to exiting the gate I had entered only a few days earlier. The routine for the fourth day is the same until about the last hour before the departure. We hear deeply caring and encouraging speeches by the *o-bosan*, wishing us well in our journeys. The Rev. Kuroyanagi and the Japanese speaking teacher encourage us to carry into the householder life the same kind of attention that we cultivated during the four days at *Eihei-ji*.

We re-trace our steps down the staircase, stop at the ground floor for a little souvenir shopping, retrieve our shoes from the lockers, and go out the front gate, once again bowing deeply to the gate-keepers. I make a phone call to my aunt in Tokyo to reassure her that I survived *Eihei-ji* and get on the bus back to the train station. As I look through *The Lonely Planet Guide Book*, not having planned my journey beyond *Eihei-ji*, I realize I don't want any more challenges for the moment. It had to be another place of peace and beauty: I was clear about that.



haiku

*smiling
as the girls walk by
his white cane*

*found -
the last stone Buddha
without a "ku"*

*passing
his jagged heartstone
again*

*stormlight passes
a gray heron
becomes great blue*

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*following children
round and round the edge
koi*

*turning pink
as it opens
white lotus*

*new lily pond
frogs-snakes-dragonflies-birds
and one flower*

*deserted mansion
poke salat
where lilies once grew*

*James Patrick Haynes
Member, Zen Group of the UU Church
of Bowling Green, Kentucky*

Simple Joy

By "Tom"

There's an old Buddhist saying: "Ah, the joy to discover there's no happiness to be found."

When we think we're looking for happiness, what we're really looking for is joy. We can be temporarily happy, but simple joy is our natural state when we're not being distracted by our desires and fears. Life can be rich and rewarding, but we have to give up our constant demand for more, newer, bigger, better.

Are we going to have the insight to hop off the internet and watch the sun go down? Are we going to have the patience to be quiet and make time for "unproductive", unstructured time every day? Or are we under the delusion that somehow we're going to create this big busy thing that by its success is going to fill us and bring us enlightenment and peace?

Just think of how many labor-saving devices have come along that make food, shelter, and warmth so much easier and quicker to get than ever before. Yet, look at the pace people are living today. Where is all the time that has been freed up? We have to look at it all in its simplest terms which is "it's intrinsically good just to be here and be alive."

Joy by its very nature is simple and we must become simple people. If we're going to solve the pressing problems of our world and find joy, we're going to have to go back to the advice of all our elders from all the traditions and religions: "Be simple people of good will who spend some time touching into the unknown and all of our outer focus on caring for each other."

There's so much mystery, so much goodness when we're not beleaguered by our busy-ness. Even "good busy" doesn't lead to simple joy unless we find a balance and a way to slow down as well. The kingdom is within and it's revealed in solitude, in humility, in silence.



"Tom" is incarcerated in Arizona.

Qigong in Prison

By Debbie Cole

Qigong is an energy movement discipline. There is a program at the Folsom prison and other facilities in California to teach qigong movements to inmates. In the absence of such a program at your facility I will attempt to talk you through some basic pieces of a beginning practice. It takes very little space.

First stand straight with your ears over your shoulders, over your hips. Your feet should be in a V-shape with the heels closer together (not necessarily touching) and the toes further apart. Soften (bend) the knees just a bit to release the natural tension in the lower back. It is rather like being suspended from the ceiling from a thread. Relax the shoulders and the hips being aware of your body weight being balanced on your feet. The weight should neither be noticeably forward nor back, right or left, but centered evenly on your feet. Now, gently, shift your weight to the right foot. The left foot will now be "empty" (no weight being supported on it.) Place the left heel out in front of you with the toes facing straight ahead. While the hips stay at the same level (same distance from the floor) slowly and evenly shift the weight forward onto the front foot, emptying the back foot. Think of gliding forward as if being pulled from a string just below your waist. Allow the back leg to go to straight before the back heel comes off the floor as the full weight is shifted to the front foot. Now, evenly shift the weight back, allowing the back heel to come down first and softening the knee (bending) only what is necessary to keep the hips at the same level. Try shifting forward and back a few times, keeping the pace slow and gentle. Feel every change in the weight shift in the soles of your feet. It is a form of meditation, fine-tuning your attention to the body.



Debbie Cole is an experienced teacher of qigong and tai chi chih. She is a long-time member of the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis.



UU Buddhist Fellowship

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CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP
freely following jesus



UU Mystics in Community

Exhibit Booth Talks

(in booth #928 near the UUA Book Store)

The UU Buddhist Fellowship, the UU Christian Fellowship and the UU Mystics have arranged a meeting area in their shared booth space to present these informal workshops:

Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism

Thursday 1:00 – 2:15pm

Based on the book by Skinner House, edited by UUCF President Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, different UU Christians will talk about freely following Jesus as their spiritual path and how Unitarian Universalism has helped.

100,000 Vajrasattva Mantras Later

Thursday 2:45 – 4:00pm

The Rev. Judith Wright will present slides and speak about her 5 month sabbatical journey in Nepal, January-June 2008. She stayed for this entire time in a Tibetan-Buddhist monastery/nunnery (Kopan) doing spiritual practices and teaching the nuns.

UU Mystics Community Gathering

Thursday 4:30 – 5:30pm

An informal gathering of members, friends, and all who share an interest in direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. Our trustees will be on hand to discuss our purpose, objectives, activities, and our contribution to the spiritual life of UU congregations.

Mystical Naturalism

Friday 1:00 – 2:15pm

Mystical naturalism means that basic religious truths can be found in nature, through observation and experience, and recognizes that some of that experience is beyond our natural abilities to understand. The universe is unknowable in its entirety and mystical naturalism respects the mystery of the wonder and wisdom that is there for all of us in times of need or out of the blue. Led by the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale.

UU Christian Spiritual Practices

Friday 2:45 – 4:00pm

What spiritual practices and disciplines from our own UU Christian history, and from other Christian traditions, do UUs follow, and how can they grow the soul of all regardless of theological orientation?

Emerging Small Groups the Jesus Way

Saturday 1:00 – 2:15pm

Planting and nurturing and multiplying small groups of UU Christians and Jesus-followers in your church or, with other progressive Christians, in your wider area, and how the lessons from the Emergent Church movement can help.

Sharing Mystical Experience

Saturday 2:45 – 4:00pm

Many of us have had them, but not as many have found a place to share our mystical experiences with others of open mind and heart. These experiences can take on the shape of our religious backgrounds, but the commonalities are deep and connect us to one another. Led by the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale.

Fostering a UU Mindfulness Practice Group

Saturday 4:30 – 5:30pm

This workshop will help you foster your own lay-led, peer-led, UU Mindfulness Practice Group. The MPG model emphasizes practice and does not require teachers or adherence to any particular approach to Buddhism. Led by Robert Ertman.

Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Sunday 1:00 – 2:15pm

A panel of representatives from UU Christians, UU Buddhists, and UU Mystics will discuss some of the themes from the 2005 report from the Commission on Appraisal. How are we informed and transformed by our theologies? How do we engage our theological diversity within the UUA? How can our theological interest groups further enrich UU congregational life? Attendees will be welcome to participate in the discussion.

How We Started Our Sangha in Gray, Tennessee

From the Holston Valley Sangha, March 2008

The Sangha represents the positive energy and support we all need. Sangha friends can help you get through the hard patches of your path, when you feel discouraged and depleted. Sangha can teach you a lot, and group sangha practice can wear down many of your rough edges.

*Lama Surya Das
Awakening the Buddha Within*

In the early summer of 2001, four members of Holston Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, in Gray, Tennessee, got together over lunch to discuss the need for a Buddhist meditation group. One member was a practicing Buddhist, another had a past in TM, and two had the strong desire to start down the Path. We needed some help.

One member had been exploring the UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association) web site, and had come across the UUBF, and brought the information to the group. This was exciting news because it gave us a starting point, with people we could contact, and some credibility in our immediate community as we planned how to start. On a very practical level, being affiliated with the UUA provided an already established relationship with reason to develop the same in our church, inviting participation by church members and having a place to meet.

At the same time (June 2001) one member attended the General Assembly of the UUA in Cleveland, Ohio. One of her goals was to seek out the UUBF booth to get some suggestions on how to begin the sangha. She joined the UUBF membership and had the good fortune of meeting Dorrie Senghas, who offered the encouragement that got us started. One very important piece of advice she gave was not to judge the success or validity of our efforts by the number of people that attended each session. There may be times when there are only two or three people. You come and you sit. You make that commitment...no judgment. The important elements would be constancy, regularity, and reliability. We are now in our seventh year and have cancelled our regular gathering only for holidays. Sometimes there are twenty people, sometimes only two...no matter. We sit.

After returning from the General Assembly, we met the first of July and formalized our plans. Here is what we have taken into consideration, and what we have done:

We chose to meet at the Holston Valley Unitarian Universalist Church because it is a public place that is accessible to anyone who would like to attend. It offers consistent location rather than meeting at members' homes, which might get confusing. It is available for additional events that we might sponsor. There is no charge to members.

We originally set up our space in the church religious education trailer, and it was working out very well. We had a fairly extensive library, a tea station, and had space to store the things we used every week. There were two rooms; we used one for meditation and the other for refreshments, socializing, reading and discussion.

In early 2007 the trailer burned down, and we lost everything. Immediately our members generously made contributions that would allow us to rebuild what we had lost. One member gave enough to reestablish our library, making it more extensive and up to date. We now meet in the newly completed Religious Education Building that replaced the trailer.

It is interesting to note that even with the destruction by the fire (which included the floor caving in), the special ceramic tea set collected by one of our members survived. Everyone was afraid it had been destroyed, but it was dug from the rubble intact to continue to serve and warm our members' hearts.

Having decided on the church, we had to schedule when the space was available. We considered other regular church meetings and get-togethers. The four of us then decided on every Tuesday evening from 6:30pm to 8:30pm.

We begin by listening to contemporary recordings (Pema Chodron, Thich Nhat Hanh, Adyashanti, N.S. Goenko, Eckhart Tolle, Ram Dass, etc.). It gives us the chance to settle down before meditation.

We move on to thirty minutes of silent meditation. If anyone needs meditation instruction, a senior member will offer instruction on request. This is followed by a short time for announcements and socializing and then an hour for dharma reading and discussion.

We choose a book together; then spend the next several weeks reading it out loud and discussing as we go along. We have read books such as

Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Lama Surya Das' *Awakening The Buddha Within*, Bhante Gunaratana's *Mindfulness In Plain English*, and Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart*.

We started with a small group of four to test out the plan, though as people heard about it we soon increased. Once we were comfortable with the format, we invited other church members, keeping them informed through the church newsletter, posted fliers, announcements and copies of the UUBF brochure. We also placed a notice in our local free publication and posted fliers in local businesses that might attract those searching for a Buddhist gathering place in this area. We have kept a log of everyone that has attended; over one hundred have signed in over time. We maintain a committed core group of about twenty people. Our Newsletter keeps everyone (who provides their e-mail address) up to date with what our group is doing, and also what is going on in our area on a broader scope. We recently launched our web site holstonvalleysangha.org, and are open to anyone having an interest in meditation or Dharma study.

We have added a Second Saturday Meditation (10am - 2pm). This is led by various members of the sangha on a volunteer basis. It usually begins with a fifteen-minute musical interlude while everyone assembles and settles in. Then, at the discretion of the leader, we will practice any combination of silent meditation, mindful walking, mindful eating, tai chi walking, guided meditation, metta, chanting, or dharma talks.

The sangha has annually walked the labyrinth at a local church and invited several Buddhist speakers. It's amazing what you'll find once you organize and commit.

We have not overlooked the need for interaction with our UU church: On request, our members have introduced Buddhism and meditation to the Religious Education classes, presented services to the congregation, and brought meditation, labyrinth, and sand mandala meditation to our women's group.

In July of 2003 we were contacted by the chaplain at Lee County, Virginia Federal Prison, requesting that we consider meeting with Buddhist prisoners there. We still maintain this practice with monthly visits.

It's been a wonderful journey so far, and we look forward to the road ahead.

It is well worth investing in a Sangha. If you sow seeds in arid land, few seeds will sprout. But if you select a fertile field and invest your wonderful seeds in it, the harvest will be bountiful. Building a Sangha, supporting a Sangha, being with a Sangha, receiving the support of a Sangha is the practice.

*Thich Nhat Hanh
The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*

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UU Sangha Winter 2009

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Don't miss UUBF at the UUA General Assembly in Salt Lake City. Find us in the Exhibition Hall and see the flyer on page 7 (this will be printed in the GA program).