



# A Renewal of Faith

BY MATTHEW JOHNSON, SENIOR MINISTER, THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH, ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS

I've known the song Spirit of Life by heart for longer than I can remember.

*Spirit of life, come unto me.*

*Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.*

*Blow in the wind, rise in the sea.*

*Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.*

*Roots hold me close, wings set me free.*

*Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.*

Carolyn McDade, who wrote the song, tells the story of where it came from. I had heard through the grapevine that McDade wasn't happy with the way that we often sing it, that it isn't about celebration, it isn't about triumph. If you listen to the words, you can hear that: it's a request, a need, a longing. And when she was asked to tell the story, here's what she said.

She was coming home from a meeting about Central America—this in the early 80s, when the US government was supplying arms to oppressive regimes, when people, including nuns and priests and activists were being massacred. She was coming home from a meeting, as she had done so many times as a life-long activist. The reporter Kimberly French records it:

*What McDade remembers most clearly was the feeling she had. "When I got to Pat's house, I told her, 'I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the door, and I'll be dust.' I was tired, not with my community but with the world. She just sat with me, and I loved her for sitting with me."*

*McDade then drove to her own home in Newtonville. "I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out. It was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement."*

*Spirit of life, come unto me.*

It's a prayer, a longing. It comes out of that place of feeling like a piece of dried cardboard, of feeling tired, empty, spent. That we cannot carry the load by ourselves for one more minute.

We yearn. We yearn for renewal because sometimes we feel like a piece of dried cardboard. We need renewal: a renewal of faith, a renewal of hope, a renewal of joy. I'll tell you that lately I've been right there—dried cardboard, ready to be blown away.

Sometimes the candle is burning low. Sometimes it goes out. Parts of my life are good, and parts are really hard. There are parts of this work of ministry, this calling, that I deeply love, and there are parts that feel like slogging through a swamp. Like Carolyn McDade, sometimes I come home from the meeting on this or that, and feel like *What was the point of that?* The world's problems seem so huge, and I'm just one person, and a tired one at that.

I'm yearning for renewal, and I'm feeling like dried cardboard. We've all had those dried cardboard moments, haven't we? Stretched too thin, with no more tears to fall, because we've used them all up? Frustrated by the injustice of the world and despairing about how to fix it?

Yearning. And we reach for a language of that yearning, that longing for renewal. And, because we are Unitarian Universalists, because we know that language points to the mystery but isn't the mystery itself, because we are suspicious of creeds and easy answers, this is complicated.

# Quest

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The receding wave  
does not despair;  
it knows it will  
rise again.

— Marty Rubin

A monthly for religious liberals

## THINKING ABOUT RENEWAL

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We want to be healed by some ancient ministry of stars, but language is tricky. For a long time we just avoided the subject all together. We didn't talk about it; or, we spoke about it in psychological terms and not spiritual ones. We spoke about justice, but less about how to cultivate the spiritual resources necessary to stay at the work over the long haul, when things didn't go according to plan. Sometimes we even dismissed this yearning as juvenile, something we had grown out of.

But that began to change a while ago. Partly, it was women like Carolyn McDade and others, who gathered to offer each other healing and comfort and solidarity, who expressed their yearning for the spirit of life, lived in community with one another. They kept their language open-ended, and focused on the heart. Others among us resurrected the old Universalist story of a God of love and mercy for all people everywhere, who loves us without needing us to be perfect.

As the culture has become more secular, the folks who come now to church don't come for psychology—there are plenty of therapists to choose from, after all—they come for something deeper, something, dare we say, religious. Spiritual at least.

Some 15 years ago Rev. Bill Sinkford, then president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said we needed a “language of reverence.” He talked about his own long night in the hospital with his son, and how he reached for that language of yearning, and prayed—with open-ended language, but prayer to God—without apology. He was, by the very act of speaking of the yearning in his heart, renewed.

And he encouraged us, whatever our understanding of the holy, the sacred, the ultimate, to cultivate a language of reverence—a sense of mystery, humility, wonder and hope in how we spoke about and experienced our lives. A language of poetry.

There was a huge controversy at the time; folks thought he was saying we all had to say God, but that's not what he meant. And when things settled down, it began to happen. Naturalistic atheists spoke about the sense of wonder and awe and community they felt when they stood upon the shore, under the stars.

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### We long to be connected and renewed and inspired — and it's right here.

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The theists among us spoke of the love of God, how they prayed and yearned and felt that presence in their heart. Unitarian Universalists who were following the paths of Buddhism, Paganism, Islam and other wisdom ways of being in the world began to speak about their own languages of reverence: their yearnings for wholeness and healing and hope, their feeling of being dried cardboard, sometimes, and needing the spirit of life—however understood—to come unto them.

I've been feeling like dried cardboard, but I know that renewal will come. In time; you can't force it. I know some of the things I need to do to set the stage. Reaching out to friends is one of them. Singing, that's essential. I need to take Sabbaths. It's really important to have that quiet, Sabbath time, because in the midst of a complicated life, when time is running down and urging us on, we need to put away our phones and lie on the hammock, and let Sabbath time renew us. We need to get out into nature and let water, sky and earth renew us for the journey, And I need to pray. To express my yearning, in the language of poetry and metaphor.

In time, renewal of the spirit, renewal of faith, will come. It was this kind of thing that we Unitarian Universalists

began to talk about as part of the conversation about the language of reverence: our yearning, and our experiences of renewal.

We yearn, we seek, we long to be connected and renewed and inspired—and it's right here. The holy isn't gone from the world, it's everywhere. Miracles happen every moment, if we open our hearts and minds—our friends, music, Sabbath time, nature, poetry—these things are each a sacrament, a sign of the holy in the world. In the beloved words of UU musician Peter Mayer, “Everything is holy now.”

I know there are moments that don't feel like that, and suffering, pain and injustice are real. But even in these hard places there is holiness, there is compassion and solidarity and mercy and truth.

I may feel like a dried-up piece of cardboard right now, but these practices of holiness, of sacrament, have carried me through the journey before, and I know they will again. It's the journey Bill Sinkford made from his son's hospital room to the pulpit. It's the journey Carolyn McDade made from the meeting about Central America to the piano. It's the journey I've seen so many people make in their own lives, from a place of trouble and sorrow to a place of hope, solace and peace.

Each spring we celebrate renewal, as life comes back, but there really isn't any seasonal limit on renewal. Open yourself to be renewed. Open your heart to all that is holy everywhere, every-now. Open yourself to life and love, even in your sorrow and grief, your fear and pain, for this too shall pass, and life is a gift, not a project. The Holy is here, is now, however you see it and feel it and name it—right here—so trust it will come.

And when it does, rejoice and be glad, and share your good news in this world which needs more than ever to be renewed as well. ■

## A Glad Surprise

BY KRISTIN GRASSEL SCHMIDT,



CO-MINISTER, UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF  
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

My heart sank as I  
watched Notre Dame de

Paris burn and its spire fall. That great 850-year-old landmark which thousands of stoneworkers and glass blowers, metal workers and wood carvers crafted for over two centuries, that great site of so many musical, artistic and religious developments, had been burning already for hours. Crowds had lined the streets, singing hymns, pleading for the church to survive. But when the spire fell, I think many of us assumed the church was gone.

But then a new picture emerged, blurry around the edges, but clear enough to make out that it was of the inside of the nave, the large stone worship space inside the cathedral. It was obvious some damage had been done, but the nave was still standing, the altar somehow unscathed. Some called it a miracle. However the main body of Notre Dame managed to survive the inferno, it was certainly, to borrow Howard Thurman's phrase, a glad surprise.

We can only imagine the glad surprise of the women in the Easter story. They rise very early and go expecting to prepare Jesus' broken body for burial, to anoint it with good-smelling herbs and oil so that his friends and followers could gather around his body comfortably to offer their last goodbyes. They go expecting to encounter death, but instead they find an empty tomb, and a stranger with the unbelievable news that Jesus isn't dead anymore. They don't know what to believe. But then the story says that Jesus appears to each of them, urging them to travel far and wide, teaching the saving message of his ministry. He tells them that the true path of salvation lies not in military might and occupying force, but rather in work toward justice, mer-

cy, compassion, and the understanding that every single person bears the image of Love.

With no dead body, no final resting place to visit, Jesus' survivors are denied the possibility of dwelling on his death. They are beckoned into looking forward toward new hope, toward a future they believed impossible only moments before. And from there they carry his ministry forward. Jesus' death was meant to be a humiliating deterrent. As black liberation theologian Dr. James Cone wrote, crucifixion was the lynching of the Roman Empire. Jesus' execution was meant to shatter the threat to the Empire posed by the movement Jesus was building.

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But Jesus was not defiled by his death; his ministry was not undone because the Roman government attempted to frame him as a criminal and a fake. As my colleague, the Rev. John Buehrens, explains, "... the resurrection was a vision—one deeply connected to a radical hope... that death, exile, and seemingly utter destruction can never put an end to Divine Love, to the Sacred story." In other words, it was a vision of glad surprise.

What a blessing that we have this holiday set aside to remember again and again the glad surprises that buoy our lives and shape human history. What a blessing to have a day to honor the astonishing ways that renewal happens in the face of what seems like certain defeat. This is the day we celebrate that pain, hate, and death don't have the final word, that something wonderful, something holy, can come out of

even the worst experiences.

Many of the symbols of Easter testify to this idea. After a long winter when crops are just beginning to grow again and game is still scarce, it is the rabbits that first begin to appear in great numbers, probably because they will eat just about anything that grows. They are symbols of fertility and the abundance of spring. The egg, likewise, is a symbol of fertility and new life.

A friend recently told me about something I think is an even more powerful symbol of renewal—the Sahara resurrection plant. This plant can survive months and even years of dehydration, rolling through the desert wherever the wind blows it. It looks dead—way past dead, actually. But when it does finally roll into some water, the plant transforms from a brown, withered, tumbleweed-looking thing to a vibrant, green plant.

The Sahara resurrection plant seems an especially fitting Easter symbol. It's kind of a hard sell to preach about resurrection in the same month as Earth Day, given what we know about how the planet is doing. Human activity has affected the planet in lasting ways, ways that could literally come to annihilate much of life on Earth as we know it.

This isn't hyperbole, it's science. A UN report on climate change from a year ago suggests that humanity has only 11 years to make big changes before the damage we've done is irreversible. This isn't new information, it's just much more urgent. Yet despite decades of scientists' warnings, many governments around the world, including and most especially the US, are doing little or nothing to reduce carbon emissions, and even deny outright the mountain of evidence that climate change is caused by human beings.

Without government support, getting everyone from individuals choosing not to use single-use plastic to big business choosing to invest in renewa-

bles instead of fossil fuels seems next to impossible. The problem feels too big. It's too wrapped up in economic and political systems. It is all too easy to feel hopeless or powerless about the planet and our future on it.

And yet, the earth has amazing powers of renewal. Like the Sahara resurrection plant, entire ecosystems revive when given the opportunity.

Now, I'm not suggesting that the harm we've done to the Earth can or will all be undone. Scores of species have

gone extinct. Radiation from nuclear bombs permeates an entire layer of matter on the Earth's surface. Even in the most optimistic scenarios, climate change will have significant impact on life on this planet.

In another telling of the Easter story, when Jesus appears to his followers after the resurrection, his hands, feet, and side still bear the wounds from his execution. The wounds and scars of the past will never be erased. But if Easter has anything to teach us, it is that life and love are more powerful

even than death. Though the path towards a sustainable relationship with the Earth is unclear, we must not lose hope that life will find a way.

When we've gone in expecting the worst, only to have the opposite happen; when we're convinced there is no hope, and suddenly it dawns, filling the empty tombs of our hearts not with the finality of death but the possibility of new life, that is the glad surprise.

That is the power of resurrection and renewal. That is Easter. ■

## Serving Time/Served by Time

BY GARY, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED IN NORTH CAROLINA

When I arrived at North Carolina's Central Prison I wore my fear and trepidation like an aura as I, a pallid 128-pound weakling, stepped into my worst nightmare. All conversation and card games came to an immediate halt when I walked into the dorm. My first thought was, *I'm going to die tonight*. I was about to learn just how misleading first impressions can be.

I never knew his real name. "Preacher" was probably in his late fifties and, despite imprisonment, carried the demeanor of one who hadn't a worry in the world. As fate would have it, I was assigned to the bunk immediately over him. After a couple of days of observing me in my self-imposed isolation, Preacher approached me carrying a soda and a Bible.

Now, I always considered myself to be a Christian. I mean, I was brought up in the church, baptized, and "saved," so I must be a Christian, right? Yet, I tended to view God as some sort of celestial Santa Claus who I called on only when I wanted something.

"You look like you could use a friend," were Preacher's first words, as he handed me the Bible and soda. My suspicions must have been obvious. Preacher tilted his head back and laughed. "Don't worry yourself. I ain't gonna hurt you, and I want nothing from you. My friendship and the Bible are free. You can repay the soda when you're able to."

My relief, as well as all of the anxiety and apprehension I'd kept bottled up inside, suddenly burst forth. Tears flowed.

"You can live in prison one of two ways," Preacher explained. "You can serve time or it can serve you."

Puzzled, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious. God intends for you to learn something. You have a choice now, just like you did when you committed your crime. It's called *free will*. You can spend your years consumed in anger, bitterness and blaming everyone and everything else, or you can accept responsibility for your actions and make this time work *for* you and count for something."

"You mean, sort of like when life gives you lemons and you make lemonade?"

"Kinda," Preacher responded. "You have the opportunity, albeit forced upon you, to better yourself—get a handle on your problems, pursue an education, develop a talent. It's all up to you."

I stared dumbfounded. "It sounds as if you think I should be thankful to be here, Preacher."

Shaking his head, Preacher replied, "No, Gary, not at all. What I'm trying to tell you is that you should make the conscious choice to not waste this time. Have something to show for it when the time comes."

Preacher left Central Prison just a few days later. Inmates are a transient population. That was nearly 29 years ago. Since then I've earned four college degrees, and banked over 300 credit hours. I've published six books, four plays—all of which have been produced on stage—and innumerable stories and poems. Equally, I've developed an appreciation for art that once upon a time I would never have taken the time for—all of this while making time serve me.

Most importantly, I've gained a greater sense of who I am and a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God. I no longer see God as a celestial Santa Claus who I run to with a wish list of prayers. I now see God as my Creator, with whom I spend time every day.

While I am still not grateful for prison, I have come to accept it and to find renewal in making time serve me. ■



## Thriving in Difficult Times

BY KAT LIU, OWNER, WIZDUUM.NET

Recently a fellow climate change activist exclaimed in despair, “The world has never faced a crisis like this before!” I’m not sure how convincing my response was to her then, or how it will be to you now, but I tried to reassure her that while the world may have never faced human-made climate change before, the world *has* faced crises *like* it before. Humanity has suffered and survived global plagues and world wars that killed tens of millions and displaced many millions more, my parents included. I would not be here were it not for such a crisis. We are currently in the middle of the sixth great mass extinction, and it is going to get a lot worse. But the fact that we’re in the middle of the sixth means that there have been five others before, and the world survived. Moreover, had there not been five mass extinctions before, we humans would not be here today.

Changing climate patterns will (as they already have) create new niches, which living beings will fill in ways that we cannot predict, for worse *and* for better. As Buddhism recognizes, all that exists is the result of causes and conditions. Under changing conditions, creative, new ways of being will come into existence. New behaviors. New species.

To be clear, I am *not* saying that everything is going to be hunky-dory, so we don’t need to do anything, or that global upheaval is “all for the best” because it will provide new opportunities, or any other Pollyanna-ish nonsense. To talk like that ignores that tens of millions of people died in those plagues and wars. That among humans who suffer and die, it is more often people of color, the poor, and other marginalized groups. That even though living species, including us,

will adapt, the conditions may change so fast that we won’t be able to keep up. So many have already succumbed.

I am *not* saying that everything will be OK. That would be a lie. But if history and biology can be our guide, *some* things will be OK. Something will survive, and hopefully thrive again. While any one life is incredibly fragile, life as a whole, life as a communal web, is incredibly resilient. Even in the face of great loss and sorrow, joy and beauty still exist alongside.

We are in the midst of a great deal of turmoil—ecologically, socially, economically, and politically. You know what I’m talking about. And many of us have our private crises not known to all. You also already know that the future of the world depends on what we do right now. I don’t need to remind you of that. What I’d like to add is that the quality of our lives right now also depends on how we react. It is OK to smile at beauty even when you’re grieving, if you want to (Obviously, if you don’t want to, that’s OK too.) It is OK to do things that bring you joy even in the midst of turmoil. In fact, that’s probably the only way we’re going to get through this. Have faith that while the world needs you to act, it also needs you to care for yourself, and to enjoy the gift of your one precious life. ■

The CLF exists because of your generosity. Each gift we receive renews our ability to serve UUs around the world. In countless ways, from our online show The VUU to pen pal letters between incarcerated and free-world members to conversations on Facebook, CLFers renew one another’s spirits with faith and courage. Please give generously in the enclosed envelope or at [clfuu.org/give](http://clfuu.org/give) to help continue this cycle of renewal.

## Renewal

BY JACK, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED IN TEXAS

We are blessed here in Texas to have nearly hundred-year-old live oaks inside our prison. We have double cyclone fences topped with razor wire and electronic sensors through the wires to remind us of where we are, but inside these wires and fencing we have rows upon rows of massive oaks.

Live oaks are not the tall and stately oaks sought after for building. Their limbs are crooked, and the trees about half the height of the builder’s dream.

Instead, they are as bent as many of those they shade as they spread wide and provide cooling protection from the hot Texas sun. Over their many decades they have provided shade for tuberculosis patients, for the mentally ill who were too often sent here and forgotten, and now for the men and women incarcerated here, whose minds and lives have been as twisted with fear and sickness as have the oaks that have offered their shade to all who found respite here.

Like those beneath their shade, they have suffered from the storms and lightnings of their lives. But as winter comes on, storms blow through them, loosening thousands of acorns that fall upon the ground. Many even fall outside the cyclone fencing, untouched by the razor wire—fall through without alarms, to be free outside.

Shiny, new, perfect acorns that nourish life when winter blows, and in the spring, when the sun warms them and the skies water them, they bring forth new oaks. Not oaks bearing the scars of their parents, not the oaks twisted from the storms and winds, not the oaks scarred by what life has brought them, but perfect, unscarred oaks ready to meet life’s challenges.

These oaks have seen much renewal of life over their near hundred years—life that grows to provide shade for all. Life renewed.... ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I've been thinking about renewable sources of energy versus sources of energy that deplete. Like many others, I have grown alarmed at the world we are creating for the young ones to inherit, and convinced that my own consumption of energy must change.

I've been watching videos and listening to people who know a lot more than I do about this. And one message that comes through over and over is that, if we stop hurting the earth, the earth knows how to heal itself from the damage we have done. The earth is a fountain of renewal.

It's an amazing thing to think about the inexhaustible energy sources that the earth offers us: wind, and sun, and the power of oceans, to name just three. And heartbreaking to think that instead of harnessing these renewable sources, greed and expediency cause us instead to take what is not freely offered, what must be taken forcibly, at great cost to humans and other living beings, thus putting the entire planet's life at risk.

It's easy to point fingers at other people—oil executives, politicians, consumers greedier than I am—and blame them. But if we're honest and look at ourselves, most of us see that our own energy consumption is not sustainable. I've taken the survey at [Footprintcalculator.org](http://Footprintcalculator.org) and learned that if everyone lived as I do, it would take 5.4 earths to support us. (Flying is what makes this number so particularly high.) So how do we—how do I—realign my values so that I am supporting the earth, and future life? And, more cynically, does it really matter, what I do? When governments and corporations are creating mass global destruction, does my own modest change of behavior really make any difference?

When I start to go down that road, I think about the difference every new baby's birth makes in the world. Right now, a dear friend has just given birth, and I am about to meet a whole new human being. A beloved relative will have given birth by the time you read this newsletter. I know that when I hold these tiny ones, all will seem possible. Their small lives will tell me that the world is renewed over and over again. Their squalling little bodies, fragile and helpless, make all things new.

It is easy to look at the large patterns of cruelty and oppression in the world, and sink into despair. When that happens, hope and renewal are to be found in the particular: the particular ways I connect to the earth, the way the particular baby is cherished, the particular action of particular people in particular situations. For me, renewal is not found in abstractions, and especially is not found in detachment. Rather, it comes from embodiment, inhabiting my cells, recommitting myself to life. Choosing relationships with other embodied people that open me to the widest swath of humanity, listening to the voices of people who know and see what I can't or don't. Leaning into discomfort and learning that I am stronger than I thought.

Renewal can be as simple as remembering to breathe, or to just say, *Today has been hard enough, I'm going to sleep and I'll try again tomorrow*. It can also come after extreme pain, or in the midst of extreme pain. I learn a lot about renewal from CLF members who live in chronic physical pain. You share about the tiny acts which make a big difference in your days, and you model the acknowledgment of real human limits which make another day a tiny bit easier.

In this spring season of flowering trees and bushes (in the northern hemisphere), evidence of the earth's renewal comes in yells, not whispers. Vibrant color and longer days sing of

new life. But even in the darkest days of winter, even in the hardest times of our lives, new life is available. It's in our curiosity and our willingness to start again, even after yet another colossal disappointment or failure, just as the earth comes back to life after a fire or volcano or hurricane. Inhabiting my particular cells; my particular, imperfect, body and life; my own aches and pains; my particular dreams and demons, connects me to everything and everyone I am willing to view in their common humanity.

The miracle, says Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, is not that we are in the universe, but that the universe is in us. ■

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## Notice of Annual Meeting

**To all members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist**

Per Article VII, Sections 1 and 2, of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) Bylaws, the 47th Annual Meeting will be held via video/telephone conference call and screen sharing on Wednesday, June 10, 2020 at 8:00PM EDT. The video call link is <https://zoom.us/j/520572054>

We will email meeting information to our members in April, and post final documents to the CLF website ([www.clfuu.org/annualmeeting](http://www.clfuu.org/annualmeeting)), by June 3, 2020. You can download materials and print them or call the CLF office at 617-948-6150 and request a paper copy.

The purpose of the meeting is to elect, from the slate of candidates recommended by the nominating committee,

- One member to a 3-year term on the board of directors
- Two members to 3-year terms on the nominating committee
- A clerk and treasurer

We will elect a moderator from among members present to preside at the meeting.

**Danielle Di Bona, Clerk**

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## REsources for Living

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

As I see it, there are three words—related but not the same—that apply to the holidays I celebrate this season. Those three words are *resurrection*, *redemption* and *renewal*.

*Resurrection* is pretty clearly a word that goes with Easter. Easter is the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, of his return to life from death. Even if you don't believe that it is ever possible for someone to literally be dead for three days and then come back to life, the concept of resurrection is a potent one. After all, who hasn't experienced the feeling that something has died, only to come back? A relationship is broken, but then somehow we find our way back to a genuine connection again. A serious illness robs us of our capacity to live in the world as we are used to, but then, finally, we recover. Depression or loss leaves us adrift in a land where everything feels worthless, but we manage to find our way back into the land of possibility and hope.

Now, of course, not every relationship gets (or should be) repaired, not every illness is curable and depression can be a life-long struggle. But it is also true that in various ways, the experience of resurrection, of rising from the dead, can and does happen throughout our lives, and Easter is a beautiful way to celebrate the reality that life overcomes death in a surprising variety of ways.

*Redemption*, in Christian theology, is used to describe the way in which Jesus' suffering buys back the sinful souls of human kind. But we more typically use the word to talk about how we retrieve something good from something bad. We redeem missing the bus by calling a friend while waiting. We redeem ourselves in the eyes of our beloved by making a nice meal after

we have flaked on putting out the garbage cans. But we also find redemption in far more serious and compelling ways. More than one of my friends live with the complicated knowledge that they are alive only by grace of the organ donation of someone who died. There is no equation that says that someone's death is good or right because their death enabled others to live. That is certainly never the case. But it is true that the gift of life that is organ donation does something to redeem the loss, to bring beauty into the tragedy.

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### Like resurrection and redemption, renewal is inseparable from loss and grief and death.

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Redemption in the sense of the buying back of souls is certainly no part of the Passover story. But consider the story of Moses, who was left in a river as a way to escape the Pharaoh's cruel decree that the sons of the Jews be killed at birth. Moses is plucked from the river by Pharaoh's daughter, is raised with the privileges of palace life, and eventually returns to defy Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people to freedom. There is no way that killing babies—genocide—is ever anything but horrifically wrong. And yet through both coincidence and courage, Moses' life creates a story of redemption in which the Jews leave slavery to become the covenanted people of God.

And then there is *renewal*, the least dramatic and most common of the three. In my mind renewal goes with the third major holiday of the season, Earth Day. We all live with the devastating knowledge of just how threatened life on our beautiful and beloved planet is. Pollution clogs our oceans, species are dying at a staggering rate, rainforests are being burned off to make room for cattle and climate change poses an existential threat to life as we know it. Earth Day calls us

to focus on a painful reality that is always at least at the edge of our consciousness—human activity is causing devastating loss all around the globe.

But Earth Day is also a time to focus on the Earth's incredible powers of renewal. Life is an incredible force, maybe even an unstoppable one. Time and again we find that if we restore rivers and their banks, their native inhabitants return. As more and more people plant pollinator gardens, devastated populations of monarch butterflies are starting to recover in their eastern migration. Areas devastated by fire will, all on their own, regrow to lush and healthy habitats if they are given the chance.

The spring reminds us of the Earth's power to renew life after the dormancy of winter. Earth Day reminds us that we are part of life, and part of the incredible power of renewal, if we will choose to embrace that power. Like resurrection and redemption, renewal is inseparable from loss and grief and death. But life finds a way in even the most improbable circumstances, fathoms deep in the ocean or in arid deserts or in polar cold. And if life is that potent, that creative, that fierce an urge, then how can we doubt that renewal is possible, if we will only commit ourselves to fostering it?

Resurrection, redemption and renewal. Easter, Passover and Earth Day. Our celebrations of the season insist that while death is real and loss is inevitable, that if we give life a chance—if we are stubborn enough to never give up and flexible to embrace change as it comes—then life will spring again. Not



always in the ways we expected. Not always even in the ways we wanted. But life, vigorous and determined as a weed, that will grow and bloom and seed and grow again. ■



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## Renewal is Re-Knowing

BY TIMOTHY, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED IN NEW YORK

recognize the good you've done  
and know love radiates  
revel in the person you're becoming  
and know you are remarkable  
remember your past  
and know growth is rebirth  
realize there will be setbacks  
and know to trust your resilience  
reflect on your mistakes  
and know insight is rewarding  
review your bad habits  
and know they bend to your resolve  
reveal your good habits  
and know there's joy in rhythm  
revitalize your love of community  
and know it's rational to rejoice  
reflect on your still, small voice  
and know you are renewed

