

# Inviting You into Community



LEAD MINISTRY TEAM  
*Church of the Larger Fellowship*

As we enter the third year of the global pandemic, there has been a general malaise and exhaustion. We wonder when it will be over and we long for socializing in person, we long for gathering carefree. We long for the time when we receive an invitation to meet in person and we gratefully accept the opportunity to be with those we love.

Some of our most sacred moments in life start with an invitation. We are invited to witness weddings, celebrations of birth, memorials of loved ones just to name a fraction of the ways we gather. These times remind us of our connections to each other and to the community.

In community, we are invited to learn and grow. In community, we are invited to listen to the experiences of others and to share your experiences with them. In community, we are invited to be a part of a constant process of change that pulls us all towards liberation.

Choosing to be a part of a Unitarian Universalist religious community comes with a host of invitations.

It is in the religious community that we are invited to a way of being with one another. Through bringing our skills and gifts to bear in service to others, we find and express our call-

ing. We invest in the institution of our congregation in real and meaningful ways. We are invited to be faithful stewards of a common mission.

Often, when we think about the invitation to stewardship, we understand that to be a request to financially support our congregation. And certainly, it is that, but it is so much more. We are also invited to participate. Members of the CLF serve our church as facilitators and moderators of online community groups, as members of committees that write grants and monitor our finances, leaders in our governance, and authors for our publications (like this one). Our congregants serve each other as pen pals, witnesses to the joys and sorrows in each others' lives, and members of our circles and groups. Our congregants serve the world by working to make everyone free and building beloved community one small piece at a time.

You are invited. You are invited to the stewardship of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. To support one another and our common mission of liberation and justice. Over the years, the CLF has invited Unitarian Universalists to engage with our faith in myriad ways. We began as a monthly snail mail packet to soldiers in WWII and we have evolved to provide worship each week through a weekly live stream. We provide a ministry to incarcerated UUs who find sustenance in a liberatory faith.

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# Quest

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*"If you are a dreamer,  
come in,  
If you are a dreamer,  
a wisher, a liar,  
A hope-er, a pray-er,  
a magic bean buyer...  
If you're a pretender  
come sit by my fire  
For we have some  
flax-golden tales to spin.  
Come in! Come in!"*

SHEL SILVERSTEIN

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# INVITATION

*When have you felt invited and welcomed as your full self?*

GARY

*CLF Member, incarcerated in SC*

Growing up gay in the South, especially in the turbulent 1960s, was a childhood of secrecy and shame. The established mainstream churches preached intolerance and damnation on being “queer,” just as 11am on Sunday is still one of the most segregated hours of the week. I attended Sunday School, worship services, youth fellowship and never once did I truly feel part of all that was going on. I knew I was “different.” Sneaking into my father’s den, I scoured books, trying to decipher this mystery of who I was and where I fit in.

As the confusion of childhood became the certainty of adulthood, I was active in political campaigns on a local, state, and national level, and even sought local office myself. Still, the “full” person of me, who I am, could not be admitted, accepted, or even acknowledged. A gay politician in the South doesn’t go far. So I closeted myself and denied myself the freedom I observed others enjoy.

Strangely, as I’ve said before, incarceration has been a liberating experience. Having lost virtually everything (home, bank account, reputation), I had nothing to lose by emerging from the shadows of shame, and being me.



PHOTO BY RICHARD FULLBROOK ON UNSPLASH

Still, my spiritual life lay vacant. I maintained a belief in the Divine and sought books on being gay and Christian, but could find no house of worship accepting. I gravitated to Buddhism, Wiccan, and explored Humanism, but my ingrained belief in “God,” and yes, in Jesus, would not let me enjoy any other faith fully. I tried the Metropolitan Community Church, which a friend had told me about, but could not find a willingness to admit a prisoner by those I contacted.

Then I discovered Unitarian Universalism and the CLF, and it was as if (waxing poetically), the clouds

of gloom parted and a shaft of light finally appeared to my battered soul. Here was what I had sought! A church home. I can not only *be* me, but the CLF *wanted* me. I felt the warmth, the love, the genuine desire to welcome me and show me the love of the Divine that I had been so long denied. I am still on a spiritual journey as I evolved in my relationship with God. The CLF allows me the freedom to explore, to reach for beyond the limits of church dogma, to finally enjoy my road to religious liberation. For I can be Wiccan, Christian, Buddhist, or none of the above, but most importantly, I can at long last be *me* – fully invited and welcomed just as I am. ■

# To Whom It May Concern

Dedicated to the CLF

GARY

*CLF Member, incarcerated in SC*

To Whom It May Concern

Last picked for softball  
first to be blamed  
taunted and jeered at  
hiding in shame

To Whom It May Concern

Last born child of eight  
awkward and confused  
never feeling love  
knowing only feeling abused

To Whom It May Concern

Told there's no place for me  
I would never fit in  
*God's love is not for you!*  
no way to win

To Whom It May Concern

Rejected and ashamed  
life as dark as night  
love finally parted the clouds  
at last I saw the light

To Whom It May Concern

I found a place at Christ's table  
there really is room for me  
I have emerged from the abyss of despair  
and at long last I am free



PHOTO BY HALEY RIVERA ON UNSPLASH

## INVITATION

CARLOS

*CLF member, incarcerated in VA*

I have found my home in music. Music is forgiving and it resonates not only physically, but also spiritually.

In singing with my congregation, the very attempt to harmonize with each other brings a sense of inclusion and belonging. Each note I contribute lends itself to the melody of the community's worship. There is no past, no regrets – only a collaborative effort to unite our efforts into making something beautiful. There is a selfless giving of our individual talents, great and small alike, to convey the melody of a given piece of music.

In music, I feel valued and at home. ■

## INVITATION

ROBERT

*CLF Member, incarcerated in MA*

What is to be truly invited in? Being yourself, letting who you truly are shine through, not be covered up, hidden. Not only that, but when you felt welcomed to be that person.

Growing up, there was always that expectation to fit in, to be like the rest of my family, so I was never able to relax, ultimately for my entire childhood. Being myself was frowned upon, because otherwise I was just too odd.

The side-effect of that was my happiness. I was typically a bit too serious, a bit dour, if you will. I existed but never really lived. It took major

changes in my life, where and how I lived, to not only feel welcomed, but comfortable in my own skin.

Like many things in my life, the turning point, the linchpin, occurred once I became a husband and became a father. The first time I felt like I belonged was when our daughter was Dedicated.

My wife and I, by the Church's altar, having our little one blessed. Her whole life was in front of her, and my life was now just truly starting. The two most important people in my life, the ones that I would lay down my life for, were there: one in my arms, one right next to me.

At the party afterwards, the celebration of introducing her to the world, was when it was acknowledged by my aforementioned family. My uncle

came up to me and let me know that seeing me up there, with my wife and daughter, was the first time in 25 years that he had ever seen me happy.

Periodically. I think back on that, both the Dedication, and what my uncle said afterwards. That sense of belonging is hard to put into words, for it transcends description. It's a feeling of perfection, a pinnacle obtained, a sense that everything is right in the world.

I miss that feeling. I miss them. In here, I don't have that access; you're not allowed to be your true self, to show that vulnerability. There's a need to always have a front, a "tough guy" persona, which I am not. To be able to relax, welcomed to be yourself, is a treasure, and not noticed until it is lost. ■



PHOTO BY LIV BRUCE ON UNSPLASH

# The Eclipse of Our Lives

JACK

*CLF Member, incarcerated in TX*

I'm a volunteer Suicide Companion, assigned to watch over and talk to other prisoners who are in crisis, severely depressed, who hear voices telling them to harm themselves, those who have found prison life beyond their ability to endure.

My schedule had me leaving my unit at 3am recently, only to find a gaggle of officers outside staring up at the moon, as it was nearing a total eclipse, something no other inmate was blessed to be outside to see.

As a Druid and practicing UU, we are taught that there are three facets we must honor—the Earth Path of nature awareness and natural living, the Sun Path of seasonal celebrations honoring the Sun's cycles and the yearly cycle of growth and harvest, and the Moon Path. To live the Moon Path is to touch the divine energy that creates the universe and lives in all things. We do this through meditation and prayer, opening a wider awareness of the universe, ourselves, and our place in it.

Locked up, I seldom see the moon, since prison yards are islands of light at night, making the moon and stars invisible, and seldom are we even allowed out at night. So to see the full moon at 3am is true soul food. To see the moon nearly covered by the



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN VOROS ON UNSPLASH

Earth's shadow put my mind to thinking, meditating for days after.

The moon's white color comes from the Sun's rays. The blue tint is a reflection of the blue marble that is the Earth during the eclipse, the white and blue had become a dusky red-brown disk. I began to wonder if it was a reflection of my soul, my daily life. Prison has a way of tainting our lives with negativity and endless drama. It taints our Moon Path meditations and prayers.

Seeing the moon fainted by Earth's shadow rather than the pure blue made me take stock of the red-brown reflection of my current life and the place I've allowed negativity to grow in it. The only way I've been able to do nearly 20 years behind bars has been

to be positive, to reflect the pure blue, the pure white light of positivity, to not be drawn into the prison dramas and voices of negativity. Yet like the Moon's eclipse, I've been eclipsed by those who live negative lives, those whose lives are drama, those who stare vacantly at nothing while the drug courses through their veins, and whose every waking minute is focused on finding something to alter their minds. I've allowed those who live negative lives, who live for drama, who live for conflict, and who live to escape reality to affect me.

My meditations since that 3am shocking visage have shown me the way out of my frustrating and

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[Eclipse, continued on page 6](#)

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# ORA ET LABORA

TIMOTHY TARKELLY

*CLF free world member, living in KS*

A task is only as dull as its suitor,  
and if you listen, you can hear your work  
calling you, the joys of occupation  
waiting to unveil their rewards: a chance to pray,  
name your talents, a chance to sing.

Find rhythm in the feathers  
scraping their wetted tips against  
darkening sheets, open skins  
soon to hold some ancient secret,  
hallowed verse, hardened holy rule,

or in the marriage of wool and work,  
the blood of pressed flowers fueling  
the swimming needle, binding spun black  
oceans, adding stones to heavy oaths,  
to tonsured ethic,

or in the fields, the stench  
of soil as its churned for new life,  
rising to meet the spade  
gripped in purposeful hands, pendulized  
by the bulged and sweaty breaths of repetition,

and in the rise and fall of duty,  
the long-hewn, calmative voice  
of a thousand hopes burning at once,  
smoldering inside righteous chests,  
every candle's daring lash at cobbled darkness.

Call back to it, say that you're coming,  
muscle and timbre, there is no other  
that can wear your name,  
sing these songs, mold the earth  
quite like you.

## *Eclipse, continued from page 5*

negative prison games. The first way is to say: "No! I'm not going to play your games. I'll be here to talk, if you need me to be a sounding board, to counsel you as a friend, but don't bring your drama, your negativity to me. If you are going to do drugs, take it somewhere else, but I'll gladly support you if you want to quit."

At 76 with seven years to go on my sentence, I'm considered one of

the trusted people by some, but to become a part of the problem negates my status as "old school," and I begin to reflect the dull red-brown of the Moon's eclipse and I begin to wallow in the my pity pot of negativity.

It was fated for me to see the total eclipse while over 1200 other inmates slept behind locked doors. It was fated for me to see the Moon's Path when I had been sinking into the pit of negativity and feeling helpless to escape it. Once again the Moon's path of reflective meditation

allowed me to see the road to freedom from the negatives of prison life. It allowed me to be a touchstone for some who need me to listen and reflect, to help them overcome the ever-present negativity of prison life, the trap that we all face.

Buddha, the Goddess, Allah, or God of three persons — whichever — we are led when we open our lives to the creation of the universe, and we open our lives and our hearts to hear them speak to our souls. ■

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*Invitation, continued from page 1*

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We are finding new and creative ways to invite all those who seek a liberal, loving community to engage with this expansive and inclusive faith.

As you flip through the pages of this month's *Quest*, let it be an invitation into deeper reflection and contemplation.

In Faith from the Lead Ministry Team,

Christina Rivera  
Aisha Hauser, MSW CRE-ML  
Rev. Dr. Michael Tino ■



*The CLF Lead Ministry Team (l-r): Rev. Michael Tino, Christina Rivera, and Aisha Hauser*

## 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.*

**Do you feel invited and welcomed as your full self by the CLF? If so, how does that invitation feel? If not, what could we be doing differently?**

*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*

**Learning Fellows:** Dr. Althea Smith, Erien Babcock, Lecretia Williams

**Websites:** [clfuu.org](http://clfuu.org), [dailycompass.org](http://dailycompass.org), [worthynow.org](http://worthynow.org)

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