LEXINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, INC.

Interview
John Buehrens
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Interview conducted by Nancy Earsy
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JB: I'm a Unitarian-Universalist minister. I currently serve as president of the UUA [Unitarian Universalist Association], an association of a thousand liberal congregations spread all across North America. And we're talking in my office at 25 Beacon Street, right next to the State House.

INT: How long have you been a Unitarian minister?

JB: I went into the Unitarian-Universalist ministry following my graduation from Harvard Divinity School. Although it's also more accurate to say that I was really serving in forms of ministry while I was still a student, primarily at the First Parish in Lexington.

INT: And when was that?

JB: I began my student work at First Parish in Lexington as I began Divinity School in the fall of 1969. I served there throughout that church year as advisor to the high school youth group, which then had oh, sixty or seventy-five young people. The following year, working with Barbara Holleroth who was the assistant minister and who was working on some very innovative curriculum development, I really took administrative responsibility for the whole children's and youth program of the church. Had some wonderful teachers. Those were fairly turbulent times throughout the nation. And, in some ways, particularly in Lexington, the church itself was something of a center of anti-war activity. And we were, in good Unitarian-Universalist fashion, not all of a single mind within the parish. So we had some very robust discussions and some considerable controversy and some memorable events.

INT: You mentioned that you worked with young people your first year. What do you remember about them and the War—their views, their concerns, the things that you did with that high school group?

JB: You might think that young people would be among the most socially active. I didn't find that to be the case. Lexington is an affluent suburb. I found many of the high school young people detached from and neglected by their parents, their very busy parents. There were many parent-high school youth conflicts going on. As a youth advisor, one was always hearing about someone who had run away from home, taken refuge with another family. The Hancock Church across the Green was sponsoring a ministry particularly to youth who had separated themselves from their family homes. I remember at one point we had a young person who had run away and was essentially hiding out at First Parish with the connivance and knowledge of the kids in the group. And I had to raise absolute hell with them about that.

I'm sure that the kids had fairly strong feelings about a number of social issues. But those weren't uppermost in their minds. The whole youth rebellion of the period was more about youth autonomy, the right to shape one's own life and values. Some of it revolved around lifestyle questions of drug use. You know, smoking marijuana in the graveyard seemed to be a favorite way of conducting deep spiritual communion. I also had to make sure that that was something that never got into the church itself, and set some real firm limits about all of those things. Interesting times, the beginning of things that have become all too familiar in some ways. But also a particularly difficult switch from the more conventional family patterns of Ozzie and Harriet in the fifties and sixties to a greater degree of youth autonomy.

INT: You mentioned that the church was very involved, that some of the members of the church were very involved in the anti-war movement. And I recall John Wells was minister of that church at one time. What do you recall about his activities in this respect?

JB: Well, John, of course, had come into the ministry from a background in the law. He was the only white graduate of the Howard University Divinity School in that era. And, as an attorney attached to the Pentagon, he had been responsible for the desegregation of military housing. He was, in that capacity, had worked with many State legislatures because—well, I guess that actually had to do with the ability to get servicemen the right to vote. In any case, his work at the Pentagon had put him in touch with State legislatures all across the country before he went into ministry. He was very adept at doing public advocacy. In Massachusetts which has always enjoyed the right of citizen petition for legislative change, John found a particularly open opportunity to—as an individual citizen—put issues before the Great and General Court. He worked with Representative Jim Shea of Newton on formulating a bill that actually passed the Legislature, which empowered the Attorney General of Massachusetts to go into federal court on behalf of citizens of the Commonwealth who were being drafted into a War in Southeast Asia which, after all, had never been declared a war by the U.S. Congress, and to challenge the constitutionality of the federal government essentially requisitioning the citizens of the Commonwealth (and of other states) for an undeclared war. It was one of the most significant challenges to the legality of the war in Southeast Asia.[1]

John had persuaded the Governor of the State—the Republican Governor, Francis Sargent—to come to the Lexington Green on Patriot's

[1] This action, the Shea-Wells Bill, was enacted by the Massachusetts legislature and signed into law by Governor Francis Sargent in 1978. Upon appeal, the U. S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

Day and make what I believe was one of the first, if not the first, public denunciation of the War by a Republican officeholder during that era. Many people in the church felt very strongly that the War in Southeast Asia was a misbegotten and misguided adventure. I remember helping John with one of the first funerals that I participated in, which was the death of a young man from Lexington who had been killed in Vietnam. The way in which that tragic death which no one present, including the young man's parents, felt had been for an honorable or justifiable cause, helped to galvanize the depth of feeling that I think many of us had—that the War was being conducted on inappropriate principles and that it needed to be stopped.

INT: Moving to 1971, I believe you were still affiliated with the church then… Early Sunday morning on that Memorial Day weekend, 1971, four hundred and fifty-eight people by some counts were arrested as a result of an anti-war protest on the Green, just across from First Parish Church. You were the minister then. How did you learn about this protest?

JB: I was one of two student ministers, perhaps three. During the two years that I worked at First Parish I remember four Harvard Divinity students all together who served on the public ministry in legislative matters—and Tom I believe has gone on into work primarily about issues in Africa. Ken Hurto who went on to enter the Unitarian-Universalist ministry and is now a minister of a congregation in Virginia that John Wells once also served—Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church in in Alexandria. And David Robinson who was also involved on the date that you mention—David has become Professor of English and Director of American Studies at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, where he is also a member of the Unitarian-Universalist fellowship. He's a distinguished historian of American culture, and particularly of Unitarian-Universalist contributions. He's an Emerson Scholar, among other things.

Now my recollection is that it was David and I who arrived at the church on that Memorial Day Sunday as student ministers, as we normally did, only to find that virtually everyone who was expected to put on the service that morning, from the interim minister through the church organist and various lay leaders—the bulk of the parish committee of the church—had gone to jail along with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. As you will recall, the Vietnam Veterans were following the route of Paul Revere's ride in reverse, warning us about what we were doing in Southeast Asia. They had petitioned the Selectmen of Lexington for permission to camp out on the Green as they made their way from Concord back toward Boston. And I believe it was on Saturday night that the Selectmen, after initially leading them to believe that their petition would be granted in one form or another, were pressured by citizens in the town and somehow came to the decision that the permit would not be granted. And they called the State Police who came with, as I learned that morning, a rather large number of school buses and arrested everyone and took them to the garage where snowplows and the like were kept, [then] out to Concord for arraignment at Middlesex District Court. So David and I arrived at the church only to discover that the service wasn't there. Instead, we had a few people who had—to their great disappointment—failed to get arrested—they ran out of buses—sleeping on the pews. And we roused them and got the story, and came to the conclusion that if there was going to be a service that morning, we were going to have to do it.

Now I have to admit that I frankly don't remember a great deal of what it was that we whipped together. Except that it was essentially on the theme of the play written about Thoreau's night in jail, and the famous although probably mythical encounter between Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which Emerson supposedly came to Thoreau in the Concord Jail asking

him, "David, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau, supposedly having protested the Mexican War by refusing to pay his poll tax; and then, according to the play at least, Thoreau replied, "The question is, Waldo, not what am I doing in here, but what are you doing out there?" Those of us who hadn't joined the protest were disappointed that we hadn't been arrested, too. Both David and I felt that we had missed the action. As one of my mentors once said, in every person's life there probably should come a time in a democracy when you go to jail for what you believe in. In our relative youth, we were afraid that we had missed our opportunity.

It was a memorable morning at First Parish in which two student ministers led a spontaneous service made up partly of Vietnam Veterans—not all of them had been arrested—partly of citizens of the town and members of the parish, relatively few in number. And then we proceeded out to Concord to see what we could do about the disposition of the arraigned.

INT: What did you find when you got to Concord?

JB: That part of it is a bit hazy for me. I've been trying to recall exactly. I have some recollection that later in the afternoon I was sent over to the rectory at the Catholic church in Lexington essentially to inquire of Monsignor Casey whether he planned on coming out to Concord to provide bail for his two vicars who had been arrested. And the response was essentially that he didn't mind their having protested. The Monsignor was quite a radical in many ways, an old Socialist who had gone to seminary with Cardinal Cushing and therefore had been protected for many years. He wasn't upset about their politics, but he was still mad at these two young priests for having handed out balloons on Palm Sunday instead of palms. And he just thought it would be fine if they rotted there for a few more hours before he went to fetch them. In fact, I'm not even sure he even went that

day. That was the most memorable aftermath of the whole thing. Various of us in the parish and on the staff had various little chores and duties to check on one person after another. People were released fairly promptly later in the afternoon on Sunday.

INT: So did you talk with your colleagues who had been arrested—the minister who wasn't there, the organist who wasn't there, the other people?

JB: Well, certainly with Dick Harding. Now this was an interesting situation for First Parish as well. Dick was serving as the interim minister of First Parish while also serving as the program officer for the United Methodist New England Conference. He had been pastor of the Methodist Church in Lexington. When John Wells had resigned the ministry at First Parish in the middle of the year, he had been engaged as the very part-time interim minister. He and his wife were building a home in Lexington. And the Harrington House, which was then the parsonage for First Parish, needed an occupant. I mean, it was a historic and somewhat vulnerable house on the Battle Green. Actually, I remember thinking to myself that I would have been perfectly willing to move in. But they hired Dick, who did a marvelous job as interim minister, doing reconciliation meetings within the congregation.

You see, I think in those years First Parish was the kind of place where there was a tremendous diversity of approach to all of the issues of the time. About that year, Yale Professor Charles Reich had written a book called "The Greening of America," which in retrospect was a rather silly book. But it did have the analysis called consciousness one, traditionalists; consciousness two, technocrats; and consciousness three, the counterculturalists of my generation and the like who were going to save America with their transformation of its entire consciousness. We had all three groups at First Parish.

We had families whose history in that congregation went back five generations and had the family name in brass plaques at the end of the pew. We had, heaven knows, our share of Route 128 and Boston area academic technocrats. And we probably had the bulk of Lexington's would-be countercultural aspirants. The three mindsets were certainly not on the same wavelength. It made it very difficult for John's ministry. In some ways, like many other sensible people, he had a foot in each of the three camps. But it was a very difficult time to hold things together. You know, "Things fall apart; the center will not hold." Yeats.

I can remember during the spring of 1971 Dick organizing these reconciliation meetings and then announcing that if there was enough spirit of real community in the parish, despite all these differences, to celebrate, that on Easter the historic Hancock communion silver of First Parish would be brought out for an Easter Sunday communion. Well now, communion in Unitarian congregations, as you may well know, is a fairly rare event. For it to be conducted by the Methodist interim minister raised more than a few eyebrows. I remember one woman of Irish-Catholic background who phoned up the congregation, the church, and wanted to know what this communion service was going to be like, because she said, "Mr. Harding, I'd like to know what words you're going to be saying in advance. Because if you're going to stand up there in front of all of us and say things like, this is me body and this is me blood, I'll have you know that I don't even care for rare roast beef."

The communion service was another morning that turned out to very memorable. I connect it with the Memorial Day event because when Dick Harding arrived on Easter morning to prepare for this service we discovered that the church had been broken into. The minister's office had been somewhat ransacked. Obviously someone had come searching for this

historic early Colonial communion silver. It was given by Ebeneezer Hancock, the grandfather of John Hancock, who was minister of First Parish. And only the newer pieces were by Paul Revere. But we hadn't been so foolish as to keep it in the church office overnight. When it had been removed from the bank vault where it had been kept for something like nineteen years—unused—it was put in the custody of—I think I have the name right—Miss Frances Ballard, a retired physical education teacher, who had it safely under her bed that night. When the police arrived on Easter morning to take a report about the break-in, we went through the whole song and dance. But the silver arrived with Miss Ballard and we prepared for the service, only to discover shortly before service time that what the thieves had made off with was the bread and the wine. Although this may be my memory improving on the story in retrospect, I recall that we had to—in the last twenty minutes or so before four hundred and fifty people showed up for Easter Communion service at First Parish—scuffle around and defrost two or three Parker House rolls from the church freezer, and heavily water about this much port found in a closet at the parsonage in order to have a communion service at all. Of course, it had turned out to be a kind of experience in loaves and fishes with barely enough to go around. We had people taking communion by wetting their fingertips and sort of spearing a crumb, and taking tiny sips of this heavily watered almost pink liquid that had to substitute for wine that morning. It was really quite a head-shaking event, and somehow comes to my mind as I think about the Memorial Day weekend as well—another event of that same springtime at First Parish.

INT: Much longer before that there was a Reverend Carlton Staples for whom Staples Hall was named. He was minister around 1884. And he was also the first founder of the Lexington Historical Society. He wrote about the Battle Green back then in the late 1800's, and said, "Let it be kept clean

and bright in the years to come, that the thousands who visit it from far and near may see we are not unworthy possessors and guardians of the birthplace of American liberty." What do you think Reverend Staples would have thought about the events on the Green in 1971?

JB: Oh, that's always hard to project. It's always very difficult to read back into history the potential attitudes of people about contemporary events. I think that's fraught with all sorts of peril. One wonders what Jonas Clark who was Chaplain to the Minute Men and Minister of First Parish would have thought of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War on the Battle Green that day. He, after all, was the person who, like many of the other ministers of the standing order of Congregational Churches in Eastern Massachusetts, had helped to preach up the revolution by asserting that, in his theology at least, God had not predetermined all things, but had given human beings the responsibility as well as the freedom to order their own lives in community. And that that responsibility extended to not only leading godly personal lives, but so ordering the community in right relation, that their obligation to exercise that freedom, free of the extraneous restraint, the untraditional restraint of Britain during that era, should be done. I think that in fact there are a lot of people in the history of Lexington and the care and nurture of the traditions surrounding the Battle Green who would have approved the exercise of petition and witness and free speech against an act of government that was represented by the actions of both the Vietnam Veterans and the citizens of the town on that Memorial Day weekend.

INT: The First Amendment covers both religion and free speech—the right to petition government and the right to dictate one's own religion. Do you have some thoughts, beyond what you've stated now, about the role of churches and ministers in political situations that challenge the moral views, the different moral views of their congregations?

JB: Significant speech about public matters is always going to arise out of those convictions that come closest to our moral and spiritual core. That's why those things are in the same amendment. And those who try to separate the practical, the political from the spiritual do a disservice to both. You cannot have a democratic society without people who exercise the kind of covenantal responsibility that the people of New England have always known is at the very core of democratic right relations. It is a sense of moral and spiritual relatedness and obligation to one another, and to, as it were, a higher authority. It's only the most secular fear of religious conviction that leads us into the illusion that we can separate the political and the religious. Admittedly, politicians can manipulate the religious ideas and feelings of people for cynical ends. And some religious political leaders will always help them in that endeavor. Many of the conflicts going on in the world today that seem to be religious in nature are really ethnic violence carried out in the name of religion, being fomented by cynical politicians using religious feeling. But religion rightly understood first of all, allows the correction of alternative voices. It becomes not the prophethood of the singularly guided, but the prophethood of all who seek in conscience to read the signs of the times and ask the deep question, "What is required of us here in the way of making more just relations with one another, a more merciful and compassionate community?" And walking together with real humility before a sense of that mystery that created us all and is not of our own making.

When human beings are able to walk in that way, which is of the deepest New England covenantal spirit, then I think they are really helping to shape a body politic which has the capacity for moral seriousness and spiritual depth. So I'm very wary of any attempt to separate church and state in a way that keeps religious conviction out of politics. The proper use of the

separation of church and state is to keep the state out of the church so that we each can follow our own spiritual path, our own way of worshipping or not worshipping, free of state coercion. That's what that First Amendment bar against the establishment of religion is about. It is not about preventing people from expressing their deepest moral and spiritual convictions about the issues of their time.

INT: you spoke of reconciliation meetings that Reverend Dick Harding tried to conduct. And I thought about that in connection with your concept of the covenant and getting people of diverse views to talk with one another. Did you see some positive outcomes? Did you see some change resulting from those meetings?

JB: Oh, absolutely. I think that within the life of the religious community we had gotten too secular/political with one another. The parish…John Wells had resigned the ministry in no small part because people were distressed about the way in which he had essentially lined up votes for a congregational meeting that passed a substantially deficit budget.

In fact, going back to my involvement with the youth group, the part that I disliked during that was a deliberate attempt to go out and round up the youth and have them vote at the parish meeting, too. Because the by-laws of the parish were rather loose, and I think [they] allowed anybody over the age of sixteen who wished to be a member to take part in the parish meeting. The deficit budget passed by some awful margin like a hundred and eighty-seven to a hundred and eighty-one—highly conflicted. Now, in religious community you don't do that kind of head to head voting the way you do in a legislature, except at your peril. I don't believe in going to the other extreme either, which is insisting on unanimity or Quaker-like consensus for all decisions. The preponderance of sentiment in a democracy that wishes to treat one another with real dignity has always got to be allowed to emerge in

a process. So a lot of the reconciliation that had to come about was about methods that had been used within decision making in the congregation, and people's feelings of having been manipulated or driven into an overly political conflict with their own fellow parishioners. Underlying that, yes, there were differences in political perception of the War and other matters—broader cultural matters. But a lot of it, when we really got into the reconciliation meetings, was: How did I feel about that last parish vote?

INT: Something very specific.

JB: That's right. It usually is. When you're dealing with reconciliation, you know, you want to gradually trim away all of the atmospheric issues, and get down to the core of whatever the conflict may really have been, so that conflict resolution can face the central issues.

INT: Just in closing, what was your personal reaction to this protest, to this event in Lexington?

JB: The following year I went off to do a full year of internship in the ministry, in effect. I became kind of a….without yet being ordained, I was the interim associate minister at a congregation in New Jersey. I told the Department of Ministry here in Boston that after the tumult of two years in First Parish Lexington I wanted to see what it would be like to work full-time in the ministry before I made the decision to really go ahead, and instead of seeking an academic career—which was another alternative for me—make a firm commitment to serving in the parish ministry.

I got several things out of my experience in Lexington. One was a real sense of what a profound difference a religious community can make in the wider world. And the other was a sense of what a profound difference religious community—well conducted, with strong pastoral leadership, with caring ministry—can make in the lives of individuals. There my real mentor was the other minister at First Parish, Barbara Holleroth, who was an

extraordinarily gifted counselor, creator of innovative programs, sensitive to the needs of young people. A pioneer among women in the ministry, she was one of the few women available to counsel with women facing unwanted pregnancies through the clergy consultation service. I admired Barbara's way of working with individuals so deeply, and I admired so much what I saw possible for a prophetic ministry on the issues of the time, that I became convinced that as difficult as it might be on both of those fronts—as many dangers as there were to sort of getting eaten alive by other people's agonies and personal needs in the ministry, as conflicted as parish life could be when it tries to practice an effective social witness—that that's where I wanted to give my life and my personal professional commitment. I've never regretted that. In some ways, coming into the ministry through the First Parish in Lexington during those exciting and difficult years prepared me more deeply for effective parish ministry than I think anything else could have. Certainly it was better than getting one's feet wet in a rather placid little pool where nothing much happened. The storms of that era in Lexington taught me a great deal about how to keep my balance, how to steer the fragile craft of the church through turbulent waters, and how to accomplish the transformative work of the church, both in personal and in social terms, with effective balance. And so I owe the First Parish in Lexington and the town as a whole a great debt of personal gratitude.

INT: Well, thank you. Is there anything that you would like to add?

JB: Well, it has been my privilege to recall some of those exciting times, and to share with you.

INT: Just one final question, about the forgotten past. What are your thoughts about this project that we are undertaking to capture the history of this town?

JB: I'm delighted that you're doing it. You make me feel a little old doing this. As I've worked with oral history projects in parish life—rarely using video, I might add, usually just the tape recorder—I've often encouraged young people in the life of a congregation to interview some of the elders of the congregation, to learn more about their early experience and commitment of the community, in order that the values can be passed on from one generation to the next. When young people visit me here in my office at 25 Beacon Street where the walls are covered with portraits depicting many of the leaders of Unitarian-Universalism—Susan B. Anthony, and Thomas Starr King and James Freeman Clark and others—I give them a little pep talk to the effect that you can't have an effective democracy, either religious or civic, without a sense of history. And so much of what you're doing in your oral history project I believe is of very much the same purposefulness as the whole covenantal approach that I was speaking about. That is, we need to hand down the passwords from generation to generation. We need to have that proportionate sense of what is possible in human community, what constitutes a naiveté or an overreaching—and there was some of that during that era. What are the central moral principles that one really must stand up for? You can only do that through history, the telling of history, and particularly I think through the witness of particular individuals who have been through it in one way or another. So I commend you for the project.

END OF INTERVIEW