



Hunger and Abundance

BY BARBARA H. GADON, LEAD MINISTER, ELIOT UNITARIAN CHAPEL, KIRKWOOD, MISSOURI

Jesus and his people were on overload. They had been working day and night, healing the sick and helping whoever needed help. There was no rest, the gospel says, not even enough leisure time to eat. So they came to him, worn out, telling him about *all* they had done. Some of the gospels place this story right after the beheading of their beloved friend, John the Baptist, a wild man, and Jesus' first teacher. And so they were in grief, too. Jesus said, *let's get in a boat, let's get away from all of this and rest. Just spend some time together.* Sometimes when I've heard this story, I've thought this was where they were going to finally do the *spiritual* stuff—pray together, study Torah, really learn what God was about. I picture one of those spiritual vacations I see advertised in yoga magazines, with photogenic people in stylish yoga outfits posing on the beach in the Bahamas.

So imagine, you step off your yoga cruise ship, ready for a little retreat on the velvety white sands, and... *everybody has followed you there.* They all want a piece of you. You or I might've found this mighty irritating, and looked for a place to hide. In the midst of our grief, our exhaustion, we probably would have been like the disciples, who were ready to tell everyone to go home. In a nice way. But Jesus can't. He looks at the crowd of people gathering and feels—he can't help himself—compassion. I actually think that is the most important sentence in the story—Jesus looked at the crowd with compassion.

There probably *were* great crowds around him. Why? Well, I don't think it was for the reasons we are typically interested in Jesus today. I don't think it was simply because he provided great moral wisdom. Remember that these were people who were incredibly poor, on the edge of survival. Dominic Crossan says that the Greek word used here was more like *destitute*. They were probably people who worked all day long pressing olive oil or tending sheep, and still struggled to have enough to eat. Why would you follow someone in this case? What did you get? Why did you bring your sick relatives or your own ailing body to be healed?

There was little in the way of medical help for the sick, no hospitals or clinics, and so they were all over the streets. I don't know what kind of healing Jesus and the disciples practiced. But I have to believe that they did people some tangible, significant good, or why would the people have kept coming? I think going to Jesus and his disciples was like going to a free clinic, worship service, and soup kitchen, wrapped in one. These were people needing to be *fed* in some significant way. And people always need to be fed.

People today need to be fed, in greater numbers than we have seen in recent history. Within the past decade, dozens of food riots have broken out across the globe, causing political destabilization in addition to the more immediate suffering of starvation. An estimated 800 million people now go to bed hungry each night, a shocking number even for we who have somehow (not to our credit) learned to live with the knowledge of world hunger. The problem escalated to the point that the 2010 UN summit in Rome shifted its topic from climate change to the global food crisis. They came from their meeting urging the world to help. But they did not have much agreement about how to achieve this.

The food crisis comes at a time when we're already feeling overload about the problems of the world. When there are already several situations where we seem to have either no solution or no collective will to change in ways that would solve the problem. In her book *Writing to Change the World*, Unitarian Universalist

Quest

Vol. LXXIV, No 5

May 2019

There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.

—Mahatma Gandhi

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT HUNGER

- HUNGER AND ABUNDANCE
Barbara H. Gadon
- HUNGER BANQUET
Greg Ward
- HUNGRY GHOSTS
Joseph Boyd
- FROM YOUR MINISTER
Meg Riley
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING
Lynn Ungar
- POTLUCK
Lynn Ungar

psychologist and author Mary Pipher says that now, more than ever, we human beings go on overload with knowledge of problems of the world. We know about more things outside our immediate experience than ever before. It's harder than ever to look at the crowd coming at us with their need, to look at them with compassion.

Jesus sat down with the people, the story says, and he taught them many things.

And at some point, he realized how hungry they were. He must have felt the hunger in his own belly, having had "no leisure to eat." The disciples suggested that perhaps the crowd should be dispersed to the surrounding country and villages to go buy food for themselves. A reasonable suggestion, except that "this was a deserted place and the hour was very late."

God is food, holiness is food, mercy is food, justice is food.

Remember, too, that these were people who probably had no money. Just what did they think people were going to do? Jesus said, "No—you feed them." And they said, "Are we to go and buy 200 dinarii worth of bread?" One dinarius was a full day's wages, mind you. This was like saying *a million dollars*. One should read this line leaning hard on the sarcasm. (Thanks to J. Harry Feldman for this helpful bit of information.) They kept a collective purse—Jesus probably had a pretty good feel for the books for their operation. He would know they didn't have that much. They were sure they had him here.

He answered their question with a question—standard rabbinical technique—and asked, "How many loaves have you?" They answered, "five," sure they had him now. And then, the miracle of the story goes, he blessed

the loaves, as one would make the *motsi*, the Jewish blessing on the bread, at dinner on Shabbat. He had everybody sit in neat rows of hundreds and fifties, and handed it all out. And there was enough for everyone, with 12 baskets worth of leftovers.

There are two general interpretations of this story. One is pure magic. Jesus waved his magic wand and it was like turning the place into one big Costco, full of items in bulk.

The other way people interpret what happened is as a miraculous enlarging of people's hearts. They saw one boy who gave up his food for the crowd, and they reached into their bags, moved to share their own food.

The first one is not as bad as it sounds. It would be nice to believe that by faith in the creator, we could have an end to hurricanes, an end to earthquakes, an end to this food shortage we're facing now. Alas, though, its violation of natural law simply makes it an untenable interpretation for most rational sorts, and makes it easy for us to dismiss the story out of hand.

I prefer the other interpretation. If I were to choose a miracle, it would be that people were somehow given eyes to see one another, and hearts that were connected by their experience together. But this interpretation has problems, too. If people had truly brought lunch for themselves, why would they have looked so hungry to the rabbi? If they had come to him on impulse, as the story seems to imply, would they really have packed a picnic lunch with enough to share around? Each of the six tellings, in all four gospels, paints an absolutely impossible situation. Each cries out for a miracle.

For some time now, we've had some reliable miracles. Economic growth has been our solution to problems of poverty. "We're going to grow our way out of this mess," we keep hearing. Improved technology has been our magic wand. Environmentalist Bill McKibben

considers fossil fuels to be our greatest "miracle." They are powerful, remarkably easy to get, and highly concentrated. They replace human and animal effort. We now spend about 11% of our budgets on food—the generations before World War 2 spent 22%. And it comes from the rise of centralized, efficient production demanded by the large grocery stores. The one stop shopping we love. It's hard for us to understand the impact on most of the world, which lives so differently.

The 2008 report of the four-year International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, backed by the World Bank and UN, did not push for big technical fixes, much to the irritation of America and Europe. It came down on the side of "multifunctional" agriculture, which incorporates goals such as poverty reduction, water conservation and climate change adaptation alongside conventional efforts to increase production. It said that the biggest gains will come not from new "miracle crops" but from making existing science and technology available to the small scale farmers responsible for tilling a third of the world's land surface. Only by helping them to feed themselves—partly by improving distribution and markets—will the challenges be met.

What does this mean for us? There are a growing number of people urging us to rethink the gospel of endless economic growth, and endless technological growth.

People like Bill McKibben counsel that smaller and simpler lives for everyone—rather than insisting that everything keep getting bigger—would point the way out. I know that sounds about as likely as making giant loaves of bread and gigantic plates of fish with the flick of a wand. So many people would have to change in such fundamental ways. We are in a loaves and fishes story right now, an impossible situation. What will it take for us to feed one another?

Back to the gospel story. It gives Jesus the opportunity to ask one of his very favorite questions of the disciples: “Don’t you get it?” What’s the “it” here, what is there to get? “Religion,” writes Sara Miles, “is not so much about swallowing beliefs, as it is about learning how to see.” See with the eyes of mercy, with the eyes of compassion. And what we must learn to see, again and again, is how intimately we are all connected. How one person’s suffering is not so different from mine. The food crisis is asking this of us. It is asking us to see our neighbor, and feel their hunger. It’s not an easy thing to look at.

I remember one time I was asked by some friends to help them with their turn on the sandwich van, going to a designated place in their neighborhood and handing out sandwiches. People were collecting at the corner, I saw, and I suddenly felt tremendous fear and reluctance to open the doors. I felt the enormity of being one of the people inside the van handing out sandwiches, versus being the one on the sidewalk in need. I suppose I felt guilty. Perhaps I even felt their suffering was contagious, or something I did not want to know about. But once we started, I was surprised by how ordinary it felt. Some of them smiled, some didn’t. Some of them looked at me, some kept talking to their friends and took the sandwich without looking. I could feel, for a moment, a very natural connection—I eat sandwiches, you eat sandwiches. I get hungry, you get hungry. We are not so different.

God is food,
holiness is food,
mercy is food,
justice is food.



But God does not appear unless we look at one another and connect on this very ordinary, human level. The distribution of this God, found in food, is very much dependent on us. We must look at the crowd with compassion, or we will go hungry, too. ■

The Hunger Banquet



BY GREG WARD,
UU COMMUNITY
CHURCH OF SANTA
MONICA, CALIFORNIA

The invitations were elegant. They announced a hunger banquet. And as soon as people began receiving these invitations, I began getting calls. They were excited. Which made me smile. Because I knew they didn’t know what a hunger banquet really was.

For those who are unfamiliar with a hunger banquet, it’s not your regular dinner. People are invited to gather and eat, like a regular dinner. But not everyone is served the same things. In a hunger banquet, a hierarchy is established such that some get more than others. Just like our society—and our world. Some get a lot. Some get enough. And some get not enough.

I arranged for all invited to be assigned to one of three tables based on some arbitrary characteristic. I chose eye color. The objective was to make it something people had very little say in—like how we have no say in what family or what class we are born into.

The brown-eyed folks got to sit at the first table—the privileged table. This table was placed on the risers where the choir sat, a little bit above the congregation. They had a floral arrangement, matching china, polished silver and ruffled napkins. Two bottles of wine, sparkling cider, crystal pitchers of ice-water, candles and silk table-cloths sprinkled with little daisies. The table was arranged banquet style, like you’d see at a wedding, where guests sat all on one side looking out over the room.

The green or hazel-eyed folks were placed at the second table, below. It was somewhat less elegant. Real dishes went with paper napkins, a pitcher of water and juice.

The third table, for the blue-eyed folks, was placed around the corner by the entrance to the kitchen next to the big

trash cans. They had paper plates, plastic forks, Dixie cups and water. Their location was such that the privileged table couldn’t see them. But the middle table could. Interestingly, 10 of the 14 people at the middle table chose to sit facing toward them, with their backs toward the privileged table.

To provide an indication that some system was in place, I had asked two of our newest—and relatively unknown—members to stand as “guards.” I asked them to dress “officially.” One surprised me by coming in combat fatigues, army boots, sunglasses, with a beret and a nightstick. When the poor table saw him at parade rest, watching over the room, they began referring to him as *the man*. The guards were given almost no instruction, except to maintain order and civility, which at a friendly invitational dinner might seem unnecessary. But, after all, we were dealing with hungry Unitarian Universalists encountering injustice.

When the dinner was served, the privileged table received the greatest care. They started with tossed salad, fruit salad, bread and butter, carrots and onions, rice and finally, chicken divan.

The second table was served after a few minutes and received the green salad, bread, plain carrots, rice and chicken.

The third table received only rice. And there was an extensive delay before that came. By the time it did arrive, some had grown tired of waiting and sent one among them who was intimately familiar with the children’s religious education program on a reconnaissance mission to liberate half a box of Triscuits and a bag of Smarties from the snack cupboard.

This surprised me a bit. But, I confess, I really didn’t know what would happen. I had fully expected that the artificial groups I set up would quickly dissolve, food would be shared between tables almost as quickly as we set it out, and the evening would be spent talking about the gross inequity in the world.

But I was intrigued to see that this was not what happened. There was a hesitation. And what happened during this hesitation was what taught us the most about our goal of oneness and the work of justice required to move us there.

The people at the privileged table had two kinds of responses. The first—and I will clarify that this was said in jest—referred to how appreciative they were that the superior nature of the character had finally been recognized and that it was about time they were given the treatment that was their due.

The other half of that same table did not seem so proud. They did express discomfort upon realizing that, while they were going gourmet, others were going without. Yet there was also a strong sense of confusion about what the guards would do if they challenged the system. They were reticent to do anything to create a scene. And that reticence held the status quo in place. All in all, it reflected some truth about the privileged group in our society—justifying some entitlement while issuing vague discomfort about the state of affairs and slow to take any action to change their position of privilege.

The second table was, to my mind, the most interesting. One member of the table reported, matter-of-factly, that he knew what we were attempting and considered it old news. Consequently, the conversation turned toward the details of one another's lives. All in all, a fairly true picture of the middle class: generally intelligent people who work hard, are aware of the dynamics and problems of the world around them, but are too preoccupied with their own lives and those of their friends to effect much lasting change on systemic conditions of poverty.

The third table also seemed very adept at capturing the essence of the group they represented. They were pissed. They were hungry. And they minced no words about it being unfair. They weren't angry at the guards, who were just doing what they were told. They

also weren't really upset with the other tables—they were just playing their part in the game. But they were, without question, pretty unhappy with me.

They came to see me as the instigator. The maker and the keeper of *the system*. For all intents and purposes, I played the role of God. A figure whom the privileged throughout history have cited as the source of the privilege they enjoyed, God has always been an ambivalent figure for the middle class, sometimes treated with confusion or indifference. And God is a figure the poor have often felt promised them more. And the poor have been dining on empty promises for a long time.

When any in the world suffers, we all suffer.

None among us can deny the tragic inequality in our world. Unfortunately, pinpointing the ultimate cause behind it isn't as clear in real life as it seemed to be in our simulation. One of the truest statements made during the evening was during the discussion afterward, when someone pointed out that the experience that we simulated that evening was too simple. They pointed out that the roots of all oppression are far more complex and entangled in well-meaning endeavors than is ever initially perceived, and it is hard for any congregation to know how to do the good they so desperately want to do.

Trying to find oneness or navigate our way toward justice isn't always straightforward. We want to help, but we don't want to upset others in the process. We want to empower others, but we don't want to take power from those who have earned it. We want others to have a place at the table, but we hope it is not at the expense of our own. This can lead to paralysis, and eventually, despair.

But beyond despair, beyond the tangled details of cause and effect, beyond the many reasons why it is impractical

to work for change, there is something else: a realization that when any in the world suffers, we all suffer. As our inner cities are assaulted with strife, our suburbs are assaulted with fear. As the poor, the Black, the Asian, the Jew, the gay, the disabled and the disenfranchised are denied their due, we all feel the hunger of living on empty promises. And none of us—not the rich or the poor—ever get to know what it would be like to live in one world, where bridges are built and peace is possible for all people.

If the situation in my church had remained at a stalemate of confusion and inactivity we might have all gone home that night in despair. We might have demonstrated the reasons why 1% of the world's population owns 99% of the combined wealth. We might have justified why prisons are over-represented by the poor and minorities. We might have accepted the inevitability that guards will always be threatened by plastic utensils because crime is the only hope for the poor. And we might have lost hope for the kind of communion we all crave—the kind that says that all differences and all fear can be bridged by love. If the situation in my church had remained the way it began I might have lost hope.

But I knew my community. And I knew deep down that they would get indigestion dining on fear and injustice. That is why I invited them—to show how it is possible to overcome paralysis. And I was not disappointed.

As I was talking to some of the folks at the privileged table, I began hearing the echoes of rebellion coming from across the room. Voices from the underprivileged table started singing. Slowly at first. Softly... "We Shall Overcome..." Some started to join hands or link arms. Then, the people at the privileged table saw their opportunity. They rose above their hesitation, elbowed their way past the guards, and carried food across the room. When the guards feebly



Message from the Executive Director

BY JODY MALLOY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Greetings *Quest Monthly* readers! Thank you for being a loyal supporter of the CLF. Do you know that your support not only contributes to the production of *Quest Monthly* for you to read each month, but also allows us to reach Unitarian Universalists worldwide?

I'd like to share some of the work we did in 2018, so you can see why I tell folks that I love my job:

- We produced weekly online worship that is seen across the world, inviting everyone to hear the life-saving message of Unitarian Universalism.
- We curated worship, podcasts, and RE materials into Faith Rocket, a monthly subscription service for small congregations, so that emerging faith communities who need assistance can get use out of what we've produced.
- We produced #TheVUU, a weekly web show that focuses on topics relevant to the UU community, especially centered on antiracism and anti-oppression.
- We ministered to 900 incarcerated members, providing pen pals, a New UU class, other UU classes, UU reading materials, *Quest Monthly*, *UU World*—all of which is a written correspondence ministry. With lots of volunteer help, we sent three holiday cards to each incarcerated member—which was only a small part of the over 16,300 pieces of mail sent to members behind bars last year. For these folks, contact with CLF might be the only time that they are hearing that they are worthy and valued.
- We trained UUs across the country to understand the prison system and mass incarceration, and how we can help those who are incarcerated.
- We mentored three Learning Fellows, ministers in formation, helping them to expand their idea of what ministry is. We are an incubator for ministers preparing for the 21st century.
- We welcomed entrepreneurial ministers, giving them a home from which to launch their innovative ministries.

All of this work inspires me. We have a very lean staff, almost all part time, who collaborate to do this work. Our staff inspires me. And your consistent financial support inspires me. Thank you for being a part of our worldwide ministry. **We couldn't do it without you.**

2018 Congregations Who Supported the CLF

Many congregations choose to support CLF's work to bring Unitarian Universalism to all those who need it. Financial contributions go directly to support our programming, such as our prison ministry, our outreach via *Quest Monthly* and our internet-based worship. Congregations typically raise this money by sharing the plate for CLF. If you would like to see your congregation on this list, contact us and we can assist you in the process. **Thank you to all those congregations who have supported CLF during 2018:**

All Souls Bethlehem Church of Brooklyn, NY
Bay Area UU Church, Houston, TX
Champlain Valley UU Society, Middlebury, VT
Channing Memorial Church, Newport, RI
Heartland UU Church, Zionsville, IN
James Reeb UU Congregation, Madison, WI
Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA
Mount Diablo UU Church, Walnut Creek, CA
Northern Idaho UUs, Coeur D'Alene, ID
Our Home UU Church, Ellisville, MS
Unitarian Coastal Fellowship, Morehead City, NC
Unitarian Meeting of South Berkshire, Housatonic, MA
Unity Church Unitarian of St. Paul, MN
Unity Temple UU Congregation, Oak Park, IL
UU Church of Augusta, GA
UU Church of Concord, NH
UU Church of Fresno, CA
UU Church of Indianapolis, IN
UU Church of Lancaster, PA
UU Church of Stillwater, OK
UU Church of the Restoration, Philadelphia, PA
UU Community Church of Santa Monica, CA
UU Congregation of Danbury, CT
UU Congregation of Lakeland, FL
UU Congregation of Whidbey Island, Freeland, WA
UU Fellowship of Fredericksburg, VA
UU Fellowship of Marshfield, WI
UU Fellowship of the Peninsula, Newport News, VA
UU Women of Greater Lynn, Swampscott, MA

NOTE: We do our best to keep accurate and up to date records. If your congregation's name is missing, please let us know so we can apologize and do better next time!

attempted to stop them, the middle class quickly surrounded the guards and handcuffed them in debate about proletarian morality in postmodern capitalistic systems. They were quickly overpowered. The lower class, seeing the privileged people coming toward them with food, unlinked arms and welcomed them into the group. Everyone began to sing louder. Then it was only a matter of a few minutes before we were all—guards and cooks and people of every class—sitting at the same table discussing what happened and in complete agreement: it was all the minister's fault.

The way out of paralysis came when we heard the voices calling for action and heard the confusion within our own voice—and realized it was the same voice. The difference came when we recognized that all that separated us, whether authentic or artificial, did not, could not, *would* not divide us in our common humanity. The difference was made in recognizing that the good within us is as powerful as the complexity and the confusion of the system around us.

We will only work for others in their efforts to escape the yoke of bondage and oppression when we see ourselves inextricably linked to them. When we understand that their story is our story, their opportunity is our success. Coming together on the Side of Love is everyone's reward.

Since that evening, I've helped organize hunger banquets at four different congregations. On no occasion have we ever ended hunger or oppression. But I have seen six-year-olds stuffing rolls in their shirt to deliver them to their parents at the poor table. I've seen 75-year-olds loading up their walkers and cussing out guards on their way to bring dessert to children. And every single time, I've come to know a communion of people who never thought about the poor—or the rich—in quite the same way again. ■



Hungry Ghosts

BY JOSEPH BOYD,
MINISTER, FIRST UU CHURCH
IN YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO

It's possible to be surrounded by abundance and never notice. It's hidden in plain sight, and we miss it in the day to day grind—burdened by responsibility, meetings, traffic—waiting for some kind of relief. We miss it as we go about our usual way of thinking and doing, playing the role we've been cast in, or the one we've cast ourselves in. Too often we just accept the script that is handed to us by our parents, our society, even our churches, without much thought for what's truly possible. We sigh, and concede to limitations that are embedded in the script we've been given.

If we listen to this kind of advice too often we can feel cold, lifeless, alone. We yearn to take in the world, to love and be loved, and this is so hard sometimes. It takes a level of trust we can hardly imagine.

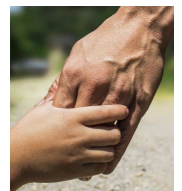
The Buddhist tradition understands this painful predicament. The tradition teaches about a malady where we can be surrounded by life's abundance, and yet lack the ability to take it in—to let it touch our heart, our soul. We can lack the ability to digest the beauty and possibility that is surrounding us. The tradition refers to these creatures who can't take in life's greatest gifts as *hungry ghosts*. Hunger is a painful thing. It's horrible to hunger for something that is not available. It is even more painful to hunger for something that proves to be right in front of you, but which you can't take in or digest. It gets missed. These hungry ghosts are depicted with long necks and distended bellies, showing the limitations of what they can swallow, and showing the toll a narrow neck or a narrow perspective can have on us.

It's part of the reason I think we need church. We want to live, and we know living can feel small and limited, but

we have a sense that perhaps there is a way to live with more freedom, more courage, more love. Perhaps we can find ways of seeing which show us the abundance that is waiting for us, but we've been too busy and bogged down to notice. We need help to get fed. In our shared hunger, our shared plight, even our shared sense of scarcity, we have a chance to stumble across something that truly satisfies.

Buddhism holds teachings on re-birth, and tradition says that these hungry ghosts will continue to be in a state of constant hunger until the day they find a way to allow in some kind of satisfaction and be re-born. I have thought a little bit about re-birth, and this is what I've come to: Every day is a chance at re-birth. We may feel we were born into a certain kind of life, a certain kind of story, and yet re-birth is possible every waking moment of our lives. We have a chance to wake up and see the life we're actually living, a life that is expansive, mysterious and connected to every living thing. This is possible, and it's not based on belief. It can be your experience or mine at any minute, on any given day.

I think this kind of re-birth has potential to show us a truth that is incredibly obvious but commonly missed—by feeding others, we too are fed. We can't find satisfaction by stubbornly trying to feed and satisfy ourselves. Our culture teaches us that we can, but it's a lie. The spell can be broken. All it takes is a little imagination. When we begin to develop the ability to listen to the growling stomachs in the world, we see something truly awesome and ordinary—our own hunger. And instead of wallowing in our own dissatisfaction and failed attempts for fulfillment, we reach out and we touch another. And the ghosts find what they were hungering for, and we are reborn. ■





From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

“You were ravenous right from birth!” This is the story I was told through my whole childhood. It puzzled me as I began to spend time with babies, because it seemed to me that when they were hungry, all of them were ravenous. Which is to say that they turned purple and screamed till they were fed. And then they calmed down.

I don’t remember my babyhood, but I do remember a very complicated relationship with food and hunger from earliest childhood. When my parents told me that I was ravenous from birth, it always felt laced with shame and judgment. This, I think, was because of two factors—one, my gender, and two, more essentially, that I was always chubby. When I was young, just a little chubby. As I aged, and largely due to dieting and external controls on food, chubbiness turned to obesity.

As someone who has lived with “weight issues” my whole life, hunger is a complicated thing to talk about. I grew up in a household where there was enough food and we did not worry about where the next meal would come from, so there was never a question of physical hunger. Someone I know who had to live with hunger describes it thus: “I couldn’t focus, couldn’t think straight, couldn’t keep my energy up... at times I remember thinking about what it would be like to die of starvation.”

This was never my experience, and I know from others who lived with it that the trauma that comes from genuine hunger, especially in childhood, never goes completely away, no matter how circumstances change. My experience was that there was food around, plenty of food, but that I was not sup-

posed to eat it. That I was bad if I ate it. This led to a different kind of hunger, to a distrust of what my own body wanted and needed and an externalization of how I thought I “should” eat. That kind of hunger led to secret eating, shame about eating, and a sense that my hunger was insatiable.

There is an insatiable hunger that arises from being out of sync with your own body.

Beginning when I was about seven or eight, and family photos show me on the chubby side of being normally sized, my parents locked the food in a closet. There was food in the refrigerator—things like condiments and leftovers—but other than that, food was impossible to get unless it was served. Mealtimes, however, were fraught with anxiety. We had to “clean up our plates,” whether we liked the food or hated it. Many nights ended with my father sitting at the kitchen table glowering at me while I sat defiantly by a half-eaten vegetable or half-drunk glass of milk, watching the hours tick away until bedtime. At breakfast, the same food, which had been on the table all night, would be served up as breakfast.

There is an insatiable hunger that arises from being out of sync with your own body, with your own rhythms and needs, likes and dislikes. Other female friends have told me how shame and hunger interacted for them, and I’ve heard a huge variety of stories about women told they were too thin, too fat, or simply hungry when they shouldn’t be—who also felt shamed about hunger or lack of hunger. I did not ask other genders but I suspect they also have complicated narratives to share. Thirty percent of the American people are obese. Depending on which study you believe, between 30 and 75% of

American women have eating disorders of one kind or another. These numbers correlate, I think, to the quantity of processed food we consume, but also to some deeper hungers which are not being honored or addressed.

By now, I have engaged in so many forms of controlling what I eat that I couldn’t even begin to list them all. Diets, “food plans,” restrictions from certain processed foods, call them what you want. What I notice is that the times I am in best relationship with food and with my body are when I am eating with people I care about and we are eating food prepared with love and care, living a life where I am engaged with and connected to others.

I can’t get my childhood back, or re-do the shaming messages that permeated my relationship with food and hunger and my body. What I can do is refuse to pass that shame and judgment on to others. I refuse to judge anyone’s appetites or choices, to presume that I know what anyone else needs for their own body, to dictate when or what other people should eat. I refuse to participate in the shaming of anyone about their body or their appetite (or lack of appetite).

And I celebrate good food with friends and family, paying attention to how food makes me feel and honoring those feelings, trusting my own body. For me, it’s been the work of a lifetime, but I am grateful to have made some amount of peace with myself about it.

Do you hunger for meaning?

For connection? Are you looking for ways to feed your mind and heart and soul? The CLF is available 24/7 to address these hungers and nourish the spirits of all who come looking. Please do what you can to enable the CLF to continue to feed a spiritually hungry world by sending a check in the enclosed envelope or by giving online at clfu.org/give.



REsources for Living

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

If, like me, you are fortunate enough to have a refrigerator and the means to fill it, it is possible that you have a tendency to stand in front of the open fridge, staring at the contents and wondering what there is to eat. It is even possible that some of us do this multiple times a day, staring at the shelves as if something would have magically appeared while the door was closed.

The thing is, when I stare at my open refrigerator—or at my open snack cupboard—it's not just that I'm hungry. I'm hungry for something in particular, but I don't know what. And so I stand there, wondering if what would satisfy me at this moment is avocado or cheese—or maybe both together on toast. What exactly is it that I *want*?

You could quite reasonably argue that my refrigerator-gazing habit is silly—I pretty much know what's in there with the door closed, since I did the shopping and the cooking myself. And it is certainly not energy efficient to stand there letting the cold air out and the warm air in. But I would contend that the question that goes along with staring at the food is absolutely crucial.

What do I *want*? What *exactly* do I want? I imagine that pretty much all of us spend a lot of time dissatisfied with our own personal lives and with the world in general. We hunger for work that is meaningful and restorative rest and caring relationships and fun times and a world that is more just. And many of us have gotten pretty good at



recognizing and sharing the many things we see that are wrong with the world—racism and homophobia and sexism and ableism and environmental degradation and corruption in government and the whole long list of very real, and often devastating, problems.

And it matters to identify those problems, whether personal or social. We need a clear analysis of what has gone wrong and why. But it seems to me that we often assume that identifying the problem is the same as finding a solution. Somehow we seem to think that if we tell our partner or our child how their looking at their phone during dinner makes us nuts, it should fix the relationship. Or maybe we figure that by sharing news of the latest police atrocity against a person of color on Facebook we are dismantling white supremacy.

And those are both perfectly good things to do. But they aren't solutions. Solutions don't start with what is wrong. Solutions start with the question *What do I want?* And the more precise we can be about what we want, the more specific we can be about how we might be able to get there.

What do I want from my family at dinner time? I want to hear about each person's day, their successes and frustrations. I want to look in the eyes of the people I love. I want to share a story about something that happened to me today. I want to make plans for what we will do on the weekend. I want to hear about an idea you had or a book you read or something you learned.

When I know what I want, I can ask for it. I can make a plan for how I might get it. I shift the focus from how the other person is wrong to concrete steps that would move in the direction of something that is better. Of course, getting to those solutions is not necessarily easy. What I want may be in conflict with what someone else wants. Powerful forces may stand in the way of what I want. But creating change is

only possible when you move step by step down the path of *what exactly do I want?*

To be clear, I'm not saying that there is some magic power that will manifest what you want if you just imagine it. I'm not a fan of the power of positive thinking, or of the prosperity gospel which seems to generate so much more prosperity for its preachers than for its followers.

Solutions start with the question *What do I want?*

The question *What exactly do I want?* is pragmatic, useful. What do I want? Justice. What *exactly* do I want? Well, it's a long list, and I'm going to have to choose where I will focus my attention at any given point in time. I want an end to racist policing. OK, but that's really what I *don't* want. I don't want racist policing. What *do* I want? I want police who understand their job as protecting and serving the entirety of the community where they work. I want police to choose de-escalation over force whenever possible. I want the police department to listen to the community about what would make people feel safer. I want police officers to be accountable for their behavior.

That list could go on and on, and each piece could be broken down into smaller pieces. But when I know what I want I can find other people who want the same thing, and we can find points in the system where we can exert pressure to accomplish those goals.

Maybe my standing in front of the refrigerator pondering what exactly I might be hungry for is a waste of time and energy. And it is possible to get what you wanted purely as a delightful surprise, without even knowing the hunger was there. But if you intend to actively pursue positive change, then the more exactly you know what you want, the better position you are in to make it happen. ■



Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist

24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

You can listen to audio recordings of *Quest Monthly*, read back issues or get electronic versions of the text to share with friends (and much more) at questformeaning.org

Quest Monthly Editorial Team: Adrian Graham, Stefan Jonassen, Janet Lane, Kat Liu, Beth Murray, Niala Terrell-Mason, Meg Riley, Arliss Ungar, Lynn Ungar, editor

Copyright 2019 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest Monthly* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. ISSN 1070-244X

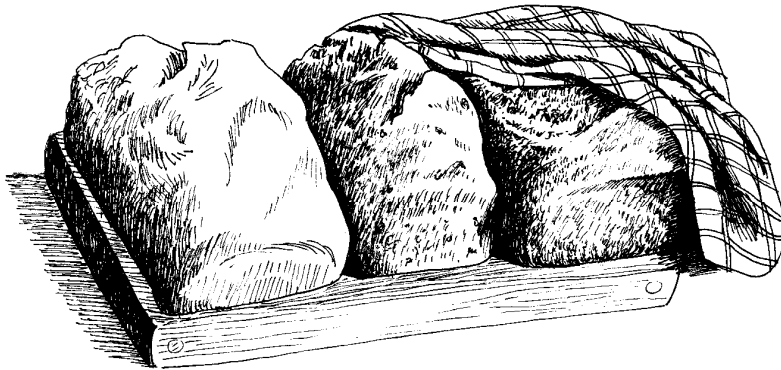
CLF Staff: Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest Monthly* editor; Mandy Goheen, director of prison ministries; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Beth Murray, program administrator; Judy DiCristofaro, fiscal administrator; Hannah Franco-Isaacs, social media coordinator and administrative assistant; Andrea Fiore, webmaster.

Learning Fellows: Margalie Belizaire, Antonia Bell-Delgado, Rodney Lemery and Jessica Star Rockers

Web Site www.clfuu.org — Email clf@clfuu.org — Toll-Free Line 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150

CLF Jewelry at *inSpirit*, The UU Book and Gift Shop 800-215-9076

CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA



Potluck

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

Sure, there are grand cathedrals
that proclaim God's glory to the heavens,
preachers who shout the word unto the faithful,
gilded temples rich with incense and chanting.
Who doesn't want to reach out
and try to grasp the eternal?
And shouldn't we try 10,000 ways
to build the Kingdom of Heaven?
Whatever your theology, we all
have our religion. This is mine:
Bring the best you have to offer.
Be fed by what is on the table.
Be grateful for the feast.

*Lynn's book of poetry, Bread and Other Miracles,
is available at lynnungar.com*