

Embracing Pluralism



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

When my daughter was nine years old, she asked me which religion was the “right one.” The reason this was even on her mind is that my children are part of an interfaith family. Their father was raised Jewish and I was raised Muslim. When we married, we had a secular wedding and for a time chose not to raise our children in either of the traditions exclusively. We thought we could get away with raising them with no religious identity. However, this turned out not to be the case.

At the time we were living in New Jersey and my children's best friends (also siblings) attended a conservative Christian congregation. I would let my kids attend programs with them mistakenly thinking it would be benign. This changed after my daughter returned home at age 5 declaring to her Jewish father, “Jesus is the light of the world.” To which he responded, “No he's not, we're Jewish.”

I realized at that moment that we weren't being intentional in how we raised our children and they were clearly wanting to engage in some kind of religious community, even at their young age. It was age appropriate, wanting to belong.

I had already known about Unitarian

Universalism and promptly looked up the closest UU congregation. Thankfully, there was one just two towns away, in Ridgewood. We attended together and the rest is history. One year later, I was the religious education coordinator for a small congregation in Orange, NJ and from there I dove deeper into the world of faith leadership, eventually becoming credentialed in religious education leadership, a long and thorough process demonstrating competencies in leadership, faith development and the UU faith, among other things.

The reason we chose a Unitarian Universalist community is that it is pluralist. UUs do not claim to be superior to any other faiths and we affirm that there are many paths to what we understand to be spirituality, whether or not that includes belief in a deity.

This is a profound and sacred notion for the modern era. Especially because it seems that the world around us is doubling down on religious extremism. Religious dominance causes intolerance of those who are of a different faith, or choose no faith at all.

Truly embracing pluralism and the freedom to coexist in the same society while maintaining your own religious identity is a transformative idea. We are witnessing in real time the impact

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“Pluralism accepts the moral reality of different kinds of truth, but rejects the idea that they can all be placed on a single scale, measured by a single value.”

TIMOTHY SNYDER

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PLURALISM

What does it mean to be pluralistic in our beliefs?

JACK

CLF member, incarcerated in MA

Is God an old man in flowing robes with a long beard who looks down from on high? A Lord and Lady offering blessings to those in worshiping circles? A pantheon of Gods, each representing another face of a Supreme Being? Or Gaia, Mother Earth, in which we and all were created?

Is Jesus a prophet? The long awaited Messiah? A forerunner of Mohamed? An issuer of great wisdoms like the Buddha? On the son of a supreme being — but then aren't we all sons and daughters of the Supreme Being?

Is Heaven a place of pearly gates, streets of gold, food aplenty, where

we all learn to play harps and praise our God; a place where all earthly pleasures are ours? Is Hell a place of fire and brimstone, a land of ice and perpetual cold, where our earthly bodies are eternally tormented?

Is Heaven and Hell the legacy we leave behind, the kindnesses we showed, the ones we befriended, fought, touched, challenged to be better, to show love for all? Or is it the pain we left behind to be suffered generation after generation?

Does it really matter? Does it really matter how we envision a thing beyond human comprehension? Does it really matter what happens to our earthly bodies after death? Does it matter what name we use for those forces of creation?

Names come and go. Visions change as our lives change and evolve from a primitive society living on the land to a people of computers, space travel, and seeking to understand the stars.

What does matter is how we lived our lives, how we respected each other, and how we had reverence for all creation of the heavens and the earth. What does matter is not what we will gain or suffer after death but the legacy we leave for future generations. Will they show the love we shared or the pain we caused?

The future of and those who live beyond us is not written in stone—yet—but you are the sculptor with the hammer and chisel who will write it. What will you write? ■



PHOTO BY VAL VESA ON UNSPLASH

JACOB

CLF Member, incarcerated in AR

Pluralistic is, by definition, holding to the doctrine of pluralism, which is accepting and embrace diversity in all of its forms. The act of accepting and encouraging diversity leads to a better acceptance and love for others. It helps us to remember the fact that the Divine is Love; accepting others and their differences is a step to acting in Love and embodying the true essence of Love. ■



PHOTO BY AARON BURDEN ON UNSPLASH

A Utopian Crucible

LAUREN SILVERWOLF

CLF member, incarcerated in TX

Oxford defines pluralism as, “the acceptance within a society of a number of groups with different beliefs or ethnic backgrounds.” This does not sound like the world we live in today, but it does sound like somewhere I would bleed to see become a reality.

I joined the U.S. Army at the age of 18, straight out of high school. I was an Airborne Infantryman, and I swore to defend the Constitution. What I

wanted was to defend the principles of being truly free, of being accepting of all who came to us, and of being what we proclaimed ourselves to be in word, although never truly in deed. I would love nothing more, and I would serve again to defend a truly pluralistic society.

I would like to introduce two more terms to define what this would look like: utopia and crucible. Again, we go to Oxford: utopia is defined as, “an imagined world or society where everything is perfect,” and crucible is

defined as, “a container in which metals or other substances may be melted or heated.”

This may seem completely out of context, but think of a society like the crucible. If we melt together, we become one out of many, and if we could coexist in this manner, most of our reasons for war or violence would diminish, creating a utopia. Pluralism seems far off, to my eye at least, but I believe it is achievable. The day we see it, we live truly in a Utopian Crucible. ■

Chaos and Concord

TIMOTHY WELLS

CLF member, incarcerated in NY

Chaos and Concord battle in the collective mind.

Chaos whispers to every tribe, religion, and race

“Fear ‘the other’

They covet your power

They envy your advantage. “

She sings to each group,

“You’re the stronger, the higher, the better,

You’re the blessed. Privilege is your right.”

Concord’s small voice speaks of equity, justice and peace.

“Like us, ‘the other’ has tradition, history, community, art.

Like us, they are right to exist.”

“No,” cries Chaos.

“Only the strong, the worthy, the majority can rule.

The vote is your modern weapon for keeping them at bay.

If you cannot defeat them,

feign tolerance to hide your enmity while you bide your time.”

“Tolerance is not enough,” Concord interjects.

“We must be happy for them and their community.

Erasing a culture is not up for ballot.

We can’t hide our violence and bias behind popular votes.

It kills freedom, feeds Chaos, it is cruel.”

“Conquest and conformity,” Chaos asserts,

“is the only way to happiness.”

“Belief that, someday, all will accept the same beliefs,

the same god, the same history,

only perpetuates sadness and despair.”

Concord challenges,

“pursuit of happiness is not by forced acceptance.

Happiness grows

by being happy for each other,

by supporting each other’s spiritual growth,

by helping each other build meaning,

by trying to understand and encourage all those around us.”

May Concord’s voice be heard.



PHOTO BY NIKOLETT EMMERT ON UNSPLASH

Love Demands A Permanent Ceasefire Now



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

Recently, several people have taken the time to write to us about the ways in which we talk about Israel and Gaza, especially on our weekly talk show, Voices of Unitarian Universalism (aka The VUU). I thought that our wider community would be interested in my response.

It is correct to say that the CLF Lead Ministry Team has taken a clear stance on the current state of the conflict. We believe strongly that the preservation of life is the value that should be most paramount. I have been taught by Jewish teachers that this value is in line with the highest teachings of Judaism. We believe that all lives are worthy of preservation, even if all lives are not equally threatened by violence at present.

We also believe strongly that those with the most power to preserve life have the most obligation to do so. On a recent show of The VUU, my co-minister Christina Rivera eloquently spoke about the power imbalance present right now in Gaza, and why our stance is that Israel needs to be responsible for a cease-fire. Some have noted that Chris made them think; for this we are grateful.

We have not taken a stance on Zionism, nor will we; it is simply not



PHOTO BY AISHA HAUSER

The Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco hangs this banner in support of a permanent ceasefire now. The banner is from the Interfaith coalition of Faith Communities across the San Francisco Bay Area.

our place as non-Jewish people. We understand why criticizing the actions of the State of Israel might make it seem as if we have done so, but we are clear that the actions of Israel are not on behalf of Jewish people everywhere. We have strongly opposed anti-Semitism in all of its forms, as we oppose all forms of hatred, oppression, and violence.

We have invited Jewish UUs onto the show who share our viewpoint on the abhorrent ways in which current Israeli leadership is dehumanizing Palestinians, abrogating treaty obligations, and murdering innocents. To be frank, we don't want to feature voices who might support that. I don't think that academically debating the term "genocide" is worthwhile as hospitals

and refugee camps are being bombed. It's a strong word on purpose.

We are committed to continuing this dialogue in the future. We are working on having Jewish UUs speak on The VUU about the ways in which anti-Semitism is rearing its ugly head around the world. When we do so, we will invite people who have been chosen by Jewish UU communities as leaders.

We hope that the CLF community appreciates the values with which we have come to these positions. We hope that you will continue to let us know how we can live out those values, when we agree and when we disagree with each other. ■

Notice of the CLF Annual Meeting

To all members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist:

Per Article VII, Sections 1 and 2, of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) By-laws, the 51st Annual Meeting will be held via video/telephone conference call and screen sharing on **Sunday, June 16, 2024 at 7:00PM EDT/4:00PM PDT**. RSVP to attend the meeting at www.clfuu.org/joinannual-meeting.

All those who have access to the Internet or phone are encouraged to join our meeting via Zoom and participate in the discussion. Meeting materials will include absentee ballots for those unable to attend in person. Please send your ballots to our office at the address on the ballot so we receive them no later than Friday 6/14/24 to ensure your vote can be included in our process..

We will send the meeting materials in April. All incarcerated members will automatically be sent paper copies of the meeting materials and do not need to send us a materials request form. All free world members will be automatically be emailed the materials as an electronic document. If we don't have an email address we will send a printed copy. Meeting materials will also be posted on our website (www.clfuu.org/annualmeeting). Free world members who would prefer a printed copy sent to them may request that by sending back the form on the final page of this issue of Quest, or calling the CLF office at 617-948-6150.

The purpose of the meeting is to:

- Report on highlights of CLF activities and finances
- Vote for the following leadership positions (see nominations from Nominating Committee in the packet):
 - Elect three members to 3-year terms on the board of directors,
 - Elect one member to 2-year term on the board of directors to fill a term vacated before the term was finished,
 - Elect one member to 1-year term on the board of directors to fill a term vacated before the term was finished,
 - Elect one member to a 3-year term on the nominating committee,
 - Elect one member to a 1-year term on the nominating committee to fill a term vacated before the term was finished,,
 - Elect a clerk and treasurer for one year

We will elect a moderator from among members present to preside at the meeting.

One of the important tasks we undertake as a congregation is voting for our elected leadership, and my hope is that as many members of the congregation will participate as possible.

Aisha Ansano, *Board Chair*

If you are a free world member of the CLF and you would like to receive Annual Meeting materials by mail, please use the tear-off form on the final page of this issue to submit your request.

All incarcerated members will automatically receive these materials by mail.

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of religious extremism, whether it is anti-trans laws that purport to “protect children” or taking away the right to bodily autonomy, this kind of thinking is oppressive at its core.

The path to a liberated society includes embracing pluralism and not holding up any one religion over another.

As for my children, they continue to be on their own path. I will not share where they are, as this is their story to tell. I will share that their values and who they are is shaped by growing up as part of a Unitarian Universalist community. ■



PHOTO BY LEVI BARE ON UNSPLASH

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 pluralism? When does it feel easy to embrace pluralism, and when does it feel hard?

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.



Angus MacLean
Church of the Larger Fellowship, UU
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*, JeKaren Olaoya, *copyeditor*

CLF Staff: Aisha Hauser, Christina Rivera, Michael Tino, *lead ministry team*; Jody Malloy, *executive director*; Lori Stone, *director of technology*; Beth Murray, *prison ministry administrator*, Judy DiCristofaro, *fiscal administrator*; Rose Gallogly, *publications coordinator*, Cir L'Bert, Jr, *prison ministry manager*, David Pynchon, *data services coordinator*, Ashley Parent, *communications specialist*

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

Phone: 617-948-6150 or 617-948-4267

Email: clf@clfuu.org, worthynow@clfuu.org

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

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