

A Eulogy for Rev. Robert Eller-Isaacs
offered by Rev. Dr. Wayne Arnason at his Memorial Service
Held at Unity Church, Unitarian St, Paul MN 9/17/22

How do you make the invisible visible? How do you express realities best experienced in silence? How do you create something built to last in a world you know to be impermanent and fleeting? How do you pass on the deepest truths you know?

These are the questions that Robert Lewis Eller-Isaacs tried to answer with his life, and the answers that he found are his legacy that we are honoring today.

His answers began with books. Robbie grew up surrounded by books. His father Al was an attorney who made time to pursue on the side his heart's delight: buying, selling, and appraising books and libraries and reading books. Robbie's mother Rosalia loved Al and loved the books, too, later getting into book-binding herself. At times the books threatened to engulf their family of four in their homes in Woodlawn and Hyde Park on Chicago's south side.

So Robbie loved his books too, and found inspiration and solace in them most mornings of his adult life as the oldest component of his routine of spiritual practices. Fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, especially poetry – the pile beside his reading chair could at any moment could be a syllabus for a course in cultural currency - what was new and emerging and what were classics that required a second reading in order to re-engage with the internal conversation among Rob's community of writers.

Al and Rosalia were secular Jews. Jews are a "people of the book", trusting the written word of sacred texts and commentaries to cast the shadows of the invisible, holding the divine, in a single word that cannot be spoken or written. Robbie's grandmother was the observant Jew in the family, who delighted in taking his older sister Jane to temple with her. Even though regular temple attendance was not part of Robbie's own childhood experience, his Jewish identity was a genetic and cultural inheritance that he honored and expressed throughout his life. It is no accident that the liturgical element for which he is known best among us is his Yom Kippur responsive reading in the hymnal.

Young Robbie might have been exposed to temple if not for Jane. When their grandmother became dissatisfied with the new rabbi at the temple, she switched to attending a different one, and Jane was not happy there. So when a friend at school suggested that Jane might come to her church one Sunday, Jane (and her parents) said "why not?" Jane loved it and soon so did Rosalia. Al went along. And that was how the Isaacs family connected to First Unitarian Church of Chicago. Rosalia made friends and eventually took one of her part-time jobs there, and Robbie began going to church school. Some lives have well-defined turning points where everything is different from that point onwards. This is one of those.

As a five-year old, Robbie made friends in his weekday nursery school that he also saw on Sunday morning at Church. This is where his religious education began, but not just on Sunday mornings. The Chicago Children's Choir offered Robbie new answers for expressing the inexpressible through making a joyful noise unto the Lord together. It was founded by the Rev. Christopher Moore at First Unitarian in 1956 as the congregation's children's choir. Jane Isaacs and Mark Morrison-Reed were in that first generation of choir

members. Inspired by the civil rights movement, Chris Moore believed that the Choir could embody a multicultural multiracial future that could only be dimly seen at that time, but which could be experienced in children making music together. Robbie and his friends joined when they were about nine years old.

Choir alumni will tell you that they found their first spiritual teacher in Chris Moore, whose mission was not only to help young people sing better, and sing together, but to introduce them to a choral music that lifted up the highest aspirations of the human spirit. For Robbie, this was the beginning of his lifelong love of music and singing. He took up the guitar and began listening to music of all kinds. He joined his love of words and love of music by committing to memory many hundreds of songs – hymns, folk songs, rock and pop songs, and musical theatre pieces.

This is no revelation to all of you here at Unity Church. In the article published in the Pioneer Press last month, daughter Hannah said: “When you’re standing in the sanctuary at Unity Church and the whole congregation is singing, you could hear his voice for better or worse above everyone else in the sanctuary..”

No one would say that Rob was an accomplished musician or singer. He did not seek recognition as a soloist. He was an amateur in the best and original sense of that word, as in the Italian *amator*, a lover, who taught by his example that loving the music is the way to enter its gateway to the inexpressible, that blending of notes and chords and keys, of words and images and emotions that evokes unspeakable peace, awe, understanding or commitment as nothing else can.

The rich array of opportunities for choral singing and instrumental music at the congregations Rob served was a special delight for him. Yet even amidst the weekly musical experiences in worship and the memorable seasonal offerings that were part of Rob’s life in Oakland and in St. Paul, some here today will always treasure the memory of a tradition that first began during Rob’s 50th birthday celebration in 2001, a Thanksgiving Friday singing party at the Eller-Isaacs’ home. Standing with his back to the front entrance foyer, so that people in the dining and living rooms and the stairway to the bedrooms could all join in, Rob would engage a changing ensemble of family members and friends with him in up to three hours of robust singing together.

When I draw a through line between Robbie’s childhood experiences in the Children’s Choir and the Thanksgiving singing parties, love of music is not the only connector making up that line. It is also composed of the love of friends and family. Robbie’s lifelong friends from his Chicago were joined by so many more along the way. The church gave him a place to make and sustain those friendships, first through the Choir and then through Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) and Starr King School and his colleagues and parishioners in ministry. Robbie attracted people. I remember the first time I saw him at the LRY Continental Conference in 1968. My first impression was that he had a trailing entourage of people moving through the conference with him. Back then, not yet seventeen, his face was thin, his black hair was full but not yet long, and his moustache was sparse. He had a hawk-like intensity when he focused on you. All the aspects of his personality which made him an outstanding preacher and pastor - his intellect, his insight, his words and his presence both in speaking and in listening – were all there early on – along with that huge self-confident emerging ego. Intimacy is at the heart of

a life in ministry. It begins with a hard-won intimacy with yourself and who you are. It continues with the ability to offer the gift of intimacy with others in pastoral ministry, and it requires a deep intimacy with this fleeting life in order to preach its inestimable value. Rob and Janne made intimacy central to the ministries they shared. Among all the important values and commitments that most Unitarian Universalist churches ask their members to embrace, Rob and Janne added a unique one here at Unity Church – to “go deep with strangers.”

So in whatever role or time of life you may have met Rob, you may be one of the many who considered him your friend, as well as – you name it – your minister, your neighbor, your fellow activist, your teacher, your mentor, your supervisor, your fellow Board or Executive committee member. Whatever role he had, the intimacy that was offered made it easy for many people to consider him a friend, and he welcomed that and was committed to all these relationships. But that also came with some risk – because that self-assured ego that emerged early would not let him go, or let his friends go. Despite that intimate presence, and those listening skills, you always knew he had an opinion to share, even on the rare occasions when he didn’t express one. He could be so sure of himself, all the time, so strong in his point of view, so clear about what we – or what you - should do.

There was one time in Oakland in 1988 when Rob’s actions were challenged by church members who believed he had harmed important relationships with a prospective funding partner. Rob was the chaplain partner of a grass roots collective of activists for the unhoused. He recruited other clergy to join him in full regalia and hosted a Christmas Eve march that led to a civil disobedience action, breaking down the fences around empty houses and occupying them. One activist was dressed as Santa Claus. Wavy Gravy showed up dressed as Big Bird. The Oakland police pushed the clergy, robes and all, to the ground getting them out of the house, but Big Bird’s arrest got national headlines. A crisis brewed in the congregation after that for weeks, finally requiring a listening session. Rob wrote in advance of that meeting: “It has been by no means easy for me to listen patiently to your opinions without becoming defensive. I feel strongly about the stand I have taken. Yet I feel even more strongly that truth emerges only out of heartfelt conversations between and among folks who disagree.” Time and time again in his ministry, Rob had to test that belief.

Sometimes Rob’s friendships were challenged by his opinions when they were felt to be judgments. And sometimes a friendship became stronger because that friend could confront Rob’s confidence and tell him he was wrong, or out of line, or bullying or self-absorbed. In our friendship, like so many of yours, Rob and I had to remember his own words “We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.” Rob never used the phrase “best friend” because each friendship was uniquely important to him, but from where I sit the best of his friends were the ones who could love him unconditionally and either stand up to him or ignore him when he was a jerk. You all know who you are. And I can;t even begun to talk about what he required of Janne and their children when it came to beginning again in love.

So that lion of an ego Rob had was tamed and tempered by another quality he developed over his years, a quality that isn’t acknowledged enough: his humility. The church was the first space in which Rob’s ego was not only first formed but also first tempered. The transcendent beauty of making music together was the first but not the only humbling aspect of growing up in First Unitarian Church of Chicago. The building itself is a small and exquisite Gothic Cathedral. For Robbie and his church school friends it had been their sacred

architecture playground since they were five. In a sanctuary with a rose window above, and a crypt below, it's easy to feel humble. And -- Since Robbie came of age in the peak years of the counterculture 1967-72, I'm sure no one is surprised to know that his emerging ego was also humbled, shattered even, and reconstructed several times by psychedelics. First Unitarian and other sacred UU spaces provided some of the safe and holy places where set and setting could shape these experiences into a foundation for spiritual experiences and practices. Robbie already had an intuitive grounding in practice disciplines with his books and his music. Meditation and martial arts practices introduced to him by friends and teachers came next and pushed him deeper. More chances here to explore humility and patience! And then, he had the opportunity to frame all these experience, and temper his ego yet some more, through a formal theological education and to meet experienced elder practitioners like Rev. Harry Scholefield, one of the teachers who brought Rob to a mature understanding of the necessity of spiritual practice in a life of meaning and purpose. Without it, Harry would say, you will dry up and blow away, and Rob quoted him often.

Because Rob had confident answers to the question "Who Am I" earlier than most of us, his ego had to be tempered by the next level of that question: "Who Am I in Relationship with YOU". Some people want mainly to be friends with people that are a lot like them. Robbie wanted to be friends with people that were different than he was. Growing up in Hyde Park, Robbie's earliest friends could include people that weren't like him, and he wanted more of them. He looked for friends in in the Woodstock Vermont Country School he attended during some of his high school years, where he became Vermont co-chair of the Students for A Democratic Society, finding common ground with friends in opposing the war in Vietnam. He looked for friends through Liberal Religious Youth and the opportunities LRY gave to him. Rob's LRY friends came from all over the country and from different backgrounds. Here the common ground was usually a family connection to Unitarian Universalism, And, I have to say, in both these places - whiteness – mostly whiteness. For as much as Robbie loved the networks of friends he made in high school and LRY and throughout his life, he continued to yearn for the fulfillment of the vision of the Chicago Children's Choir, to live in an embodied multicultural multiracial community.

In 1970, after he had been elected President of Continental LRY, Robbie had his first opportunity to leave this country and immerse himself in another culture when he was offered a chance to attend a conference in India sponsored by the Ghandi Peace Foundation. In one of his earliest sermons published in the LRY newsmagazine Nameless Newsprint, he described an experience riding a train in India: "Everyone seems to move for the white man in India...I want to stand up and give a (tubercular old) man my seat, but 'that just isn't done' my white friends have told me...It is the responsibility of the westerner to nurture the power of his whiteness. So...I shut out the old man. He is only one of many millions, there is nothing I can do... Who is each of us? The pain I feel is the pain you feel, the joy and the loneliness, the shout and the whimper."

From his earliest years, Rob was disturbed by the white supremacy culture in which he found himself, and was committed to challenging it, not just in his own relationships but in his institutional commitments. His presidency of Liberal Religious Youth overlapped with the years of the struggle for reparations within the UUA that our history books call the Black Empowerment Controversy, and our two signatures are on the first Black Affairs Council bond

ever issued that was purchased by LRY. When the time came to pursue an internship in parish ministry, Rob approached one of the few African American ministers serving at that time in a parish ministry, Mwalimu Imara at Arlington Street Church in Boston, who took him on. These formative leadership experiences shaped Rob's commitments in parish ministry and UUA leadership for the rest of his career.

Rob had known early on that he wanted to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. He had watched closely his childhood ministers and had been especially encouraged into ministry by Jack Mendelsohn. There was an urgency within him after he settled on his life's mission. He wanted to get on with the work. After his many leadership experiences in LRY, when everyone else was going to college, he didn't see the point. He applied directly to Starr King School for the Ministry in 1970 and along with Marsh Agobert they became the first students admitted to the school without a college degree. At age 22 Rob served his intern ministry in Boston. At age 24 he received his first call to the UU Congregation in Whittier, CA. For the next forty-five years he served continuously as a parish minister within our faith.

It's one thing to participate in a church, to take advantage of all that congregational life has to offer. It's another entirely thing to lead a congregation, to take on the responsibility not only of spiritual leadership but of sustaining institutional leadership. We all know that seminary only gets you so far. Rob had to learn a lot on the fly in his first four years in Whittier, and his early solo years in Oakland – and he matured, not only in his preaching ability but also in his capacity to inspire a multigenerational long-term practicing congregational community.

His first years of ministry remind us of how Rob offered his congregations not only his charisma in the pulpit, but his organizational and fundraising skills. These were congregations that many had given up as lost causes. But Whittier grew! The church school grew because younger families began to come! However, Rob was soon itching to return to the multicultural environment that had surrounded him in Chicago and in Berkeley. While in Whittier, as a member of the Urban Church Network, Rob had collaborated with Bay Area colleagues in advocating for Oakland to become the first Urban Extension Ministry site funded by the UUA. The congregation had dwindled down to a couple of dozen active members. Rob Eller-Isaacs was appointed to be the settled minister in the spring of 1982. Four years later, when the congregation began to discuss bringing on Janne Eller-Isaacs as co-minister, they had already begun to revitalize and reinvent themselves through Rob's leadership, as described in Sheri Prud'homme's excellent history of the congregation. Familiar elements of Rob's ministry focus emerged quickly in Oakland. It began with a new covenant among the members and between clergy and laity. New leaders were brought in through Rob's indefatigable networking abilities, drawing on old friends and making new ones. The Eller-Isaacs' family life attracted other families in their age range. Worship and Music were at the center of a welcoming and inclusive congregation that re-committed itself to the neighborhood in which they lived. A master plan for the building was developed, and a vision for the future was created that would take twenty-five years and five million dollars of fundraising to realize. Rev. Bill Hamilton Holway, who was the UUA staff member in charge of the oversight of these urban extension ministries, describes Oakland as the most successful of these initiatives, by any standard. At the conclusion of the Oakland ministry, the congregation's membership had grown from twenty to three hundred ten, and the budget had grown tenfold.

Rob had learned and was teaching by then that any life of meaning requires planting trees under which you will never sit. That is why we look for partners, create marriages, start families, and that is why we come to church. That is how you build to last in a world of impermanence. You recognize that you can't do it alone, that your life is ultimately not your own, and finally that your most cherished work and communities will be carried on differently, beyond your control, by others. But you keep doing it with all your heart, knowing that you and your work will always be a foundation for something beyond your own imagination. Rob's powerful personality, presence, and vision found a partner in life and in ministry, Janne Eller, that made it possible for him to fully embrace all these truths. In Oakland and here at Unity Church, most members speak of them in just one word – RobandJanne - as if they were one being with two heads and two hearts. In various tributes I have heard and read, both formally offered and informally dropped into a conversation, I have heard several people say that Rob was the voice that brought people into the congregations they served, and Janne was the heart that made them stay. There is truth to that – their co-ministry was indeed complementary – but it would be a mistake to use that Shel Silverstein metaphor of *The Missing Piece* to talk about them together. Janne and Rob did not make each other whole – they were already whole. Instead, they made each other reach beyond the limits of their personalities and their individual skill sets.

Starting formally in 1987 in Oakland, but including the years before that installation ceremony and after their retirement from full-time parish ministry -- let it be said that Rob and Janne's co-ministry was never easy! That was why it was so compelling, so inspiring, so maddening, so exhausting, so creative. In their worst moments, Rob could be a classic male hierarchical dominator, and Janne could retreat into classic female self-doubt. In their best moments together, they could be breath-taking in the spiritual grounding and compassionate presence they offered. To be co-ministers, to be co-parents, to be co-spiritual leaders they had to work on their issues involving style, preference, and passion year after year, and sometimes that work could happen in public. As much as their children might feel resentment of the demands of the church's members on their parents' time, they always knew they shared at least one thing in common with the parishioners – they all knew it felt pretty uncomfortable when Mom and Dad were fighting!

Rob and Janne shared the journey of their marriage and their parenting and their family life as spiritual practice in the informal ways their legendary hospitality always drew a circle that could be wider still. They did it in formal ways as well, using their marriage as a teaching platform, occasionally in the pulpit and in the Committed Couples class. Their version of "marriage encounter" was one of the many ways that they innovated and enlivened so many of the old familiar elements of church programming. In Oakland and continuing at Unity, the old model of a Sunday Services Committee became a Worship Associates Program, with a widely circulated and influential training manual written by an early lay graduate of the program. Using this Associates model involving training, action, spiritual reflection and mutual support, the Eller-Isaacs tried the model out within pastoral care, with religious education, and with justice work. Their deep commitment to religious education was grounded in a belief and trust in the innate spiritual instincts and questions of children. Their innovative work is too little appreciated beyond this church. Rob and Janne shared a special commitment to youth work and the role of the minister in coming of age and high school programs. They developed models of pilgrimage, in particular in their congregations' partner

church relationships, understanding that a pilgrimage could be both a climactic experience after much involvement for some church members, or an entry point for others into deeper commitment in a project or in the life of the church. It becomes hard to separate the different strands that went into the weaving of the whole cloth of Rob and Janne's co-ministry. They were not the first married co-ministry team, but I believe they have served together continuously in their two parish settings longer than any other married co-ministry UU couple and they inspired all of us who followed in their footsteps. Their work with twenty-one interns and their informal roles as mentors, advisors and supporters of their colleagues in ministry has endeared Rob and Janne individually and together to the generations of ministers who have served with them.

One area where Janne and Rob did diverge in their careers, making distinctive contributions to the larger Unitarian Universalist movement was in their denominational leadership roles. Rob's distinguished service to Unitarian Universalism spanned four years on the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, two terms encompassing six years on the Executive Board of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, and four years as a Trustee on the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

For three of his six years serving the UU Ministers' Association, Rob served as one of the most consequential Presidents of the UUMA from 2008-2010. It was his vision that the UUMA could be a substantially more effective and comprehensive organization supporting the diverse interests, continuing education, and competence of our ministers. This would require full-time staff, a different kind of Board and governance, and a substantial expansion of the offerings of the UUMA. It also required tripling the dues. Some of his predecessors, including me, thought it was too ambitious and unnecessary. We were wrong. Rob's vision has been realized and built upon by subsequent teams of leaders. His UUMA vision was very much inspired by his time of service on the Fellowship Committee during a period of intense scrutiny of the Committee's role in supporting excellence in ministry. Rob felt it was critical for the ministers themselves, not the MFC, not the seminaries, to take up that responsibility for excellence, and in the words of Marion Ham's hymn, to revere the past but trust the dawning future more. He followed those instincts in his service on the UUA Board as well, serving at a time when a new governance model and commitment to de-centering whiteness was being tested. Looking back to his formative experiences during years of the Black Empowerment Controversy, Rob's strong voice urged the Association to renew the promises made back then to a new generation of African American leaders through a significant commitment of resources to Black Lives UU.

Rob also had an international vision for Unitarian Universalism that began in his young adult years and that was sustained by an abiding love for Transylvania and the Unitarian friends he made there in all his travels. With David Keyes and Bev Smrha, Rob brought forward a model of egalitarian and respectful partnership, beyond offerings and tourism, embodied in Project Harvest Hope, a program of partnership for economic development.

In all his denominational leadership roles, Rob was informed by his deep study of the policy governance model applied to church leadership and governance. As an individual, and through an initiative of Unity Church called Unity Consulting, Rob advised literally dozens of congregations and their staffs and Boards on effective governance and the insights that this model could provide for sustaining it.

Rob's denominational roles also included leadership recruitment. Many here and listening on line today were encouraged into ministry by Rob. He managed one campaign for President, fund-raised for others, and gave deep consideration to running for President of the UUA himself. I remember vividly these several conversations between us about whether to stand for a denominational office. They always came back to where Unitarian Universalism could have the most meaning and impact, and for Rob that was in the daily spiritual lives of the members of a congregations, in Parish Ministry, in the weekly round of meeting and teaching and preaching, within the sacred occasions of preparing and leading the rites of passage, this is where our faith matters. So that is where he wanted to stay.

Parish Ministry asks you to pay a terrible price in time and energy, and it is an amazing gift to have a life partner who shares that commitment and is willing to pay that price with you. But your children never sign up for that. Minister's kids have to figure out for themselves and accept and forgive what parish ministry demands. Jonah and Jessie and Hannah, no words of mine are necessary to assure you or could capture for this congregation the depth of your father's love for you. You each hold your own memories and stories. You are each so unique, so much yourselves, and I love the ways that I see Rob in each of you. You were asked to hold within your love for him the expansiveness of his love, his love for your mother, for his friends, and for the church and the ministry. You had to hold within your love for him all the other children as well that his heart made room for – your own children of course, his grandchildren, Lewis and Mira and Levi, but also a foster brother London early in your life together, a half-brother Michael discovered late in your life together, cousins, friends' children, always room for more, always room for more love, but I trust that each of you knows that there was always **your** room in his heart. and that you will always be able to go to that room where he lives with you forever.

Janne, we are all heartbroken that you cannot be with us today, but have no doubt that we feel your spirit whenever we are in this sanctuary and especially today as we hold Rob close to us together one more time. You wanted this to be Rob's day, and it is, but know that we all see you, we call your name, we know how much Rob's deep love for you meant for who he became over forty-three years of marriage. Your most important legacy together is obviously your amazing family, your children and grandchildren. But I cannot stand in this pulpit today and turn this eulogy towards a conclusion without naming what I know you and Rob held so dear and took care of so well for so many years --- and that is the community of Integrity, Service, and Joy that is Unity Church. In the Berry Street Essay that you and Rob created together last year, you captured that legacy so well in describing your vision of a liberal religious community of disciples, disciples not of a charismatic leader, but of the highest values of our faith. The Chorus of Voices with so many of them from among this congregation, the tributes when you retired, the standing ovation from the UUA General Assembly when you wheeled Rob across the stage at the Service of the Living Tradition, the many messages from your parishioners on Caring Bridge over the last year, are all testimony to what you and Rob invited and welcomed and sustained here together at Unity Church. Our service honoring Rob today is another bucket of tears and gratitude tossed into that ocean which surrounds you both.

I started this eulogy today asking four questions: How do you make the invisible visible? How do you express realities best experienced in silence? How do you create

something built to last in a world you know to be impermanent and fleeting? How do you pass on the deepest truths you know? All the answers to these questions can be found in the life that Robert Lewis Eller-Isaacs lived – and found in his loves -- in his books and poetry, in his music, in his commitments to spiritual practice, in his marriage and children and in his family of blood and chosen friends, in his justice work, in his church communities and in the values and commitments that they will sustain to embody love and justice long into the future, long after we are all gone.

Well Done, Rob. No bare ruined choir for you and no flights of angels. Let ours be the voices that sing thee to thy rest.