

Interview with Naomi Pullman
November 23, 2001
Interviewer, Bonnie Habel

Bonnie: I am here with Naomi Pullman to talk about some of the experiences that Naomi remembers from the UUCA and any other experiences in her Unitarian experiences.

Naomi, when did you move to Asheville?

Naomi: I moved myself in 1973. The folks had come down in 1968 so I was down there to visit, and then came down myself when my mother was sick and my job ended in Washington so I came and stayed.

Bonnie: What was your mother's name?

Naomi: Ruth.

Bonnie: And they had come in '68. Why did you come at that time then, in '73?

Naomi: Well, Mother had had heart surgery before they came in '68. She was never very well. That has always been one of my regrets that people didn't get to know Mother the way she really was because she was such a vibrant neat, lovely lady, which she still was, but she had never recovered from the heart surgery. There were certain problems after that and she was never fully active here. Anyway by '73 she was getting worse so when my job ended in Washington I thought it was a good time to come down to stay for a little while, so I came down in, I think it was spring of '73 and stayed with Dad at his place, and then she died in November of '73.

Bonnie: I am sorry that I didn't get to know her.

Naomi: She was a neat lady.

Bonnie: Were you a Unitarian in Washington, DC?

Naomi: Yes.

Bonnie: And tell us a little about that church.

Naomi: All Souls – well, it was a huge church. It was an interesting time there because I was in Washington from 1963 to '73, which was the time of the civil rights movement and the war in Viet Nam, and all sorts of things going on, so it was a very

– I don't know how to describe All Souls at that time except that we had a lot of federal employees and government employees and activists so it was a very . . . I don't want to say volatile church, but it had a lot going on, a lot of internal kinds of . . . well, it was a pretty volatile time for those ten years. Jim Reed, of course, was the associate minister there, and of course he was killed in Selma, Alabama during that period of time. The church was very much involved in the civil rights movement and it would often, not often but now and then be the site of services for bringing ministers and people together from all over the country, so there was a lot going on. Duncan Howlett was the minister.

Bonnie: What was the size of the congregation?

Naomi: I have no idea, but it was huge. I would say five or six hundred but I don't know that for sure. Many many parts of it. Parts of it I never knew much about. Again I was working with the RE people a lot. When I went to Washington I worked for the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice, that's how I got to Washington, so I was involved in denominational events, like the March on Washington and all of those kinds of things that involved a lot of Unitarian-Universalists in the Washington area, staffing those kinds of things. So my involvement with the church was pretty much in social action activities, which as I say at that time was pretty active, but also brought conflict in the church, especially over the Viet Nam War, and then in the RE program at the church.

Bonnie: Did you continue your social action interests when you came to Asheville then?

Naomi: Certainly my interest. It was very different being in Washington then during that ten years. It was the center of the universe in terms of, as I say, Viet Nam and civil rights. So coming to Asheville was pretty laid back. Not very much in the first few years, but later on.

Bonnie: And you were working where when you first came down to Asheville?

Naomi: When I came back to Asheville I went back to the University and that's what I was doing the first year or two. I was at UNCA doing a degree in Appalachian studies.

Bonnie: Then as you decided to join the church then, what date was that?

Naomi: What did we say, '74. Yes, 1974. That was when I kind of decided to stay here. I had no intention of staying here, and then it just kind of happened. I guess I felt like putting roots down after I had been here about a year and a half or so.

Bonnie: Then tell me about some of your involvement. What did the church look like in '73-74 when you first were getting acquainted with it? Were we still on Vermont?

Naomi: No, by then they had come to – I don't remember years very well, but the church was built – well, it was before because I remember coming down for the celebrations and for the big, big dinner at the hotel. But that was all prior to when I came down to live. The big part of the church was built what . . . the sanctuary and the meeting hall, but I was trying to think, the RE part was not built and we didn't have Jefferson house and the playground and all that stuff. I was trying to think of that today, that funny little area in there where the offices were.

Bonnie: Off the sanctuary.

Naomi: Well, Dad's office was off the sanctuary, but then the secretary's office was over on the, well sort of where it is now, but it was old. Was it still a house? That's what I can't remember.

Bonnie: Norburn house maybe?

Naomi: Is that it? I just remember it was an old connection to the new part. When I came down that still hadn't been done. I know we didn't have Jefferson House. I can't really remember when that other part, the church offices, were built. Must have been when I was here but I don't really visualize that.

Bonnie: Probably the end of the 70's. You were involved in RE then as you became a member and we were in the new church, because RE was in that old building I think, in Norburn House.

Naomi: No, I wasn't involved in RE until later I don't think, when they had – who was the wonderful woman who was doing RE? We were involved a little bit, we weren't official. Then Janet came right away after her.

Bonnie: Lisa Holt did it.

Naomi: Oh, Lisa Holt, that's right. It was the woman before her whose husband had the junkyard – Lisa Andrews. And then Lisa Holt. I don't think I did anything in RE at that point. That was later on.

Bonnie: Why did you decide to join the Unitarian Church here?

Naomi: I think that's when I decided I was going to be here for awhile because when I originally came down I didn't expect to stay.

Bonnie: And your dad was still minister here for a year or two?

Naomi: Oh, yes, just a year or two. I guess I just decided – it was the family pattern. I don't think I ever actually joined the church in Washington, so this was kind of putting down roots.

Bonnie: What was the congregation size in 1974, do you remember? Do you have any sense of smallness, largeness?

Naomi: It was pretty intimate. Of course it grew a lot when they got the building and when I got here they were just in the process of that. They had been in the church maybe a year or two. When was it, '71, '72?

Bonnie: '72.

Naomi: So they had just been there a year so it was growing like crazy in that period. And I think the nature of the congregation was changing. It had been an older congregation and some younger families were coming. They were getting more people and younger families just because of visibility, and I think there was probably more outreach at that point too. I don't remember what that was about, but advertising. I don't know numbers but it was really just growing a whole lot.

Bonnie: Did they have a choir?

Naomi: I think so.

Bonnie: Do you think of music connected with the new church? Did they have an organ, a piano?

Naomi: I remember the organ, but I don't know if that was before I came or after I came. But the organ – I don't know, was Anita Freeman – oh, no, it was a wonderful woman from Waynesville. Natalie Kendrick. I had forgotten about her. Yes, she was wonderful. She did both the choir and she did the organ. I think maybe there was somebody doing the choir but I can't think who it was.

Bonnie: Perhaps we can't solve that.

Naomi: No, but somebody needs to remember everything. I think that's when Bill Frish took over. There may have been a couple more in between, but there was somebody. Well, Anita did both choir and organ but that was later.

Bonnie: After Bill left, I think.

Naomi: Yes.

Bonnie: After that, what were some of the changes that were occurring besides growth. Did that bring more young families?

Naomi: Yes, I think so. I think that's when they began to get serious about RE and getting an RE director and developing a curriculum and those kinds of things. It was certainly after that. I don't know what the RE program had been like before, but I think it was pretty token. Probably good, but pretty token for the number of people. I know that expanded and expanded pretty rapidly after the church started. I think probably . . . just the diversity of programs, because the congregation . . . I don't know about social action. But I think more of these became formalized, the social action committees and worship committees, all of these kinds of things. I'm not sure, they may have existed before but really had a role in the church. I don't know about church council. When Dad was there, there was one thing that I thought was kind of neat, it was a really good church council. I know Dad saw that as, they were the people who ran the church was the church council and he took his direction from them. I don't remember why I attended some church council meetings when he was there, but I was really impressed with that. Whether they had had that before or not or whether the new church made it necessary for them, more programs made it necessary to develop more of a church council, I just don't know that. But I remember being really impressed with them. They really ran the church.

Bonnie: Good strong people, willing to work and lead.

Naomi: Yes.

Bonnie: Can you remember any of the names of those leaders?

Naomi: I think it was Mike Moore, when Mike was president. I don't remember the council under Jim Brewer, whether that continued strongly or not. I think it probably did under Bill Hammond, but I'm not sure – time spans I'm just not good about. George Love and Michael Moore.

Bonnie: And Patsy Keever was president during one of those years?

Naomi: Yes, this was '84. I must have been on the board when she was -- I was on the board when Michael Moore was president and when Patsy was president.

Bonnie: We talked about a This I Believe report. I think you mentioned that you hadn't given one of those, but if you had were there new things or reasons why, new thinking developed for you or were you working a philosophy of religion with being a member of the UU church?

Naomi: Probably broadly. I think the change from Washington, DC and both Unitarian life in general, life in general, was so different there. As I said, I was so involved in social action, social movements and political movements in Washington that coming here to a totally different kind of community, issues were treated very differently. People were very polite to each other. I remember going to meetings here and people were very polite and it wasn't the kind of rowdiness and political conflict that you found in Washington. To me it was just a whole adjustment of not just religious philosophy, but being in a different community, how you learned to do things differently. You had to change in some way the way you approached issues, the way you approached people. People just . . . I don't mean didn't know as much here, but people were just out of being in the heart of things in Washington. Everyday you knew everything that was doing on in the world it seemed like. Here there are other things going on in people's lives, and it was just a whole different community, a whole different way of life. So I went through lots of changing. I did that degree in Appalachian studies because my first degree was in anthropology, and I was kind of focusing and learning about the culture I was living in. I remember I had a lot of trouble with racial issues when I first came here because Washington was so diverse and the majority of people were African-American, so I was a minority in the community, and friends and associates were very diverse. Asheville was very hard for me to adjust to in that way because the communities were very divided and just didn't see each other very much.

Bonnie: Were there African-Americans in your church in Washington, DC?

Naomi: Oh, yes, a lot.

Bonnie: That's a good component to share with us. Of course when you came here, then there weren't.

Naomi: Well, that's it. And then the community. It was visible in where you got to see people every day. It was very, very different. I don't know if it was a religious philosophy or -- I think I felt that the Unitarian Church was so different because it was pretty isolated. I didn't see a sense of diversity of population. It certainly wasn't, and people were pretty much alike, which had not been my

experience before. There were always different cultures, different races in the church and in my community. Asheville was so homogenous in so many ways that I think I kind of had to relate that experience and somewhat adjust, but also at the same time I never felt as comfortable in the Unitarian Church here because it was pretty insular. People were doing wonderful things in the community and stuff, it's just different.

Bonnie: In your work when you first came down here in '74, did you encounter, or even in school at UNCA, did you encounter some of the mix that you had hoped to see, or was the whole community pretty much hard cross into and get to know other people of other races?

Naomi: Yes, throughout the whole community. As I say, it was heightened by being from a community that was predominantly African-American in Washington. It was just such a sudden change. It wasn't very diverse. Work was diverse, yes.

Bonnie: Were you a leader, to help the church to learn about the other members of our community that would provide diversity?

Naomi: Probably not, no. I was working in things in the community. I chose to work on programs in the community more than at the church. Social action committees kinds of things. I don't know what we did at that point.

Bonnie: I know you did Building Bridges. That was not a church activity.

Naomi: Oh, yes, Building Bridges and Opening Doors and those kinds of things in the community. That was later. But in the early days of the church I don't think I did much for inside the church. I was adjusting to the community and pretty Appalachian culture oriented. I wanted to learn more about the culture and such. But I remember writing to a former colleague . . . actually he was from college, he was an African-American minister . . . and writing him and saying that I didn't know how to behave because everybody was alike. I mean, not everybody alike, but the lack of diversity and I didn't know how to relate to people. I didn't know how to relate to African-Americans in the community because they were just sort of different, and my first good experience, I guess, when we did – not the first but it stands out in working – was when we did the Anniversary March on Washington which the church helped sponsor. There was a community committee. That was in '84, the first march was in '63 or '64, and this was '83 or '84, and we got a group to go together to the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington. But then I worked with the community committee where there were a lot of African-Americans.

Bonnie: Good information. I think that is brand new and important for us to know.

Naomi: And various things in the social action.

Bonnie: We were talking about some of the committees that you've been involved in.

Naomi: Yes, the social action committee. There was a lot of good work being done. I don't know if I can remember all the stuff we did, which I don't. That march on Washington, sure, and the Crop Walk we did. Sue Walton took big leadership in that, and a lot of us in the church were involved in that for a number of years. The social action committee was very solid and very active. We raised money, and I don't remember how we raised money . . . maybe it was money from the church, I guess it was money in the budget from the church, and it was given to the social action committee to decide how to parcel it out, and make recommendations on who the money should go to. I think it was a church budget item that we were responsible for, but there was a lot of goings on in the committee about who to give money to and how much and that kind thing. I know a lot of time was spent on that, that some of us were less interested in. But it was a big responsibility, it was a big responsibility of the church. We made people come from the different groups and give us a little presentation on why they need the money, and also it familiarized us with their work. We did that for a number of years. I don't know if they still do that now or not.

Bonnie: Other committees that you were involved in?

Naomi: I think the only other committee was – there are probably other committees short term things – the nominating committee for the board and the officers for several years.

Bonnie: You were on the board of trustees.

Naomi: I was on the board of trustees for two terms. Larry Hooks was responsible for that. He talked me into it. He was treasurer. . . no, Johnny Keever has always been treasurer. I don't know, somehow Larry helped. Maybe he was on the nominating committee. He got me into that effort.

Bonnie: Then later on you also served a term on the nominating committee, is that right?

Naomi: Yes, several times, two or three years of doing the nominating committee, yes, with Bonnie Habel and a number of other people.

Bonnie: I know you were quite busy during that time, but any similarities – I know that you have had other experiences like Detroit that we haven't mentioned yet, but those were in your formative years, so did you relate some of that to the needs of RE here when you got involved in RE?

Naomi: No, I got involved in RE, I think, because I liked the leadership of Janet Harvey and what was happening down there, and then it was just growing so fast, and probably because she came and asked. They needed somebody. It was the infants and toddlers. At this point life was pretty busy work wise and other things, and spending Sunday morning with infants and toddlers was a kind of delightful idea, and so I did that for many, many years, and Mrs. Lindsey, who had been with the church on Vermont Street, was there and came to that room downstairs, and then I was joined by Dizzy Walton, who was in high school at that point and was more interested in the infant and toddler room than what was going on in her class, I guess. Pretty much throughout high school Dizzy was there with me and Mrs. Lindsey. And we had a wonderful time, the three of us, and saw lots of kids come through, who are now married and have their own children.

Bonnie: But stayed with UU, you think? Can you remember the numbers and the families that were continuously with the Unitarian Church?

Naomi: Say that again.

Bonnie: Thinking of as you got to know the toddlers, did those families then continue on, and those toddlers, then to 1st, 5th, 7th graders.

Naomi: Oh, yes.

Bonnie: So that you saw the continuum for those children.

Naomi: Oh, yes, I think so. I think that most of them – or a lot of them I know today or have contact with the families today were there all through. I am sure that there are some who have left, but . . . My new next door neighbor, her babies were there and they grew up in the church and now they're older, college and post-college. There are a lot of families that I still know that their kids went all the way through the program.

Bonnie: Are there other comments that we haven't touched on. I'm sure there are a lot of important things that were going on. If I just think of the right questions, you'd have a lot of information about these things. I think we have covered a lot of those. I really appreciate your taking this time today, the day after Thanksgiving, to

share your remembrances, and you have some valuable gems in here for us to put into our long and happy time here in Asheville. Thank you, Naomi.

Naomi: You're very welcome. Thank you.

Bonnie: We paused for a tea break and thought of these additional things we'd like to have added to this. Naomi, some recollections of when people were getting acclimated to the new church, and some of the stories that you remember about events happening as we were getting settled in that church.

Naomi: The only thing that I remember is that the structural decisions and the architecture and those went pretty smoothly, but I remember Dad talking about the toughest fight was over the color of the pews and the rugs, those colors. That there were very strong minds at that point, Sarah Walters, who was the matriarch of the church for a number of years, and I know there were quite a few conflicts over the color of the pews and things like that. Otherwise it went pretty smoothly as far as I know.

Bonnie: Were there any funerals you remember as an outstanding event?

Naomi: Well, it was during Bill Hammond's time there. Dad used to come down every winter after he left to visit. Bill Hammond would go and take a break for a couple of weeks and Dad would come down from Boston and cover the services for a couple weeks, and during one of those periods Mrs. Sandburg died, so he had the memorial service which, of course, was quite a memorable event, the family and many devotees of her who were there. I just also have to remember Mrs. Sandburg, the first time I met her was the night of that final dinner at the Battery Park Hotel when we were fundraising for the new church, and it was during, I think, the McGovern campaign in Washington. Of course she knew I came down from Washington, my parents introduced me to her, and I just remember walking up the stairs of the hotel and her lecturing me to death on how important this election was, and was I doing this and were we in Washington doing this and everything else to get McGovern elected, but I remember her being adamant, and from this small tiny woman, great vigor, very strong opinion. It was one of those memorable experiences.

Bonnie: Naomi, I didn't ask you how it was growing up as a lifetime Unitarian in a home where your dad was a Unitarian minister. Tell me about any early remembrances at any age that you would like to share with us.

Naomi: It is interesting, because our family was, I don't know how many generations, Unitarian-Universalist, mainly Universalist, so I never had any questions about my heritage. The family was true blue from the beginning. Of course we

were in a big church in Detroit where I was brought up, a very intimate church and a very, most of the time, friendly church. We went through some political times in the town that kind of made people unpopular, but it's interesting, talking about pews in the church, the biggest fight I remember was over when they tried to change the name of the church in Detroit, and it just caused all sorts of enormous uproar, but it was a very intimate church. I'm glad we had summer vacation of two months . . . at that time ministers went away for two months in the summer . . . because that's when we saw each other, and those are memorable times. That's when the family was together in our cabin in northern Michigan. During the year it was pretty much on the go pretty continuously Besides the church, which of course took a lot of leadership, Dad was very involved in the community and in social issues. In the 50's I remember the House of American Activities Committee business there was a lot of political – and that's when some of the members of the congregation got kind of mad at him because he took a strong stand against the Committee in Detroit, but he was out in the front of a lot of things in Detroit, so we didn't see him a whole lot, and mother was also very busy in church groups. She used to be an RE direction but was not after they were married, so she was not active on the staff of the church but she was very involved in the groups and helping out with things in the church. So life was just very busy and very active and very vital, and I was very grateful that I was brought up in that kind of household that made us sensitive to social issues, especially very early. We lived in an interracial neighborhood and took part in our neighborhood community in Detroit, so I was very fortunate because I just kind of grew up with a lot of natural things that benefits one that people have to come to later in life, just came . . . we'd spend Sunday afternoon on a picket line or a civil rights march when I was a kid. So those things came kind of naturally. It was a good experience except for not seeing everybody all the time, and we didn't have a lot of time to go out to movies or to go to stuff that a lot of families do and go on picnics or whatever, because everybody was busy during the year, but we had our two months in the summer where we did all that sort of thing.

Bonnie: Do you have siblings?

Naomi: I have a brother, I had a brother, yes. He was about five years older.

Bonnie: Thanks so much again. We'll look forward to seeing you more.