

The Impossible and the Laughable

BY ERIKA HEWITT, MINISTER, LIVE OAK UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women who told the disciples [of the resurrection], but these words appeared to the disciples as nonsense, and they would not believe them. Luke 24:10-11

As a brand-new Unitarian Universalist, I was an atheist with a chip on my shoulder. Later, I would make peace with the Christian tradition in which I was reared—in fact, today I’m affectionately grateful for the Methodist church and the Roman Catholic

schools that raised me. But in my early UU days, I felt uncomfortable coming to church on Easter because I didn’t want to hear about Jesus. There might be similar thoughts going through your mind as we approach Easter: *Why, as rational realists, do we have to reflect at all on the resurrection? Can’t we just talk about daffodils?*

Well, this sermon *does* mention Jesus and his resurrection. There also will be mention of Pharaoh, Moses, and the parting of the Red Sea. I will speak of miracles and I will also invoke the supernatural—things so mysterious so as to be inexplicable. But bear with me, because my starting point is something theologically neutral: particle physics.

I’m no physicist, but I love mystery. The inexplicable gives me goose bumps. I get a thrill from entertaining bizarre explanations for the unexplainable. That’s why I paid close attention to reports that the Large Hadron Collider, a gigantic scientific instrument near Geneva, Switzerland, had finally succeeded in accelerating and colliding particles.

This particle accelerator is used by physicists to study the smallest known particles—the fundamental building blocks of all things. The Large Hadron Collider is a 17-mile underground ring designed to smash atoms together at high energies. It was created, in part, to find proof of a hypothetical subatomic particle called the Higgs boson—sometimes called “the God particle.”

I wasn’t interested in any of this until I read that in 2009 the Collider had to be shut down because it had been damaged by a piece of baguette... baguette, as in *bread*. How would a piece of bread make it past such intense security measures and scrupulous standards of sterility? None of the resident physicists could explain it; eventually, scientists and spokespersons concluded that the baguette piece was dropped there by a bird.

Here’s what snapped me to attention: two well-respected and experienced physicists weren’t willing to write off the baguette piece as a freak accident. (After all, how would a bird get to an underground atom-smasher?) These bold physicists pointed out that the Collider had encountered *many* strange and random setbacks, and suggested in a series of formal papers that setbacks to the Large Hadron Collider were occurring because of “reverse chronological causation”—which is to say, sabotage from the future.

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Suddenly there is a point when religion becomes laughable. Then you decide that you are nevertheless religious.

—Thomas Merton

A monthly for religious liberals

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What if, the scientists asked, the Higgs boson—the “God particle”—is “abhorrent to nature”? What if, in some dim layer of the future, the Collider creates the Higgs boson and sends a message backwards in time to botch its own creation? Every time scientists are on the verge of capturing the Higgs, the theory holds, the future intercedes.

If you were a widely-known and well-respected physicist, imagine what it would take for you to publicly suggest that the world’s largest scientific experiment had been stopped by a time-traveling bird. Wouldn’t you suspect that just a *few* of your colleagues—and not a few other people around the world—would find your hypothesis impossible, and even laughable?

We’re approaching the culmination of holy days held by two different religious traditions: the Christian holy day of Easter and the Jewish celebration of Passover. So here’s a quiz: Which of the following statements seems impossible to you? Which of the following statements is so preposterous that it’s laughable?

A. A time-traveling bird sabotaged the field of particle physics by shutting down a collider with a piece of baguette because every time scientists are on the verge of capturing the “God particle,” the future intercedes.

B. An outspoken prophet of justice and radical inclusivity lived among his followers days *after* the Roman regime brutally killed him by nailing him to a cross.

C. An entire people who had been enslaved in Egypt were freed from captivity through a series of ten plagues—blood, boils, the whole lot—and the Red Sea parted to give them escape from soldiers in pursuit.

D. All of the above.

In *For the Time Being*, Annie Dillard asserts that “the presenting face of any religion is its mass of popular superstitions” —like seeing the face of Jesus in a tortilla, or Mother Teresa in a cinnamon bun, or the name of Allah appearing in a halved eggplant—all of which have happened, to the delight of the faithful and the press who document these happenings. The fact that some people interpret these appearances literally, as articles of faith, reveals just how deeply we hunger to craft hope and sense out of mystery.

Being religious despite the impossible and the laughable... [is] less an intellectual exercise than it is an inviting of our imaginations and our hope to dance together.

“Suddenly,” writes Trappist monk Thomas Merton, “there is a point when religion becomes laughable. Then you decide that you are nevertheless religious.” To me, Merton’s words suggest that deciding to be religious hasn’t so much to do with the *content* of our beliefs—or subscribing to the impossibility of *other people’s* beliefs—as it has to do with the suspension of disbelief...which is just another way of saying the willingness to entertain mystery.

This isn’t the same thing as suspending reason altogether, or accepting any sufficiently wondrous explanation for mystery. Being religious doesn’t mean that you must examine the tortilla wrapped around your burrito before eating it. It *does* mean, depending on how you orient your heart, that you might see the face of God or the name of Allah in the most laughable places.

Being religious despite the impossible and the laughable means shifting how we think about belief; it’s less an intellectual exercise than it is an inviting of

our imaginations and our hope to dance together. Being religious means holding the modest position that the universe will not be fully explained or understood within our lifetime.

All too often, we Unitarian Universalists define ourselves by what we *don’t* believe. Even when we do talk about our beliefs, we’ve come to view this as an intellectual exercise, and end up explaining too much and too often. Lauren Winner, a Christian writer and historian, remembers a friend reading out loud to her from an obscure British novel. In one scene, a believer and a cynic are debating God. *Of course I know you believe in it*, the cynic says. *What I want to know is do you believe in it the way you believe in Australia?*

For my part, I don’t believe in God the way I believe in Australia. In some ways, I believe in God *more*, or at least *differently*, than I believe in Australia. I’ve never been to Australia, but I have experienced God. Don’t let the name distract you, because I’ll call it just about anything to have you focus on this part: I have been awakened, healed, transformed, called to my fullest self, comforted, and guided by some force larger than my human self. So I believe in the Source of Life. But I’ve never seen Australia.

I don’t believe in the resurrection of Jesus the way I believe in God *or* Australia—I don’t believe that Jesus’ body was restored to life. But if you ask enough Christians you’ll find a good number who don’t believe that either.

I don’t believe that when Moses stood at the edge of the Red Sea he looked anything like Charlton Heston, and I don’t believe that the aforementioned Source of Life split the surface of the waves to create an escape route for the Jewish people. But if you ask enough Jews, you’ll find plenty who don’t believe that either.

I do believe that the stories themselves, and their very improbability, speak to something deep inside of us...call it the

“God particle.” I believe that we are religious when we allow ourselves to be constantly surprised and awed by the world’s complexities.

“People flock to religion not in spite of the fact that it’s laughable, but precisely because of it,” says UU minister Rob Hardies. “The reason people come to church on Easter is to look for hope.... The church is the repository of human hope.... The church is the place where we stash away those stories of hope for when we and the world need them most.”

The richly-textured fabric of our Unitarian Universalist community holds countless stories of hope. Those stories give us reason to trust that the impossible can happen. What impossible things does your heart yearn for? What hopes, if you named them out loud, would seem laughable?

Is the “impossible,” for you, the hope that you might emerge on the other side of some harrowing inner struggle?

Is it laughable to think that whatever’s burdening your heart *right now* might grow lighter, until one day it’s gone?

Does “peace” seem impossible to you? Is it laughable to think that we human beings could live in peace in the Middle East? Between the gang zones in your own city? In our own families?

Or perhaps what seems impossible is that our culture will one day reflect the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Is it so laughable to believe that you’re nothing less than beautiful, nothing less than whole?



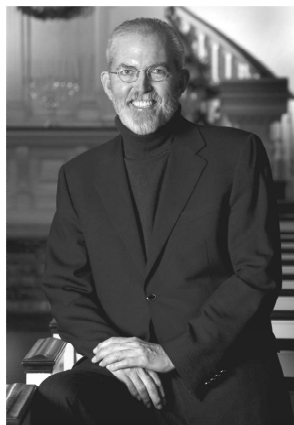
These are all religious matters, every one of them. Do they seem laughable? Do they seem impossible?

Let us decide, nevertheless, to be religious. ■

Prayer 101

BY FORREST CHURCH, MINISTER OF ALL SOULS CHURCH (UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST) IN NEW YORK CITY FROM 1978 UNTIL HIS DEATH IN 2009

It is eleven o’clock in the evening. The children are in bed. I am sitting on the couch in my living room attempting to read. My eyes have tracked



Photograph by Mitchel Gray

one page three times without connecting. My mind is wandering. It covers a little ground then circles back, half-attentive, locked in fresh ruts. Or it stops somewhere and spins. Vagrant images, many painful, steal into my consciousness. “I should have said.... I wish I had.... Of course, he didn’t give me half a chance...but even so I should have said” Nothing earthshaking, just the old, familiar, ever-unfinished machinations of the mind.

Just think of the number of times you have been reading a book only to find yourself, as I did, lost in self-absorption. On the other hand, have you not also lost yourself in a book, lost all track of time and place, submerged yourself in its world, characters, setting, and plot, and emerged completely refreshed?

Admittedly, the voice of a human soul is devilishly hard to keep in tune. With its interlocking registers of sensation, memory, emotion, and thought, it is the most complex of instruments. Sensitive and therefore temperamental, it jams easily and at best is slightly out of kilter. Difficult to play well, it is impossible to play to perfection.

To keep ourselves halfway decently in tune, we must tinker all the time: here on our anger, there on our bitterness, lethargy, pettiness, or pride. Fully to love we must mute our fears; fully to serve, tone down our piping little egos. In order to produce anything like beautiful music, we must join in the band of our brothers and sisters, be an instrument of their peace, a humble instrument of justice and mercy, a dedicated instrument of truth.

To move from distraction to attention, there is no better gambit than prayer.

In prayer we sing by listening first. Prayer shapes and colors our melody, helping us keep in tune with ourselves. It also brings us into harmony with others. Finally, prayer tunes us to the cosmos, to the overarching and all-sustaining hymn of life. It recalls us to the symphony.

Prayer is the art of listening. Reverent attention to something unites us with it. Distraction divides, fragmenting us. Salvation and sin are much the same. Salvation: wholeness, health, healing—all words stemming from the same root—occurs in this lifetime when we are at peace with ourselves, united with one another, and at one with God. Sin is a state of brokenness. It exists when we are consumed by preoccupations and distractions, inattentive to the needs of others, at war with ourselves and the world.

The divisions within us spring from negative self-attitude based upon experience. We have done things we wish we had not done and left undone things that begged our doing. We have hurt others, letting them down and ourselves as well. All of us have a weight on our shoulders that needs unburdening.

This leads us to the first of three kinds of prayer: confession. Jesus teaches us to love our enemy. How difficult this is if the enemy is another. Even more so if the enemy is ourself. Standing sentry at the portal of our minds, this enemy is ever ready to fend off the influx of better thoughts. How quick we are to

remind ourselves that we have done wrong or been wronged, given or received pain, failed or been thwarted in our endeavors, missed out on some happiness or had it snatched cruelly away. The problem is, none of this does any good. Worst of all, we do not change, for the enemy within is a fatalist: "That's life. A pretty rotten business. Go ahead, stew. Given the circumstances, what else is there to do?"

The promise of confession is integrity. Confession is an honest confrontation with ourselves as we are. This, coupled

In its very essence, to pray for another is an act of reconciliation.

with a faith in forgiveness, can heal us. If we dare to delve into our brokenness, confess and beg forgiveness, the healing process will begin. Through confession, coupled with the will to change, we gain in strength and dedication. Having known what it is to be broken, we begin to discover what it is to be whole. Confession is a pledge toward wholeness. It cannot change the past, but it can help to bring the present out from under the shadow of the past. In this alone there is power.

A second kind of prayer links self to other, whether a person or a thing. At its most primitive, such prayer amounts to little more than begging for something we cannot have. Pray all we want for wealth or fame or happiness, in selfish prayer there is no power save the power of illusion. But by keeping ourselves mindful of others, of their needs and the ways in which our lives intersect with theirs, any number of good things may happen. First, we are taken outside of our own narrow precincts. This is true of the simplest of prayers, "God bless Mommy. God bless Daddy." And grandparents and friends and pets and the moon! Such a prayer is a basic expression of connectedness. We become part of all we pray

for, and it a part of us. Distances are bridged, our relationship to others becomes more organic, and thereby our wholeness is enhanced.

A more difficult example. We are estranged from a loved one. This estrangement has ever so many consequences which mar the present and darken the future. We are angry and so try to hide our anger. In such cases, those who are closest to us are sailing through dangerous waters. The most innocent maneuver may result in a collision. When we harbor bitterness or resentment within us, allowing our hearts to ice over, the slightest mishap may sink all hope for love. This is no way to live, either for us or for them.

Often our estrangement is the result of so many little things that it is hard to know where to begin unraveling it. Such estrangement tends to grow like a shopping list. The problem is, we can lose all sense of direction and never find the store. So the list grows, until we find ourselves carrying around a staggering inventory of grievances. No sugar, no cream, no warmth, no light. Late at night we tick off the items until they lull us into restless sleep.

For such a condition, no amount of accommodation will suffice to work a cure. An armed truce is no more than a reminder that the battle lines are drawn. Both parties remain on edge.

There is only one sure cure for estrangement. It is reconciliation. Reconciliation is not accommodation; it has nothing to do with compromise. It demands a change of heart, a radical refusal to be trapped by our bitterness. It requires that we remember that there is a bond between us greater and more powerful than anything that separates us: the bond of birth and death.

Though we have little power over what others think of us, we do have the power to free ourselves from our anger toward them. We picture them in our mind. And we pray for them. It is hard to hate and pray at the same time.

Reconciliation, with those we think we hate as with those we try to love, is a living symbol of that which, in theological terms, is called atonement. Atonement is, literally, at-one-ment, the redemptive uniting of parts into wholeness.

The moment we pray for others, our attitude toward them changes. And due to the relief we feel once unburdened of our spite, the way we approach them will change as well.

In certain instances, the only thing that stands between estrangement and reconciliation is an inability to imagine the possibility of reconciliation. In its very essence, to pray for another is an act of reconciliation.

The third kind of prayer is the most healing of all. It is a way of saying yes to life, a yes of gratitude and trust. Blending all dissonance into a larger harmony, putting all the parts in perspective of the whole, we say, "I am in Thy hands, Thy will be done." In such a prayer, we ask nothing of ourself or for another. We simply acknowledge life's wonder and mystery, not taking it for granted, but receiving it as a gift.

This is the most important of prayers, a loving token of fidelity to all that lies beyond our power to effect or change, an expression not of obligation but of appreciation, not of guilt but gratitude. It is a way of letting go and for a blessed moment being swept away.

In the Psalms it is called the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Not only do we sacrifice our ego by acknowledging the receipt of undeserved gifts, especially the gift of life, we also find our life rendered sacred by this same acknowledgment. Sacrifice means to render sacred. By suspending the claim of our own ultimacy, willfulness, and authority, we are freed to perform this sacrifice. The present becomes one with eternity. In eternity, division and brokenness are overcome. Where once we harrowed, we are hallowed and made whole. ■

Finding Healing Through the Mail

by **Beverly**, CLF penpal



Many UUs don't realize that the CLF ministers to over 350 incarcerated members through its Prison Ministry Letter Writing Program. Rev. Patty Franz matches incarcerated members of the CLF with free-world UUs for the exchange of friendly letters. Members of my own family don't understand why I do this. "If a person has done something terrible then they deserve to suffer, so why bother?" Why indeed?

I moved to California from Florida four months following the death of my beloved husband. He had been my world for over 20 years, and when he was gone I truly felt my future was all used up. I knew no one here, had no family close by as my four children are scattered around the U.S.

Then two years ago I was matched with Alex, who is in prison in Texas. Alex is extremely verbal, very bright, and almost a poster child for how to raise a career criminal. It is possible to look up a prisoner's conviction record, but I never felt it was relevant to do so. I wanted to be free to relate to a person, not an "offender."

The first letter exchange is a little like a "blind date" and when I recently re-read his first letter to me he stated he hoped he wouldn't be too much of a burden and interfere with my other "good works." "Beverly, I hope you're not swamped with numerous pen pal friends and that this letter isn't one of many that you do for the Fellowship Church out of compassion and good deeds. So maybe after awhile I'll become a headache to you. Chaplain Pat referred me to you, so you must be okay." I hastened to reassure him that I was not earning some kind of merit badge for good deeds, but was simply interested in exploring ideas and philosophies with another adult. I gave him some basic background bio and he did the same, and then we were off and running.

I never in my life would have believed just how much having a pen pal would change me. When I receive his letter and devour the words, I think deeply on how best to respond. I find myself doing some reading so I have a better understanding of the topic, but sometimes I just use my gut, and intuit what he's really asking or questioning. The most important thing is to let Alex know that he is special to me, and that we are equals in sharing this adventure of spiritual and intellectual growth. The letter exchange provides him the opportunity to escape the mental numbness and negativity that prisons seem to nurture, and being a letter writer gives me the opportunity to practice my faith regularly in a way I know makes a difference.

The letters from Alex are some of the most interesting reading I do. I enjoy hearing about the people in his earlier life and the experiences that shaped him. He gives detailed descriptions of prison life routines and the varied cast of characters, including the guards and other inmates. Alex recently wrote to Chaplain Pat and said "I didn't know what was expected from a friendship between me and your referral. I pretty much accepted out of courtesy and spiritual obedience to your kindness. For so long I've been an unsociable and self-imposed hermit. Beverly actually shattered all of the rude, crude and misconstrued arguments and ideas I felt at the time. My life has honestly been the richer for it. She showed me how to look beyond the exterior to the interior and to the un-ried voice of conscience. She makes you more than you are, if that's possible."

Flattering words indeed, but I am also "more than I was." So this is not some grand work, just my attempt to feel of some value in the world and to bring some beauty and joy into another's life. ■

Green Options

Earth Day (each April 22nd) is a global celebration, honored in more than 140 countries. Earth Day is the perfect time to bring earth-friendly practices into our daily lives.

One way to make a green choice is to arrange electronic monthly contributions to the CLF. Reducing paperwork through automatic donation arrangements not only



minimizes paper use and transportation, it also simplifies budgeting for you and for the CLF. Another idea: *Quest* can come to you each month via email (instead of a printed paper issue), or you can subscribe to our podcast version. You can easily make these changes by going to the CLF website, calling us, or indicating your preferences on the attached return envelope. Easy for you, easy for us, and easy on the planet. ■



GA 2011?

If you are interested in learning about being a CLF delegate to General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina, June 23-27, 2011, please contact Lorraine Dennis at clf@clfu.org or 617-948-6166. ■



Be a Prisoner Pen Pal

The CLF's Prisoner Pen Pal Program has many prisoner members who have not yet had the opportunity to be matched with a free-world correspondent. If you are interested in being a part of this program, go to www.clfu.org/prisonministry for more information. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I wanted to see Harriet Tubman's grave.

I wanted to see it enough that I drove from Boston, Massachusetts, to Rochester, New York, about 400 miles, for a speaking gig I ordinarily would have flown to. Tubman is buried in Auburn, New York, close to Rochester.

This was in 1993. At the time, I had a picture of Harriet Tubman on the wall behind my computer screen. Her courage and tenacity spoke to me as I was becoming visible in ways I had never dared before, inspired to free my own people.

I was then Director of the UUA's Office of Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay (and later Transgender) Concerns. In that capacity, I had discovered the somewhat invisible entity called "The Religious Right" and had suddenly catapulted into the public eye for exposing their homophobic agenda as based on bad religion. This is what I would do in Rochester, as I was all over the country. It is what I was doing, not only for UU's, but also for universities, secular gatherings, and media. I was terrified, in over my head, and Tubman's life story and her image helped me to be braver.

The drive to Auburn took longer than I'd expected. When I arrived, on a cold, snowy, muddy, winter afternoon, it was almost sunset. I parked and walked to the graveyard's office, hoping for a map to Tubman's gravesite. But it was locked up; I was on my own.

I looked around and began walking into the hilly graveyard. I had broken my leg the previous winter, falling on ice and snow, and I was nervous and hesi-

tant. But still I was determined to use the remaining light to see if I could find Tubman's grave. I hoped there would be signs guiding my way.

Suddenly a huge gathering of crows swooped through the air, seemingly out of nowhere, and landed in a tree about fifty feet in front of me. They began hollering so loudly that I stared at them for a moment, and decided to head for their location. Why not? They were not the kind of 'sign' I had in mind, but I had no better plan. As I neared the tree where they sat, they all leapt up off their branches and flew another fifty feet to a different tree. I followed them. They flew on to another tree just a little ahead. And so we went, deeper and deeper into the graveyard, into the final minutes of the day, the sky itself deepening to a brilliant peacock blue.

This process of freeing ourselves and each other from bondage is the work of our lives.

As I neared the crest of yet another hill and gazed up towards them, the crows unmistakably circled around a particular monument in the valley before me. They perched in not just one tree beside it, but four or five. No yelling and cawing here; they became very still. As did I, looking in fear at the way before me. This monument was at the bottom of a long hill. A long, slippery hill. The kind where it would be easy to break your leg.

But I was so close! So I laid back on my winter coat in the snow, and I coasted down that hill like a small child on a sled. I wore a parka—it was slippery. I slid down that hill looking up at the sky and when I stopped at the bottom, I saw hundreds of black wings ascend and noisily disappear.

I sat up, still on the ground, in an altered state from all of it—the crows, the sliding, the twilight—and I bowed

my head in awe before the monument. I looked up in the last moments of light. The stone was large, shiny white marble, looming before me. I squinted into the shadows for the name, "Tubman," or "Harriet Tubman."

I could not make out that name, because it was not there. Instead, in elegantly carved letters, in a clean square font, was a different name. MOORE.

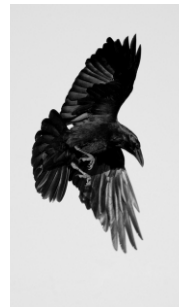


I fell back as if someone had punched me. I gasped, sputtered, and finally began to weep, lying flat on my back in the valley. Moore is a family name. My mother's father's name. My southern, slave-owning family name.

The crows were gone. It was me, in the dark, with a muddy coat, and falling snow and tears and this family name. After a while I stood up and somehow found the way back to my car.

I know Unitarian Universalists value reason highly, and this is a story about something else. Some of you will say this was all sheer coincidence. Make what you want of it. I'll tell you what I made of it then and make of it still.

While Harriet Tubman's courage and tenacity are the world's to admire, each of us must lead our own selves out of bondage. There is no abstract, universal, trek to freedom that we can access historically and gracefully, out of time and place. This process of freeing ourselves and each other from bondage is the work of our lives. Sometimes it takes us places we would never choose



to go. What is ours to do is precisely ours to do, but when we are engaged with our work and our healing, there is support available for us that we might not even imagine or believe. ■

April 2011

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

For Christians, Easter is a big deal holiday. Unitarian Universalists (Christian and otherwise) tend to focus on the life and teachings of Jesus, rather than his death. But for most Christians the Easter story of how Jesus died—and then reappeared to his friends three days later—is the central mystery of their religion. Of course, not all Christians (UU or otherwise) have the same understanding of what that mystery means.

Some Christians talk about "redemption," which basically means "buying back." When I was small some stores would give out green stamps or blue stamps, which you collected in little books. Then you'd take your book of stamps to a "redemption center" to trade them for toys or cookware or whatever. The Christian idea of redemption is kind of like that. Jesus, they believe, died for our sins: because he was the Son of God his suffering and death paid for all the bad things people had done or would do. Some Christians say that the Easter story means that they are "redeemed," bought back by Jesus Christ, who traded in his suffering for their souls.

Other Christians talk more about "salvation" or being "saved." "Salvation" and "redemption" are sometimes used as if they were the same—a way for souls to go to heaven—but they have very different meanings. Redemption means buying back, trading one thing (suffering) in for another thing (going to heaven). But salvation means healing. Like when you put salve—ointment—on a wound or a place that is sore. If you understand the Easter story as a story about salvation, then the story about Jesus appearing to his friends after he died is about healing. Not just how Jesus was healed, but also how his friends were healed from the



trauma of witnessing his death, and how Jesus asked them to preach his message of healing to the

world, and how every person can be healed, even when it might not seem possible.

It's important to remember here that healing can mean a lot of different things. There are stories of Jesus physically healing people just by touching them, but the healing by salvation isn't so much about healing bodies as it is about healing

Sometimes our souls get healed when people offer us kindness, when the world turns out to be full of unexpected sources of love.

souls. How do souls get healed? Well, there are plenty of different answers for that one. Some Christians would say that the way to heal souls is simply to accept that Jesus has saved you. But UUs tend to expect that each of us is more involved in our own healing, and in the healing of the world.

Sometimes our souls get healed when people offer us kindness, when the world turns out to be full of unexpected sources of love. Once, when I was maybe four or five years old, I got separated from my family when we were out on a busy street. I was too young and scared and confused to have any idea how to find them again (or to know that I should have just stayed put and waited for them). What I remember about the incident, along with my fear and confusion, is that some kind strangers saw that I was lost, and bought me an ice cream cone, and held my hand until they were able to connect me back with my parents. My soul got a little bit broken when I suddenly discovered that I was all alone in the world. And it got a little bit healed when people I had never seen before or since took the time to make sure I was safe.

Sometimes our souls get healed when we are the people who offer kind-

ness, and find connection. I read wonderful letters from people who participate in the CLF Prisoner Pen Pal program. It seems to be pretty common that folks in the CLF or other UU churches decide to join the program because they want to do something nice for another person. They know that life inside prison is very hard and lonely, and they know that doing something bad enough to land you in prison means that you've made a very bad mistake, but it doesn't mean that you are a very bad person. So they sign up to exchange letters with someone who is locked up away from their home and fam-

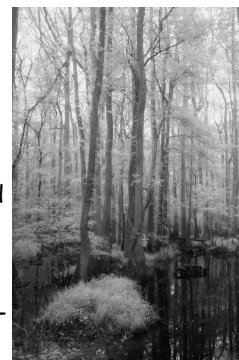
ily. And pretty often we hear from these people that the connection they create through

those letters is healing for their own souls, as well as for their pen pals in prison. These letter writers share from the heart with people whose lives seem very different, and find out that their souls are much the same.

Sometimes our souls are healed by silence, or music, or poetry, by letting something beautiful creep in.

Sometimes our souls are healed by a willingness to be amazed, like the other night when, very late, I stared up into the sky as the moon ever so slowly slid behind the earth's shadow and turned a deep red-orange in a full lunar eclipse.

And sometimes, perhaps, our souls are healed by the example of a person who tells hard truths, like the fact that it is possible to love people who are cruel to you. Although the story may be sad, our souls can be healed by the example of a person who is willing to live by hard truths, even if standing by those truths should lead to their death. ■





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Mending

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
What shall we use, and how is it
in the first place you've come to be torn?
Come sit. Come tell me.
We will find a way to mend you.

I would offer you so much, sweet Soul:
this banana, sliced in rounds of palest
yellow atop hot cereal, or these raisins
scattered through it, if you'd rather.
Would offer cellos in the background singing
melodies Vivaldi heard and wrote
for us to keep. Would hold out to you
everything colored blue or lavender
or light green. All of this I would offer you,
sweet Soul. All of it, or any piece of it,
might mend you.

I would offer you, sweet Soul,
this chair by the window, this sunlight
on the floor and the cat asleep in it.
I would offer you my silence,
my presence, all this love I have,
and my sorrow you've become torn.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
With these, I think, gently
we can begin: we will mend you with a rocking
chair, some raisins,
a cat, a field of lavender beginning
now to bloom. We will mend you with songs
remembered entirely the first time
ever they are heard.

We will mend you with pieces of your own
sweet self, sweet Soul—with what you've taught
from the very beginning.

by *Nancy Shaffer*, associate minister,
First Unitarian Universalist Congregation
of Ann Arbor, Michigan, from her medita-
tion manual *Instructions in Joy*, published
by Skinner House in 2002. Available from
the CLF library at www.clfuu.org/library
or (617) 948-6150. ■

