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Interview of Bruce Larsen by Arthur Poultney

This is an interview with Bruce Larsen. Bruce has been very active in Unitarian Universalist service in Asheville and he has served in many capacities in our church life, including the presidency. I’m Arthur Poltney, Church Historian. The date is February 7, 1999.

Arthur Poultney (Art): Bruce, when did you first learn about Unitarian Universalism?

Bruce Larsen (Bruce): Well, it’s hard for me to say exactly what the date was. I know where I was. My wife and I were living in Durham, North Carolina roughly between 1974 and 1983. And it was really at that time, by looking at the newspaper, that we saw references to the Eno River, I guess it was probably a Fellowship at that time, had moved to a more prominent location. Anyway, I would say probably around 1979… is when I first became aware there was a Unitarian Universalist Church and movement to be associated with.

Art: Then what prompted you to attend a Unitarian Universalist service?

Bruce: Well, at that time, once again around 1979, my wife and I both thought it was a comfortable place, might be a comfortable place for us to be. But we didn’t really feel any need at the time to go and check it out. It really wasn’t until 1983, when we moved to Asheville, with I guess, what was then about a 9 month old daughter, to find a religious home. Since we lived on Macon Avenue and since we repeatedly drove by the church and saw what the sermon topic was for the week, we eventually were inspired to visit and once we got to the door we never got out!

Art: And when did you join the church?
Bruce: We joined the church, I think it was in October of 1983.

Art: OK, that’s all interesting, Bruce. Now what interested you most about our church? Worship service? People? Activities? Or other?

Bruce: Well I suppose it’s a combination of really the sermons and the people. Interestingly enough, since he passed away just recently, the first person that we talked to in the church was Arnold Walz. We happened to sit next to him during the service and Arnold,… Jim Brewer, at that time, had given folks an opportunity to talk a little bit with one another during the service and Arnold introduced himself and asked a little bit about us and he was so honest and sincere that it seemed like that’s the kind of person that we wanted to be around. The sermon itself, the day that we first came to

church, was about Taoism and I guess as someone then, who continues to be now as a searcher, the idea to be in a place and … well, that it was safe to question things, was important to us, Jean and myself.

Art: And since then Bruce, you’ve been very active in the church. What church jobs have given you the greatest sense of fulfillment?

Bruce: I think actually, there really have been two. I was the main usher at the 9 o’clock service basically from, well not basically, from its inception until this year when we moved to the 9:30 time. And to be there, to see everybody, greet everybody every week, to give them a smile and to be smiled back at, smiled upon, to help really make the service environment for everyone else there something that was manageable was enormously rewarding. I really enjoyed that and frankly, miss it this year.

The other thing, not that it was necessarily less rewarding, but as certainly rewarding in different ways, was of course, the two years as president of the congregation. I really felt I was able to use the skills that I had to make a difference in the life of the congregation and, develop new ones as well. So really those are the two jobs: very different in character, but both with very different challenges.
Oddly enough, maybe, maybe it’s not oddly, but although the position as being the main usher was uniformly rewarding and positive, and positive is the word I want to hit, what is really true about the presidency, is that there’s so much emotional… it is such an emotional job, in contrast to what many people thought.

Art: For the sake of history, Bruce, would you brief us on some of your most vivid memories of the church, of ministers and church events and whatnot or anything else you would care to tell for posterity.

Bruce: Hmm. Why I think really it’s the most amazing thing to me in the life of my participation of the church took place on the very first Easter service that I attended in 1984. At that time the congregation had a tradition of decorating the sanctuary with balloons. Balloons balloons, balloons everywhere! And, it was such an amazing and joyful surprise that it clearly is a thing which stands out in my memory. That was such a neat event. Being a member of this religious community and kind of seeing how things were done here was just incredibly liberating. It just brought the widest smile to my face. And as you can see, it still does today.

The second point I was going to talk about with regard to impressive events was the Canvas dinner that we had at the First Baptist Church. That was really just a wonderful event. Virtually everyone from the congregation was there. And we were all able to sit down and eat at the same time. And we were entertained by a variety of folks in the congregation and it was just a really nice event, one I wish we could have more often.

I guess a third thing that I would mention is really just the pain associated with and sadness associated with the death of Betsy Brewer. It was, in fact… Betsy had done some babysitting for us, for our daughter Hope, and I think on the night that Betsy committed suicide, I was scheduled to play tennis with Jim Brewer. And it was just such a horrible, horrible event and I guess seeing Jim Brewer in the pulpit after that, after he, he and his wife had come back, Barbara, had come back from
Vermont after a tiny healing for them. And just to see his pain. It sounds trivial now, you hear that so often, but it was just a horrible event for me. So I can really, I think those are the three things that stand out. There are other things, but if I had to choose three, I think those would be the three I would chose.

Art: Well thank you very much, Bruce. I certainly appreciate your interview. I’m going to close now unless you care to say anything else. If you don’t care to, just say “This will do it,” and I’ll close the recording.

Bruce: Well, let’s see…is there anything I really want to say in addition? I guess my time in the church has been really rewarding and I would like to see more people get out there and do some of the things I have done because it really is true, that with regard to service you get what you put in and I’d like to see more people get a lot more. Thanks Art,

Art: You’re certainly welcome, Bruce.