Grads Speak to Hearts and Souls at Commencement

Don Southworth started the student commencement addresses with a humorous tale about his first day at Starr King and the delicate sand dollars, emblems of the school, he soon crumbled in his pocket, leaving him worried about a bad omen for the years of study to come.

At the end of his speech, Don asked the audience to imagine what would happen if they all fully committed to using their gifts to “bless the world.” “You don’t need a Master of Divinity,” he explained, “only a heart of grace and a soul generating love.”

The evening of May 19 at the Mount Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church in Walnut Creek, Calif., was golden warm. Too warm for Starr King’s class of 2000 graduates draped in heavy black robes. But they probably barely noticed as they waited with family and friends for the crimson and gold hood that would signify newly earned Master of Divinity degrees and long-held dreams finally realized.

Each of the 22 graduates, among them six men and 16 women, spoke. Each told a story about how she or he reached that podium, and nearly everyone honored the years spent at Starr King. Here is a sampling of those graduate addresses —

Between tears and laughter, Anne Marie Geever described herself after Starr King as “more confident than I’ve ever been and smarter than I ever thought.”

From school janitor to “custodial goddess” is how Alicia Grace portrayed her transformation at Starr King. She told about marrying a couple under the circus big top with attendants who included performers on horseback and an elephant bridesmaid. Alicia skillfully wove her story into a parable that showed how one accepts the path life throws underfoot.

With fervor bracing his voice, Todd Strickland called upon the audience for an “investment of faith and a belief in the abundance of love.” “I’m leaving (Starr King) radically naïve,” he said, “and ready to preach that gospel.”

For Karen McFarland, wearing outrageous earrings and “going to Berkeley to hang out with the Unitarian Universalists” signified her arrival at a “certain age.” While at Starr King she learned that “doing my ministry is being a wounded healer” but the act of ministry made her whole again.

Laura-Hummingbird Fraser, who infuses her ministry with the spirit of the natural world, said she asked the banded snake, the giant redwood and the hummingbird what they would like said on their behalf.

“The whole forest reminded me,” she said, “that it was only in the blink of the universal eye that humans emerged from the forest, the trees, the soil.”

After four years at Starr King, Audette Fulbright said, “I’ve begun to see a brilliant edge to chaos” and to “love even the shape of loss.”

Patricia Franz remembered her fellow travelers — the jail inmates, hospice patients and their...
Starr King School Says Goodbye to Yielbonzie

In spring of this year, after thoughtful consideration, Yielbonzie Charles Johnson, Starr King’s professor of ministry, resigned from the faculty, effective July 1.

“All of us who’ve had a chance to work with Yielbonzie have benefited from his presence at the school,” said President Rebecca Parker. “He’s a gifted teacher and a wise counselor who has helped us re-imagine worship, guide students to confront the fear of freedom that can keep them from preaching with power, and shown how ritual can help us move through stations on the wheel of life.”

A 1986 graduate of the school, Yielbonzie returned to teach at Starr King a decade later after serving as minister of the Church of the Restoration in Tulsa, where he founded and built a multi-racial congregation. His background also included community mental health work and community organizing among the rural poor.

At Starr King, Yielbonzie’s preaching classes helped develop the potential of students, including those who came to the school unsure of their voices. Starr King’s recent commencement bore witness to Yielbonzie’s accomplishment. One after another, graduating students stepped to the podium and electrified the audience. Each voice was unique, each voice resonated with strength.

“In his preaching classes,” said third-year student Barbara Threet, “he provided a rare place to deliver a sermon on a subject that was complicated and painful.”

School faculty and staff have responded to this change with a new approach that includes the modern version of an ancient spiritual tradition, the revival of an old Starr King tradition and a new reflection group. (See box for story.)

“They’ve created a solid and exciting interim plan that provides some unexpected opportunities for both academic and spiritual growth among our students,” said board president Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt. “It’s a plan our board unanimously approved.”

McNatt emphasized that the school would miss Yielbonzie and that board members are looking ahead to the job of filling his shoes.

“Now,” said McNatt, “our challenge is to find a new faculty member with new gifts to support our mission to prepare our students for ministerial leadership and educate against oppression. We know from experience this can be done, and so we’ll meet with a confidence born of that experience to plan our next faculty search.”

Parker said the board will start planning the timing and focus of that search at its next meeting in November. She added that she was grateful Yielbonzie had been a part of the school’s faculty for the past four years.

“I wish him all the best as he moves on to new endeavors,” said Parker.

New Staff, New Approach

With Yielbonzie’s departure, Starr King’s faculty has created an interim plan with new educational approaches for the coming year.

Victor Lee Lewis, a social activist with an M.A. in culture and spirituality from Holy Names College, will serve this year as the school’s first chaplain and spiritual director. On a half-time basis, he’ll offer students individualized consultation and spiritual direction, an approach coming from an ancient monastic tradition that has regained popularity in the past 10 to 15 years, according to Starr King President Rebecca Parker.

“You can’t sustain good work in the world,” she said, “or become an effective religious leader without attention to the inner person.”

Christine Fry, a Unitarian Universalist minister of religious education, will lead a new reflection group for students doing field work in religious education.

The coming academic year will also see a return of the visiting minister program. Jeremy Taylor, a noted dream worker, will spend the fall semester at Starr King, while Dave Pettee (M.Div. ’88), will come for spring.

“We’ll have a full complement of educational options for our students while we prepare to launch a search for a new full-time faculty member,” said Rebecca Parker.

Starr King Delivers at GA

About 124 grads connected over poached salmon and chicken piccata, sharing old times and new at the Graduates’ Dinner.

This illustrious gathering in Nashville was one of several events Starr King School sponsored at General Assembly June 23-26.

The President’s Lecture this year featured Dr. Yasay Barnwell — composer, arranger, actress, health care specialist and member of the internationally acclaimed acapella quintet, Sweet Honey in the Rock — who delivered a workshop called “The Power of the Communal Voice” and led more than 300 participants in song.

Starr King’s incoming dean of the faculty, Elias Farajaje-Jones, delivered “Meditate, Liberate, Educate” for the Sophia Fahn Lecture, and Yielbonzie led the assembly’s closing worship service.

Other Starr King notables, including President Rebecca Parker and Professor Alicia Forsey, participated in workshops and panel discussions.

Grads got a big kick out of the Starr King booth where they contributed “historical” photos to a display of life on Holy Hill, updated with instant prints shot at GA.
Jeanne Foster (‘82) reports a busy life filled with teaching, traveling, writing and ballroom dancing. She’s a professor of religious studies and chair of the Critical Perspectives Department at Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, Calif., where for two years she also served as the director of the graduate liberal arts faculty and Curriculum Development Institute. This work led to the design of a new, interdisciplinary Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program. Currently Jeanne is enjoying a year’s sabbatical. She spent three months in a 16th century stone cottage in Tuscany where she worked on two book projects: “The Lizard’s House,” a sequence of poems set primarily in Italy; and “Memoir of James Arlington Wright,” a Pulitzer-prize-winning American poet and Italianist. In March she gave a seminar on James A. Wright at the University of Verona.

Brendan Hadash (’86) will make his longtime union legal this July when he and partner Alan Hultquist are married before a Vermont justice of the peace. Brendan and Alan’s holy union took place 15 years ago, so they’re planning no party this time. Brendan will probably become the first Unitarian Universalist male minister to legally wed under a new state law that takes effect July 1. He also reports that his ministry is “going very well.” In the last five years, he has increased membership at St. Johnsbury Universalist Church in West Glover, VT, from three to 25. “The congregation,” said Brendan, “is growing and enthusiastic. Everyone is working.” Brendan’s Website is located at www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/3936.

Haverhill, Mass., is where Lynn Mikula Kerr (’97) and her husband, Jerry, recently settled into a new home. Lynn has boosted commute time to her job as director of donor relations for the UUA at Boston headquarters. But she takes a train to work and loves the trees and open space of Haverhill’s location near the New Hampshire border. Soon after they moved, Lynn and Jerry took a vacation in Montana where they preached at the Glacier Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, located between Whitefish and Kalispell.

Adrian Meloti (’71) celebrated his 14th year on the University of Kansas faculty and marked his one-hundredth publication in his research area of cosmology. Since early 1999 he has been active in the state-wide controversy over science standards, which are controlled in Kansas by a fundamentalist creationist group. Adrian has been active in founding the Kansas Citizens for Science (www.kcfs.org), an organization working to overturn these creationist standards. To read Adrian’s essay based on his experiences, go to http://physics.wm.edu/~sher/apr00.html.

John Morris (’54) reports he has greatly expanded his volunteer work in alternative religions, including neo-pagan, wicca, shamanism and druidism. He produces “The Seeker Journal,” a monthly newsletter, and organizes meetings of various alternative religion groups. A few months ago, from his home in Amherst, John served as a sponsor (with help from a Unitarian Universalist church) of a successful workshop series given by Starhawk, a nationally known pagan leader, social activist and feminist. “Interest in neo-pagan groups has been growing at a fantastic rate,” he said. “These are exciting times and fun.”

After 14 and 18 years (respectively) of shared ministry at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, Calif., Rob and Janne Ellor-Isaacs (’75 and ’86) are headed for St. Paul, Minn. Over their long tenure in Oakland church membership fell from 50 to 350. At Unity Unitarian in St. Paul, the movement’s third largest church, they will serve as co-ministers of a congregation topping 800. Rob and Janne will start their new positions Aug. 1.

Robert Pennington (’71) continues to work his green thumb in Santa Fe, NM. After 25 years, he and his wife, Jeni, still operate the Agua Fria Nursery. They started the business with Robert’s father Phillip W. Pennington, who also attended Starr King and passed away last year. Robert reports he just finished a two-year term as president of the Santa Fe Botanical Garden and continues to serve on that organization’s board along with his duties as president of the American Penstemon Society. The penstemon is a native American wildflower with 290 species found in much of the continental U.S. “Anytime anybody comes to Santa Fe,” said Robert, “they ought to just drop in.”

Danny Reed’s (’96) most important news is that his son Harrison Evan Reed celebrated his first birthday in May. On the professional side of life, Danny will split his time next year between First Unitarian Church in St. Louis, where he has served five years, and Emerson Chapel in Ellisville, a nearby suburb with a 15-year-old Unitarian Universalist community ready for a part-time minister. Recent SKSM grad Alicia Grace just completed her internship at Emerson Chapel. “I’ll be picking up some of the good work she has left,” said Danny. He’ll have two capital campaigns to work on—one for Emerson Chapel and another $2 million effort for First Unitarian to fund a new chapel and renovate existing space.

“Very happily settled,” is how Tom Rhodes (’96) describes himself after two years at the Westside Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tenn. Since January Tom has received 18 new church members. He also has been working hard on restarting the Knoxville Interfaith Network, made up of a dozen local religious organizations. Tom chairs the membership caucus. “I take off Mondays religiously,” he added. Observing his own Sabbath, he said, makes him a more effective and relaxed minister.

Ben Bortin (’76) said he continues to enjoy the ministry “immensely” in Staten Island. “I find it very meaningful with warm, human contacts and a chance to learn, learn about life and engagement with vital issues,” he said. One of those vital issues is clearing minesfields. Every 22 minutes someone, usually a child, in one of 70 countries around the world is injured or killed by an exploding landmine. Ben is working as board president of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office’s “Adopt a Minefield” program. This group is trying to raise $19,000 to clear a site in Kabul, Afghanistan. The effort will save lives, end maiming and reduce malnutrition and hunger in regions where local farmers are unable to work the soil. For those interested in donating to the program, send checks to Landmines Campaign - US UNO, The Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, 777 UN Plaza, Suite C-C, New York, NY, 10017.

His passionate anti-slavery stance led him to travel California from 1860-64, preaching against the state’s threatened secession from the Union.
CLASS of 2000 continued from page 1
families who were part of her ministry. Dawn Rose
thanked the Pomo Indian women who taught her
basketry and the Tibetan monks with whom she
studied mandalas and the sacred sand ritual. Sean
Dennison recommitted to the calling that brought
him to Starr King four years before.

“May we never forget,” said Laura Farha,
referring to Iranian suffering, “that extinguishing
the divine spark is the equivalent to killing God.”

This year’s commencement was filled with
laughter and care, ancient music in soaring voices, a
setting sun and rising hopes. It’s worth noting that
before they left Starr King, the class of 2000 reached
into budgets already stretched hair-thin to donate
$2,000 to the school’s scholarship fund. The money
will help support new students embarking on their
own journey of transformation.

If David Sammons, minister of the Mt. Diablo
church, was correct when he said these graduates
represent the future of Unitarian Universalist
ministry, then it’s a fine future ahead.

The Long and Winding Road: Looking Back On the First Year

For many Starr King students, time spent at
the school results in a life-changing experience, and that
effect is often most keenly felt as the first year ends. Two
members of the Class of 2002 describe their reactions . . .

Nina Kalmouts: Since coming here I’ve felt
nurtured and cared for, and I’ve also felt profoundly alone.
It’s here that I’ve rekindled my commitment to speaking
the truth as I see it and exercised my commitment to
remain open to growing and changing. Being here has
reminded me of how much I’ve always loved going to
school and experiencing that exhilarating interaction
between the process of learning and the joy of sharing
with others.

I began my own journey at Starr King seeking
knowledge, community and transformation. Already these
things have manifested for me in ways I never could have
imagine possible. Though I didn’t have the language to
express it when I first considered coming here, I know
now that I came to learn how to be in relationship with the
Divine.

Fred Rabidoux: I discovered at Starr King that
there’s a tremendous community and support for what I
wanted to do. Secondly, there was a wide-open
opportunity to define my career and ministerial goals as
well as the educational development it would take me to
get there. My one disappointment was that I found the
spiritual environment lacking. I don’t know if I’ve gotten
straight the difference between Starr King being a place
of higher learning and a place to prepare for the ministry, my
goal from the first day. Where is the focus every day on
spiritual development? But I absolutely loved my first
year here.

Abraham Lincoln believed it was Reverand Thomas Starr King who kept California within the Union during the difficult days of the Civil War.