

## “When all else fails...”



REV. DR. JJ FLAG  
UCC Pastor  
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WTF?!?! Those three letters and what they mean seem to come to mind and sometimes roll off my tongue with more regularity these days. Honestly, there was a time in my life when I would never have admitted that, especially as a clergy person. There’s a spoken and unspoken expectation that those of us who are ministers will be more put together, more pious than others. We definitely shouldn’t use four-letter words that aren’t “love.”

I get it. People want and expect their spiritual leaders to have a certain level of control. The work we do is sacred, and I am by no means trying to evade the responsibility of what it means to journey with others through the highs and lows of life. However, sometimes all you’ve got in you, no matter who you are, is, “WTF?!” COVID-19 has been one of the greatest WTFs as of late, but so is the presence of ableism, racism, sexism, and so many other isms present in our world today. W...T...F...? It’s 2021! When will we get beyond where we have been and where it feels we still are in so many instances?

Some may choose not to use certain words or language to express their

frustrations or dismay. But, again, I get it. Eloquent articulations come easier to some than others. In any case, I want to convey more than anything the collective need for lament. We lament the loss of loved ones and friends, the loss of work and provision, the loss of community, the loss of \*a sense of\* balance. Loss. The weight of it all is tough to bear. And so, I am; we are all seemingly screaming, “WTF?!”

I said earlier that the only four-letter word ministers should use is love. But, unfortunately, the English language (my native tongue) and its conventions make this an impossibility. To adequately convey a thought using English, one would need to string together a collection of words that are maybe four letters or more, and perhaps even less. For example, the words that comprise the fullness of WTF are 4, 3, and 4.

Now, some might critique my message as being crass or irreverent. I’m not trying to be. What if we experienced WTF as an invitation to create and hold space for our collective lament at this moment? Space to cry, space to yell, space to pause and ponder. A space that is absent the policing of language and the angst of respectability? One open to the

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# Quest

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*“Let peace begin  
with you. Let  
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Find your center,  
a little bit at  
a time.”*

REV. DR. MICHAEL TINO

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# CENTERING

*What does it feel like to have your experience centered?  
How do you find your own center?*

TYSON

*CLF Member, incarcerated in TX*

When I think of “centered,” several concepts pop into my mind. Spatial reckoning. Centricity. Centrifugal forces. Center punch, meaning the tool I used to mark metals and plastics for precision drilling – and the center punch that I used to use to swiftly break car windows when I was a “bad kid.”

What makes me feel most centered is the sky at dawn. Looking at the sky, I often think, “wow, all of this for me right this moment. Thank you for allowing me to share it with everything else.” I get pretty emotional these days, seeing the sky at dusk, and at midnight... the sky and me seem to have a thing going lately.

My experience feels centered when the sky tells me that I am precisely as insignificant as I am suppose to be. The sky tells me to stop belittling myself even more; I have the entire world between my ears and the universe is in my mind and the sky is in my eyes. So what else could matter?

How do I find my own center? When I can't find it, I go outside and look up. Maybe it finds me? ■



PHOTO BY DEWANG GUPTA ON UNSPLASH

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lament of our hearts? Over the last eighteen or so months, WTF has become my most honest prayer. It is a lament and a statement that seeks to make meaning out of what has been confounding.

May we all experience the kind of liberation that frees us to lament those things that weigh heavy on us, with whatever words we choose. May we be reminded that we are held together by a word that is just four letters long yet is so much bigger than that, LOVE. ■



PHOTO BY GAELLE MARCEL ON UNSPLASH

## I Am Now Whole

ETHAN

*CLF Member, incarcerated in AZ*

To find a gathering of like minded souls  
 Makes me feel at home, I am now whole  
 Acceptance of every person no matter the faith  
 Has opened my eyes to a new loving embrace

My spirituality has grown in so many ways  
 I look forward to your publication as I count my days  
 Being forced to sit here and do time, I mean literally wait  
 Has shown me how I can strengthen my traits

Patience takes on a whole new truth  
 Hope that I can make up for lost youth  
 Understanding that the world must move on  
 Acceptance that an old love is gone

How I reminisce the good ol'days  
 Except I know I must change my ways  
 At least I do not fight this fight alone  
 I try to learn and make lessons known

Maybe I can help another like you helped me  
 Behind bars your mind can still be free  
 I joined a Church of Larger Fellowship  
 In a past life I was anti-religion, what a trip

So I want to thank the people who opened up my mind  
 I received a gift that is rare to find  
 That is acceptance of my lost soul  
 You make me feel at home, I am now whole



# DAILY COMPASS

*The Daily Compass is a ministry of the Church of the Larger Fellowship crafted by Rev. Michael Tino of the Lead Ministry Team. It that offers words and images to inspire spiritual reflection and encourage the creation of a more loving, inclusive and just world. Short reflections and prompts related to monthly themes are posted every day at [dailycompass.org](http://dailycompass.org). The following is a selection Daily Compass offerings from recent months.*



## BALANCE

Vital to the balance of a stone arch is the keystone, the wedge-shaped stone against which the two sides of the arch push in equal measure. In architecture, this is a vital and important role; in life, this is not a healthy situation in which to find ourselves.

*When have you experienced balance brought about by things pushing you in opposite directions? How did you interrupt this?*



## SPIRIT

Carolyn McDade described the night she wrote the hymn Spirit of Life to Kimberly French of UU World: "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." Writing the song was the prayer that refilled her spirit.

*What words or prayers refill your spirit when you feel like you're about to fall apart?*



## COVENANT

The power of covenant derives in part from the fact that all parties to it must agree, and that agreement must be renewed and renegotiated constantly. Healthy relationships require mutual consent; that includes spiritual relationships as well as intimate ones.

*How do you seek consent from others in meaningful ways?*



## GRACE

Sometimes grace comes through sheer will, through persisting despite the odds against us. Sometimes grace comes from hanging on, from inching ourselves forward until we are somewhere better.

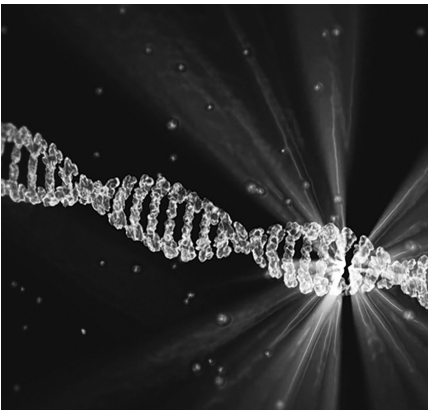
*What do you need the strength to persist through today?*



## UNION

The union of two people or two entities requires negotiation. The best negotiations don't get mired in positions, but instead focus on needs and values. Each party must be able to articulate their values and state their needs; each party must be able to say how they will help meet the needs of the other. Sometimes, sacrifices are made. Sometimes, synergy is developed.

*How can you make your needs and values known to others today in generative ways?*



## EMBODIMENT

You share 55% of the DNA in your genes with a banana tree, 80% with a cow, 98.5% with a chimpanzee, and 99.99% with every other human being on the planet. One ten-thousandth of the DNA in our genes is responsible for all of the differences we see in humanity. For the hundreds of rainbow shades that skin, eyes and hair come in. For the differences that make it so hard to find organs to transplant. For every shape and size that humans come in.

*Notice your connection to other living beings today. Feel your relation to them. They are your kin.*



## CREATIVITY

Where will you pause to touch the Earth? Where will you marvel at the hints that lie scattered around you in the grass? Where will you discard what you previously thought was true, and try on a new belief for size? Where will you stop for directions, for advice, for a conversation with another, for a relationship, for a moment of grace brought to you by the mind of a child?

*What does it mean to you to persist through difficult times on your journey?*

# Centering: A Little Bit At A Time



REV. DR. MICHAEL TINO  
Lead Ministry Team,  
Church of the Larger  
Fellowship

*If there is to be peace in the world,  
There must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations,  
There must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities,  
There must be peace between  
neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between  
neighbors,  
There must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home,  
There must be peace in the heart.*

— Taoist philosopher, Lao-Tse, sixth century BCE

Philosophers and theologians throughout the ages have pondered the roots of peace, and have come to the conclusion that peace between and among people is not possible without smaller bits of peace, especially peace within oneself. “Let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with me,” the popular song goes.

Peace within oneself is the challenge of centering: How do we center ourselves? How do we go within and cultivate peace?

Many people turn to spiritual prac-



PHOTO BY JUNE WONG ON UNSPLASH

tices to do this. Spiritual practices are regular things that we do that connect us with something greater than ourselves, and there is not one right way for everyone to engage in them. We each need to figure out what it is that gives us that feeling of inner peace, of centering.

But the trick to spiritual practice is doing it regularly, and if we’re already overwhelmed by the world or our circumstances, one more thing to add to our day is just one more thing to knock us off of our center, one more thing to cause anxiety instead of cultivating peace.

I have begun to think about this differently.

Instead of carving out twenty

minutes to sit in meditation, or an hour to walk a labyrinth every day, I find moments of spiritual centering throughout the day.

In giving advice to people in caring professions about cultivating peace and centering themselves, psychologist Ashley Davis Bush writes about “micro-practices,” one-moment-long glimpses of peace and mindfulness. Bush encourages people to fit them in throughout the day—in the pauses and cracks around other things, with no pressure or timeline or necessary outcome.

Take a breath. Notice how the air moves in and out of your body. Just

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one long, slow, deliberate breath.

Drink a glass of water. Feel it fill your body and think about how you will absorb that water.

Take just a moment and visualize in your mind something that makes you feel happy, or calm, or connected, or grounded. Choose an image and come back to it—just for a few seconds—throughout the day.

Choose a few words to guide you, and repeat them in your mind every

now and then, whenever you're feeling unmoored. "I am grounded," perhaps, or "I am loved."

Spend a moment acknowledging the difficulties in your life right now. They are real. You are real. Your pain is real, too, but it does not own you.

Find a way—a small way—every day to connect to another person. Write a letter to your pen pal. Smile at a friend, or if it's safe to do so, a stranger. Help someone out. Cultivate the knowledge that you are not alone in this world.

Think of something you're thank-

ful for. Take just a moment to feel gratitude.

Say something kind to yourself.

These practices don't need to be long—ideally they're just a minute, a moment, a breath. And they are all ways to connect to our center, to cultivate peace within our hearts, and to connect to something beyond our individual being.

Let peace begin with you. Let peace begin in your heart. Find your center, a little bit at a time. ■

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## FOR YOUR REFLECTION

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*In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, 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.*

**What practices and rituals help you find your center? What does being centered mean to you, especially in these (to quote Rev. JJ Flag) WTF times?**

*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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