

The Life and Work of  
Rev. Dr. Josiah Bartlett (1913 – 1997)

The Best Seat in the House  
from Which to View the Theater of Life



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Rebecca Parker, the President of Starr King School for the Ministry, our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, wrote, "Jo [Bartlett's] educational imagination was vigorous, and wide ranging, and it always came down to his interest in people, his trust in the possibilities that lie within human beings, and his enthusiasm for the adventure of free spirits, engaged with life" (Parker, *Journal* 1998).

Jo Bartlett was born on August 9, 1913. His father, Charles Edwin Bartlett, a 1905 graduate of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, headed Bartlett and Associates, a company which distributed Ruud water heaters. He was warm and outgoing. "My father," Jo explained was "a lifelong Conservative, regarded himself as religiously liberal, He didn't want the government to tell him how to run his business, nor any church to tell him what he must believe." His mother, Helen Reed, "a proper Victorian," was a Smith graduate whom Jo described as extremely beautiful and very warm and infallibly supportive, but truly "New England" in that she was not able to show affection easily (Duography 4, 17).

Jo spent his early years in Ridley Park, Pennsylvania, a town south of Philadelphia on the train route to Washington, D.C. In 1913, Ridley Park was still a town with horse drawn carts and gas street lamps. Jo remembered, "My childhood was puppies, spelling-bees, long summers at the seashore, ice cream Sunday nights, Lionel trains, piano lessons and sometimes sledding, a sister [Edith] four years younger, who worshiped me and whom I ignored or teased" (1988 *Odyssey* 39-40).

He said:

The ocean was my constant childhood playmate....This was in South Jersey, where the beaches are wide and flat and the waves gentle....The family went to the shore every summer, and I practically grew up building drip castles and making forts against the advancing tide. My metaphor for life itself is the ocean, the Sea of Being, which will support you and give you rides and play with you if you know its ways, but which will also tumble you and drown you and never say a word or wrinkle its surface when they come asking after you (Duography 11).

His family moved to Germantown when he was twelve. They left the Presbyterian Church for the Germantown Unitarian Church "which had a good enough, though most proper minister." Jo was active in the youth group, "a great experience." He remembered the church as "a beautiful, dignified church, with a magnificent organ, a first rate choir and a gorgeous stained glass ("A Shovel of Stars," preached 1975-1978). "Adolescence," Jo said, "was stormy, but not newsworthy. Private School in genteel Germantown, a part of Philadelphia. I was not a leader at school" (1988 *Odyssey* 40).

He majored in history and literature at Amherst College, from which he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1934. He got a "solid foundation" at Amherst, but described it as "unexcitedly nonconformist."

He explained:

My senior year in college, unable to decide between teaching, law, or the ministry, I was offered a position as traveling secretary of my college fraternity, Chi Psi, for a two-year appointment. As I was but 20 years old, undecided upon a vocation and as the position seemed to offer experiences, travel, earnings and a chance to become acquainted with men of all ages and occupations, I accepted....I do not regret my choice, for I both learned and earned, as I had hoped. In addition, I received a training invaluable to me in learning to handle myself among all kinds of people in the greatest variety of situations and personality problems....I was a management consultant without a title (Union Seminary application, n.d.).

Then, after a summer studying psychology, he went to the University of Michigan where he earned a Masters degree in English Literature in 1937. He was not happy as a teacher. He explained, "I made a stab at being an English professor and picked up a Master's degree. Yet somehow I couldn't shake the image of myself in a campus-side cottage with a spaniel named Plush and a comfy little wife making curtains. When a teacher remarked that if I were a good scholar, I might achieve immortality in a footnote, I'd had it" (1988 Odyssey 42).

"One path offered some promise: theological school. I figured that since such a school was in the wholesale meaning business, it might suggest something more challenging than spending my life in ultimately a barren busyness" (1993 Odyssey 1). At the urging of his Germantown minister, Max Daskam, he chose Union Theological Seminary in New York. His teachers there included Henry Sloane Coffin, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. In his application to Union, he wrote:

My experience this year has confirmed what I suspected, that my object in learning to teach literature has really been the application of the ideas behind it to life; naturally, therefore, I want to do this directly rather than indirectly.... [This consideration has] grown upon me more and more [as] I see my own generation of young men and women – and my acquaintance, over the country, runs into many hundreds – sent forth into the world puzzled and shallow in faith.

Two chief considerations have influenced me in my choice of the ministry as a life work. 1. Practical experience as well as personal conviction of the fact that the fullest life is achieved in the service of others; and 2. A keen sense of the feebleness of religion as a guide to life today in those I meet and work with, together with a consequent emptiness and sense either of futility or agnosticism.

At Union, Jo learned to respect the reverences of others. He was one of two Unitarians of 500 students from many "communions. He explained:

As I began to work with underprivileged kids and troubled people, some glimmer of mission flickered. I wish I could now [many] years later, offer a more precise diagnosis of our societal sickness than this one: Humaneness and accountability to the common good are not built into our way of doing business. If we find out how they can be, we may create a structure that gives people a fair chance, but the individual virtues will remain...in grave question (1988 Odyssey 42).

He graduated in 1940.

Jo's first ministry was as a "joint" Unitarian minister in Flatbush, New York. He, with others, introduced and promoted the concept of the "Unitarian Circle," small groups that met regularly for discussion and support in leading a religious life. He wrote:

The vital matters of life today have been handed over to secular divinities, while religion sulks in its tent. This, we claim, is what is the matter with our church today. It explains why the church fails to challenge us. It explains why our young people are tired of endless discussion which never leads anywhere. It explains why worship becomes vague and meaningless. It is at the root of the despair and confusion in our lives: lives which in practice don't know what "the union of religion and living" and "community" mean, despite all the pious cant that is preached...

...Consequently, we are tired of talking about these things and doing nothing about them. We want to realize – and some of us are realizing – what a vital Christianity has always meant: a community, integrating life and faith, not taking us out of the world, but giving us a center of meaning for lives that have become meaningless.

How do we do it? We make use of an old idea: we form little groups, anywhere from four to ten people, individuals who recognize the fallacy of individualism, who want to live as part of a group dedicated to Christian living, and who believe this strongly enough to discipline their daily living accordingly...

...[People] form groups, then decide on "a common discipline....to bring all of life into the focus of religious purpose, and it involves critical self-examination: of how you spend your time, your money, your personal relationships. In each case, the question is: does each of these things further my total aim?... Areas of concern include: Devotional life; political action; group discipline [including some group projects which make a difference in secular life]; being responsible members of our local church "to reassert a vital Christianity from within" (Unitarian Circle, n.d.).

His next ministry was in Marietta, Ohio where he met and married Laile Evelyn Eubank, a professor of Sociology at Marietta College. He and Laile had a fifty-seven year marriage of true cooperation and collaboration, and deep admiration, respect and love. Jo said that long before Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* which launched Women's Lib, he was an ardent feminist. Their marriage, he explained, was "a vision in which each should help the other realize as much of him/herself as possible....We [had] decided that all our decisions must be on a mutual and win-win basis..." (1991 Odyssey 2-3). "Ours, they said," is a marriage of two working, independent people whose contract is that our major decisions as much as who gets the supper tonight are mutual free agreements, largely interchangeable roles and equal responsibility" (May 5, 1985 sermon). "We have been co-creators of family, complimentary careers, writing and speaking, teaching and leadership, and not the least, recreation and half a dozen hobbies (1988 Odyssey 39).

Frederick May Eliot, then President of the American Unitarian Association, pressed him to look at serving the struggling little University Church out in Seattle. "The Seattle church had fallen on to hard times..." Jo said. "They wanted 'a strong, vigorous person' to go there and revive it" (2001 Laile Bartlett Odyssey 6). Jo explained that going to

Seattle “was the first instance of what became a rule with us: putting our Us-ness first, as the best of decisions...” (1991 Odyssey 3). They moved to Washington, where they lived on a house boat on Lake Union. He was the minister at University Church in Seattle, and she a professor of Sociology. They were there from 1942 to 1949. During that time he doubled the size of the congregation, built additions to the church building, helped out the Tacoma church and helped to start three additional congregations in the Seattle area. They helped to establish a Group Health Cooperative in Seattle. Laile’s first pre-natal check-up was the first appointment of the new cooperative, the morning after the contract was signed. Their first two children were born while they were in Seattle.

In Seattle, Jo and Laile started a weekly radio book show— a public service program for the Seattle Public Library System in which Jo was the voice and Laile was the researcher. They continued it when they moved to the San Francisco area. Laile did the selection of books, the planning, the outlining of the series, and the script writing. Jo read the script on the air. CBS nominated them for a Peabody Award for “best show of local origin” (1991 Odyssey 14-15).

Jo, known for his creativity and innovation, was also a founder of the Bay Area Funeral Society, a concept which became an accepted means of dealing with and dignifying death. Jo wrote:

When we got down to the San Francisco area we held a meeting before our fireplace to organize the Bay Area Memorial Society, which, like the Group Health Co-op, became the largest of its kind in the country. At the meeting was Robert Truehaft, the lawyer husband of Jessica Mitford who, some years afterwards, wrote The American Way of Death, which became a best seller (1991 Odyssey 9-10).

Later, in Berkeley, Jo and Laile were also among the founders of the Co-op member-owned food store chain. Laile served on the boards of the two organizations.

Jo’s next position was as the head of Starr King School for the Ministry, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, where he remained for nineteen years. He came to Starr King School in 1949 when it was at a very low point, and reconceptualized and redesigned the school, making supervised clinical experience the core of the curriculum, and individualized learning and treatment of students as “mature human beings,” as well as a hands-on familiarity with art, a central part of the educational experience. Jo said, “Fortunately, I had never had a course in education; so I was blissfully uninhibited as I plunged into this next exciting and fun chapter of my professional life” (1988 Odyssey 45).

In a tribute to Jo after his death, Rebecca Parker, Starr King president, wrote:

Josiah Reed Bartlett died this summer

on August 15th,

In the morning, at peace.

From 1949 to 1968 he served as Dean and President of Starr King School for the Ministry.

Let's begin this school year  
by noticing what his imagination,  
his labor,  
his leadership,  
and his work with others  
have helped to make possible here.

Here's how Jo came to be President of the school:

During the depression years, the school struggled. Much of its endowment had been lost, and its continued existence was in question. An arrangement with Pacific School of Religion made it possible for Starr King to continue to offer degrees even though the school had very few faculty and only a handful of students.

In 1946, the Board of Trustees set up a committee to assess the future of the School. Jo Bartlett was one of its three members. The committee reviewed the forty year history of the school, and wrote:

*"All who are connected with the school recognize that it has been highly effective in two respects: 1) in gathering a library surpassed by none in its invaluable collection of source material of Unitarian history both at home and abroad; 2) in making it possible for the Rev. Earl Morse Wilbur to prepare and publish his important works, Our Unitarian Heritage and A History of Unitarianism."*

But, the committee continued:

*"The record of the school can be summarized by saying that, while the school was founded primarily to prepare ministers for and to further the work of Unitarian churches on the Pacific coast, it has signally failed in that primary purpose and, far from gaining, the churches have lost ground during the life of the school . . ."*

In the face of this failure, should the School continue?

*"Our answer is,"— and here I hear Jo's voice — "a resounding, yes. The school not only should continue but should continue with a broadening scope of activities."*

They outlined a new vision for the school.

- Its curriculum was to be centered in field work and oriented to the real problems and challenges of ministerial life.
- Its courses would prepare people to address *the pressing and urgent problems of the world*.
- The scope would include those preparing for the ministry, yes -- but also, the school could serve as an educational center for youth and for laity.
- The admission standards would be high and selective.
- Students would be treated as self-directing, mature persons for whom the school serves as guide, resource, minister and community.
- Students would increasingly be full participants at every level of the School's operations and decisions.

The Committee went on to re-conceive the purpose of the faculty—instead of a conventional faculty, with representatives of various classical disciplines, the school would be organized around a Dean whose work would be *leading, guiding and*

*inspiring the students in their preparation for the ministry* with attention to the individual preparation of each person.

The trustees considered the report and then asked Josiah Bartlett to take on the task of bringing this newly conceived school into being, and Jo agreed. The report noted that, with the right person as Dean, there were just three remaining problems to overcome.

1. We have no student body.
  2. We have no faculty.
  3. Our present finances are . . . limited
- in other words, we have no money.

At the family service for Josiah Bartlett, which took place here at the school on August 23, 1997, it was recalled that early in his life Jo had written in the family log, shared with others, that he was troubled because he was looking for a problem to solve and he hadn't found one. He was a man who liked problems. The school proved to be sufficient challenge... (Parker 1998, 6).

Jo explained his coming to Starr King this way:

I became involved with Starr King by being elected a trustee. I came back from my first board meeting so upset by what I found that I determined to speak out. The results were that the board, who indeed were desperate for some fresh vision, appointed me to head a little committee for what now we would call "market research" into what a theological school should provide. And then, of course, they said, "Well, go ahead and put these ideas to work."

My idea was very simple: since we want our churches to empower our people to become all that they can be, then a theological school must have the same objective for its students. You could call it the UU equivalent of conversion: converted, you just can't help sharing your transforming experience with others...

...No one in the history of theological education ever had my great opportunity. There was no place to go but up. There was no faculty and no tradition to stand in the way of anything I might want to do. Moreover, very fortunately I had never had a course in Education. So I had complete *carte blanche*: to design the curriculum, to decide who should be admitted, who should teach, what would be required for a degree. And I had neither preconceptions nor inhibitions (1991 Odyssey 10-11).

He said:

I was unencumbered by any academic theories of education, but I had certain convictions which were sharpened by an extensive, if quite unscientific sampling of ministers' answers to our questions about their theological education and suggestions for improving it. In terms of content, they lamented that, in addition to standard topics such as Bible, theology and church history, they needed grounding in social sciences and psychology. They also lamented being thrust into parish work without any clinical preparation. To this I added my own views, that they needed more work in language arts and preaching, and hands-on introduction to art....We know that parish ministers spend most of their time in administration, which they dread most and understand least....In truth, administration is not about paper clips

but about relating to people, which is the heart of ministry itself (1993 Odyssey 5-6, 10).

“Clearly what we did at Starr King, however imperfectly,” Bartlett said, “was to realize that vision I had: to take students completely seriously as human beings and to empower them to do the best they could with what they had...” (1991 Odyssey 11). “As ministers,” he said, “Our faith bids us address persons as individuals meant to become responsible adults, and so how better prepare students for this, than to treat them so” (1993 Odyssey 6).

Ron Cook, Class of 1960 and for many years a professor at Starr King, remembers, “Jo built a school based on valuing what was unique in each of us, a school that respected each of us, that encouraged each of us to stretch and risk...” (Cook, 1997, 7).

Many years later, one student wrote to Jo and Laile, “I would like you to know that you both have resided with me through the years as models and teachers. Even in my moments of failure you have helped me to dust off my hat and hit the road for the next adventure” (Arnold Thaw, Ph.D. Sept. 2, 1991).

Influenced by Unitarian educator Sophia Fahs, Bartlett believed that every minister should be creative in one way or another. The Rockefeller Foundation gave the school a three-year grant of \$2,250 to establish a circulating collection of original prints on religious subjects. His wife, Laile, remembers fondly their visiting art galleries, museums, and art show openings all over the Bay Area looking for suitable art for the collection. He invited famous local artists such as Richard Diebencorn to the school to be “artist of the month.”

Their other two children were born in Berkeley. The middle name of each child is that of a “spiritual ancestor” – Emerson, Kingsley, Starr (for Starr King), Channing. The children called Jo “Doodles” and Laile “Lady.” When the four children were young, Jo helped look after the them, taking his turn worked at the cooperative nursery school they attended, and helped with the cooking and other household chores in ways and amounts that few men of his time did.

Most days, Jo walked from his home to Starr King and back, often reading Dante in the original German as he went along. In February 1962 he wrote:

Walking to my office on one of those glorious spring mornings after a spate of rain, with the clouds blowing in from Nevada instead of from our great air conditioner the sea – blue and sun, daffodils and cherry blossoms – it is enough to make the heart sing praises for what is, I shall always feel, one of the great privileges of our being in Berkeley: walking to work and back, a mile and a third. By this time people are used to seeing me with my nose in a book or the sky, and they stop offering me rides. I have read through Dante twice and whatever else, almost, I have been able to read at all under the usual distractions of an administrator. It is the only time people can’t get at me, the surest time for dwelling with Beauty and the Great Companions. And in our mild

climate I can do this nine mornings out of ten even in the rainy season. The equivalent of any saint's discipline of meditation.

I suppose I should keep a diary. Today would go in my feeling (not unique to today) that I am At My Peak, peculiarly blessed in wife, home, children, health, associates and work. If the world goes bang tonight it doesn't owe me a thing: I live on velvet. I don't know many who can say this and I worry mainly about the ancient law of compensation – surely the gods are plotting to even it up with some series of disasters (February 19, 1962).

In 1962, Jo was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by St. Lawrence University in New York, founded by the Universalists.

In November 1962, Bartlett wrote:

Rarely in anyone's life, in any great way, and for some perhaps never, is it given to hear one's deepest convictions and years of dubious work independently confirmed. But such has been my lot today when the church's committee on Theological Education [Taylor Report] reported – and to my embarrassment more than elation, pointed to one little school in all important ways as the pioneer and example to the rest. It has taken twelve years. Elated I was and my mind rushed ahead to what such leadership preparation really taken seriously and endowed sufficiently, might mean not just to ourselves but to a grasping fragmented society. So I indulged myself in the childish celebration of a "first class" flight and a good supper....

But as when I was a small boy and got my electric train all set up and running, already I feel no special inflation of spirit, no smacking of the lips, and indeed no anticipatory pleasure in watching the shining construction go round and round. They said, "now you will be really needed to help carry it through." Exactly, so. I'm weary at the thought. Can't somebody else do that? In principle its already done: to do it will be at bottom a bore. I want a new problem! (Note November 9, 1962).

Jo often through of himself as the luckiest man alive. In a 1964 note (to himself ?), Bartlett wrote:

Another of those mornings and moments when I feel like the luckiest person in the world, almost guiltily contented, looking over my shoulder to see if the gods aren't sending Trouble after me in observance of the Law of Compensation.

Here I am, walking to working on spring's first great morning. The air is brilliant and crisp, the Bay and hills stretch out so clear I can touch them, the plum blossoms burst like pink popcorn on Berkeley's clean streets.

I am not on time to work. I make my own time. I measure my own tasks according to my own sense of completeness and excellence - - and I am one of the few people in the world paid to do what he likes to do.

In 1964, Bartlett guided Starr King School in its integration into the Graduate Theological Union, the newly formed consortium of theological schools in Berkeley which began two years earlier. The next year he wrote, "I still want to do much reading, meditating, research. But I get most excited thinking in concrete terms: where does theol edu [theological education] and specifically SKSM go from here (Memo 1965)? In 1967 Bartlett led Starr King School in participating in the Pacific Central District and Pacific Southwest District's Venture Project, "an attempt to provide training for persons leading education programs in our churches and fellowships, whether these be volunteer or professional" (Ungar 2006, 228).

Jo's considerable skills were in education for ministry, rather than in raising money and in strong administrative leadership. In May 1967, the Starr King Board decided that "Dr. Bartlett would be more valuable at the School if he were relieved of all administrative duties and able to devote more time to academic concerns." In 1968, Jo, who felt "more and more that my wings were being clipped," resigned. He left, he said, "full of honors but with mixed emotions" (1988 *Odyssey* 47).

"My two loves," Bartlett said, "are people and design. What I'm most happy doing is designing institutions that enhance and liberate people." ( Laile Bartlett, *Art at Starr King* n.d.) When Bartlett resigned from Starr King School, he took a position with the Wright Institute, a new institution headed by Stanford Psychologist-educator Nevitt Sanford, which studied ways in which the resources of social science can be brought to bear speedily on urgent problems. His move, he explained, was to provide him with time and the opportunity to explore new and experimental forms of religious programs and preparation for religious leadership (*Berkeley Gazette* July 12, 1968).

Jo said that after he left Starr King:

I went through a drastic redefinition of career....This was a very scary time....Though I think we are having a great life, it has had it's dark areas, and this was one of them....I went through several years of exciting but also painful career search....Now at that time, when I said to Starr King "That's all, folks" a trustee staked us to a year of transition. He hoped that I would package all that I had learned and do something mighty with it for the denomination. But I was interested in the future more than the recent past, and it took me three years before I got into focus....I put together for the UUA a career kit called "Employing Your Total Self"....[then] Laile's knowledge of institutions came to our rescue and we came up with something we called the "Vanguard Project." It was a new way we could help a church get a fresh look at itself, or transform tensions into community and commitment...In this work my two chief interests work together, people and design. With a congregation, I help them get a clear sense of their goals, and then help them design how they are going to realize them (1991 *Odyssey* 16-18).

"The *Vanguard Project*," he explained, was "a short-term, mostly do-it-yourself consultation, which has turned a couple dozen UU congregations around...After a few successes I was restored to favor at 25 [UUA headquarters] which began to recommend me to troubled congregations.." (*Odyssey* 1988 54).

*The Religious News Service* reported in November 1970:

A former clergyman and seminary professor who now serves as a consultant to churches says that the main difficulty with congregations today is their “fuzziness about goals.”

“Most churches are unsure of what they are about,” says Dr. Josiah R. Bartlett, “and so, are unable to devise effective ways of ministry.”

Instead of “corralling their people” and trying to raise money for “routines they’ve inherited,” he says, they should “clarify and focus their aims in relation to people’s real needs.”...

In a project designed “to do something about it,” the former seminary president noted, “Usually churches kill themselves off, corralling their people and trying to raise money. And for what? For routines they’ve inherited and a round of activities they take for granted. They exploit people’s devotion to the institution.”

“It should be the other way around,” he declared. “When churches clarify and focus their aims in relation to people’s real needs – and they can – half the battle is won. Then they can translate aims into program, and program into action.”

The instrument which Dr. Bartlett uses, and designed, is his Vanguard Project. It has been field-tested and refined in 10 churches over the past year. An innovative approach, it probes the true needs and wants of congregations...

...At its heart is a Vanguard committee, a carefully selected cross-section of the congregation, which puts the program into “orbit.” Vanguard members, unlike the typical church surveyors, do not talk to themselves or solicit only the faithful and the work horses. “They go in search of the more difficult ones,” Dr. Bartlett explained, “those who are restless and have drifted away. What did they want? Where did they go?”

“Most parishes, once they dust off their files, are amazed to find how many people have not responded to their routines, or have left. I’m not talking about people who have left town,” he remarked, “just those we’ve failed to attract and prefer to *forget*.” The Vanguard Project delivers more than *findings* or a report to be filed with the governing board. It produces a new corps of dedicated and committed workers, and a people-and-dollars budget for an action program to realize freshly-perceived goals. In some cases, Vanguard people admit to a new kind of vision for their church and what it can be... (5).

Bartlett then began his long career in Interim Ministry. He explained:

The Vanguard Project led me into my new, third career, accredited interim ministry. David Pohl decided he needed seasoned ministers for interim work. The term interim then meant, and alas! generally means still, any sort of between regular-ministers make-do. But in 1975 Alban Institute and others were developing an upgraded concept of the interim as a consultant equipped to make the between-time one of in-depth review and a fresh start.

It restored my soul mightily that David asked me to participate on his Department’s behalf at the first ecumenical training conference for this new ministry.... I am now on my eighteenth such [interim ministry—he did 25] My colleagues persist in making me the convener of our annual tribal gathering. This

work brings together all my talents and experience; even my gray hairs, promising wisdom, are marketable assets. I love it!

The spiritual lesson of the interim ministry is related to the Buddha's teaching about compassion and non-attachment. The consultant is compassionate, but his/her usefulness is just that he/she is not attached. Success is measured by what happens after the consultant leaves, and his/her effectiveness depends on the constraint of scheduled, imminent departure. The consultant's ego must be, not in the center, but to one side. The pleasure must be in empowering others so that, in Lao-Tse's phrase, "The people say, 'We did it ourselves'" (1988 *Odyssey* 54-55).

Jo explained:

For me Interim Ministry is...a custom design, because it employs all that has gone before, all my skills and joys and experiences....My success is measured not so much by what happens when I'm there as by what happens after I'm gone. My joy is to help people identify their needs and goals, then help locate their resources and organize them to meet those goals.

People wonder how Laile and I can stand moving around so much, especially saying goodbye to friends every year. We will not pretend we have found a balm for this pain. However, moving we love....All Laile needs for her work is a phone, an airport and a typewriter. The nature of my work is such that every year is an exciting new challenge (1991 *Odyssey* 22-23).

He wrote to the UU Society of Albany, New York:

Let me remind you what this interim is "about" (to use that dreadful current buzzword.) It is about what I call a "re-founding experience." Institutions: a marriage, a business, a government, a congregation, usually begin with great dreams and a great burst of energy. But in time they settle into routine. Rarely do they have a chance to make a fresh beginning – to "re-found."

The interim between settled ministers is such a chance. My charge is, first of all, to be an effective minister, in the vital roles of pastor, preacher, councilor, and as far as I can, source of inspiration. But the special task of an interim minister is to be – always to the degree the congregation wants – consultant, empathetic critic and resource, as we take a fresh look at all we do and how we do it. Jo later explained, "My wife has a less delicate way of describing my work: she says my job is to 'give 'em hell and blow town!'" (n.d.)

Over the next twenty-five years, Jo conducted twenty-five interim ministries ranging in length from a few months to two years. They drove to their assignments in a very large, beloved old Chrysler they named *Andromeda*. Laile reported, "The odometer turned over a half million miles, as we once slid across the border into Alberta" (Laile Bartlett *Odyssey* 2001,18-19).

Jo wrote to Loren Mead in 1984:

My other hat these days is on our "Commission on Appraisal" the designated "watchdog" body of our General Assembly. We just finished a three-year study of what UUs have done (mostly NOT done) with racism.

[For our next assignment] We are, as a commission, about to go back to the grass roots, asking two related questions:

- 1) What, for you as a church member, is a quality experience of vital religion, which you can reasonably expect in this congregation given its size and circumstances?
- 2) Given our present UUA, with its resources, what kind of help does your congregation need to make it happen?..

...I'm feeling quite optimistic about our chances of bringing some fresh zip and hoope vis this talk-with-the-people strategy, and of the readiness of our churches and HQ to respond.

From 1981 to 1989 he served on the UUA Commission on Appraisal, with, at various times, among others, Natalie Gulbrandsen, John Wolf, Rev. Mark D. Morrison-Reed and Jerry Davidoff. This included the writing of the 1983 COA report on the Black Power controversy, "Empowerment: One Denomination's Quest for Racial Justice 1967-1982."

In June 1987, he wrote to his congregation:

Dear Friends:

I write you this as I am about to go into surgery [for a hip replacement]...

...There's something about being stripped of all my valuables, made naked but for this silly hospital shirt; signing away all claim against the mischances that attend grave meddling with our flesh, becoming a child again before my nurses; it is not a gallows vision but it does spotlight essentials.

The TV paraded its murders & scandals & sleaze, which wonderfully blended with Prospero's wisdom [He reread *The Tempest* in the hospital], and that other angle of vision, the baseball game: grown men so serious about a pastime.

We must base our life & its choices on fact, not delusion or error. Therefore ours is a religion of relentless search & insistent honesty, holding the plumb-line up to all we build.

Yet the most human, most enduring thing about us is not material; & what gives both zest & goal to these little lives of ours is a vision, a fancy, a poetry that does melt into thin air like our goods & bodies, our honors & titles & riches.

In this world that grubs about with tangibles, this world of tawdry dealing & vanity, of vain striving, the means & product of which is cruelty & injustice, there must be a company of those who, at the same time they are passionate for truth & justice, are nurtured by a vision, who know that, not only at the end, but all along, true awareness is consciousness of the music which shapes this finally insubstantial world into approximation of a dream which can satisfy the soul (June 26, 1987).

He wrote about his hip surgery recovery:

I had spent a couple of weeks lying in post-operative bed in our Berkeley apartment, looking out at the beautiful scene in a succession of incredibly fine days.

The operation signaled my dependence, henceforth definitively, on medical science more than on my – again incredible – natural good health. The operation had been under local (waist down) anaesthesia: I lay on the table and could touch my lower body, grown inert and senseless as stone. This was what Death must be like...

...Then the days of recovering movement until I could walk. And after that, deference and kindness: gratifying, but firmly fixing me in a new station as “elderly.” Be careful. Don’t pick up that box, try to leap that hedge, etc. You’re not a kid anymore. Yes, I am damnably WEAK...

...It’s autumn as I get around to writing this. The symbolism of the glorious leaves and gathered crops. But, so far anyway, as Camus said, “In my heart an invincible summer” (JRB August 1987).

Later in 1987, he wrote:

As for myself, I was at perhaps the peak of my present and perhaps final career as minister, interim minister this time: a successful year at Ridgewood, a promising new post in Reston, honored as senior and leader in the denomination’s group of interims. Laile in good health, as ever with more writing projects than she had time for; despite the disappointment of slow sales, still full of zest for her work, and in fine health.

I had just come through the operation for replacing my hip. This was a milestone: very definitely an entrance upon the Indian Summer of “senior” years, warned of failing powers yet still on the plateau of well-being....” [He conducted interim ministries for another ten years].

In 1988, he talked about his personal theology:

Where do I wind up theologically? I don’t find any label I like. You might call me a “life-affirming” mystic, with an ethic based on reverence for our oneness in the patterned energy we severally incarnate. I am a humanist only if that word is an adjective. I see the humanist as a noun, hung up on a dead cosmology, a situation which can be, and I think is being, corrected. I am certainly not a theist if a theist must have a personal god. Nor am I happy with process theology which calls the anti-entropic process god, which has become conscious in us, perhaps elsewhere also. Such theology leaves the rest, perhaps the bulk, of the universe unaccounted for. I cannot be a UU Christian, because I see no special kind of revelation in Jesus or the Christ-event. Yet I empathize with UU Christians’ emphasis on salvation revealed in the person and with their appreciation of our Biblical heritage...(1988 Odyssey 58).

His favorite mantra, from Kahlil Gibran, was, “To wake at dawn with a winged heart, and give thanks for another day of loving.”

In a 1995 election day sermon entitled “Who Killed Horatio Alger? Can Fascism Happen Here?” Jo said:

In a recent poll of Americans of all races, about 2/3 of them say that they are giving up on the American Dream...The American dream is dying because the inexorable workings of our economic system have created what may be an unbridgeable gap between the affluent few who run the show and buy the Congress, and the vast majority of ordinary folk. This is the economic root of our crankiness, rancor and violence. And it calls up Lincoln's words: "A house divided against itself cannot stand."..

...[What is it I see happening? Horatio] Algerism gone rank, capitalism winding up in the hands of a few and, so far, incredibly successful in manipulating our national mythology so as to get the very people who are losing, to vote for the people who are fleecing them. I see our people losing heart and hope and, naturally, becoming angry. But the manipulators are skillfully channeling that anger: just listen to the outpourings of hate radio. Just see how the pious are diverted from their real problems, by being organized to a crusade for school prayer or anti-abortion; socially irrelevant. These newly-organized armies of voters are then led by the nose to support candidates whose deeper, often hidden, agenda is to make America safe for exploitation (November 5, 1995).

In a 1996 sermon called "Thomas Jefferson's God" he declared:

It is my thesis that the essence of our UU faith, shining forth in its adherents all down the years, is a joy in using our God-given powers to the full, savoring life as good despite our troubles, insistence on thinking for ourselves, a zeal for justice, and a commitment to using our powers in the service of our fellow-creatures. This is our way of being in the world. It's a very broad definition; in fact it is universal. We have kindred spirits in every church and among the unchurched and anti-church, too. But if you are looking for a gathering of those who march to this life-affirming drummer, usually the UU church is the only game in town...

...Let's salute Thomas Jefferson, who once and for all confirmed us in bringing our brains to church, who insisted that religion must square with science, and who, most of all, affirmed that we are each and all persons of infinite promise, meant for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" ("Stage Two of our Emerging UU Faith" or "Thomas Jefferson's God" February 11, 1996).

He once explained:

In times of doubt, this church stands for faith; in moments of despair, for hope; amid confusion and hot feelings, for straight thinking and higher loyalties; and when the worth of persons is forgotten, here they are everything. You need the fellowship of this church in these times. (n.d.)

Jo loved to sing with the choir. During one of his ministries, he wrote about the church children's choir:

Junior Choir Festival  
Why, here is a legion of angels!  
In this place, in these robes  
Johnny and Mary and Bill

Become the troops of goodness, ready to take bold innocent flight  
Out over the grey desert of old wrong  
Out into the shriveling heat of ancient sin.

These are the legions of hope,  
The witnesses of that only saving grace  
That life renewed is stronger than death,  
That the strength of a child  
Is more than the weight that fetters the wise,  
The wise immobile and weak with what they know and don't know.

For Johnny and Mary and Bill  
This is a party, a trip on a bus.  
Are the robes of those others prettier?

For their leaders an hour of worried pride  
(...two, three, FOUR the choir director pleads)

For some of us who watch, our coming is a pledge  
To Johnny or Mary or Bill:  
"Did you see me, mommy?"

O child I was,  
In the voices of these eternal children  
Wake from your long sleep  
And sing again. Always sing!  
(n.d.)

In 1994, Starr King School for the Ministry gave Jo its Starr King Award. The inscription on the silver plate he was presented read:

The Rev. Dr. Josiah Bartlett  
minister and scholar  
Your passion for the arts,  
aesthetic sensibilities and sound,  
forward-looking approach to the  
education of our religious leaders  
is a gift to the Starr King School  
for the Ministry  
and the Unitarian Universalist movement.

Laile said, "What warmed Jo the most was to have a memorial service while he's still around to enjoy it! (Letter to Jenny April 18, 1994).

Finally, in May 1997, Laile and Jo wrote to friends:

We've decided to say "No" to Albany – or any other congregation and return to Berkeley for next year. The Reason: Jo's all out way of being a minister is beginning to take its toll on his amazingly healthy body. Can he continue as minister? Yes Is it worth it? No. That's the doctor's advice....The moment we decided we felt immense relief. It has been almost two years since we have spent even a semester in Berkeley....And Jo has his Minns Lectures to prepare. They're already growing into a book. And now we have "Frankenstein" the computer to keep us busy; the most maddening, time-consuming way of saving time ever invented. But, with luck, we can access libraries everywhere, in addition to luxuriating in those just down the hill (Porteus 1997).

Jo was invited to give the prestigious Minns Lectures for 1997-1998. He worked on a series of five lectures entitled "Our Emerging Faith: From the Language of the Old Religion to a Clear Voice of Our Own." He explained, "In working terms, I describe our perennial 'Golden Thread' of faith as the conviction that the goal of life is the fullest development of our powers, and joy in their use, for themselves and for the service of our fellow-creatures." He did not live to give the lectures.

During his illustrious career, the Reverend Doctor Josiah Bartlett had four settled ministries, served as head of Starr King School for the Ministry, performed twenty five interim ministries, and consulted with at least thirty-four churches. He served on the American Unitarian Association board, and as chair of the UU Commission on Appraisal, the designated "watchdog" body of our General Assembly. With his wife, sociologist Dr. Laile Bartlett, he wrote two books on the denomination: *Moment of Truth* and *A Religion for the Non-Religious*.

He explained in his 1988 *Odyssey*:

I will think well of my life if, like Dante, I have been granted a vision of the infinite reaches of the soul, felt the love that moves the stars, and in my ministry, been able to convey at least a ray or two of the divine Light to others who, like me, grope through the false lights and mists of human perversity.

The vision, itself, is more than enough, Surely, I have had the "best seat in the house" from which to view the human comedy. I am one of the most privileged people of this or any time....(38) As I look back over my own life considered as an artistic creation, I'm not satisfied yet. I take hope in remembering many a game of nine-pins. Time and again, though my score has been a memo of missed opportunities, yet in those last frames I've remembered it with a couple of soul-satisfied strikes, or at least, a spare or two (58-59).

In August 1997, Jo Bartlett sent this good bye letter to his friends and colleagues: As The Bright Days Grow Shorter, A letter to any who ask, "How Are Things?"

You may have heard that in May I retired, and so picture me happily settled into doing what I please at my own pace, in my beloved Berkeley... Well, not quite.

I'm happily in Berkeley, drinking its air so fresh, but a luring malignancy has struck, suddenly, fiercely and decisively. My doctors say I have only weeks to live.

So this is my farewell to you, to say – yes, really! – all is well with me. I want to tell you why, though I dread lest I sound like the writer Joseph Addison. As they gathered around his death bed, Addison said, “Behold how a Christian dies.” How repulsive! How Smug!

Yet I feel a certain euphoria. What a launching pad into The Yonder! Lying in this bright apartment, looking at great trees at one window, 180 degrees of the Bay at the other, centering on the Golden Gate as the seascape’s crown and symbol. Tended by loving family, supported by doctors I trust, and amazing amenities of the Home Hospice Program (all for free!).

And with the deep satisfaction of my work completed – no gnawing “might have beens” or guilt that in any but forgivable ways, I’ve let people down.

It is a departure incredibly of a piece with my whole life – a life that makes me say, Truly I am among the luckiest of humans. Born to loving parents who sacrificed for the best of education, born as a member of this society’s privileged class – all doors open to me. My occupation by nature the best seat in the Theatre of life, affording me limitless opportunity to be of use to others and challenging my powers. It has been a vehicle for what I define as the goal of our life: fullest development of our powers and the joy of using them, for themselves and for the empowerment of others.

Especially – as you know if you know me at all, awakened to “La Vita Nuova” as my friend Dante called it, by an angel, my companion of 57 years, who is life to me. She is with me to the end, center of our blessed children and endless friends who are in attendance, radiating that same spirit.

There are four standard arguments for the existence of God. None is convincing. But in Laile I have a fifth, unshakable because it rests on personal knowledge and requires no logical defense.

“God” in this context means the reality of love, erotic and altruistic. The God of Theologians, a noble and necessary, but failed attempt, is not for me. Life is strife: our human enterprise may be incidental, or even irrelevant to, a universe with quite other purposes, or none. But my corner of it furnishes grounds and materials for what could be a lovely world. Not by merit but by grace, I have known and possessed that liveliness.

Immortality— resurrection— reincarnation? These are how a reasoning creature voices the dogged will to live. Meter Baba has it right: “True immortality is not the survival of the limited individual...rather the individual who has achieved realization...is initiated into unlimited life.” Immortality Enough! Ask not why. The Why is the miracle.

And so, “my best beloved”, in Tagore’s words

*Peace, my heart, let the time for the parting be sweet,*

*Let love melt into memory and pain into songs.*

*Stand still, O Beautiful End, for a moment and*

*say your last words in silence.*

*I bow to you, and hold up my lamp to light you on your way.*

The Rev. Dr. Josiah R. Bartlett died quietly at home on Friday, August 15, 1997, with his wife Laile at his side. He was 84 years old.

His wife, Laile Eubank Bartlett, lived to be ninety. They are survived by their four children, Joel Emerson, Jocelyn Kingsley (Mrs. Anthony Muzak), Loel Starr. (Mrs. Robert F. Miller), Noel Channing, and several grandchildren.

A tribute to Jo in the *UUMA News* shortly after his death states, "Among the many memories colleagues have shared about Josiah are these: the old car he drove, the wonderful odyssey he gave at a district ministers' retreat, his passion for ministry and for Starr King, the graciousness with which he accepted his own dying...his non-anxious presence, his partnership and the 'true union' he had with his wife Laile..." (*UUMA News* 1997).

Jo once explained. "It is my spiritual goal to be able to laugh at Death when he comes, to be able to say – take this bag of bones if you like. But you won't take me for I already live in the Life Universal. I live in the lives of those precious to me – those precious ones I've known well: family, friends, church, associates – and those precious ones everywhere my neighbors on this planet " (n.d.).

Jo Bartlett continues to live in the lives of all those he taught and ministered to and influenced through the years.

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This paper relies heavily on Josiah and Laile Bartlett's Odysseys. The Odysseys, and most of the other documents listed, as well as many of his sermons, are available at Starr King School for the Ministry, 2441 Le Conte Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94709 in the original documents and /or on CD or DVD. They were given to the school for safekeeping by Bartlett's son, Channing who organized the documents and scanned them.