

Declaration of Interdependence

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed with worthiness and dignity, and that all beings deserve to thrive in relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. That to secure these rights, we gather as communities of interdependent beings, with reverence and humility, committed to one another.

This July, the US celebrated the 250th anniversary of its Declaration of Independence, a day in which a group of privileged colonizer men, many of whom counted as part of their property actual human beings that were enslaved, decided that they would found a nation independent of the European colonial power of Great Britain.

And in doing so, they baked into the DNA of the United States, the country of my birth and upbringing, the notion of independence. A notion that I believe is profoundly misguided.

I believe that instead of declaring independence, we need to replace that with a Declaration of Interdependence. Because independence, this notion that we are all in it on our own, is rooted in



Rev. Dr. Michael Tino,
Lead Ministry Team

an illusion of separateness, an illusion that comes directly from the powers of empire. These powers need us to think that we are isolated individuals in order for them to continue oppressing people.

They need us to think that there is no possible way that we can resist that oppression because we are alone.

Folks in the United States are too familiar with the phrase, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." It is almost humorous that this phrase actually originated in the 19th century in idioms and satirical pieces meant to point out the futility of trying to lift yourself up by the laces of your boots. Try it sometime. It cannot be done. And yet, this phrase has become a rallying cry for people to make it on their own.

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continued on pages 6-7

"WAR, ECONOMIC JUSTICE, RACISM, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION STEM FROM THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATENESS. IT IS DELUSION THAT SEPARATES US FROM OTHER HUMANS, THE TREES, AND THE OCEANS ON THIS INCREASINGLY SMALL PLANET."

—JACK KORNFIELD, A US BUDDHIST, IN HIS BOOK *THE WISE HEART*

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Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

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Dream Betwixt

BY ANTWON

*I had a dream... In this dream, I learned of
everything that was in between,*

The life of all things, seen and unseen.

Between fantasy and reality.

*Between sickness and health, 'tween life
and death.*

*In my dream I saw between the physical
and spiritual, 'tween plain and
subliminal.*

*I saw between what you think and what
you thought, 'tween what you sold and
what you bought.*

*Between what you learned and what you
taught.*

*In this dream I also saw in between peace
and madness, 'tween happiness and
sadness.*

*Between young and the old, 'tween hot
and cold.*

*Between humility and hostility, 'tween
clumsiness and agility.*

*I saw between fact and fiction, 'tween
soberness and addiction.*

*I saw between real and fake, 'tween early
and late.*

*Between love and hate, 'tween church
and state.*

*Between you and me, 'tween land and
sea.*

*Between thee and thou, 'tween later and
now.*

*Then I saw between day and night,
'tween wrong and right.*

*Between six and seven, 'tween hell and
heaven.*

*When I woke up I begin to understand,
That a dream like this was betwixt God
and Man.*

REFLECTIONS



Untitled

by MaKayla Morrow

In Search of Nontoxic Masculinity

It is not an accident that the same forces that bring us white supremacy culture and Christian nationalism also embrace a toxic and harmful version of masculinity. This glorification of violence harms us all.

It's an election year where I live, so this toxic masculinity is once again rearing its ugliness in US politics. It's not a partisan issue, though the dynamics of it play out differently among conservatives and liberals. For every time a male candidate is mocked by the right wing as not being "manly" enough because he talks about compassion and empathy, there is also an ad by a woman running for Congress who touts her experience in the military that made her a "tough fighter." For every disparaging comment equating kindness with weakness, there is a candidate wielding a baseball bat or loading a gun to prove their strength. Misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia are

woven tightly into the fabric of this version of masculinity, and into the culture that holds it up as worthy of esteem.

There is another way, right? There is a nontoxic version of masculinity that men can aspire to. There is a strong version of femininity. There is a fierce version of queerness. There is a way to confront evil without needing a governor who flies attack helicopters or a Senator willing to get into fistfights. There is a non-gendered way to lead that does not glorify violence. There is a way to center love and be strong at the same time.

Recently, I saw an interview with James Talarico, the Democratic candidate for US Senate in Texas, in which he was asked to respond to comments by Republican Senator Ted Cruz about his masculinity. Talarico gave us a master class in nontoxic masculinity. He told the interviewer

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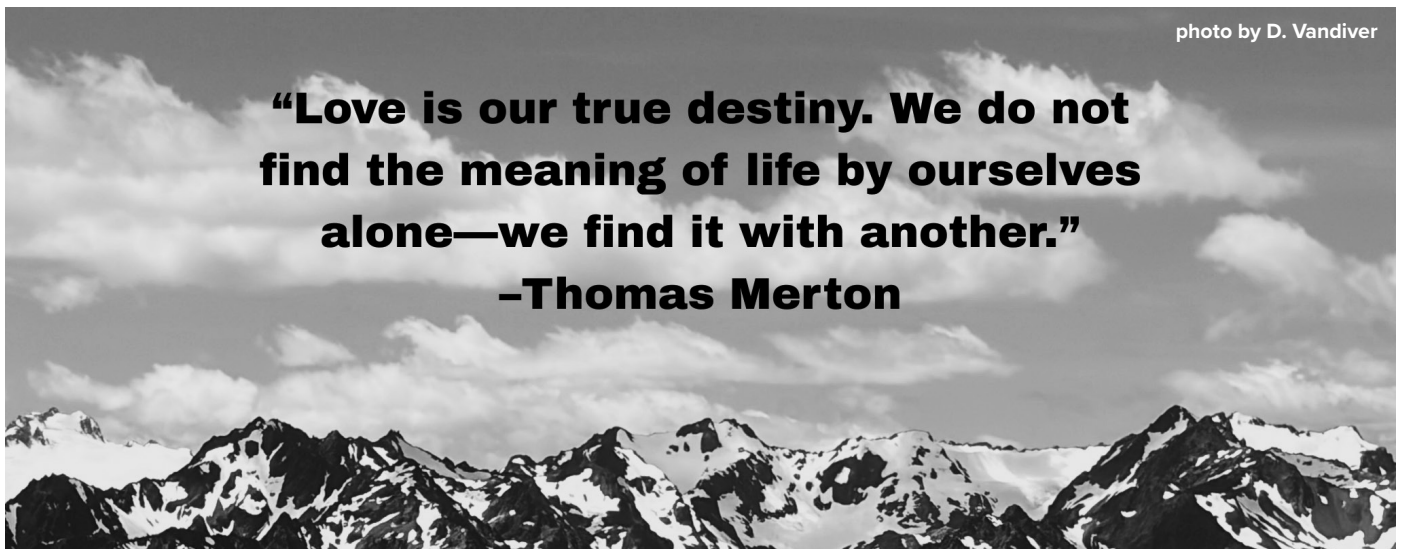
that the masculinity he learned from his father was the kind that helped neighbors and gave back to the community, and that was what he aspired to. It's what any of us growing up with Mr. Rogers' neighborhood learned, even if we didn't associate it with gender at the time. We were taught to look for the helpers because those were the folks worth emulating—not the fighters.

I wish more candidates had the strength to confront bullies without threatening violence against them. I wish more people would call out the toxicity for what it is. We would all be better off for it. ■

photo by D. Vandiver

"Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another."

—Thomas Merton



CLF at General Assembly 2026

The General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations, or GA, was held by the UU Association (UUA) between June 14-21, 2026. At GA each year, delegates are chosen to represent their congregation when voting on the items brought before the assembly. The CLF invites members to apply to be one of our 22 allowed delegates, and we provide an orientation for all delegates.

It is an honor to attend GA – to be with thousands of other UUs working together for our faith. I learn and grow more during one week at General Assembly than almost the rest of the year. I attend the business sessions whether or not I serve as a delegate and can vote. The discussions at GA bring to light the complexities of living out my faith in this world because things are not clear cut even amongst UUs. And GA models that it is truly possible to stay grounded in love while we might not agree. Taking the

time to immerse myself in the greater work and values of our faith once a year at GA is something that is an important part of my spiritual practice.

This year, the CLF delegates learned, discussed and voted in GA elections for UUA volunteer positions and business items concerning Ministerial Fellowship Committee policies and minister searches. Delegates voted for an Action of Immediate Witness (AIW) on environmental protections and Responsive Resolutions to support UU youth and emerging adults, immigrant justice, and UUs affected by the crises in the Southwest Asia and North Africa region.

GA also included two workshops on the UUA's current Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI), "Abolition, Transformation, and Faith Formation," which was proposed by the CLF and chosen by the GA 2025 delegates as the study/action issue UU member congregations would focus on together

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over a multi year period, ending with GA delegates voting on a statement to reflect UU values about abolition. CLF has been instrumental in providing resources for congregations to use as they study this issue, and Rev Michael was a speaker at one of the GA abolition workshops.

During the GA time period, the CLF offered a special mid-week worship service that was not an official part of the program, called Embodying Universalism, inviting us to unlearn theologies of punishment and embrace one of inherent worthiness. For those with access to the internet, that service, and many others, can be found at our website clfuu.org. This service is also available for use by other UU congregations. ■

Excerpt from a sermon by Rev. Josh Pawelek,
Interdependence in Three Parts

Interdependence is a fact. Not a theory. Not a metaphor. Not a new age book title (Twelve Steps to Living an Interdependent Life). It's a fact. No individual life exists independently of other life. I did not create the air I breath. I depend on the sun and photosynthesizing plants, algae and bacteria to produce that air. This is a fact. I did not create the food I eat for sustenance. I depend (primarily) on farms to produce it (not to mention soil, sun, rain, rivers, aquifers, pollinators, animals, etc.). This is a fact. Mindful also that our human bodies cannot function as carbon sinks—that is, cannot filter excess carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and sequester it—we depend on forests, soils, the deep ocean, tidal marshes and sea grasses to function as carbon sinks, so that the planet doesn't heat up to the point where its life-supporting systems begin to fail. This is a fact.

And, all life as we currently know it on Earth depends on human beings living and organizing our societies—especially our systems of energy production and usage—in ways that do not harm all the photosynthesizing, carbon-sinking plants, trees, soil, oceans; living in ways that do not harm the natural systems involved in food production; living in ways that do not pollute, do not release CO2 into the atmosphere beyond the planet's capacity to sequester it, do not poison natural habitats. In this moment, all life as we currently know it on Earth depends on human beings living as human beings and their precursors have lived for hundreds of thousands of years: in harmony with the Earth and its local environments; in intimate, connected relationship with the Earth and its local environments; as careful, thoughtful, humble stewards of the Earth and its local environments. Not as pillagers, extractors or dominators, but as partners, sustaining a balance that sustains all life.

We Will Continue to Innovate in the Ways We Provide Ministry

When the CLF began, our entire ministry was conducted by mail (what is now given the retronym “snail mail”). We sent paper packets regularly to our members, with reflections and worship services they could do wherever they were, with whomever they could gather. We sent correspondence courses on faith development topics.

Our reliance on written correspondence with our members made it easy to say yes to welcoming incarcerated members into the CLF, since snail mail was the primary way that prison systems allowed folks on the outside to interact with folks on the inside. Over the years, our prison ministry, called Worthy Now, grew in breadth and depth.

When I arrived at the CLF, we were sending monthly magazines, correspondence courses, and even photocopies (made with permission) of entire UUA-published books. Beth Murray, then our Administrator, had divided up the books into packets that she would send sequentially.

And then, states began to limit and restrict mail to incarcerated people. Arkansas famously instituted a four-page limit on snail mail, meaning that Beth had to send those books four pages at a time to our beloveds incarcerated there. Other states instituted different limits—sometimes mandating that different kinds of

mail be sent to different addresses, which forced the CLF to track multiple addresses for plain correspondence, *Quest*, *UU World*, and classes.

Later, for-profit scanning services entered into kickback schemes with carceral systems, and states began to require that all mail be sent to post office boxes to be scanned. Inside the prisons, incarcerated people have to pay to access the scans of their mail. It is a money-making scheme for both states and companies, all on the backs of legally enslaved people.

Today, most states use those scanning services, and more and more are banning all paper mail entirely. Missouri has even instituted a paywall system to scan privileged legal correspondence so that lawyers can't correspond directly with their incarcerated clients.

We are being forced to be more creative in response.

One organization, a nonprofit called Edovo, has entered into agreements with most states to provide educational resources on the tablets that incarcerated people use to access their scanned mail. These resources are made available free of charge to the folks inside because the content creators pay to upload and store their materials on the app.

The CLF has just begun a new

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partnership with the UU Prison Ministry of Illinois to join Edovo as a content creator. Soon, monthly compilations of worship (sermons and music that we have permission to share) will be uploaded to the app. We are working on adapting our New UU class for the online platform. We have been given permission from the UUA to provide PDF copies of UUA-published books on the site, and we're starting with the 2026-27 Common Read, *Love at the Center*.

Of course, Edovo wasn't in our carefully balanced budget this year. We are grateful that our partners at UUPMI have provided funds to begin this new journey. And we are aware that we will need new sources of funding to sustain this and to pay curriculum writers to make more learning opportunities available to our incarcerated members.

We will continue to meet the dehumanization of the Prison Industrial Complex with humanity and creativity. We will continue to innovate in the ways we provide ministry. We are grateful for the support of thousands in doing this. ■

Declaration of Interdependence *continued from page 1*

In 2026 this persistent, painful, and destructive myth plagues us, this myth that we are meant to be independent. The truth is that we are not independent creatures, none of us, no matter how much we try to be, no matter how much we might declare it so.

In fact, we are interdependent surely as we breathe.

Psychologist and Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield, a US Buddhist, in his book *The Wise Heart*, writes about this. He writes, “War, economic justice, racism, and environmental destruction stem from the illusion of separateness. It is delusion that separates us from other humans, the trees, and the oceans on this increasingly small planet.”

I know that this faith that I love, this Unitarian Universalist faith that has saved my life again and again, talks a really good game about interdependence. But friends, the truth is that UUs have too often bought into the delusion of separateness. We have too often bought into the work of empire, as if doing so would save us from the destructive forces at its core. Spoiler alert: it will not.

We talk about having independent Unitarian Universalist congregations as if any one group of Unitarian Universalists could actually be independent from all of the other Unitarian Universalists out there. As if the justice that is created by one Unitarian Universalist group in one city does not filter and become

the reputation of another Unitarian Universalist group in another city.

We for years taught a curriculum called Build Your Own Theology, a curriculum that basically said that each of us was independently capable of creating our own theology as if there was such a thing as independent theology, as if we were not creating that theology in relationship, in interdependent relationship with one another.

Unitarian Universalists too often have bought into this delusion.

And if we see our UU theology as primarily affirming the individual, if we understand our shared values as primarily upholding our personal individual worth, if we construct congregations to be mere collections of people engaging in individual and independent spiritual journeys, we are not doing the work of transformation that our world requires of us, that resistance to empire requires of us.

When our theology is lived in the individual primarily, individuals feel empowered to inject their toxicity and fragility into congregational systems, and then those toxic and fragile congregational systems are incapable of creating the transformative liberatory justice that our world needs.

We have another choice.

We can choose to understand that nothing we believe matters, nothing we do is real, nothing we proclaim is

worth shouting unless it comes from an interdependent relationship with others with whom we share a mutual accountability.

We must choose to be in this together with all of the beings of our planet, with all of the humans who are struggling, with especially the most marginalized among us, with all of the people with whom we share breath, including the ancestors and the descendants, with all of the people that our breath makes us interdependent with.

When our theology is lived in the midst of community, when it is given life as the bonds that connect each and every one of us as an interdependent web of creation, we understand our shared values as living, breathing organisms that require our care.

We understand that affirming and promoting inherent worth and dignity—yours, mine, and others’—is a process, an ongoing challenge to meet people where they are and experience them as who they are.

In order for me to engage in that process, I need to work on myself. I need to make myself better. I need to listen better. I need to understand better. I need to check my fragility and my privilege and my reactivity, my inclination to independence. I need to check it at the door.

And instead, I need to be accountable to others for how I live our shared values. I need to start down a path that leads me to you and you and

Declaration of Interdependence *continued*

you and all of us. Now, this is harder to do than the individualist stuff. It's a lot harder, but it's so much more worth it.

And it is the only spiritual pathway that will actually lead us to liberation for all of us.

In the Unitarian Universalism where our theology is lived interdependently, we make relationships and connections central. Instead of centering the individual, we center interdependence. I don't ask you to believe the same things that I do, nor will I believe the same things that you do. But we must understand that our spiritual journeys are interdependent.

If we live our theology in connection, in an interdependent relationship, we commit ourselves to accountability in our spiritual growth. In an interdependent relationship, I have to change myself when I am told that I have hurt someone else.

In an individualist theology, when I'm told that I've done something racist, I can beg forgiveness based on my very, very good intentions, and in doing so, ignore the impact of my behavior and never even get to the systemic factor that made my actions possible.

But in an interdependent relationship, when a person of color tells me an experience of relation, of

racism that I am responsible for, I get the challenge to learn, to do better, to grow, and then to transform the system in which that act happened. It is a challenge, an honor, and a privilege to be asked to learn, to do better, to grow, and to transform. And if I take up that challenge, I get better, the system gets better, the relationship gets deepened.

This is our interdependence.

This is our interdependence that we have the choice to declare, that we have the choice to claim and proclaim.

Will we make that choice? Or will we cling to the delusion of separateness? ■

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.

How do you describe your understanding of the Unitarian Universalist value of interdependence?



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