Framed, Furnished and Sustained
by the Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

Faith journeys are a lot like rivers – the older they get, the more they meander. Maybe, if we are lucky, like rivers, they get deeper. At least that is how it has been for me.

I am the product of a mixed religious marriage. My mother came from a Jewish home; my father’s background was Lutheran. My childhood family’s articulated faith was Marxism, social change, and the labor movement. We didn’t participate in any religious institutions. It was not until I was a blossoming young adult, in High School in the early sixties, active in the civil rights movement, that I discovered church, specifically the black church and a spirituality that nurtured and sustained people in the struggle to be free. It was there, first through the songs, that I learned that the vision of social justice, of a peaceable kingdom, of a place where people would not hurt each other, and would eat the fruit of their labor, was a biblical vision. I was stunned. I marched and sang my heart out. “You’ve got to move when the spirits say ‘move.’”

There are things about Unitarian Universalism I need and cherish – the place and forum to push the edges of the envelope, to explore that which is religiously unfamiliar and even unknown, to be in the midst of the marketplace of religious ideas and practices. It was in that environment that I became a Christian.

And there are things that the American Baptists provide that I need and cherish – a place to be with Christians who take their faith seriously and will push me to deeper places and higher accountability. Within the Baptist commitment to soul liberty, they give me a place to wrestle with the Bible with other people who care about it, for whom the wrestling is a matter of spiritual life and death. It lets me own and claim the Christian story that has shaped me silently, throughout my life.

Within Unitarian Universalism I get the broadening benefits of theological diversity. Within the American Baptists I get the depth of plumbing a particular theological tradition.

Within Unitarian Universalism I get to sing, dialog and worship with people who are a lot like me, who think a lot like me, live a lot like me, look a lot like me. There is rest and comfort in that feeling of “being at home.”

Within American Baptist circles I get the broadening benefits of being in a denomination of tremendous race, class, educational and ethnic differences. A gathering of Baptist pastors looks like the global village...it looks how I imagine the peaceable kingdom would look. What we have in common is that we love Jesus. That is enough to transcend all the differences, because we know we belong to one another even as we belong to him.

There is a warning among American Baptists about being so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good. They care about justice and what happens on the ground. In that I find a happy congruence between the two denominations.

The only draw-back I have found to double affiliation is the number of meetings – two local ministers’ chapters, two districts’ meetings (UU and ABC) spring and fall, etc. It is a small price to pay for my spiritual health.

On a very specific and experiential note: I have served as minister to two essentially white Unitarian Universalist congregations. I have served an African American Baptist congregation, and I am now serving an essentially white Baptist congregation, all of them in Massachusetts. The greatest difference is between the white and the African American congregations. The White Baptist congregation has more culturally in common with the UU congregations than does the African American congregation. Issues like the tone and culture of worship, of the
use and role of music, of the concepts of time and interpersonal relationships and how they play out in the service of worship all find common ground within the white congregations, and are profoundly different for the Black church. I had needed that kind of breaking free from time and hard rule-boundedness that the Black church provided. It was the Black church that offered an interpretation of worship that gave wings to my soul. It was the liberation theology of Justo Gutierrez that gave thought and reason to my Christian heart. It was Unitarian Universalism that gave me the place from which to explore and return, while I made sense of all I had encountered.

How could I give any of that up? Why would I?

I grew up in a house framed by two religious traditions, which it viewed with suspicion and kept at arms length. I have built a home not only framed, but furnished and sustained by religious tradition. My Jewish-Christian heritage and the faith their marriage produced is home to my Unitarian Universalist values and traditions, and my Christian, Baptist faith. I would no more choose between them than I would choose between my parents. Together they are what I am and what I need.