

No Saviors



AISHA HAUSER, MSW, GRE-ML
Lead Ministry Team,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship

One of the many reasons I choose Unitarian Universalism as my faith is that I don't believe in saviors. When I say I don't believe in saviors, I'm really serious. I don't find that having famous prophets has consistently served humanity. We can't seem to put into context the fact that those revered and held up as messengers of the holy are simply human beings. Humans who have made enough of an impact on those around them that their stories live on for millenia. Their stories become embellished and larger than life. I love stories and learning lessons from them, but whether or not some of these stories are "true" sometimes get in the way of how we are called to be in community.

The life and experiences of Jesus of Nazareth changed the course of human history. He is credited with being the catalyst for starting a new religion, Christianity. The fact is, he never wanted to start a new religion. By all accounts, he wanted people to become better Jews, not leave the Jewish faith altogether. He preached love, compassion and pointed out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his time.

He didn't claim to be God, he wanted those in power to stop abusing their power and offer care and mercy to those with no power.

Each of us has agency to affirm each other in the fullness of our humanity. We hold the spark of the divine, and we are connected to each other through that spark.

We cause pain and horror when we forget this connection to each other. History has shown us that time and time and time again, when the masses succeed in dehumanizing whoever is deemed the "other," this has resulted in horrors perpetrated to those who are oppressed.

The United States, since the arrival of colonizers, has been in the business of dehumanizing entire populations in order to steal land and steal labor. It is the only way violent extractive capitalism flourishes.

Black and Indigenous people have borne the brunt of the dehumanization and now white women, with the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, are facing a renewed understanding of what it means to not be viewed as fully human, and how one cannot rely on a system created out of cruelty and oppression.

Black and Indigenous populations have been sounding the alarm and trying to scream from the rafters what has been the core truth of this country, that in order for those in power to thrive under capitalism, there are those that must be

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Quest

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*"If we have
no peace, it
is because
we have
forgotten that
we belong to
each other."*

MOTHER TERESA

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COMPASSION & HEALING

What does compassion feel like to you? What does healing feel like?

JASON

CLF Member, incarcerated in IL

For me, growing up in the nightmare of my childhood and the abuses I suffered, compassion was an unknown word and concept. It wasn't until I was in a Department of Children and Family Services funded youth facility that I learned about compassion.

I learned from my therapist and his wife, who both worked there. They saw how messed up I was and how much I distrusted everyone and everything. So they both went above and beyond their responsibilities to show me how to trust, how a normal family is together (loving, supportive, caring). They showed me that

it's okay to make mistakes and that I shouldn't have to fear severe reprisals, and how to actually start to live and not just exist. They showed me how to be human and in doing so, they taught me the meaning of compassion.

You ask what does healing feel like? As my therapist and his wife showed me their home and family life, and taught me what it means to actually live and know what a normal, loving family is supposed to be, the pain that I experienced in learning those lessons was unlike any I have experienced before or after.

I felt as if something vast and dark that had been slowly crushing and killing me was torn off by their

compassion and kindness, leaving me crying with the pain of the realization of what I had been missing and what I had been so desperately searching for. It left behind a hollowness within me. Though I had been warmed by their compassion, at that time I still did not know what it meant to feel loved.

Healing, for me, has always been a painful experience. The hurts of my mind and soul have far outweighed those of my body. And for me, though it has been painful each time I have gone through a healing experience, I have come out of it wiser and more human. So, although I do not look forward to the pain it brings, I am always looking for ways to heal the scars and pains of the past. ■



PHOTO BY LINUS NYLUND ON UNSPLASH

Would you like your creative expression to appear in Quest?

All CLF members (incarcerated and free world members) are welcome to submit reflections on upcoming Quest themes, original poetry and artwork. If you have access to the internet, you can email your submissions to CLF Publications Coordinator, Rose Gallogly, at rgallogly@clfu.org. Submissions can also be mailed to us at CLF UU, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02210. Here are the next few Quest themes:

Approx. Due Date	Quest Monthly Theme	Response Question
August 10, 2022	September 2022 - Awe	How do you cultivate awe and wonder in your life?
September 10, 2022	October 2022 - Sacrifice	What is the value of sacrifice? What are its downsides?
October 10, 2022	November 2022 - Comunidad (community)	Who makes up your community? What role does community play in your life?
November 10, 2022	December 2022 - Rest	What does true rest look like for you?

Voices of Compassion

BRANDON

CLF Member, incarcerated in ID

In October of 2020, I suffered a week of torment within which I was repeatedly beaten, extorted of property and medication, and sexually abused by a cellmate. What's worse is that the correctional officer who put me in that cell had prior knowledge that the scenario might occur. The inmate I was housed with had not only been incarcerated for that sort of behavior focused toward women in his life, but also had prior instances of doing such to his previous gay cellmates. I tried to get staff's attention without just telling, because I was already being beaten and had been threatened worse if I told.

I have spent twelve years in here (ten at that time), and in situations like this, I know that could have been in bad enough shape to be hospitalized by the time an officer would respond. Staff ignored me. After being moved I did not make an official report right away because I had attempted to poison my abuser by drugging him with atropine, the deadly poison found in atropa belladonna, a plant like deadly nightshade (I am prescribed medication that contains atropine).

Later, when I did make the "official" report, the C.O. I unofficially reported the situation to did not step up and say anything about my confessions to him. The investigation staff did not interview any of the witnesses who

knew it was happening when it was happening. They found the report unsubstantiated the same day that it was opened, without notifying the police. They confiscated much of the paperwork that I had been filing, and warned me that if I continued with the paperwork, they would further separate me and another inmate to whom I was handfasted (married). They said they were giving me and him more freedoms than they'd typically give two inmates in romantic relationships. They went so far as to tell me that I was unable to use the grievance system on an issue that occurred over 30 days prior, but when

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A Compassionate Life



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

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong has studied the teachings of religions large and small all around the world. And she has, as we all have, witnessed the strife in our world: the pain, the isolation, the injustice, the inequality.

And yet, she realized, no religion teaches that those things are acceptable. All of the world's religions, in fact, teach compassion. They use different words and different concepts to talk about it, but all of them teach their followers to treat other people with kindness and respect. All of them teach their followers that moral, good people help others.

In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Armstrong asks us first to learn about compassion. What do the religions of the world say about it? What have we been taught about compassion—from our heritage, from our families, from our experiences? And most importantly, what does Unitarian Universalism teach about compassion?

We've got a principle about it, certainly. We covenant to affirm and promote, among other things, "justice, equity and compassion in human relationships." And yet, how

often does our practice of this principle stop with promoting justice?

What does it mean to promote compassion in human relationships?

How would our society be different if we made it the norm that we try to feel one another's pain—that we suffer *with* one another instead of watching one another suffer. Justice and equity only require the latter—it's compassion that requires the *with*.

Our Universalist heritage also encourages us to compassion. The promise of universal salvation, at its most basic, is that all of us are going to end up in the same place when we die (we can disagree about where and what that place is). I don't think of heaven as a realm for the soul that is outside of what we know—I think of it as right here, in the midst of the world that we know.

Your being, mine, and everyone's—all part of one, interconnected, closed system. I am regularly stopped in my tracks by the unfathomable beauty of this notion that we are inextricably bound to one another. The promise of our connectedness requires us to realize our unity with all of creation.

In his 1945 work *A Religion For Greatness*, Universalist minister and theologian Clarence Skinner emphasized our religious call to work toward the unity of all beings, which

he defined as "the coherence of what may seem to be separate, into a oneness. Unity," he wrote, "means an operative harmony, a functional relationship which belongs to all the parts of a whole."

Later in this work, Skinner also wrote, "This great religious experience of the unities and the universals, however, tends to direct [humanity] outward toward what is greater than the atomistic human."

Clarence Skinner pushed to expand the notion of Universalism that his spiritual ancestors had developed. He called us to a "cosmic mind-set" in which we all realized our connection with—indeed our unity with—everything that is, everything that has been, and everything that ever will be.

We are one with the stars. With the planets. With the oceans and mountains and ice caps. With the forests and the deserts and the fauna running through them. We are also one with one another.

This unity of existence has profound implications for how we live.

This unity of existence calls us to suffer *with* those who suffer, because we are they and they are we.

This unity of existence calls us to practice compassion. Our faith teaches us we must. ■

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subjugated. As time went on and this country grew, the list of who became dehumanized grew and grew. Now we have the highest population of incarcerated humans of any industrialized nation on earth, we have caged children whose only crime was to be traveling with their parents in search of a better life. It is all so overwhelming, I sometimes want the story of a savior to be true, I mean now would be a great time for Black Jesus to come back and save us, but the truth—as I believe it—is that no one is coming to save us, we must work together and affirm each other to transform this country.

I believe it is possible when we do what we can from where we are. I am clear in my support and affirmation of those with targeted identities, descendants of enslaved Africans, indigenous people, immigrants, those with seen and unseen disabilities, people in the LGBTQI+ communities and anyone else targeted, I am at the ready to fight for and affirm them. The ones I have trouble maintaining their humanity are those who are in power and the oppressors. I have had to remind myself that I do not condone (to put it mildly) oppression and I combat oppression in the ways I am able, and I also need to maintain that even those people who I distrust and abhor are still human. I do not want to fall into the trap of dehumanizing anyone.

I do have boundaries that I maintain, I do not pretend the world is not a



PHOTO BY LIAM EDWARDS ON UNSPLASH

scary and cruel place. I do not “agree to disagree” about the humanity of others. I do try to refrain from holding hate in my heart. I focus on liberation, rather than bitterness. It’s not easy; it is a spiritual practice for sure.

Yes, we must fight systems of oppres-

sion in all the ways available to us. AND we must remember that each day we can affirm each other and show up in love and with care.

It is this love, care and compassion that affirms community. Amen, Ashe and Blessed Be. ■

Voices of Compassion cont. from page 3

I kept up the fight, they said they'd try to get an exception, though that was after I submitted forms to retrieve the confiscated documents for "legal reasons," that prove neglectful behavior on their part.

Before that October, I would have seen compassion and healing in the achieving of a sound mind and heart from a past of broken and failed relationships. I would have seen it as smiling and my ability to be happy at last with the man I had chosen to marry. But after that October, even the happiness he had brought to my life was not enough to heal the nightmares and anxiety attacks that, like COVID, had become the new normal. I sought out the help of clinicians to help with talking about the rape and the relationship issues with my husband, but they only told me to do the same things I have always done, like to count and breathe if I felt a panic attack coming on. And then they told me to think "happy thoughts," as if I were Robin Williams being taught to fly by Julia Roberts in the movie *Hook*, after the children were abducted. However, unlike Robin Williams, that was "professional" advice that I would not accept. If I could just think happy thoughts... don't you think I would be doing so?

It is now 2022, I am single and I have healed a lot from last year's devastation of my severance ritual from my husband. It's been a long journey, but the week in October 2020 still haunts me. I brought it up in a mental health



PHOTO BY EROL AHMED ON UNSPLASH

evaluation that the prison's medical contractor conducted. The psychiatric doctor responded coldly, saying "still?," which elicited a cold response of my own: "yeah, still." Today, I reflect on that appointment and I also ask myself, "still?"

The people I've reached out to for support have told me that things will get better in time, but the effects of the trauma that I've experienced may last forever. Where is the healing in that?

I had made a promise back then that was holding me back from the kind of self-protection that I would have normally engaged in. Yes, I was poisoning him — but the doses were low and would only cause drowsiness at that level; it was the justification I told myself as I risked his life. But after time moved on, I made myself a promise that if I had to, I'd engage in the defense needed. But the question is, what does healing and compassion look like to me now?

I am looking for the voices of compassion and of justice to stand against those in places of power that abuse that power, who don't use their power to enact a compassionate justice. Healing looks like change. Reckoning those powers and replacing them

with those who would protect others from suffering what myself and many others have experienced. The justice system as long been flawed and it punished consenting partners while ignoring a lot violence and rape. It also is a breeding ground of hate, not love. People in here do not always take an opportunity for rehabilitation and instead, the harsh environment makes us harder. And many leave as harder criminals than when they came in.

Compassion would mean reaching out to inmates, especially the LGBT communities within the prisons, and learning about the condition they live in. Joining groups that act against injustice in the justice system. Voting on laws that would help inmates, not harm them. And healing would mean change.

I hope that if you've suffered the same sort of experience, and you're reading this now, that you take some comfort in knowing that you are not alone. This is a common problem and there are people, like us, who will fight the system until change occurs. And there are people outside of prison who are compassionate and will help people like us. We cannot give up, we will win. Blessed be. ■

Updates from the CLF's 2022 Annual Meeting



JODY MALLOY

*Executive Director,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship*

The CLF held its Annual Congregational Meeting on Sunday June 5, 2022. Anyone who could not attend the meeting was invited to vote by mail ahead of the meeting. We received over 300 votes via mail. 32 members voted in person at the meeting.

CLF members voted for the slate of nominations presented by the nominating committee (318 yes, 0 no, 12 abstain) as follows:

- Rev Jessica James for Board of Directors for a three year term
- Darbi Lockridge for Board of Directors for a three year term
- Mandy Neff for Board of Directors for a three year term
- Rev Dr JJ Flag for Board of Directors for one year (to complete an unfinished term)
- Darbi Lockridge for Treasurer for a one year term
- Mandy Neff for Clerk for a one year term
- Michele Grove for Nominating Committee for a three year term

CLF members also voted to ordain Dr. Althea Smith, a CLF Learning Fellow,

as a Unitarian Universalist minister (320 yes, 0 no, 16 abstain). Althea was recommended for ministry by the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Althea's ordination was on June 18, 2022. She is now Rev. Dr Althea Smith!



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.

How do you relate to the idea of saviors? Does it offer you hope and/or pose the risk of dehumanizing people?

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
Unitarian Universalist

24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

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Learning Fellows: Erien Babcock, Jess Hunt, JeKaren Olaoya, Lecretia Williams

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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