

Holding On to Our Humanity

Quest

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My friend the Rev. Meg Barnhouse often says that she believes in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, not every idea. This distinction is a way to think about how to work with and engage with people who hold different values and beliefs. I don't mean different opinions. I mean values and beliefs. Believing that trans people do not have a right to bodily autonomy, or that Black and Brown people are as worthy to thrive as white people, are not simply "an opinion." That is a belief and a value that I do not hold and work to dismantle as part of laws and policies.

And, globally, the rise of fascistic values has meant that we do not exist in bubbles, we will come across people who hold values that are harmful.

I have often asked myself, how do I hold on to my humanity when I am angry, sad, discouraged and want to lash out at those whose values cause harm. Because holding on to my own humanity is crucial to not becoming that which I rail against.

It has been excruciatingly painful to witness the genocide in Gaza and the attacks by settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank for so long. Intellectually, I understand how we got here and yet... I have worked so hard not to let anger take hold.

*AISHA HAUSER, MSW
Lead Ministry Team*



When I have been sad and angry, uninterrupted for too long, I find myself on the brink of othering. That is when I stop and interrupt harmful thinking.

I remind myself of Meg's words. "I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, not every idea." I will add, not every value. I remind myself that I can be angry, sad and grieve while knowing that everyone involved has inherent worth and dignity. I want peace and thriving for every single human on this planet.

I wish for communities that have clean water, stable housing, ample food, and joy. I wish for communities globally to experience connection and joy.

I know that we live in a world that all of what I listed is not happening to those who have been most impacted by violence, extractive capitalism and genocide. The way out of this will take all of us and the way we can hold fast to our values is to feel all

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*"BREATHE IN AND BELIEVE
THAT A SACRED CHERISHING
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SEND A PATHWAY GOING
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THE WORLD. THERE IS A
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YOU ARE HELD THERE."*

REV. SARAH PIRTLE, CLF MEMBER

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Sewing Up the Holes

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino,
Co-Lead Ministry Team



Thinking about grief doesn't need to mire us in sadness. That wouldn't be true to the teachers of many spiritual traditions who tell us that we are especially close to loved ones who have become ancestors in this time of the year. My pagan teachers would say that the veil between the world of the living and the dead is thin, so thin that we can see through it and reach through it, and that is not an occasion for sadness.

My Mexican and Mexican-American friends who celebrate Dia de los Muertos at the end of the month understand the closeness to the ancestors, and even the grief that we feel for their loss, to be reminders of the joy that is possible and the investment that our ancestors have made in us.

So, I want to think about grief in the context of some stuffed cubes.

When my daughter was one month old, I spent a night away from her for the first time. I had to fly to Virginia for one day at the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, because I was being announced as the director-elect and needed to go to a board meeting. Zoom wasn't a thing in 2013.

I wanted to bring my child home a gift, so I went to what is called the Artisan's Bazaar. It's a place where

artisans of all sorts offer beautiful handmade goods for sale. There, I saw these stuffed cubes, four-inch cubes made from scraps of quilting fabric by fiber artist Michelle Hodgson. I bought two or three of them and brought them home to my daughter who was a month old at the time.

If you've ever been around small babies, you will know that many people will bring your small babies soft things, stuffed things, and babies gravitate to one or the other, and there is no telling which thing they will latch onto as their "love," their special comfort item. For my daughter, it was these cubes.



They became the thing that she would snuggle next to every night. They became the things that she needed when she was upset, so much so that she started calling them her "uh-ohs." Whenever there was an uh-oh in her life, she needed one of these. "Uh-oh, she would say, asking for a soft cube to comfort her.

Thankfully, Michelle offered these for sale every year, I could replace some of

the uh-ohs in my daughter's collection each summer. Because, beloveds, when you love thin cotton again and again, when you rub it against your face again and again, when you're teething and you chew on corners again and again, when you're frustrated and angry and you bite at an uh-oh, beloveds, the fabric tears.

And each time they tore, I would sew them up. I would have to fix them because she came to love particular ones, of course. And so, before long they looked not so much like cubes anymore. I would do my best, but eventually they became misshapen ovals, some missing entire sides.

They were very different from how they started, but they were no less soft. In fact, they became softer after washing and playing with, after all that love. The fill on the inside became less stiff. They were different, but still precious.

Author Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, has a recurring theme in it. Roy writes about the holes in the universe that are left by loss and death and grief – the holes that are shaped like those whom we have lost. So, she might talk about a Joe-shaped hole in the universe where once Joe was.

I know that we each have those holes in our universe, beloved. Holes that have been left behind where those

Sewing up the Holes *continued*

who we have loved and loved and loved are no longer.

Psychologist Rollo May, in his 1969 work *Love and Will*, writes, "To love means to open ourselves to grief, sorrow, and disappointment, as well as to joy and fulfillment, and thus an intensity of consciousness that before we did not know was possible."

The people we have loved and lost, the things we have loved so hard that they have broken and torn, all of those have left holes in our universe.

And the grief that we feel at their loss is proof that we loved with all of our heart. That grief is proof that the hole in the universe left behind means something. We love and we are loved because we are human. We attach to one another because we are, by our nature, social creatures.

We do so secure in the knowledge that loving others ensures that at some point we will feel loss. We don't know when it's coming often. We don't know how it will affect us often. We don't know when it will come back to us often. Grief is tricky and weird like that.

Still we love, even knowing that to love means the fabric of our souls will wear thin. Given enough time and enough love, it will wear thin enough to tear. It will wear thin enough sometimes to disappear in large pieces right before our eyes. We love even knowing that sometimes the fabric will be torn by sudden and unexpected loss, rent by the powerful grief that comes way before we are ready for it.

And beloved, we have opportunities together to sew the holes in

our universe together. We have opportunities in community to express the memory of those who have gone before us as ancestors, and telling those stories, expressing those memories, sharing how special our loved ones are and were. That sharing sews up those holes little by little.

Sometimes skillfully and sometimes crudely. Sometimes the sewing leaves marks, leaves misshapen parts. Sometimes the sewing changes the fundamental shape of our being, but that sewing keeps us whole.

It makes us no less important. It makes us no less whole than we were. And we do that together, beloved. We do that with each other. May the holes in your universe remind you of the love that made them, and may you have a community to sew you back together again. ■



PHOTO BY JOHANNES PLENIO ON UNSPLASH

When I'm the Source of Grief: A Meditation on Heartbreak

Content Warning: This sermon addresses two sensitive subjects: substance abuse and heartbreak. Please care for yourself.

Have you ever experienced heartbreak?

You know. the feeling of gravity losing its hold as you begin to float into an abyss of sadness and sorrow? Well I know that I have. But it is only recently that I have begun to understand heartbreak as a grief cycle. The grief of a relationship ending not because that person is no longer alive but because despite your best intentions, hopes, dreams and desire, that relationship just is not working for you. . . “hits different”. Yes it “hits different” when someone you love but need distance from still inhabits your familial, social, or professional eco-systems.

I met him early during the pandemic. He was sweet, kind, thoughtful, caring and handsome. We spent hours talking, laughing, watching tv, playing with his pets. Everything seemed unforced. Not perfect, but easy. I enjoyed having this other person around that felt safe. A person to love on knowing it was reciprocated and appreciated. We never gave our relational dynamic a name. To be honest, I never felt the need or desire to do so. But I so enjoyed the ride we were on.

3 months in, he got a life changing diagnosis. We held each other. We cried. Regular doctor visits became a part of our shared time together. I never wanted him to feel alone or



*Rev. Donte' Hilliard,
CLF Learning Fellow*

abandoned in his healing and grief journey. And for a while, despite this new reality, we seemed to still be in sync, operating as a team. And that too was nice.

10 months in, things began to get strange, odd, unfamiliar. He began to behave in ways that were out of character. Eventually, he shared a new truth with me, a truth that made sense of the new behaviors but still a truth that changed us forever. In order to deal with the devastation of his medical diagnosis he began to self medicate with Meth. Meth, a reality I had never dealt with personally but unfortunately was all too aware of due to its it large-scale ravaging our gay communities. I hate Meth. But I love him.

I had no desire to judge or condemn him. I know that substance use and or abuse is a symptom and not the problem. I knew enough about his childhood to know the deep traumas he manages and how that trauma gets activated when life dump a pile of “ish” in your lap. Over the next few weeks and months I watched this fun loving person full of vitality transform into someone I found hard to recognize. I pleaded for him to go to therapy or rehab. I assured him

I would be there with him in the journey of recovery. But he always said no. Even though I knew he had bad experiences with therapy as a child; I was afraid for him, I was afraid for me, and I was afraid for us.

Eventually, for the sake of my own wellness and longtime recovery from codependency I had to draw some painful boundaries that led to the dissolution of the relationship we had. Though, I have tried my best to honor my grief about this, I have just begun to realize that I also became another source of grief for him at a time in his life when he was already overwhelmed by great circumstances. I regret it has taken me this long to name this. I broke his heart...I dashed his hopes, dreams and desires about us. And now I need to figure out what it means to process the grief I have caused my beloved.

As I come to my close—because there is no pretty ending to this story—I challenge us all to check on our single friends, who do not the same have long-term partners or spouses as others do. However, our heartbreak is no less painful and our need for radical companionship is great.

For all of us living through a journey of heartbreak grief — I pray that the mender of broken hearts be with you always. ■

Prayers of Love and Lament: Self Love that Heals Wounds

By Rev. Sarah Pirtle

Good morning. You are no longer alone.
A warm voice is saying – I'm with you.
You are surrounded by unseen understanding.
A window has been opened for you.
Source is with you. Your guardians and your angels,
all can more easily reach you and be felt.

Breathe in and believe
that a sacred cherishing love is coming to you.
You are wanted in this world.
Breathe out and send a pathway
going directly to the heart of the world.
There is a heart of the world
and you are held there.

Those unfair things that happened are not your fault.
Those times of grieving alone are changing.
Find the flame inside you. Find that flame we mean
when we sing,
"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."
We are living in a world that is trembling with
violence and domination.

A world unbalanced by it. And we are trying to
make our way.

This is a prayer for all of us because all of us have
wounds and trauma.

How do we hold our own hands and keep going?

Having PTSD means that at times I feel like my arms
are made of cement.

I am in too many places at once.

I am trying to deal with the demands of today and
the dangers of yesterday.

One day in grief I sat on my couch and asked myself –
What is the letter I wish would arrive?

What are the words I wish someone would say?

And I decided to speak the words I needed.

I held myself and found missing words of tenderness
and compassion.

Good morning. Your soul is unhurt.

You are whole. You are cherished

by me, by us, by the heart of the world.

We carry the flame.



PHOTO BY DAN MEYERS ON UNSPLASH

REFLECTIONS

Night Rain

BY GARY F.

In the South,
 Summer is like a guest
 who stays too long
 at a party.
 A house is much more
 than mere paint and walls.
 It is a place of memories
 of all who once lived there;
 the prints of pudgy fingers
 on doorframes,
 meals enjoyed,
 holidays celebrated.
 I sat beside Pop
 in the green rattan chairs
 brought from Ceylon.
 He exhales a plume
 of cigar smoke,
 from his *Muriel Senator*.
 The rain cleans the air
 of August humidity.
 I love him.
 Success is often measured
 by the accumulation
 of wealth and fame.
 While my father knew little of
 either,
 he was one
 of the most successful
 and beloved men
 I will ever know.
 I ponder this
 as I breathe in
 the fresh scent of a late Summer
 rain,
 the glow of Pop's cigar
 like a beacon in the night,
 calling me home.

*In the Moment
of Grief*

By Scott D.

I was working at the prison laundry facility when I was called to the supervisor's office. That had never happened before. I was used to sorting the soiled clothes, operating the industrial washers, and checking the pile of loads without being of interest to just about anyone. On this day, however, I was told by my supervisor that the counselor wanted to see me. This was very odd, and my heart sank in the knowledge that there was rarely good news to be found in the cramped counselor's office. The counselor, without ever quite making eye contact, informed me that my mother had died.

He delivered the fact with the detached professionalism proper to his station. Yet, he allowed me to talk to the hospice worker who had called him. It was a kind thing to do, and I wrote some phone numbers down on the pink scratch paper the counselor provided. I was given permission to take the rest of the day off.

My mother died of complications from leukemia. She always tried to downplay the progress of the disease when we spoke on the phone or visited. Yet, I could see her wasting: away and hear her voice becoming weaker. She was fading away from me one moment at a time, slipping like water through my fingers. She had been the one constant in my life. Through all the moves we had while I was growing up, through all the tribulations of my time in prison, she

had loved and supported me. In her last days, I could do nothing: I could not do the chores as she became too frail or held her hand as she passed. There is no personal deprivation of prison as cruel as that knowing.

In the months and years since that mild December day, I have thought much about the nature of grief. I have found great consolation in Stoicism. Henry David Thoreau, who had a large influence on Unitarian Universalist thought, had a fondness for the Stoics. Their aim was, contrary to popular understanding, not to become an emotionless stone, but to see the truth that we are each an ocean with depths unperturbed by life's sorrows. We are not going to stop ourselves from enduring loss or feeling grief. Yet we can bear witness to that grief, to experience it without reservation or indulgence. In doing so, we experience the truth that exists in that grief: that we grieve because we love so profoundly, so deeply.

That is the lament to which I choose to surrender: to be present to the grief whenever it returns, to neither run away into nostalgic memories nor ward off the pangs in my heart with white-knuckled hopes that "this too shall pass." I will not be perfect in my surrender, but each moment of grief is a new chance to yield. I honor my mother, my love for her, and the sorrow that lingers in the fractures of heart by being present with it all, accepting all. That grief inspires in me a love as final as the death that seeded it. Love is indeed at the center — in every season of life. ■

Holding On to Our Humanity *continued from page 1*

our feelings and remember to connect with those who do share our values. Find joy and love with the people in your life who affirm you in the fullness of who you are.

When you come across people who say things that are contrary to your values, you do not have to find “common ground.” All you are called to do is know they are as fully human as you are.

What does this look like? Once I was told by a Board member at a congregation I served years ago that, “We don’t want to turn off Trump voters.”

I responded that I am not interested in that, I am clear what my values are and I will be loud about them. I believe it is immoral to have family separation policies, it is immoral that anyone doesn’t have stable shelter, healthcare and bodily autonomy. I have my non-negotiables in my belief system and I won’t find common ground with anyone who doesn’t believe in the thriving of all.

When I have had someone try and argue, I respond, “Nothing I say will change your mind and nothing you say will convince me to change mine. I affirm your humanity and hope you affirm mine. I wish for a

transformed world where we can all thrive.”

It is unsatisfying to not be able to change people who exhibit uncaring and cruel beliefs, however, getting into arguments does nothing but exhaust us.

We need to reserve our strength for our communities and supporting those most impacted by the cruelty and chaos.

We need to reserve our strength for liberation rooted in love. ■

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS WITH US

To share your thoughts, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a separate piece of paper with your writing.

Please read “Prayers of Love and Lament” by Rev. Sarah Pirtle, the reflection question is taken from that piece.

One day in grief I sat on my couch and asked myself – What is the letter I wish would arrive? What are the words I wish someone would say?

You are invited to write yourself a letter with the words you wish someone would say and say them to you.



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*, Joshua Degregorio, *publications coordinator*

CLF Staff: Aisha Hauser, Michael Tino, *lead ministry team*; Jody Malloy, *executive director*; Joshua Degregorio, *publications coordinator*; David Pynchon, *data services coordinator*; Ashley Parent, *communications specialist*; Cameron Seymour-Hawkins, *tech manager*; Paul Spanagel, *administrator*

Learning Fellows: Donte Hilliard, Katherine Hofmann

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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