



# The CommUUnicator

Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro

## Discovering Jack Mendelsohn

By Jim Clark

Accidentally hitting the throttle with my elbow in the Piper Cub cut the engine speed, scaring me that I had doomed the flight. Pilot Jeane Lillis assured me the engine in the two-seater would slow to an idle and not stall. My friend Jeane was a cool guy, as expeditious an aviator as he was trouble shooter and problem solver at the General Motors plant where he worked. We met at the UU Fellowship in Winchester, Virginia, a small group of about a dozen members that he helped to organize a few years before we met.

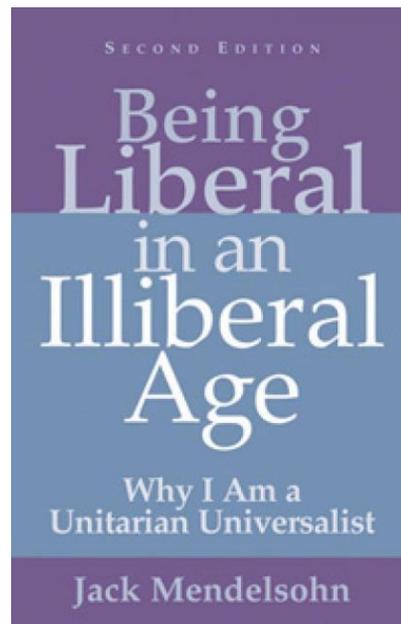
Jeane was often asked how he became a Unitarian. He said he was looking for a religion to join, but couldn't find one to his liking until he read a book that he checked out from the local library. "That's my religion," he said after reading the book written by UU minister Jack Mendelsohn. To fill the void in Winchester, Jeane joined with a handful of others to establish the Winchester fellowship.

I never asked Jeane what the book told him and, frankly, I knew nothing about Mendelsohn. That is, until recently. A yellowing, out-of-print copy from E-Bay of *Why I am a Unitarian* told me what I think was so convincing to Jeane and confirmed why I was attracted to Unitarianism 50 years ago. (The most recent edition of this book has been renamed as pictured here.)

"Unitarians believe people can work together for the betterment of character, the advancement of spiritual life, and the improvement of society without conforming to a set of doctrines," wrote Mendelsohn. "Attempts

to enforce religious conformity are deadening and potentially destructive. History is witness to the horrors of religious intolerance. Unitarian Universalist fellowship is a purposeful, positive, organized movement dedicated to the moral, aesthetic, philosophical, scientific, and social progress of human life."

"UU is an ethical rather than doctrinal religion," he went on to say, "with individual freedom as its method and with reason as its guide. The path of the liberal religion journey leads from freedom through reason to another principle: a generous and tolerant understanding of differing views and practices. We are not anti-anything except ignorance, superstition, dogmatism, bigotry, poverty, injustice, tyranny, and disease."



Mendelsohn's book is available through the [UUA Bookstore](http://www.uua-bookstore.org)

What is especially appealing to me, and I believe appealed to Jeane, is the intolerance for intolerance that Mendelsohn spoke of. Reverend Tony Larson, the 42-year alumnus of the UU church in Racine, Wisconsin, stated that guidance in this way: "You are free to believe whatever you want here—but only as long as it helps you live a caring and humane life—or at least doesn't prevent

you from living a caring life. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're a Christian who doesn't think atheists belong here. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're an atheist who thinks Christians don't belong here, or Buddhists, or psychics, or pagans, or spiritualists."

Thinking for ourselves in helping to bring about an improved society and respecting the thoughts of others who speak with differing views can make it difficult to be a genuine UU. I have often thought how much easier it would be to just follow the directions of theologians.

Jeane did not explicitly speak to me about Jack Mendelsohn. My additional research quickly revealed his crusader efforts for social justice. "He is largely responsible for making social justice essential to the DNA of Unitarian Universalist identity," said one admirer. "He was a writer of the sheerest elegance, a speaker of incomparable power, an enormous public presence, a fierce devotee of justice, and at the same time a personally shy and occasionally awkward man," said former UUA President Bill Schulz in his praise of Mendelsohn.

"From racial justice, to the empowerment of women and working for LGBT rights, Jack was there," said the minister who succeeded Mendelsohn at First Parish in Bedford, Massachusetts, one of the five churches Mendelsohn had served. Both renowned and controversial, he led a walkout at the UUA General Assembly in 1969, rebelling against the denomination's rebuttal of demands by African-American delegates. He was a lone voice in calling for more women in the ministry and was rebuked by a Catholic bishop when he advocated "reduced tax exemptions for prospering churches in tax-embarrassed cities." He is the author of seven books.

A confidant of Adlai Stevenson, Robert Kennedy, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, he marched in Selma, Alabama in 1965 with Martin Luther King, Jr. where one of his church members was murdered. Jackson said that it was Jack Mendelsohn who taught him how to pray, and Reverend Al Sharpton said he had hoped "to grow up to be Jack Mendelsohn!"

Mendelsohn was awarded the denomination's top honor in 1997 for his activism, the Unitarian Universalist Association's Distinguished Service Award. He died in 2012 at the age of 94.

I will always be indebted to my friend Jeane who made me aware of the incomparable Mendelsohn, despite my procrastination to discover more about him. Jeane was 90 years old when he passed away in 2018.

### Learning Opportunity

The UUFW received a flyer from the UU Multiracial Unity Action Council about a virtual event on "The Struggle for Unitarian Universalism: Defending Our Seven Principles." It is scheduled for the afternoon of Saturday, February 6. For details on the agenda and how to participate, see the flyer at [this link](#).

#### A Greeting

We've never met,  
 But as we pass with shopping carts  
 Our unmasked eyes meet  
 And I see you are a friend.  
 Beneath the mask a muffled greeting,  
 Muffled concern, muffled courage,  
 A muffled smile.

*Joe Good*

