

Whole and Holy



QUIANADENAE PERKINS
*Seminarian, Starr King
School for the Ministry*

I came fractured, I healed, and now I live in a stained glass mosaic of faith. The ME you see is a collection of shards, reconfigured and made into a whole new kind of beautiful.

I am proof that spiritual growth is both possible and worth it, proof that life is such a beautiful, complicated mess.

I grew up in a home where faith was spoken but never personally practiced. I know the words of belief, but not the behaviors. We swore to g*d, but we never visited a house of worship. I learned reverence for faith, but I never adopted a faith ideology.

As a teen, I came out to myself as a bisexual. This knowing was huge and shaped much of my life at the time. In parallel, having always been drawn to topics of faith, I began seeking out a faith community.

The churches I attended told me two things: I was a divine creation of g*d, AND g*d was casting me into hell for being bisexual. I tried to reconcile these two juxtapositions. I lived as a sacred creature of g*d who was also hell-bound. I took on the posture of the unredeemable.

In 2000, I took a job at a local Unitarian Universalist (UU) Church, a faith/church/ way of relating to

g*d that was new to me. I treated that first community like a hostile suspect. I took on the posture of a disbeliever. *Who were these people? Where is the sales pitch? When do we talk about my time in hell?*

My suspicion dissolved when I learned more about the seven principles of UU, communal rituals, and social justice dedication. This faith was not asking me to worship a book or man; the ask was to join a beloved community aspiring to be their best self.

This invitation was the gateway I needed to dive “heart first” into the faith community and bring myself whole/ holy. You can see the evolution of my journey as I have moved from lay leader, paid staff, and now as a minister in training. I have come a long way in 20 years. And over time, I have gained a posture of spiritual maturity and curiosity.

My faith looks like being a community member, volunteering on different committees, and financial stewardship. It includes the hosting of altars for African Ancestors, participating in seasonal rituals, movement as prayer, and by no means is bound to Sunday morning.

I used to say I came to UU whole, but that was not true. I stumbled into this faith with open wounds and deep scars that needed severe tending.

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“Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.”

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JOY

How do you practice and cultivate joy, especially when times are hard?

Double-Edged Joy

SCOTT

CLF Member, incarcerated in CA

*“ I slept and dreamt that
life was joy.
I awoke and saw that
life was service.
I acted and beheld
service was joy.”*

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Joy is one of the few things we humans desire for its own sake. It inspires us to pursue our highest ideals and is the fuel of hope when the fell clutch of circumstance gives us no season to continue. The swell and rush, the soaring of the heart, the urge to smile and laugh and dance: we dream of life being filled with such joy.

There is, however, a dark side to joy. Too much can be an easy lure into complacency or can feel like a veil hiding our problems from ourselves. Depression has its secret joys – the enticing liberation from the duties upon our weary shoulders. Drugs are abused exactly because they throw a euphoric haze over the brain, even as they rob it of chemical self-reliance. Then there is the dog-



PHOTO BY CRISTIAN ESCOBAR ON UNSPLASH

matic zealot, who condemns, while reveling in the joyous throes of blind faith. Joy can lead away from service to our better angels.

Where does that leave us? Should we moderate our joy? I think we are better off rethinking joy: it is a practice we can cultivate. We can learn to find joy in the small details of life, the everyday gifts we largely take for granted. We do not have to wait

for disaster to rob us of our bounty to finally appreciate it – that is the power of a spiritual practice. For me, having a liberal spirituality calls me to love the world as it is right now. It helps me see the beauty everywhere and resist the darker joys that try to pull me away from my own path. I want joy to better serve me so that I might better serve others. That is a joy worth having. ■

JOY

TIMOTHY

CLF Member, incarcerated in NY

Joy is all too rare behind bars, yet it is here that I experienced its power.

After a year of legal proceedings, I was transferred to a state facility. Arriving well into the evening I was physically stunned at the intimidating walls, razor wire, and unearthly

lights from the towers creating a forbidding estate — ghostly and lifeless. If the prison designers intended to conjure Dante (Abandon All Hope All Yet who Enter Here) they succeeded.

Soon I received a letter from my aunt saying she was planning to visit me. I considered writing to wave her off. I longed to see her, but how can I be so selfish as to allow her to experience the visceral injury that is arriving here and being subjected to

visitor processing. I did not write.

After a long hug and happy greetings, I told her how I worried for her, entering a totally depressing environment. She held my hand and said, “As I pulled up, all I felt was joy for seeing you.”

What an incredible gift! Circumstance did everything to defeat joy. Ignoring the circumstance, she lovingly created joy for both of us. ■

JOSEPH

CLF Member, incarcerated in NC

How do I cultivate joy, especially when times are hard? Well, the first thing I do is wiggle my toes, move my legs and arms, open and close my eyes, remembering that all things I can physically do with my body should not be taken for granted, and I thank the higher power for those gifts.

I also give thanks for many other things. Even though I am in prison, there are many blessings if I count them. Food, water, shelter, clean clothes, and a clean comfortable bunk to sleep on. Even though many of the people surrounding me have been sentenced for violent offenses, I somehow feel safe and serene.

I have plenty of time to study and plenty of material to fuel my desire for self improvement, as well as knowledge of self. I have a budget that allows me to buy things I want.

I have a job that allows me opportunities to serve others, which allows me to take my mind off myself for a change as well. I have a release date, which some people in here do not.

I have developed a meditation practice which has begun to calm the stormy hail-field of my mind, parting the clouds and fog slowly, allowing me to realize many things and gain insight on developing a purpose-driven life.

So anytime things seem to get hard, and I feel down and out, I practice these steps, and I pray to my creator and all is good, and ask forgiveness for any past violation against the order of goodness and love. I ask for the peace that surpasses all understanding to come over me, and that’s when I receive the gift of joy, and how I cultivate it daily. This was not an overnight result, it is a practice, one that I have and will continue to revise and allow to evolve in my life. Even though I am in prison, and still

have some time to go, I have significant hope for the future, and I’m filled with joy when I think of how far I’ve been brought out of the pit of despair that I found myself in prior to being incarcerated. I am blessed and look forward to future opportunities to bless others as part of my spiritual quest here on this earth. ■

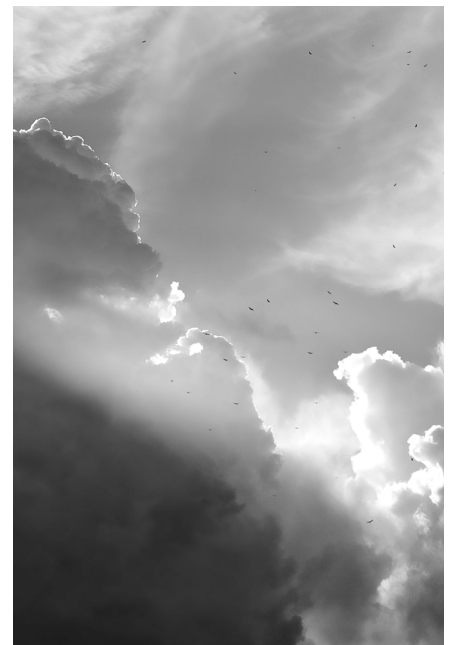


PHOTO BY TODD QUACKENBUSH ON UNSPLASH

JOY

KEVIN

CLF Member, incarcerated in VA

I practice and cultivate joy by helping others through these times of hardship – and I still take time for myself to connect with our Creator and Saviour so that I can remain in a joyous spirit, to continue passing joy

to those that come to me, or I find in my walk of the day.

I surround myself, even when the negativity surrounds me, with the light from who created us, and remind myself that this is all part of the “plan.” I believe that all is part of the trials and tribulations that we have to go through until it, the whole plan, is put to rest and made new and everlasting.

So, surround yourself with this knowledge – seek and you shall find, as all you have to do is ask and receive and know that one must have faith. Believe and fight the good fight and it (the Joy) will come in time. Seek friends, company, to help bring you out of the funk you might be in.

Be hopeful, be around others, and activate the energy to create the joy needed for our lives. ■

KWANETA

CLF Member, incarcerated in TX

I'm a 50-year-old menopausal Black mother of three, who has been living in a non-air conditioned solitary confinement cell the size a parking space for the past five and a half years.

In this environment, which has been designed for human torture and suffering, the holidays are always a time of increased suicides and suicide attempts. I practice and cultivate joy by “mothering” the many 17-19 year old adolescents living with me in here.

It's fulfilling to offer guidance and life lessons in kindness to other people's children, as I would my own. I can only pray and hope the Universe will reciprocate for my three children. These acts of love and kindness provide an immense sense of purpose for me. ■



PHOTO BY JOSHUA WORONIECKI ON UNSPLASH

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I stayed because the approach to healing was holistic, encompassing, and expansive.

I remain because I believe that access to spiritual healing will be a crucial component in our freedom fight.

Can you imagine what systems we could dismantle if we came to work from a place of healed + honored wholeness?

That is what I am working toward, what I believe is necessary and possible.

A stained glass mosaic of faith, reconfigured and made into a whole new kind of beautiful.

Whole and holy. ■



PHOTO BY ADAM GONZALES ON UNSPLASH

Lead with Examples

ADRIAN

CLF Member, incarcerated in FL

What do I think of the *Quest Monthly* theme?

How joy from within will be as a light beam,
when you live in the present moment,
connecting and uniting with humanity
Start now and make a covenant,
with the *I am I am* within

Interconnectedness through humility,
We are one so count me in...

Balance, spirit, covenant, and race:
all part of my daily compass
Union, embodiment, creativity, and grace:
What I will express en-mass

But first I must connect
with divine love within and not neglect,
the mission of compassion today,
touching hearts with my words and
leading with examples one way. ■



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 and other CLF staff members. It 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. The following are a few selections from February Daily Compass offerings.



JOY

Amidst the harshness of our world, it is an important spiritual practice to claim (or reclaim) joy. To wrap it around us like a blanket against the coldness of our world. Joy keeps the ember of our soul burning when forces outside of us would conspire to snuff it out.

Find something today that makes you rejoice. Find something that makes you feel warm and alive.



RESISTANCE

In recent years, I have come to embrace joy as an act of resistance. There is so much evil and sadness out there and it was through reading and following Black activists that I realized that we can't get lost in the idea of finding joy wherever we can.

How do you resist the evil and sadness of our world?



MAYHEM

We must find places to restore "our deep knowing that we have to take care of ourselves and each other with love and joy if we are to soulfully survive the world's mayhem." —Heather Rion Starr

What is your place of refuge amidst mayhem? How is your joy restored?



WHOLENESS

"I have learned to trust those who are witnesses rather than gurus, those who express their confusion as well as their knowledge, and those who share their suffering along with their joy." -David Rankin

Practice being a whole, authentic person with someone you trust.



UUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY MULTIPLATFORM / PORTLAND • 2022

Would you like to represent the Church of the Larger Fellowship at General Assembly (GA) this summer? The CLF is entitled to 22 delegates at the UUA's General Assembly, which will be held both online and in-person in Portland, OR from June 22-26, 2022.

You will be able to attend online or in-person workshops, programs, and worship services. Proof of vaccination for COVID-19 is required to attend in person.

As a delegate you will be able to vote during General Sessions. General Sessions will be held from 9:30-12:30pm PT on 6/23-6/25 and 12:30-2:30pm PT on 6/26. Delegates should be able to be online or in person to attend the majority of these General Sessions. CLF delegates vote their conscience on matters related to the denomination of Unitarian Universalism, and are responsible for their own expenses.

If you'd like to participate in GA 2022 in this role, please fill out the online application at clfu.org/delegate-application. Visit the UUA's General Assembly website at www.uua.org/ga for details.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

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.

To quote QuianaDenae Perkins: Can you imagine what systems we could dismantle if we came to work from a place of healed + honored wholeness?

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.



Church of the Larger Fellowship
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24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

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Quest Monthly Editorial Team: Aisha Hauser, *lead ministry team*, Rose Gallogly, *publications coordinator*, Lori Stone, *director of technology*, Tanner Linden, *public relations and outreach manager*, JeKaren Olaoya, *copyeditor*

CLF and Worthy Now Staff: Aisha Hauser, Christina Rivera, Michael Tino, *lead ministry team*; Jody Malloy, *executive director*; Lori Stone, *director of technology*; Tanner Linden, *public relations and outreach manager*; Beth Murray, *prison ministry administrator*, Judy DiCristofaro, *fiscal administrator*; Rose Gallogly, *publications coordinator*, Andrea Fiore, *webmaster*, Marin Smith, *data services coordinator*, Cir L'Bert, Jr, *prison ministry manager*

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Websites: clfuu.org, dailycompass.org, worthynow.org

Phone: 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150 **Email:** clf@clfuu.org

CLF Jewelry at inSpirit, the UUA Book & Gift Shop, 800-215-9076

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

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