



The Wisdom of Trees

BY RUTH MACKENZIE, MINISTER OF PASTORAL CARE AND WORSHIP ARCHITECTURE, FIRST UNIVERSALIST CHURCH, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

This month we are taking on the gnarly topic of *sacrifice*. It is a concept that makes many of us uncomfortable, distrustful and a little bit surly, and rightly so. The religious tenet of sacrifice has kept women in abusive relationships, created the justification to wipe out whole nations of people, destroyed landscapes in an equation of loss versus gain that usually involves some form of violence or coercion, and is destructive in its nature.

But today I want to start with trees, trees that say over and over again, “How can I give my love away?” Trees that in essence live out love, and might just share some wisdom about how we can reframe and reconsider sacrifice.

In 1997 a young PhD student, Suzanne Simard, went out into her beloved forests of British Columbia, where she had been born and raised and shaped, to conduct an experiment for her doctoral project. She wanted to see how carbon moved from tree to tree. So she set up an experiment in which she planted a Douglas fir and a paper birch next to one another. She labeled the trees with isotopes, or markers. One tree got C14, and the other C13, so she could track what was being exchanged between the trees. She then went on to shade the trees with little tents throughout the multi-year experiment to create different scenarios to which the trees might respond.

In the first year of the experiment, with the trees growing naturally, the Douglas fir and the paper birch did indeed find connection with one another and exchanged nutrients and carbon in this beautiful reciprocity between species. They used the great underground highway made up of fungi or mushroom networks and their own root systems in this symbiotic communion.

Now, in the second year she tried something different. She shaded the Douglas fir to different degrees with her tents. The more the fir tree was deprived of light and air, the more stressed out the fir became, and the more nutrients and carbon the birch gave to fir tree.

This was the exact opposite of everything science had said so far, that competition was and is the driving force of nature, that evolution depended on survival of the fittest and exploitation is baked into our DNA. Instead, Suzanne was coming to understand the deeply cooperative nature of life, that one species would sacrifice for another’s well-being in some kind of great exchange.

She characterizes this pivotal experiment as elementary in comparison with what we know now, and yet it was such an important awakening in forestry and science. She recounts how people threw rotten eggs at her after her paper was published, because it so upended their notion of the order of things.

In those days no one used the word “communicate” when characterizing the relationship between trees in a forest, but that is exactly what’s going on. Scientists are coming to understand what indigenous folks have been saying for a millennium or more: *the trees talk*. When you step onto a forest floor there are hundreds of miles of fungal and root networks below your feet, hundreds of miles of communicating software.

- What we call a forest is actually a fraction of what a forest really is. Most of it is below the surface of the ground, far from the human eye.
- Forests have elders, trees who nurture their community of neighbors and young,

Quest

Vol. LXXIV, No 9

October 2019

You can sacrifice and not love. But you cannot love and not sacrifice.

— Kris Vallotton

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT SACRIFICE

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and provide defense, nutrition, support and structure.

- We know that when a tree is sick or is experiencing some kind of insect infestation it sends out an alarm message to the other trees around it saying: “Protect yourself, I’m sick.” And they do.
- Forests store massive amounts of carbon, and in fact are doing their best to counterbalance the lopsided ratios of greenhouse gases.

This is not what I say as a theologian; this is what scientists are discovering about forests, and indigenous peoples have lived and breathed in their cultural and religious patterns since time immemorial.

The forests are telling us something about love, and sacrifice, and this great exchange that is available to us all if we would but root ourselves in the question *How can I give my love away?*

I once sat with an old priest as I was trying to figure out my path in ministry. We were talking about living life as a *sacrament*: making my life a visible sign of an invisible spiritual truth.

He stopped me mid-sentence and asked: “May I?” My journal was sitting open between us, so I could take notes. He took my pen and drew an infinity sign. And then he said,

“Sacrament is more than making the spiritual visible. It is more than giving up or sacrificing in order to be spiritually good. There is something in the giving that increases the gift, and comes back on itself in this experience of receiving, an offering that expands the well-being, the life force in the exchange. It is the exact opposite of coercion, or violence or exploitation. It is a way into unitive living.”

I can’t help but think of the forests as I think about that conversation and the concept, the practice, of sacrifice, which means to *make holy, a holy exchange*. It’s about love.

Love is many things. It is energizing. It is joyful. It is intimate. It is powerful. It is life changing, and it demands sacrifice. Love has costs—that’s the honest truth of it.

I think this is what Jesus was talking about when he was describing the kingdom of heaven, or this idea of right relationship, a network of justice and peace that can emerge in the here and now of human community through love. I imagine him taking us on a walk in a forest, and talking to us about the trees, who know that you love your neighbor—all the hundred thousand species of your neighbors—as an extension of yourself, and when you do that the community is transformed, and health and wholeness of

the forest abounds.

If we don’t get our heads around sacrifice I don’t know how we are going to address the huge issues staring us in the face. How are we going to address climate change without coming to grips with love for our planet that costs something? If we don’t get our heads around sacrifice, I don’t know how we as white people will ever get our heads around reparations, by which I mean, as TaNehisi Coates writes in his essay in *The Atlantic*, “The Case for Reparations”:

our collective biography and its consequences as the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely...more than recompense for past injustices, more than a handout, a payoff, hush money or a reluctant bribe...but a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.

Coates is talking about sacrifice in its true form, an offering that comes back on itself and is experienced as unitive living.

I for one, will go to the forest. I will look for a mother tree, and ask her to teach me. I’ll say, “I am open. Would you tell me about the meaning of love, and sacrifice, and the great exchange of which you and I are a part?” And I know she will share her wisdom, because *trees talk* and they know the true meaning of sacrifice. ■



American Sacrifice

BY REV. KAREN LOUISE HUTT, VP FOR STUDENT FORMATION, VOCATION AND INNOVATION, UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE TWIN CITIES, MINNESOTA

Sacrifice is a powerful, ancient, evocative word that conjures images of animals slaughtered in rituals to bind a community together in a celebratory feast for a long-awaited harvest after a drought. Sacrifice can be a visual, visceral and vivid concept that attracts our curiosity but repels us morally. Sacrifice is also described as a blessed act of holy reverence, a necessary rite to cleanse the soul of an individual or restore the hope of a people.

The concept of sacrifice is a complex religious, social and political construct whose meanings derive from cultural experiences and expectations, but I want to explore sacrifice as a political act associated with social violence. These days political and social sacrifice seems ubiquitous, from the rhetorical mobilizations at the U.S. southern border; to the ideological sacrifice of austerity for the poor and largess for the rich; to the “necessary” constructs of neoliberalism and libertarianism that emphasize privatization, deregulation, and unfettered free markets over public institutions and government services. We see the sacrificial environmental violence associated with the lack of urgency to address a rapidly changing climate.

Drill down into the data for an hour, and you will see that sacrificial thinking is the new normal. The motif of “sacrifice” or

“blessed brutalities” and sanctioned violence permeate all layers of the social and cultural fabrics purporting to offer an explanatory framework for contemporary imperial American practices. Each instance of our blessed brutality—whether it is the execution of Quakers in Boston in the 17th century, the enslavement of Africans, the genocide of native people, or the abuse of wives in the early American republic—is all a distinct trajectory that is the bedrock of the American empire of sacrifice.

Yes, friends, today American sacrifice is an intentional machine gun mounted on a hill of lies that is aimed at the rule of law, the truth and role of expertise. Everywhere you turn, it seems, some form of sacrifice is rearing its head, demanding tribute and governed by an algebra of expected returns. The transactional nature of sacrifice creates unholy alliances and disturbing binary outcomes of either/or.

But friends, sacrifice also comes in the disguise of moral control.

When we look more closely at sacrifice, we see that sacrifice is a form of violence that places itself in relation to a desired effect, so that the gain depends upon the loss or destruction of something—call this *something* the offering. The conscious act of sacrifice links the two. The offering might be a black rooster or a packet of tobacco, but it could just as well be a species, a landscape, the heart of a captured enemy or the youth of a nation. What matters is the necessity of this destruction within a logic that renders the destruction understandable—and worthwhile—as a means to some higher gain. Sometimes the terms are blunt, issued as a judgment: *This species is common, uninteresting or of “least concern.” This landscape is worthless, remote or uninhabited—it can be destroyed. The minimal value of what*

stands to be destroyed will be recovered, many times over, in the projected return.

But friends, sacrifice also comes in the disguise of moral control. Just pay attention to the arguments that weave through the next housing development, the next culled species, the next police review board, the next military intervention, the next cut to the Special Olympics. Sacrifice is almost always a mechanism in which loss and gain have been made equivalent, the balance settled—like trading a mountain for jobs in the mining sector, a forest for a highway and a faster commute.



Derrick Bell was the first Black tenured professor in the law school at Harvard, and founder of the academic discipline of critical race theory. His 1992 book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* includes an allegory entitled “Space Traders,” which explores what happens when extraterrestrials make first contact with the United States—using a holographic projection of Ronald Reagan—and offer to solve all of the country’s economic and environment problems. As proof of their power, the aliens turn the Statue of Liberty into solid gold and clean the polluted air over Los Angeles and Denver. The extraterrestrials have a price for this service. All Black Americans must be given to the aliens, for purposes unknown.

Will African-Americans become food, pets, subjects for experimentation? Perhaps they will be feasted, protected or worshiped? The extraterrestrials provide no answers. Could this be the ultimate solution to the centuries-old “Negro Problem”? A Republican president and his administration debate the merits of the offer from the aliens and eventually decide that the American people should vote on the matter.

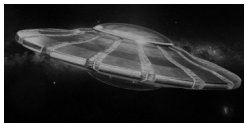
Of course, this outcome has the super-

ficial veneer of being “fair,” because the outcome was “democratic.” The safety, security, and freedom of Black Americans are treated as something illusory, debatable, something that can be compromised. The historic resistance to providing Black people inalienable civil and human rights makes the results clear for the majority of white voters. “Space Traders” concludes with millions of Black Americans—much like their ancestors being loaded into the bowels of slave ships centuries before—being marched at gunpoint into the cargo holds of the alien vessels. A return is calculated, and the decision is made to execute a sacrifice.

When this book came out in 1992, I remember talking about it with Black and white friends and our reactions were reminiscent of the OJ verdict in 1995. Very different responses. Many white friends were horrified by the story, unable to believe that such a vote could happen in the year 2000 when the story was set. Many Black friends were horrified that the white people were so naïve as to believe that it could not happen. And there was still a small set of us (me included) who pondered leaving the US for what could be a better life with the aliens. Many of us said that anything might be better than this place. I was willing to take that trip on the spaceship because the unknowable future might provide me with a new hope that I lack after 400 years in America. What would it be like to live in a world where I am not vilified, minimized, objectified or pacified by a system that has struggled so desperately to obliterate me and my ancestors?

Friends, remember the basic tenets of sacrifice. The sacrificial offering must be destructible—but also, it cannot be worthless. If anything, it must be exalted, because the destruction of its value is what renders the sacrifice worthy, even heroic. Sacrifice infuses the destruction of value with value, justifying itself not only in the pro-

spect of a return, but also in the inherent nobility of surrender. Here the idea becomes not just dangerous, but also insidious, continuously threatening to identify destructive surrender not just as moral action, but also as the very ground of morality. To be good—to be a good citizen, a good person—is to surrender what you value, what you love, for a “higher”

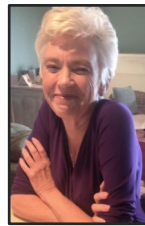


cause. In “Space Traders,” one of the ideas floated by the government was to create a selective service for Black people to volunteer to go with the aliens as a duty to country.

As Unitarian Universalists we have the imperative as people of faith to be spiritually animated by the sacrificial violence all around us. We need to be animated enough to see the sacrificial violence in policies that appeal to our heads and ignore our hearts. We need to be animated enough to dismantle false equivalences of sacrifice. We must be animated so we can demand answers, so we can resist the duplicity of sacrifice. We must make our faith three-dimensional enough to resist sacrifices out loud. When people of faith and goodness charge head on into that sacrificial altar to destroy it, the mechanism of sacrificial thinking will be disassembled, their logic revealed, their syntax demystified, and their weapons made inoperable.

So pause for a moment at the next “justified” sacrifice you are asked to vote on or participate in, the next “trade-off sacrifice,” and dwell on these questions: What is hiding among the lines of spreadsheet calculations and seemingly innocent platitudes of this sacrifice? Where is the scapegoat and how is sacrifice being framed? How does this sacrifice hide in plain sight? Whose hopes stand to be fulfilled in this and whose losses are guaranteed? And where do I stand as a person of faith? ■

Always Faithful



BY REV. JAN CHRISTIAN,
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I have learned about faithfulness and sacrifice as a result of a very strange journey I have been on since I inadvertently found some of the men who were in Vietnam with my older brother, 2nd Lt. Robert M. Christian Jr., “Bobby” to me, who was killed on April 11, 1969.

My son, Luke Christian, did an internet search for his own name and turned up a webpage where some of my brother’s Marine brothers paid tribute to him. In the years since then I have met with many of those men and even attended their reunions.

After my brother’s death in Vietnam, I saw him as a victim more than anything else. My brother joined because he received a draft notice after he graduated from college. He wrote a poem questioning war shortly before his death. The Marine Corps took a gentle young man who was taught “Thou shall not kill” in church and turned him into a killer. It’s hard for me to even speak that sentence; but, of course, that is what young Marines are trained to do. The Marine Corps part of his life was not something I wanted to dwell on and so, for many years, I did not.

The Marine Corps motto is *Semper Fidelis*: Always Faithful. Many of the guys end their email messages with “Semper Fi” or “S/F” and I often end mine with “Always Faithful.” We are all faithful, but to what or to whom? When this journey began, I would have said that my faithfulness was quite different from Marine Corps faithfulness. I would have said theirs is a blind faithfulness and that mine is a questioning faithfulness. I would have spoken about the differences in how we view doubt and ambiguity.

But what I have learned has both surprised and humbled me.

Marines have a commitment to leave no body behind. For these men, it meant that they would risk death to haul a body out of a rice paddy. My mom used to say, “Do not spend money on me when I’m dead. Wherever I die, dig a hole under me.” I would have also taken this to mean that I shouldn’t risk my life to haul her body out of a rice paddy.

In one conversation with a Marine, I said, “I can’t imagine my brother would have wanted someone else to risk their life to retrieve his body. I would hate to think that others might have died to do that.” He looked at me like he didn’t know where to start, because I just didn’t get it. He was right, but now I get it. Everything hinges on what we are willing to do for one another. Our willingness to sacrifice ourselves to protect one another is everything. We are all in this together. We are all we have. We are the saviors we’ve been waiting for.

The greatest sin is to put your own safety above the safety of others. The higher your rank, the greater your position of privilege, the greater the sin. When we put our own safety first, we are lost and so is everyone else.



There is no such thing as individual salvation. We are lost or saved together. When we know that others will put our safety before theirs, all things become possible.

There is another part of “leave no body behind” that illuminates Marine faithfulness. You are part of something greater. It began before you and it will go on after you. You enter into a stream of history and you will be remembered. You are part of a living tradition. Your memory and your sacrifice will not be in vain. Your Marine

brothers will continue to carry you with them, whatever the cost.

And my brother's Marine brothers have continued to carry him and others who made the ultimate sacrifice. While still in the midst of war, these boys and young men contacted family members of killed and wounded brothers. They sent their own family members to visit the sick and wounded. They came home and named sons after fallen brothers. One son is named Robert Christian Ager. They made pilgrimages to The Wall just to touch a name. One of the men drove 2,400 miles to attend the memorial service of the man whose face he first saw when he woke up after losing his left arm in a firefight. Whenever they gather for Company or Battalion reunions they hold memorial services.

Another part of Marine faithfulness is that the right thing is not always the easy thing. You do it anyway. Let's say, for example, that the sister of a Marine calls you out of the blue to ask you about a day that you have relived many times. By that, I do not mean you have remembered it, but rather that you have relived it. You were the Company Commander that day. When you think of that day, you are filled with regret and guilt and it is as if you are back in that place and time. The sister doesn't know that even though you met your wife right after you returned from Vietnam, you have never spoken to her about it. What do you do? You sit down with her.

You ask for a piece of paper and you draw a map and you touch it several times before you can bring yourself to say, "They said, 'Let's put a company in there and see if it can survive.'" You look over at your wife who is hearing this for the first time. Her eyes are wide and full of tears. You tell the sister that you called her mother when you got back to San Francisco. It is like you have the phone in your hand again. You hear the mother's voice, "My boy.... What happened?"

We need one another. Others are in need of us. We owe others a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid; it can only be honored. Doing the right thing often requires sacrifice. It is not always easy. We do it anyway. I can sadly say that the United States Marine Corps did a better job of teaching my brother those lessons than the religion of his childhood.

It is easy to say of Marine faithfulness: "Well, that sort of thing requires an enemy. It requires not questioning authority. It requires brainwashing people. You have to get them young." At least it has been easy when I have said these things. It's easy for me to denigrate sacrifice based on what the sacrifice is for and to even lull myself into believing that sacrifice and extremism of some sort seem to always go together. I have often trivialized what people are willing to do for their faith because I have not respected what they put their faith in or the ways in which others take advantage of that faithfulness.

I find that, in the name of liberal religion, we often trivialize sacrifice. In ways both subtle and obvious, we give the impression that sacrifice is for people who can't think for themselves, less independent-minded sorts. Liberal religion often smacks of the old commercial which tells us "Have it your way." Life is a buffet and you get to choose. If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it. You even get to complain about what other people are eating or what is on the buffet table or how it was served. I have often heard liberal religious folks brag about how little their faith requires. Many of us don't even want to use the word faith or faithfulness, let alone sacrifice.

We are not sure we even like "clear expectations." Some of the most heated, emotional discussions in the congregation I served have been about what we could or should expect of members. Some are concerned that expectations might be seen as foster-

ing exclusivity. There is concern that we might "turn people off." We are reluctant to ask anyone for anything that they may not want to give or be able to give. This is especially true when it comes to financial support. In some religious traditions, it is assumed that people will tithe by giving 10% of their income. If everyone tithed in the last congregation I served, we would have had about an extra \$900,000 dollars a year to bend the arc of the universe toward justice.

I think liberal religion can and should stimulate me to ask: What am I living for? What am I willing to die for? What am I willing to sacrifice for? What am I willing to put above my own comfort? To whom or what do I owe a debt of gratitude that can never really be repaid, but only honored? What does a life of gratitude look like? What would it mean to be faithful to what I say I believe?

I have used the word sacrifice the way it is typically used, meaning "to give something up." But when we look at the root meanings of the word, we find that it is not about *giving something up*, but rather about *making sacred*. We might question what people are making sacred through their actions, but do we really question the act of making sacred, of finding something worthy of our faithfulness?

I think war is evil. It's indicative of massive human failure. If we aren't going to sacrifice for war, we had better start sacrificing for peace and for justice. The answer is not less sacrifice; it's more sacrifice. If sacrifice and faithfulness are only for others, then we need to be prepared to live by someone else's faith or with the ramifications of their faithfulness. Each of us has cause to live a life of gratitude for all we have been given. We are called to work for justice and to bind up the broken. Imagine what it would look like if we, too, could say that we are "Always Faithful" to our highest ideals. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
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The roots of violence: Wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, politics without principles.

This Gandhi quote has haunted me for years, as I've wondered: What does it mean to worship with or without sacrifice? Does Unitarian Universalism call for sacrifice? Is it a root of violence if we do not participate in sacrifice?

So, seeking wisdom on the matter, I tried an experiment. First I went to my personal Facebook page, and I asked my wide assortment of associates (the word *friends* being highly overused)—*What is the biggest sacrifice you've ever made?* Overwhelmingly, the responses were about having or not having children, doing or not doing things because of the needs of a spouse or family member, paths taken and not taken for reasons other than personal choice. No one mentioned religion of any kind, including Unitarian Universalism, as a source of sacrifice.



Then I went on the "CLF Coffee Hour" Facebook page, where discussions flow on all kinds of topics, and asked, *What's*

the biggest sacrifice you've ever made? What motivated you to make it? Do you think Unitarian Universalism demands any kind of sacrifice?

There the conversation got very interesting! Here are some of the things people shared:

Those of us who came to UU from authoritarian churches had to sacrifice

certainty. No longer do we have someone to tell us what we need to believe and constantly reassure us that our doctrines are correct. But when we let go of certainty we open ourselves to seek and find wisdom and inspiration in those traditions we had dismissed as false. So the sacrifice becomes gain rather than loss.

What does it mean to worship with or without sacrifice?

I feel like UUism has encouraged me to sacrifice easy answers, superficial comfort, and ingrained prejudices. (I don't know if it has required that of me, but without it, I'm not sure I'm striving towards the principles.) It's hard work, all this thinking and questioning!

I would say that UUism has drawn me out of my comfort zone and has caused me to look at the bigger picture and realize that we've got to be out in the world to fight for social justice, interact with people and learn new ideas. It is scary at times, since I suffer from panic and anxiety and being gay in a hostile world, but I'm determined to help make a difference.

When I was young, people told me I had to make sacrifices to achieve success in my life. So I made all the sacrifices, but didn't get the success I was promised. So now I am very skeptical of anyone who asks me to make a sacrifice.

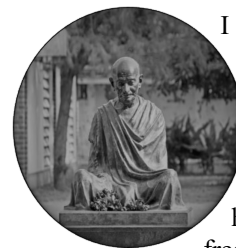
We are continually "giving up" something for something else. ... sometimes it's giving up needed change to preserve our ego or comfort. Sometimes it's giving up our comfort to bring about needed change.

That's just a sample, and the diversity of responses is compelling, but no one answered "No. UUism does not make me sacrifice anything," though one person, as you see above, voiced skepticism about being asked to sacrifice

after having made futile sacrifices in the past.

As for me, I'm still mulling it about. It's always easy to compare what I do with what other people do and come up feeling that I have made no sacrifices in my life, or to compare myself with others and believe that I have. But I don't think sacrifice is a competitive sport. And what sacrifice means is subjective. Over and over, when I exclaim about what I perceive as a huge sacrifice someone else has made, I'm told that for them it doesn't feel like a sacrifice at all!

When I was a UU kid and the Catholic kids I knew were giving up something for Lent—usually candy—I know that some part of me wanted to join them, despite my love for candy. When my own child grew up with Muslim friends and learned they were fasting for Ramadan, there was an immediate impulse to fast with them, to join them. I think that sacrificing in solidarity—not competitively, not to one-up someone else's sacrifice or to have sacrifice bragging rights—can be immensely satisfying. Whereas sacrificing when others are not can be immensely infuriating.



I still wonder what Gandhi specifically meant—he who lived in poverty when he could have been rich, who gave his very life for the freedom of his people.

I'm pretty sure that our UU religion does call us to some kinds of sacrifice—giving up certainty, giving up easy answers, giving up the comfort of old assumptions and prejudices that do harm to others. And it also calls us to work against the ways that our society seems all too willing to sacrifice the needs of some people in exchange for the comfort of others. I don't know whether that counts as worship without sacrifice or not, but I'm willing to live inside of that complexity. ■



REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR,
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I confess I've never been a big fan of the concept of sacrifice. It's always struck me as kind of punitive, like it's morally superior to suffer than to enjoy life's abundance. And the religious tradition of sacrifice, which is deeply engrained in a wide variety of religions around the world, strikes me as even more suspect. Why would God or gods want you to offer up something that surely a god has no use for? Why give up something so precious as a life, or even as trivial as a basket of fruit, for a god whose divine nature surely doesn't run to eating or drinking? What kind of relationship is it when you are expected to give up something valuable for no reason other than to prove your love and devotion?

The quintessential religious story of sacrifice is that of Abraham and Isaac, from the Hebrew Scriptures. God tells Abraham that he must make a sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac—that he must take a knife and slaughter his own child as a way of proving his love for God. Now, when the time rolls around and Abraham raises the knife, he finds a ram caught in nearby bushes, and that ram becomes an acceptable sacrifice instead of his child. Yay.

Needless to say, this is a deeply disturbing story. Sometimes it is described as depicting human moral progress from sacrificing people to sacrificing animals, which is, you know, good. But isn't this kind of a horrible way of God asking for proof of love and devotion? Where was Isaac's choice in the whole thing? Where was Sarah, Isaac's mother? Shouldn't they both have gotten some say in whether taking Isaac's life was an appropriate demonstration of Abraham's love for God? For that mat-

ter, who gets to say whether God's demand for Isaac's life was a reasonable ask to begin with? What kind of a dreadful story is this?

Maybe it is a story that is both dreadful and true. The fact of the matter is that life continually demands sacrifices of us, some insignificant and some heart-breaking. Parenting, for starters, always involves sacrifices. Of course, there are the sacrifices that parents make for their children: the sleepless nights, the severe limitations on your freedom, the



financial and emotional cost of being responsible for keeping another person safe and growing. Those are hard enough.

But there are also the sacrifices we make *of* our children. We walk away from a crying child to catch an airplane for a business trip. We shut down the endless barrage of questions and demands to get the ten minutes of quiet that we need to maintain our sanity.

We send a child to school when another day to recover from illness might be better, because we simply *can't* miss another day of work. We inevitably fail at the daily balancing act between what our kids want and what they need, or the ongoing push and pull between what we know society expects of them and the perfect freedom of expression that they deserve. And if all that weren't enough, we live with the knowledge that the choices of our generation deeply and inevitably affect the world that our children will inherit.

And there is just no way to do it right, let alone do it perfectly. The fact of the matter is that the world is continually making utterly outrageous demands. It isn't nice or fair or right, but it is true. And the concept of sacrifice is one way of making sense of that painful reality. Sacrifice declares that in the face of all the impossible challenges that the world presents to us, we choose. Rather than just stumbling through whatever

happens to be on our path, we try to remember what matters most.

Of course, what matters most changes from moment to moment. But the idea of sacrifice is that, at least some of the time, we are able to choose to give ourselves to what we most care about. We can give up what is lesser for the sake of what is greater. Maybe that looks like a choice to give up eating meat for the sake of the health of the planet. Maybe it looks like sitting through the raucous honking of a middle school band concert so that your child can see your loving witness. Maybe it looks like listening with soft eyes while someone berates you for a mistake you didn't know you made.

Of course, not every loss is a sacrifice. Sometimes we really just get no choice. But the idea of sacrifice reminds us to consider when we do choose: Who or what is lost because of my decision? Who gains? What price will I pay and what will be the cost to others? What do I have the capacity to give so that someone else can thrive?

The choices, of course, are never entirely right and never entirely wrong. But the idea of sacrifice invites us to meet the challenges of the world with the crucial, ongoing question *How do I serve love?* and with its partner question *Is there a larger love that I might serve?* Maybe living in the rich and beautiful complexity of those questions is all that anyone, divine or human, has a right to ask. ■

For many of our CLF members, their support is truly a sacrifice—not only members on fixed incomes who give what they can, but also our incarcerated members, for whom even the price of a stamp to write to a pen pal is a significant sacrifice. Please know that we see and appreciate the sacrifices you make to support this unique congregation. If you can, please be part of this support by mailing a check in the enclosed envelope or by contributing online at clfuu.org/give.



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Quest Monthly Editorial Team: Adrian Graham, Stefan Jonassen, Kat Liu, Niala Terrell-Mason, Meg Riley, Arliss Ungar, Lynn Ungar, editor, Heide Cottam, design, Beth Murray, production coordinator

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Food Chain

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

Give up pretending.
Everything, you know,
everything, sooner or later
gets eaten. Little fish,
big fish, no difference—
the world's mouth
is on you. Outside the personal,
it even has a certain glory.

When the mouse, in its last
short dash to the grain,
feels the great rush of wings,
in the flash before
the crushing beak descends,
it is finally, luminously, airborne.

In the broad, voiceless,
hours of the night
you have always known
the red beak of
your consummation
awaits you. The choice,
very simply, is this:
What will you give
your own beloved
bones and blood to feed?

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

