

Cuban Pilgrimage

UU Encounter in the Tropics

In the predawn chill of a January morning, seventeen of us, all but one members of First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati, straggled in small carloads toward the airport to begin our Cuba expedition. One member of St. John’s Unitarian Church came, too. Two more would join us in Miami. It was a trip that would bind us more closely to each other, and, for many of us, deepen our understanding of and commitment to our religion, while broadening our understandings of faith, success, and community.



The members of this little band were our trip organizer Jorge (George) Vila, his patient wife and assistant Carmen Guerra Vila, and followers Katie Campbell, Beth Duff, Al Gerhardstein, Mimi Gingold, Lois Gish, Bud and Joy Haupt, Erin Heisel, Kim Kloke, Tim Kraus, Lee Meyer, Jeanne Nightingale, Dave Robertson, Dan Schneider, Ray Sinclair, Ken Stern, and Dan Tilley.



Three days before our trip began, the White House had unexpectedly announced a thaw in US - Cuban relations after fifty years of complete embargo. Informal discussions between members of the US State Department and Cuban officials were to begin in Havana the day after our scheduled arrival. In anticipation of these talks, and perhaps as a goodwill measure, it was announced that some US travel restrictions would be lifted and that US citizens visiting Cuba would be able to bring home some previously restricted items like Cuban cigars and rum.

While the immediate loosening of travel restrictions had little effect on us (our visas and other arrangements had all been made months earlier), these developments added significantly to the chaos that awaited us upon arrival at the Havana airport. At least one US Senator (Richard Durbin of Illinois) and a full contingent of NBC News staff with 125 pieces of baggage, mostly television electronics, had accompanied us on our flight. None of us actually saw the senator, but we couldn’t miss the news crew. They were sorting through random luggage with us, looking for their equipment, which, we were assured, was sufficient to put together a complete news center should they need it.

Each of us was looking for only one or two bags to claim and get through Cuban Customs. It took hours to accomplish this and get everyone loaded on our conveyance for the week, a bright yellow school bus which had been provided for us by the Consejo de Iglesias Cubanas (CIC, the Cuban Council of Churches).

We nicknamed the bus “The Yellow Submarine” and enjoyed occasionally belting out the refrain from John Lennon’s “Yellow Submarine,” which would have been more



of an anthem for us had anyone been able to remember more of the lyrics.



Our driver and his assistant, Archimedes I and Archimedes II (a father and son team), accompanied us for the entire week, helping us on and off the bus, schlepping bags, giving directions, and never once losing patience with this undisciplined gaggle of UU's.

That first drive through Havana was memorable. We moved along broad highways, into more narrow urban streets, and finally into really narrow one-way streets as we progressed to the "casas particulares" where we'd be housed for the week. These were semi-private rooms in large homes, mansions actually, that had been converted for the purpose of providing temporary housing. They operated a lot like bed-and-breakfasts in the United States.

Our Cuban Partners

Each member of our group of travelers was paired with a Cuban UU counterpart. The assignments were made in advance of the trip and based, in part, on the relative language fluencies of the travelers and the Cuban nationals. Our Cuban counterparts (also referred to as partners, simpatizantes, or UU sympathizers) were:

Ricardo Manso Jimenez

Eric Manso

Gabriel Morales

Elda Patron

Elena Margarita Rode

Pedro Juan Expósito Landa

Eduardo Medrano

Martica & Liset

Tania Perez Garcia

Ramon Morales

Daisy Castellanos

Doris Leonard Hastyh

Leonardo Gomez Castillo

Olga Lidia Agular Herrera

Lidia Garcia

Salome Hernandez

Raul Gonzales Fernandez

Cacha Morales

José Carlos Hernandez

Carlos Vázquez

Armando Longueiera

Oscar Claro

Liliana Ramos

Jose Luis y novia

Our partners were our local friends and advisors during our stay. Of course, in very short order we were mixing with everyone, regularly changing our seats on the Yellow Submarine to meet with new friends, sitting with different people at every meal. Several of our partners are still full-time employees and, unable to get off work, were not available to us every day. But there was still plenty of Cuban interaction for each of us, especially when you include our housing hosts, Archimedes I and II, and the various employees, volunteers, and others at the many cultural venues we visited.



Eliminating Language Barriers

Any language barrier can be difficult, especially when there are two groups whose bilingual members are outnumbered by monolinguals. We chose to avoid professional interpreters, believing that we had enough people in our expanded group (Cuban and American) with sufficient bilingual skills to handle necessary translation among ourselves. Many of the Cubans are learning English, and several have very good English language skills. Most of the Americans had some exposure to Spanish. In our meetings, Elena, a retired English language teacher at the university level in Cuba, Jorge, Gabby and Kim served as translators. In private conversations, many more of the Cubans were quite competent in English, and some of the Americans could make themselves understood in Spanish. Carmen Vila, (an American and member of First Church who might actually be able to claim both languages as native) provided many impromptu translations in conversation and at cultural sites..



In our meetings with other organizations, the organization provided a translator. If they didn't, one of ours stepped forward. Both Cubans and Americans simply refused to allow language to be a barrier. When all else failed, we hugged each other!

The Bikers

Nearly half of our party signed up to rent bicycles during our visit, with the plan that they'd use the bikes for transport to local places. It was an adventure just getting them to the bike rental agency, located as it was on a one-way street narrower than most alleys in Cincinnati. Although the going was slow, Archimedes I was able to navigate the Yellow Submarine expertly along narrow passages most people wouldn't want to drive a car through! They discovered that many of the bikes were, like many local automobiles, put together from a hodge-podge of parts. Arrangements were made so that American bikers were always accompanied by at least one of our Cuban compadres, also on a bike.



Meeting with the Cuban Council of Churches

Monday morning, our first meeting was at the offices of the CIC, where we were joined by many of our Cuban partners. A CIC team gave us an overview of religion in Cuba, explaining that there are 23 denominations in Cuba, which enjoy full recognition (i.e., "membership") by the CIC. The CIC, actually an arm of the Cuban government, is housed within the Cuban Department of Justice. There are several levels of recognition available for religious organizations in Cuba, ranging from some awareness to full membership in the Council. The 23 religious groups with full membership are what we would consider to be denominations in the US. Unitarian Universalism is not among them, and might not ever qualify for full membership. Items a denomination needs to qualify for full membership in the Council include at



least one church, a congregation, and a minister. A creed is also required, but a strong argument could be made that the UU set of seven principles serves as a creed.

Full membership has its advantages. With it can come financial assistance and recognition that help grow membership. Without recognition as a religion in Cuba, our UU sympathizers are not legally able to open a bank account, do any fundraising to support their religious activities and programs, or obtain religious

visas. Without a bank account, our UU sympathizers must make personal purchases of anything the community would purchase. Our communities of UU's exist because their members donate their time and their resources to the communities.

The CIC exists to support the churches of Cuba and to represent their interests within the Department of Justice. It appears to be welcoming of all beliefs, including an acceptance (possibly grudging) of the Afro-Cuban religions. The Council members who met with us were very welcoming, appeared interested in Unitarian Universalism, and had, we should remember, very graciously provided a bus, a driver, and a driver's assistant for our use throughout our visit. We also received the religious visas, which permitted us to enter Cuba through the CIC.



The meeting closed with a prayer, possibly out of deference to us, that I'm sure was meant to be non-sectarian. It was in fact, Christian, but, respecting our hosts and our Cuban sympathizers who are largely Christian, we joined the prayer.

Cuban Unitarian Universalist Council

We met with members of the Cuban Unitarian Universalist groups at a meeting space they have in central Havana. This combined group of UU sympathizers from across the island appears to operate a lot like our UU Council of Greater Cincinnati, except that while our Council rotates its meetings through its congregational churches, the Cuban group meets at one office in Havana. Our Cuban UU counterparts are particularly proud of having been able to secure this space and the implied, although unofficial, recognition that goes with it. This is evidently a first step on the path to a more formal level of recognition.

Our meeting was as enlightening as the visit to the CIC. The meeting opened with introductions and a brief meditation. One of their speakers told us about UU history in Cuba. She was explaining that the man who is hailed as the most important historical figure in Cuba, the "father of the nation," José Martí, is referred to by some as "The Apostle of Cuban Independence." Martí had a personal hero who had greatly influenced his understanding of democracy and how a republic should work. His hero was Ralph Waldo Emerson!



Monument to Martí at the Plaza of the Revolution

As a young man, Martí had come to the attention of a concerned Spanish colonial government. He escaped to the United States, and found his way to Boston where he learned of Emerson. So the connection between Cuba and Unitarian Universalism starts with Jose Martí, the single most important figure in Cuban history. We were more than a little surprised.



Our meeting closed with a hymn, for which they apologized that it would be sung in Spanish because they didn't have the English words. They were obviously delighted when a few of us joined in. "Fuente de Amour" is the Spanish language version of "Spirit of Life"; we have sung it in Spanish in Cincinnati on more than one occasion! Those who did not know the Spanish language version, could either sing along in English or hum the tune.

This was a powerful meeting. Several participants, both Cuban and American, were deeply touched by learning how close our ties actually are. It was a lot like going to a meeting only to discover that it's really a family reunion. There were hugs and tears.

We walked to an organic garden on a corner lot across from the UU office. This lot had been a eyesore of a dump before members of the UU group decided to clean it up as a gift to the community. They pulled out trash, worked the soil, brought in fertilizer, and began planting. Once the garden started to yield, they made the produce available to the people in the neighborhood. Then, the authorities noticed it and evidently someone thought it was a pretty good idea. The government took it over and runs it now.

Seminary in Matanzas

The seminary in Matanzas is a collection of buildings on an impressive site high on a hill overlooking a bay. Following a vegetarian lunch prepared entirely from seminary garden produce, we met with the seminary Board of Directors. Matanzas is the only seminary on the island that prepares people for ordination. Clerical aspirants from all religions come to Matanzas for their clerical education, which will be overseen as well by religious leaders from their own denominations. They learn to respect each other's beliefs while also learning the particular responsibilities of serving a religious community. The meeting closed with a non-sectarian prayer.



In order to qualify for ordination, graduates of the seminary must also meet the requirements of their own religion. Of course, any ordination must be handled by the aspirant's own religion, according to the tenets and practices of that religion. And it is expected that such an ordination would occur within a church of that religion.

There are currently no Unitarian Universalist churches in Cuba, although there are several UU's across the island. There are also no ordained UU ministers in Cuba. We do have one UU who has expressed interest in attending Matanzas seminary. Assuming that he finishes his seminary studies and still wants to be UU minister, wouldn't it be wonderful if he could be ordained in Cuba? During our visit to Matanzas, we also had the

opportunity to speak individually with members of the seminary faculty.

Regla

We took a ferry across Havana Harbor to visit the old town of Regla, where the Black Madonna is worshipped in an old and beautiful waterfront church. The Black Madonna is venerated both as a Catholic icon (a representation of Mary, the mother of Jesus) and as syncretic with Yemaya, the African Orisha or goddess of the sea.



We met briefly with the local priest, then presented an altar cloth which we had brought to them as a gift. We were led into the sanctuary, where the altar cloth then in use was removed from the main altar, and we placed the one we brought in its place.



Next to the altar is a large wooden crucifix. But above the altar, occupying center stage, is the Black Madonna.

Because of its history, this church in Regla is treated as a national shrine. Because it is the main church in this community, constructed in the style of a small Catholic cathedral or abbey, with a congregational mix of traditional Catholic and Afro-Cuban worship, it is a religious shrine.

Afro-Cuban Religious Experience

We visited a Havana museum dedicated to the Afro-Cuban religion, Santeria. This museum housed displays of many different Santeria gods, which included the description of the god and his or her ascribed powers, symbols, as well as a statue or picture of the god. A gift shop near the entrance to the museum offered pieces of jewelry, framed artwork, and dolls dressed to represent different gods.

We made an evening visit to an Afro-Cuban site to observe at least part of a service. The service was held in a private home. One room was set aside with three drummers inside who began drumming to call the spirits. The drumming was rhythmic, quite intricate, and continued for at least an hour. Then the drummers moved into the living room, which had very little furniture except for chairs around the sides of the room. The center floor was open to allow for dancing. The drummers came into this room and the drumming continued. Dancers joined in as they felt moved to do so. Eventually there were only two dancers remaining, a man and a woman. The drumming and dancing became much more intense with growing overtones of eroticism. It showed no sign of slowing down or stopping. Eventually, we left.



Vedado Seminary

Vedado Seminary in Havana serves multiple religions, as does the one in Matanzas. People of any religion can attend and study the “science of religion,” learning about how religion is important to

people, how deep religious experiences can affect the brain and biological systems, as well as examining the variety of belief systems that exist.



We arrived for our presentation in a room that had obviously been designed as a Cathedral sanctuary. We later learned that the building had indeed been an Episcopal cathedral and had been donated, along with its grounds, by the Episcopal Church to the seminary. We filed in quietly while an Imam was speaking in Spanish to a fairly large gathering.

Jorge was introduced to the assembly by the seminary director, who sounded very accepting of Unitarian Universalism and ecumenism in his brief remarks. The director said that he believes it is important for each person to find his or her own path to truth and that we should be open to try to understand each other's beliefs and values. This director cited Emerson and William Ellery Channing as important religious philosophers.

Jorge then addressed the assemblage. He explained who we were and what we were doing in Cuba. He answered some questions. It was a moving and meaningful exchange. For us, it was gratifying to realize that the non-UU's in the room had some questions about us and welcomed our presence. As with other meetings in sacred spaces, our portion of this meeting closed with a meditation, this time a Unitarian Universalist one. Gabby, one of Cuban simpatizantes, is taking courses at this seminary.

Muraleando

Muraleando is a local site where neighbors created their own urban renewal project and cleaned up a dump. They decided the area was ugly and dangerous in a neighborhood where young children had few other places to play. The site included an old abandoned water tank and a lot of junk, garbage, and the vermin you'd expect.



Today, the site is an art center, totally constructed with volunteer labor and financial support from the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon. There is a shrine to Santa Maria of Muraleando – The Virgin of Cobre -- (who looks like a Santeria Black Madonna), a wall (the “mural” in the name of the site) that has been beautifully painted, an open area used as a sheltered outdoor café with space for music and dancing, and art & craft vendors' stalls inside the old water tank. Some folks have quit their state-provided jobs (and given up the monthly paychecks) to dedicate themselves to their art and to Muraleando. And those folks are actually making a living doing this!

Connecting Our Cuban Partners with a UU Minister in Colombia

Through his connections with the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, Jorge Vila was aware of the UU congregation, and its minister, in Colombia, South America. With the help of Erin Heisel, Jorge was able to arrange for a video-teleconference between our Cuban UU sympathizers and this Colombian minister, Jorge Espinel, using Skype. Our Cuban partners were thrilled. Now they could confer with a UU minister in another Latin American country who speaks their language and is interested in them!

They'd never before used this technology. Because it is still expensive for them, they won't be able to use it often. But they now know how to use it.

Neighborhood Visit

On our last Sunday in Havana, we took the Yellow Submarine to an older area of Havana, where some of our Cuban partners live. We walked past an old playground where a makeshift merry-go-round of four mini carts, one toddler in each, was pulled in circles by a mule.



Our retired Cuban English teacher, a surprisingly active nonagenarian, called out, "I remember this park! My grandmother used to bring me here!"

Someone answered, "Do you think this is the same mule?"
"Oh, yes! I recognize him!" came the reply!



We passed through a neighborhood of deteriorating streets and homes, past people lining up outside a government bakery to collect bread. A few blocks away we entered a newer, utilitarian building that appeared to be a warren of small living units. One of our Cuban sympathizers lived there with her daughter. Another of our sympathizers was her neighbor. We had been invited for coffee and cookies. 20 of us managed to crowd into this mini-home. She was very proud of this new home, having only just moved in. She and her friend had painted the entire apartment the night before! It was very clean, well-organized, yet very homey with a stuffed chair, a sofa and a television in the living room.

Sunday Service at a UU Sympathizer's Home

We arrived a bit late to the planned Sunday service at the home of Ramon Morales, the father of Gabriel Morales. Several UU sympathizers from around the island joined the Havana group and us as we assembled in the large entry area of this spacious hacienda, clearly a relic from pre-revolutionary days.

We sat in chairs arranged around the perimeter of the oval space, with some people sitting on the floor and others standing in the hallway leading to the rest of the house.



Our seminarian, Gabriel Morales, led the service, opening with a few words of welcome, lighting the chalice, and explaining the virtual flower communion that we would share in the service. The American contingent had been encouraged to bring virtual flowers, something with representational meaning to us, but which we could bring with us from the United States. Several members of our group had painted rocks with symbols. Others brought different small items which included an American Indian dream-catcher. Two actually did stop at a florist shop and brought fresh flowers. These were placed on the table with the flaming chalice. Combined with the Cubans' gifts, small imitation chalices made of wood and sea shells, handmade boxes, tiny sea shells, it was a lovely display.

Ramon led a meditation. Jorge led a hymn, "Amor, Amor!"



The service leader asked each of us to introduce ourselves and share something of personal importance that morning. The comments were many and quite moving. As each speaker addressed the crowd, their comments were translated to whichever language they were not speaking. Finally, Gabriel introduced Erin Heisel to sing a closing hymn. She stepped forward, smiled, and allowed a moment of quiet to settle in before beginning, a capella and in clear Spanish, "Morning Has Broken". There was not a dry eye in the house.

Other Activities

Most of our meals were enjoyed with Cuban counterparts. Breakfasts, at least for those of us in "Casa Mujeres" included healthy conversation with our hosts, Lazara and Jorge. Our assigned Cuban partners often accompanied us during the day and ate with us at lunch and dinner.

Our Cuban counterparts took us to the old fort one evening to watch the canon (which is pointed north) get fired! Of course, the canon ball just falls into the harbor; it's not going far!



We did visit the Atlantic Ocean, and some of us did indeed swim in it. Some of us walked down the beach or swam over to visit Cuba's only gay beach, MiCayito.

We visited the cemetery in Havana and saw their burial customs. Some joined Jorge to pay respects at his grandfather's mausoleum.

Some of us went to other museums in Havana, some to the local craft market, some to a baseball game (Havana won!), and all shared food and friendship with the Cubanos we met.

We would be remiss not to mention an afternoon visit to an English language bookstore (Spanish spoken, too), *Cuba Libro*, where we could read two-day old American newspapers, English language magazines, and English language books. The proprietress, who describes herself as "made in Cuba, born in the USA," is fluent in both languages and operates her shop as a little haven where people can gather, enjoy conversation and maybe a cup of coffee. She is a published author, working with Lonely Planet publications. The coffee was pretty good, too.



Closing Thoughts

As is always the case, we received more than we gave. Most of us have a better understanding of the lives our UU sympathizers live in a country that is still undergoing massive economic and cultural



changes as they transition from a totally controlled economy to a more open and responsive system. We saw the billboards promising restructuring and change, and we know that the good news is that the current government, under Raul Castro, understands that there are problems with the production and distribution of goods and services. We are hopeful that, for the sake of the Cuban population, they will be able to develop successful improvements.

We understand that our Cuban UU's love their country as much as we love ours. We understand that their economy is very different from ours and that a simple discussion of the peso to the dollar exchange rate is meaningless information. And we should know that successful changes to their economy will have to come from Cubans.

We know that many Cubans have understandable trepidation about opening relations with the United States. Our home, which we truly love, is also for them "the behemoth to the north." They want to open the door a little bit, to have a relationship with us. But we need to understand that theirs is a tiny island, a delicate tropical flower of a place, with carefully balanced social and ecological systems. Everything isn't working ideally right now. But they don't need us to fix it. They don't need us to overwhelm them. They need us to help, if asked, while they continue to write their own history. They especially do not want to see a return to the days of Cuba being a gambling and sexual playground for the United States.

With escalating income disparity in the United States, and its resultant problems, we are not in a position to make meaningful suggestions about economic or social reformation to anyone else. Cuba has

an admirable medical service delivery system, and has medical personnel who have served in many international disasters with groups like Doctors Without Borders. Education is free for everyone.

Although we tend to think of Cuba as an isolated island because there are still not open relations with the United States, we need to understand that they DO have relations with lots of other countries. Many of the people we met there have been to a lot of other countries, including Mexico, Colombia,



Spain, Venezuela, Argentina, and others. Perhaps the most traveled person in our American/Cuban contingent was Armando, whom we nicknamed “Batman” because of his work in caves. He has been to some of the most isolated caves in the world, including spending several days caving in the Arctic.

While in Cuba, wandering their largest city or traveling in rural areas, we saw no evidence of starvation or homelessness. We saw poverty, but not abject poverty. There were no beggars in the streets, no barefoot children with distended bellies wandering around junk yards.

We need to trust the Cubans, an intelligent and educated population, to fashion the economic and social changes that make most sense to them. And we could learn by observing what they do, what works, and what doesn't.

And, as UU's, we need to be available to assist our Cuban UU sympathizers if asked. They have a dream of actually having a church in Cuba, with an ordained minister. This is important, because it would lead to recognition by the CIC, which is important because it would allow them to have a bank account and to raise funds for support of their religious communities.

Finally, most, if not all of us, want to go back. In a shorter statement sent out on the Church's Listserve, the commenter stated, “I left a piece of my heart there.” This is true. We each left a piece of our heart in Havana.

Respectfully submitted for the American Travelers,

Lee Meyer
Jorge Vila
Tim Kraus



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