

Swapping Stories

Of the Amazing, Amusing Rev. Farley Wheelwright

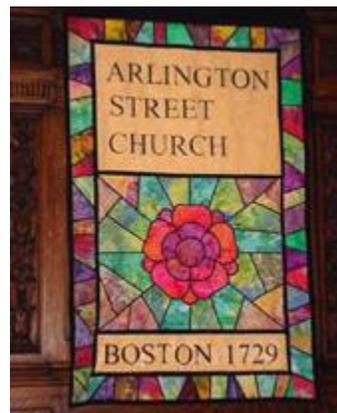
The afternoon of Sunday, May 22nd 2016, a dozen and one half of us gathered to exchange memories of the Rev. Dr. Farley Wilder Wheelwright. We met in the chapel of his beloved Arlington Street Church in Boston.

While he died in his final town of San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, February 27th at 99 years, he made it plain he remained a Bostonian by birth and heart. There was no graveside service for him at the Forest Hills Cemetery, either at the Wheelwright family plot or that beside the remains of his first wife, Patricia Preston Wheelwright. Instead a year ago, he decided his cremains belonged in San Miguel with those of his wife Virginia.

He said he considered his two plus years as Interim Senior Minister at the ASC (from 1987) the highlight of his ministerial career. He prepared the congregation and structures of the flagship, the mother church of American Unitarianism, so that the new Senior Minister would not struggle. It worked and the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie is in her 27th year there.

What follows are recollections and thoughts from those present Sunday and those people who could not attend provided.

Among those gathered, eight are ministers. Of course we ended with a benediction by Rev. David Johnson and sang two hymns from the blue book, ministerial favorites, 103 *For All The Saints* and 101 *Abide With Me*.



Right and Righteous

While many people, including ministers, speak of social activism and doing the right thing, Farley acted. We could easily have spent a day or two talking about his insights and courage in civil rights activism for African Americans, women (including those who sought abortions), marriage equality and other LGBT issues, and on and on. Instead, we recalled the person, the preacher, the pastor.

You can find much of his activism in the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed's [*The Selma Awakening*](#), in which he figures prominently. His compassion, wisdom and empathy are evident in his book of his sermons (slightly expanded as essays) in [*Twice Told Tales: A Collection of 21 Sermons*](#).

Farley Stories



Congregants Phyllis, Don and Paul Rickter and Rev. George Whitehouse

The following comments are much of what the gathering shared.

Phyllis Rickter had the most to say for her family. She, husband Don and son Paul are long-term ASC members, going back before Farley's time. They have been friends and active email correspondents with Farley.

Phyllis said, "My connection with him after he left here was I'd come home every Sunday after church and send him email. Who was in church? How many? Did the choir wear robes? What did they sing? What was the sermon and who was preaching? He wanted all the details. It was my great pleasure to give him a full report. He loved the church and loved the people."

Cindy Thames was a congregant from Rev. Victor Carpenter's tenure through Farley's and well into Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie's. She and Michael Ball are married.

She said, "I just enjoyed Farley. He came back to Boston every year until near the end. We had dinner with him and Virginia. She was delightful too."

Michael Ball was Victor Carpenter's pick to restart the ASC personnel committee with all that entailed. He became chair of the board (Prudential

Committee) and wrote the forward to Farley's *Twice Told Tales*.

He said, "Among things Farley did not want to do was be CEO of a church. He certainly didn't want to fire anyone, even as he knew he had to get the ASC ready for the next Senior Minister. When we sat with his granddaughter SJ in Seattle, she agreed he wasn't temperamentally suited to firing people."

"Moving from chum to friend to him as a father figure was an inexorable process. He came to feel comfortable enough to scold me. He was impatient for me to publish cookbooks. He also made the other diners at the quiet Addis Red Sea in Porter Square aware of my crime against ministry. He long said I was well suited to ministry and urged me to pursue it when I retired. I was sure he'd be pleased that I joined the club when I started performing marriages, mostly under Massachusetts' one-day designation of solemnization law. He asked what I charged and stiffened noticeably when I replied that I performed the marriages for friends and family. Not only did I not charge, but I picked up the \$25 state filing fee. 'Poaching!', he shouted, as everyone turned to our table. Ministers supplement their salaries with wedding fees. I was poaching and should stop immediately."

Rev. George Whitehouse has devoted his life from his teens to the ASC. He is Minister At Large there. He and Farley were fast friends.

He quickly backpedaled when he saw the raised brows of the other ministers when he defined himself as a doer, not (just) a preacher.

His wife Gaby has headed the major search committees there for decades. Farley set the tone and when the time came to search for the new Senior Minister, she knew to find someone with a sense of humor. George said of Farley, "He had a sense of humor, always a joke to lighten his sermons."

“My wife and I went to San Miguel several times. It’s a great place for retirement. Money goes a long way “

“I chase eclipses and went there to see a solar eclipse. Farley never had seen one and didn’t even know it was coming. He really enjoyed it.”

George visited the UU fellowship there and ran across several members originally from the ASC. “There were really surprised to see me.”

He noted a peculiarity there of the congregation gathering at a local swimming pool monthly on the full moon. He said it was very pleasant and added that the members had their clothes on. “They’re old.”

He said too that Virginia had taken pottery lessons and gotten pretty good at it.



Rev. Victor Carpenter (left) and Rev. David Parke

Rev. Victor Carpenter was the ASC’s Senior Minister for a decade immediately before Farley as interim. “I kept the pulpit warm for him.”

Before he left for the gathering, Victor said his wife Cathy insisted, “Don’t forget the condo.” He didn’t.

When he lost his ministry in San Francisco, he was at General Assembly on the West Coast and “I ran into Farley as one does when you’re at GA.” Farley asked where they were going to go and Victor said back to the Boston area where their families were.

Farley asked where they were going to stay and Victor replied, “Damned if I know.”

“Farley then reached into his pocket, pulled out a set of keys and said, ‘These are the keys to our condo (in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood). Take them. We’re going to Mexico and won’t need it. I’m really sorry that the key isn’t there, because we didn’t lock up the silver.’” Farley said they’d be gone for six months and the Carpenters were able to stay for three months and get settled in the area. “It was one example of the largesse of this man, this extraordinary man.”

Rev. David Parke said that he and Farley went way back. “Farley and I went head to head with each other for interim minister in several UU churches about 30 years ago. In 1988, his name and my name both came before (the Prudential Committee) here. Farley got the nod as you all know.

“Three years later, Farley and I went head to head again at the Unitarian Church in Andover. That time the committee came to a different decision. So Farley and I are one and one in the vacant-pulpit sweepstakes. We’ve always been good friends.”

Rev. Thomas Wintle had a favorite Farley memory. He prefaced it by recalling the hospitality rooms at General Assembly in the 1970s. “They drank a little. They drank a lot.”

He described himself as a freshly minted minister and warned that his tale was not necessarily politically correct by today’s standards. He said an older woman “was talking to me, pawing me and then trying to pull me off the sofa. All of a sudden, Farley comes flying into the room and yells, ‘Tom! Tom Wintle. Come here!’”

He went over to Farley, whom he was sure didn’t really know him. “I asked, ‘What do you want to talk to me about?’ and he said, ‘I was just trying to get you away from that woman.’”



Rev. Wintle (left) and Rev. Gibbons

Rev. John Gibbons was there with his *wife Sue Baldauf*. He noted that they had married many years before in that very chapel. Several ministers participated and George Whitehouse signed the certificate. He attended the ASC when Farley was interim and would run into him at GA and in Mexico. Ms. Baldauf added that “The only time she met Farley was when they ran into each other in a museum in Mexico. “He was a legend to me. George and John and many other people talked about him.”

Judith Fredieni, who worked many years at the UUA and is the widow of Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, said, “I knew Farley as basically a force to be reckoned with. I feel my real connection is through my late husband. They were dear friends, slash I don’t know how to describe their relationship, other than it was one of great fondness. It really was.”

Warren Wheelwright is the son of one of Farley’s first cousins. “I met Farley late in life when he came out to visit the Sherborn Unitarian Church as a guest speaker. Perhaps he was looking for another temporary position before the end of his career.” The Sherborn church did not choose him, even though Warren’s father was a long-standing member (and a Wheelwright).

He and his wife **Diana Sue Wheelwright** visited Farley in San Miguel last September. “His mind stayed sharp. He was a little slow to get started in the morning but he didn’t miss a trick after that,” said Warren. He mentioned Farley’s legal blindness

from macular degeneration, but added that he had learned to see a lot with his peripheral vision

“He’d walk the streets and say, ‘I don’t need any help,’ even on the cobble stone streets. He was stubborn and didn’t want anyone walking with him.” Warren added that Farley staff’s was five or 10 feet behind him, but out of his sight.

His wife spoke of a memorable reunion they arranged five or seven years ago. Farley and two of his first cousins, all in their 90s, got together for the first time since they were five years old. “They used to go to Christmas parties at their cousin Morefield Storey’s house in Boston. Farley wasn’t sure how he felt about his (very privileged) Boston roots.”

“They always liked the huge tree and the presents that Morefield Storey, whom I believe had no children, gave to all his relatives. These three 90-year-old first cousins just had a wonderful time meeting each other again at our house.”



From left, Wheelwright cousins, David Johnson, Ralph Mero

Rev. David Johnson said, “Farley was my minister when I was out of college (at the Unitarian Society of Cleveland). I remember when I’d be gone a little too long and I showed up at a ministers’ meeting where he was present. He said, ‘My God. I thought you were dead.’ He had a sense of humor.”

“He said there were three reasons to be good: one is the presence of state police cars; two is the fear of God; and three is a suspicious wife.”

“We stayed in touch all through his life. I loved him dearly. I bought his book the day it came out and I have it all annotated.”

Rev. Dr. Ralph M. Mero, Jr., former Director, UUA Office of Church Staff Finance, led efforts to raise minister and other staff salaries and create pensions. “I would see Farley and he would literally pat me on the back and say what a good job I was doing.

“On more than one occasion, I received a telephone call or email from him recommending that I look in on a retired minister who was likely to be in some financial distress. He wanted me to do what I could to find out what the UUA could do to help. He was a good soul.”

Phyllis Rickter spoke of Virginia Wheelwrights co-funding of the [Jóvenes Adelante](#) scholarship program in San Miguel that paid for and tutored local youth through high school and college. Generally they were the first in their families and villages to do either. **Michael Ball** added that “Farley was so proud of Virginia. He never pulled the I’m the minister here routine. He was just happy to be her husband.”

Michael Ball recalled his first prolonged personal time with Farley, which was at an ASC board/staff retreat at the beginning of the interim. ASC member and UUA staffer Joan Goodwin prepared everyone with the Myers-Briggs and paired them off to discuss their four letters. Farley and Mike were one pairing and both said the same to the other, — You can’t possibly be an *I!* (introversion). “Farley was a powerful preacher, loud and projecting confidence. He said he hated preaching but transcended his anxiety and discomfort to do that part of the job. He said every time he climbed the high pulpit he was nervous and his legs shook. He lived for pastoral counseling and speaking to one, two or three at a time.”

“He loved counseling and continued to advance in it. Late in his career, he finished his doctorate in clinical psychology and pastoral counseling. I’m sure he could have as easily taught those.”

“He did not hide that he dealt with depression his whole life, something he called his uninvited and unwelcome visitor.

“His first wife, Patricia Preston Wheelwright, was the love of his youth. When she died suddenly during an epileptic seizure, she carried to her death what would have been their son. The only pastoral counselling Farley got then was from their Episcopal priest who literally told him, ‘That’s the way the cookie crumbles.’ Farley said that drove him over the edge to atheism.

“He was so devastated that he joined the Army for WWII, left his daughter with his mother-in-law and did not care whether he came back alive.

“When he did return, he decided his daughter needed a mother instead of an aristocratic grandmother to raise her. He rushed into a second marriage unwisely. They were both unhappy and divorced. Years later he ended up in the very long, very happy, very fulfilling marriage to Virginia.

“Farley said his own troubles and depression made him a good counselor. He had compassion and empathy in no small part from his experiences.”

John Gibbons recalled one of Farley’s claims to fame when he led a huge funeral for Lake Erie when the Cuyahoga River that fed it caught fire from pollution. That made the national news in 1969, as he led a procession of thousands of college students to the lake while wearing his ecclesiastical garb. CBS news not only was an outlet that covered it but gave him a radio show on which he presented himself as “your friendly Unitarian Universalist minister of the air.” He did that a year and a half before he moved back into full-time ministry.

Victor Carpenter spoke wistfully of writing to Farley about 10 days before he died.” I wrote how much his communities and I valued him.” Then about a week ago, he received a note from Farley’s daughter. “She said he spoke of how touched he

was. He especially liked the line, ‘The great issues that engage the denomination during our times have hour fingerprints all over them.’ I could hear him purring from Mexico to Boylston Street.”

Distant Thoughts

Many who love and respect Farley could not be at the ASC on Sunday. Some sent their thoughts.

The remarks from the Kafka twins, Farley’s sons by marriage to Virginia, spoke engagingly and personally at the San Miguel service. Two of their comments appear here.

In addition, for a flavor of the Farley citations in *The Selma Awakening*, two snippets are below.

From *The Selma Awakening*:

(Farley) was on his way back to Selma bringing Ralph Stutzman and two other colleagues from Long Island when they got word of Reeb’s death. They had flown into Atlanta and rented a car. “Driving to Selma was a nightmare,” Stutzman said. “Farley didn’t believe in speed limits nor in allowing anyone else to drive. We kept telling him to slow down. It was stupid to call attention to ourselves, four obvious clergy speeding through southern towns at night. All we needed was to end up in some red neck southern jail! Farley ignored us.”

Jack Mendelsohn, the Reeb family’s minister lined up next to Farley Wheelwright...They were marching together, and since one was six feet three inches tall and the other six foot four, they towered above the crowd. “I didn’t know Farley all that well,” Mendelsohn recalled and “had no idea what a rambunctious son of a bitch he could be. Boy was I scared, because Farley was just taunting these rednecks who were lining the sidewalks with hate in their eyes, and he was just taunting them every step of the way. He was literally challenging them to do something. Oh, he was calling them all sorts of names. Finally, I said, ‘For Chrissake, Farley. Will you shut up!’”

when the distance between us expanded from across town to across the border.

Rev, Hank Pierce, Milton MA, For all his notoriety, however, Farley valued his career as a pastoral minister above all else. From a recent interview with him he said, “When I think of an afternoon spent supporting a grieving mother because of the crib death of her two month-old baby, my participation in the social activist movement seems almost inconsequential. It was the most exalted job I could possibly conceive for myself and my talents.”

John Kafka

I can't fully comprehend the influence he had on me, let alone explain it. He was the good things you've all experienced...and he could also be really annoying, pig headed, intolerant, sarcastic, and bad-tempered. Many of our friends and relatives were scared of him. But my daughter's middle name is Farley. She got that name because she needs to be the same kind of person that he was — confident and fearless in the pursuit of what is right. There are never enough of those.

Tom Kafka

Farley accomplished many things, and he led a full productive life. But we'll leave those details to someone else. It's in the trivial day to day stuff where you show your true colors. And Farley lived in Technicolor.

Rev. Kathleen (Katy) Damewood Korb, Farley was his stalwart and witty self at my ordination thirty-seven years ago. After Dave Parke had startled everyone by continuing an argument we had had by saying in the Charge to the minister, “And when you are lonely — and you will be lonely — would you rather turn to Jesus or Henry Nelson Wieman?” Farley, giving the right hand of fellowship said, “When I was in theological school, I was warned against three things: Wieman, women and song.” Then Dick Fewkes, capping the moment, told the congregation that of all the many books he had lent me to help me on my path to the ministry, the only one I had not yet returned was Man's Ultimate Commitment by Henry Nelson Wieman. I reminded Farley of that clever kindness when he came to preach the sermon at my 25th anniversary celebration. I miss him more than I can say.

Rev. John Buehrens, former UUA President, My most vivid memory of Farley is of him at a microphone at General Assembly. Denny Davidoff is at the Moderator's podium. This is approximately the 18th time at that GA that she has recognized her old friend, Farley. She says, "The chair recognizes the stranger at microphone number 3..." Farley then begins, "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking..." Half the hall laughs out loud. But listens.

SJ Chiro, Farley's granddaughter, At the family gathering for his 98th birthday, Farley responded to those asking if he couldn't hold out for a century. He said, “Living to be 100 is gauche.”

Kay Carson, friend and former parishioner, What I remember most about those early days of my involvement with ASC, was how he brought common sense, mixed with compassion and empathy, to the congregation and its leadership group. On a personal level, he helped me, ever so elegantly and graciously, through a rough time. He was always someone I knew I could count on, even