

Cultivating Relationality in a Time of Division



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Is it any wonder that we have a crisis of relationality in our nation? After diligently equipping our children to out-perform one another in a narrow number of ways—which becomes the primary focus of their young lives and formal education—it is left to congregations, to community centers, to social groups of various kinds to teach us how to be in complex relationship with one another—if that. By and large, even in relationally-oriented institutions, very few offer classes or training in how to engage well in the most fundamental of human needs: how to be in healthy, mutually meaningful relationship with one another. It is as if, *en masse*, we have collectively decided that these skills are somehow acquired by osmosis. And, if they are not learned by osmosis, we wait until someone 'screws up really bad' (gets into difficulty with their community, at their workplace, or in their personal relationships) and then we enact a disciplinary model: punitive action must be taken and boundaries put in place.

Indeed, at times, healthy boundaries and accountability are needed. But

why do we, as a society, make almost no effort to teach, not just the fundamentals of human relationship, but the more advanced skills related to: what do we do when we screw up? How are we present to one another across deeply held differences? What should we do in the midst of volatile conflict? How do we 'show up' in meaningful ways for the diversity that we claim to value and constantly stumble over? What do we do with our own subjectivity and reactivity in the midst of such critical relational needs?

This is a spiritual crisis, for 'spirit' (however we choose to understand it) is ultimately about interconnectivity, interdependence, and the connective tissue invisibly binding everything and everyone to each other. When we are struggling with how to relate to one another—how to even care about one another—in one of the wealthiest nations in the history of planet Earth, a nation in which no one need ever starve or sleep without a roof over their head, and yet people do—there is a profound crisis of disconnection. When it feels 'safer' to only be among those who almost exclusively think like 'us'—cutting off neighbors, family members, community members, and co-workers who hold divergent

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*We are already—
each and every
one of us—
siblings to one
another and to
all that exists at
the level of spirit.*

REV. MANISH MISHRA-MARZETTI

in this issue

CULTIVATING RELATIONALITY

Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti

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Multiple authors

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connect. deepen. act.

How does the CLF feed your spirit?

In the Fall 2020 issue of the Worthy Now newsletter, we asked for responses on a simple question: How does the CLF feed your spirit? We're so grateful for all of your beautiful responses — hearing from you truly feeds our spirits! Here are excerpts from just a few of the responses we received.

AUGUST

CLF member, incarcerated in WI

Focus is often directed toward growing physically and mentally. The problem is a person can be physically and mentally to their capacity and still experience a sense of emptiness. This begins to point to bread alone not being what sustains life. CLF has helped me reframe my mindset so growth is viewed in a more holistic way. No longer do I confine growth to the physical and mental domain. The

spiritual growth CLF has produced within me not only allowed me to recognize my worth and dignity, but more importantly the worth and dignity of every person. CLF so far has highlighted the importance of feeding the spirit. This has forced me to wrestle with how something so valuable (i.e. feeding the spirit) can ever be considered invaluable. ■

SCOTT

CLF member, incarcerated in CA

The CLF is one of the few windows I have into the uplifting and inspiring parts of the world. When surrounded by bleakness, it is easy to forget that there is plenty of good happening all over the world. In the Worthy Now newsletter, I am reminded that there are strangers who care about me even if they can not comfort me on my darkest days. Reading the Quest Monthly enlightens me with viewpoints I wouldn't have encountered otherwise. The free books and courses are essential tools I use in my

own rehabilitation. I share them with those who attend self-help groups with me, and I even introduce some of the materials in workshops I design.

There are plenty of mainstream Christians around who simply want to save my soul. Yet, the CLF is helping save me from the hell that is life in prison. Thank you for empowering me and being a welcoming community. Your compassion feeds my spirit in ways that help me stay resilient in the face of daily hardship. ■

GARY

CLF member, incarcerated in NC

Growing up as a Christian in the South meant church on Sunday, fried chicken for lunch, and youth group that night. We never questioned the “rightness” of it all or ventured to think there just may be *another* road available. Doctrine, ritual, dogma rules our lives, often crushing the very spirit it was meant to uplift.

Enter CLF. Coming to prison has strangely been a liberating experience. Formerly having to live a life in secret, being gay, and worries about a reputation and name, prison opened doors for my spirit. CLF-UU has given my spirit the wings to see that church does not have to be a stodgy, dry experience. It can be uplifting!

As my poem [on the next page] says, stripped of my armor, incarceration has laid me bare, and removed the trappings I once hid behind. Replacing beliefs no longer my own, CLF-UU has provided the spiritual communion every person seeks, whether openly or without even realizing it, as we all ponder the mysterious and wonderful thing called life. ■

Reflections

by Gary

For thirty years I was blacksmith of my soul.
I put it in the furnace of austerity and burned
it in the fire of egotism.
I laid it upon the anvil of reproach and beat it
with the hammer of blame until I made my soul a mirror.

For thirty years I was the mirror of myself, and
was forever polishing that mirror with diverse
acts of stoic harshness and detachment.

I now reflect on what trappings I had embraced
as my own:
On my waist, I wore a belt of insecurity; a breastplate
of dishonesty; a shield of mistrust.
My campaigns have taken a turn.

I am now a prisoner stripped of my armor,
I can no longer run, no longer hide.
I have cried out for understanding, to a memory,
a part of my life no longer denied.
I have reached out and found my strength.
My redemption.
Now, I look into that mirror and what do I see?

Girded around my waist is truth; integrity is my
breastplate; and faith, hope, and love are
my new shield.

I have seen that the garments I once fashioned
for myself were but temporary and hollow.
They would perish like chafe in the wind.

Now, I have been bestowed with the garb
that is eternal, as my prayers were
answered—for now I tread the path
lighted by knowledge: art, poetry, and music.
My Guides are Monet, Frost, and Bach

Relationality, continued from page 1

needs and experiences—we are deepening that disconnection, not healing it or working with it.

The frayed connective tissue of our society must first be strengthened locally, wherever we are, with whichever groups of people we are immediately connected to. Only as tissue gets stronger, as it first heals and then grows, can it bear the harder and more weighty loads. Social, civic, and communal healing requires more than convalescence, or worse, hiding in cliques of uniformity. It requires building muscle, in this case a spiritual-relational muscle. This muscle, this connective tissue, requires challenging and transforming the faulty assumptions that have been shredding it; it requires practice with relational skills that many of us were never taught and some of us may feel embarrassed not to have or intimidated in learning; it requires patience and grounding in love, love, and then even more love. We are already—each and every one of us—siblings to one another and to all that exists at the level of 'spirit,' essence, the ontological nature of 'all that is.' We just need to start behaving like we really get that. The good news is that intentional practice and learning—not osmosis—can get us there. ■

This piece is an excerpt from a larger essay of the same title. A link to Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti's full essay is available on our website, clfuu.org.

The Five Jagged Rocks of Unitarian Universalism



KARISHMA GOTTFRIED

*Unitarian Universalist
Young Adult*

The five jagged rocks were created by Rev.

Nancy Bowen, Rev. Mike Morran, and others within the Mountain Desert District of the Unitarian Universalist Association. They are a specifically UU understanding and expansion of what James Luther Adams called “the five smooth stones of liberal religious tradition.” In turn, Adams created the smooth stones with inspiration from the story of David and Goliath, a Biblical tale in which King David defeats the Philistine warrior Goliath by slinging five smooth stones at him. Adams believed that liberal religion just like David with his smooth stones, could have a powerful impact on the world as long as it had the right tools at its disposal. This newest adaptation, the five jagged rocks, recognizes that Unitarian Universalism is rough around the edges. We aren’t perfect, theologically or otherwise, and that’s okay.

I talk about the five jagged rocks all the time: I’ve led workshops for youth, preached sermons, taught adult spiritual development classes, and rambled on about them to anyone who asks me “so can UUs believe anything?” They resonate with me more than any other description of our faith, stating boldly how our never ending search for truth and our deep love and connection to each other are



The Five Jagged Rocks of Unitarian Universalism

1. There is a unity that makes us one.
2. All souls are sacred and worthy.
3. Courageous love transforms the world.
4. Truth continues to be revealed.
5. Salvation in this life.

what is needed to make this world and this life the best it can be for all.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism has the potential to be life changing—and many of us know that firsthand. But too often we shy away from using the tools to share it with the world, and often that is because we just don’t know where to start.

A few months ago, I had a conversation about the five jagged rocks with my friend Rose Gallogly, who serves the Church of the Larger Fellowship as Publications Coordinator. I asked her to design a tattoo for me, a reminder of what Unitarian Universalism has the potential to be, and a reminder that I can be a part of that potential.

Every day I look at my tattoo and am reminded of the commitment I have made to Unitarian Universalism and



the commitment Unitarian Universalism has made to me: to be a place where I share my full self, to challenge myself and others to dismantle systems of oppression, and to live deeply into Beloved Community. ■

Honoring a Year of Pandemic: Grief and Gifts



ROSE GALLOGLY

*CLF Publications
Coordinator*

Though the COVID-19 pandemic truly started months earlier, March 2020 was the month when its life-changing realities hit many of us in the US and other Western countries. In those early weeks of stay-at-home orders and new health and safety protocols, few of us could have imagined just how long and devastating this pandemic would become. There have been over 2 million recorded deaths from COVID-19 worldwide — with over

500,000 deaths in US alone — and, as enormous as those numbers are, they fail to capture the full scope of loss that this year and the governmental mismanagement of the pandemic have brought. COVID has highlighted and exacerbated every one of the deep inequities in our society, and as those of you who are currently incarcerated know well, it has made our already-deadly prisons into places of even more violence and pain.

As we reach this one year mark of the pandemic as it's been experienced in the West, it's hugely important for us all to acknowledge the collective and

individual loss we have experienced. Acknowledging and tending to our grief expands our capacity to hold it, allowing us more room to also hold the joy, resilience, and hope that may exist alongside that grief.

Below is an outline of a simple ritual for acknowledging and honoring the grief of this year of pandemic, as well as the gifts that this year may have brought. I believe that grief and gifts are inseparable — the losses we experience shape us, and we can honor them by making meaning from all they have taught us. Feel free to adapt or expand this ritual in any way that makes sense to you.

A prayer for grief & gifts

If you are able, I invite you to begin this ritual by gathering a pen and two pieces of paper, and finding a quiet spot to sit or lie down. Take a moment to breathe deeply, in and out, until you feel settled and calm in your body. You may then choose to light a chalice if that practice is available to you, or to sing or chant — whatever allows you to mark this time as sacred.

Then, call to mind all that has brought grief in the past year. As a list or in sentences, write down whatever comes to the surface. You may be grieving loved ones lost in the past year, or the continued absence of in-person community, or the loss of the sense of security you felt before the pandemic. Try not to filter what you're feeling or compare your losses to that of others — all grief is holy and deserves to be honored.

Whenever you feel ready, turn your attention to the gifts or lessons of the past year. Perhaps this year has taught you to slow down, and listen more closely to the needs

of your body. Or maybe you have learned more about your capacity for resilience, that you're able to survive through heartbreak. Again, try not to filter what arises when writing down the gifts of this year — no matter how short or long your list of gifts is, each one deserves your attention.

Next, turn toward the year ahead. What do you hope to leave behind you from this year of pandemic? What do you hope to bring forward with you? Write down whatever rises to the surface, whether or not it is completely within your control.

When you have answered all of the prompts fully, go back through your answers and highlight or underline words that stand out the most. On a new piece of paper, use the format below (or your own version of it) to turn your words into a prayer or spell. Once you are done, read your prayer out loud. Then, fold the paper that has this prayer written on it and place it under your bed or beside your pillow. These words will now be with you as a loving companion in the coming year, a

reminder of all that has been lost and all that has been gained, and the choices you are making about what to carry forward.

After a year of pandemic, I honor the heartbreak that I am carrying for all that has been lost. I am grieving _____

By holding my heartbreak tenderly, I also make space to take in the gifts and lessons this past year has brought. In this year, I have received the gift(s) of _____

Turning toward the year ahead, I hope to leave behind _____

In this next year, I seek to carry forward _____

By naming the grief and gifts of this year, I honor all parts of my experience as sacred. With these words I set my intentions for the year ahead, knowing that I am loved and held in care. May it be so.

Remembering John



REV. JENNIFER JOHNSON
CLF Learning Fellow

In November of 2020, Quest lost a frequent contributor, and the Church of the Larger Fellowship lost a longtime member and beloved friend. John had been incarcerated in Oklahoma for more than 20 years. Over those years he contributed his poetry and reflections to Quest, touching readers with his heartfelt sincerity, deep spiritual wisdom, keen sense of humor, and indomitable appreciation for the world's beauty, even under the bleak conditions of life in prison. Because of the cruelty of the prison system, we don't know the circumstances of John's death, making grief more complicated for those who knew and loved John best.

We don't know much about how John died, but we do know quite a lot about how he lived.

John was deeply spiritual, and spiritually grounded. He had a powerful ability to shape meaning out of even the smallest moments of living, and he shared his abundant spiritual gifts in his writing. The following excerpt is about an encounter with a house sparrow (called Jack) who was trapped in the day room of John's prison unit. After Jack landed on John's outstretched hand, John set him free.

Much to my surprise, he did not immediately fly off when I uncupped my hands. Instead, he just sat on my

palm, hunkered down, breathing heavily. I walked across the courtyard to a bench bathed in bright sunlight and sat down. He remained squatted on my palm for several minutes with his left eye staring up at me all the while. Was he staring because he wanted to remember my face in case we met again? Or was he, like me, just totally in awe by the wonder of this unusual being-to-being encounter? (From "My BFF, Jack" 2019)

John was a committed Unitarian Universalist. He discovered the faith in his fifties, while in prison, and in Unitarian Universalism he at last found his spiritual home.

Whereas I'd been stifled, indoctrinated, and led down a particular path during my previous spiritual walk, Unitarian Universalism opened new vistas and gave me a new perspective on the term 'spiritual path.' That is, it helped me understand a fuller meaning of Antonio Machado's statement, "Traveler there is no path. Paths are made by walking." Walking. Doing. Putting thoughts and ideas and beliefs into action. . . . When the Church of the Larger Fellowship came into my life and I started meeting UUs, I immediately felt that I had a home. And I love that feeling. (From "Home at Last" 2016)

John had a generous and giving heart. His caring nature proved a powerful source of resilience as he endured incarceration.

Earlier in life, I said many times, "If I didn't have to spend so much time making a living, I'd spend it helping people." When I made that statement it never occurred to me that a prison sentence would meet that objective. So for the past two decades, I've helped fellow inmates in myriad ways—from writing letters to their families to explaining how to find the area of a circle so they could pass GED tests, to, sometimes, just listening to what they have to say. (From "The Joy of Melting" 2020)

John's caring ways extended to the outside world. He was a good friend to his longtime pen pal, Sandy, and to the CLF staff, especially Beth Murray, Worthy Now administrator. Beth and John regularly corresponded, and John's letters were often the bright spot in Beth's work day. "While we were busy ministering to John," Beth says, "he was busy supporting us." In a letter from the summer of 2020, John included some sweet and comical drawings, which Beth keeps on her desk, along with this message:

May this note find you safe and well—and weathering this pandemic storm. Please know that you are in my thoughts. It is odd because I always am separated and remote from you, but for some reason, this feels 'different.' I care very much for each of you in my extended UU family. May blessings abound in your lives.

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While John found meaning and purpose in living even under the horrific conditions of incarceration, he never stopped speaking out and pushing back against the injustice and inhumanity of the carceral state. He was especially impassioned about prison health care reform, illuminating stark deficiencies in sanitation, nutrition, and medical care and holding the system to account for its failings.

Rest in peace and freedom, John. You were loved by your UU family. You brought more than a little joy to a great many people. We grieve your death. We will remember your life. ■

About CLF membership

We are so glad that so many people are receiving and loving *Quest Monthly*. If you are not yet a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, please reach out to us to discuss whether church membership may be the right fit for you or your family. The CLF is a vibrant and growing congregation where over 2,400 adult members and hundreds of children and youth share the mission of building a global spiritual community. It would be an honor to formally welcome you into our faith family.

Learn more about becoming a free-world member at clfuu.org/join. You may also email us at clf@clfuu.org or call us at 617-948-6150.

If you are currently incarcerated, send a letter to CLF Worthy Now; 24 Farnsworth St. Boston MA 02210, and we will reply with more information about what's included in membership and how to join.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

Each month or so, we will offer a question or two for reflection based on the idea explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. Consider submitting your reflection response for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest. To submit this reflection, you can tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

Too often, the deaths of incarcerated beloved go unrecognized in the outside world. We want to create a space in *Quest* to honor their lives and legacies. We invite you to share words of remembrance for those you knew and loved who lost their lives in prison. With your permission, we may share your words in a future issue.

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.



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