

Relational Justice

Quest

Vol. LXXX, No. 3

2026



Katherine Hofmann,
CLF Learning Fellow

As a Unitarian Universalist, I know my understanding of justice differs from that of many people because I was raised in a theology that did not rely on fear as a means of societal or spiritual control. I was never taught that people are born in sin, broken, or deserving of punishment simply for being human. Instead, I was raised with the belief that every person has inherent worth and dignity, and that belief has shaped how I have thought about justice for most of my life.

Because of that foundation, I have never been able to fully separate justice from humanity. Much of American culture and many religious traditions frame justice in terms of punishment, shame, exclusion, or suffering. Justice is often described as “getting what you deserve,” and that usually means pain, isolation, or retribution. Fear becomes the mechanism that is supposed to keep society functioning: fear of prison, fear of ostracism, fear of rejection, fear of hell. But that was never the language I was raised in.

Instead, I was taught to think about responsibility alongside compassion. I was encouraged to ask deeper questions about harm: Why did it happen? What systems or circumstances contributed to it? Who was hurt? What does accountability actually look like? How do we repair relationships and communities rather than simply discard people? That does not mean ignoring harm or avoiding accountability. It means I do not automatically equate punishment with justice.

Over the years, I have realized how deeply that UU lens influences the way I see the world. I tend to think of justice as something relational rather than transactional. To me, justice is connected to dignity, equity, healing, and community well-being.

Relational Justice,
continued on page 7

“I SWORE NEVER TO BE
SILENT WHENEVER HUMAN
BEINGS ENDURE SUFFERING
AND HUMILIATION.

WE MUST ALWAYS TAKE
SIDES. NEUTRALITY HELPS
THE OPPRESSOR, NEVER
THE VICTIM.

SILENCE ENCOURAGES THE
TORMENTOR, NEVER THE
TORMENTED.”

—ELIE WEISEL

in this Justice Issue

RELATIONAL JUSTICE
Katherine Hofmann

REFLECTIONS
Multiple authors

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM IS A RELATIONAL FAITH
Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

COMMON JUSTICE AND SIMPLE MERCY
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE NEVER BEEN SEPARATE
AND WILL NEVER BE SEPARATE
Aisha Hauser

NOTES FROM CLF'S ANNUAL MEETING

REFLECTIONS

The Government

BY ANTWON H.

Capitalism, imperialism, hierarchy
 Xenophobia, homophobia, patriarchy
 Materialism, sexism, in society
 Capitalist domination
 Ecological catastrophe
 Isms and schisms is all I see
 Even behind the walls of the penitentiary.
 Oligarchs, monarchs
 Vultures and sharks
 Homicides, genocides
 Wars they spark
 These are the problems of
 The world that be
 In every land from sea
 To shiny sea
 Amerikkka the beautiful
 How you fooled me
 Claiming this was the land
 Of the free.
 Everybody and everything
 Is up for sale
 While mostly black and brown people
 Fill up your jails
 This is what happens when you
 Open your eyes
 Give it some thought and realise that
 The real revolution
 Won't be televised.



Unitarian Universalism is a Relational Faith

Unitarian Universalism is a relational faith. It is a lived faith. It is a covenantal faith.

Rather than agree on a set of beliefs that function as a private check-off list, we agree on values that guide us in how we live.

As Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin reminds us, “our tradition cares little about what you stand up and say you believe. The evidence of your Unitarian Universalism is embodied in the depth of your relationships: how do you live in relationship to self and other?...It’s not about what you have to say. How are you living?”

Years ago, I used to run workshops in which people were asked to clarify the values they held most dear and compare them to the values they expressed through their actions. I’m currently in the middle of such an inventory with my therapist—it’s a good thing to do every few years. I commend the exercise to you. Make a

list of the things you value and then look through your calendar, your bank account, your sent email box, and other things that can tell you how you are actually living your life.

How are you living, beloveds? Do your actions match the values you think are most important? Do they match the values of Unitarian Universalism? Love? Justice? Equity? Transformation? Generosity? Pluralism? Interdependence?

I think a lot about what it means to be centered on the value of love.

It is important to know that love is not amorphous, unboundaried, or devoid of power. Actually living a life that reflects the value of love means clarity to and with those you are in relationship. It means accountability—especially when you have harmed someone or someone has harmed you. It means real actions in the world that help make real the world we dream about.

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino,
Lead Ministry Team



In his essay in the book *Love at the Center*, former UUA President Rev. Bill Sinkford wonders if embracing love as central to our values might help us collectively “gather confidence in possibilities that we can only glimpse.” “The real question,” he writes, “is whether we can experience and find joy in a love that holds us and can help us live as we want to live, even in a world that is demonstrably indifferent to suffering.”

Bill hopes the answer is yes. I do as well.

How are you living, beloveds? May your actions reflect the values you hold most dear. May your deeds match your lips. Amen. ■

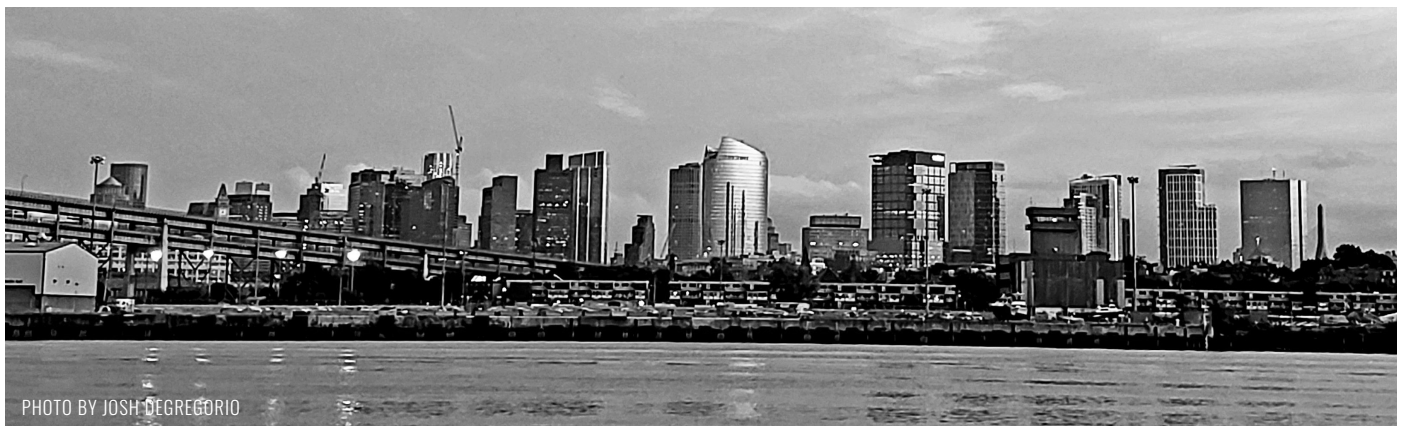


PHOTO BY JOSH DEGRECORIO

Common Justice and Simple Mercy

from an address delivered on April 14, 1875 at the centennial anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery

By Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

What we need today in the onward march of humanity is a public sentiment in favor of common justice and simple mercy. We have a civilization which has produced grand and magnificent results, diffused knowledge, overthrown slavery, made constant conquests over nature, and built up a wonderful material prosperity.

But two things are wanting in American civilization—a keener and deeper, broader and tenderer sense of justice—a sense of humanity, which shall crystallize into the life

of the nation the sentiment that justice, simple justice, is the right, not simply of the strong and powerful, but of the weakest and feeblest of all God's children; a deeper and broader humanity, which will teach [people] to look upon their feeble [siblings] not as vermin to be crushed out, or beasts of burden to be bridled and bitted, but as the children of the living God; of that God whom we may earnestly hope is in perfect wisdom and in perfect love working for the best good of all. ■

With gratitude to the UUA's Worship Web, uua.org/worship.



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper



PHOTO BY JOSH DEGRIGORIO

Human Beings Have Never Been Separate and Will Never Be Separate

What do the Nazi movement, the enslavement of Africans, the ongoing genocide of the Palestinians and the U.S. prison-industrial complex, especially what is happening with the detention centers all over the United States (such as at Delaney Hall in Newark, NJ) all have in common?

A combination of supremacy ideology and dehumanization.

In systems of brutal violence and oppression, those upholding violent systems have convinced themselves of two fundamental narratives: First, there is one group that is entitled to own resources and distribute those resources based on who is deemed worthy. Second, those not deemed worthy are stripped of their humanity and the violence perpetrated against them is justified, even to the point of murder and attempted erasure.

At Delaney Hall in my home state of New Jersey, peaceful protestors have been gathering to bring attention to the horrific conditions of the detention facility that is run by a for profit private corporation. People have been fed non-edible food, denied access to medical care and brutalized by staff. A few of the detainees have been on a hunger strike to protest the brutal conditions. Those who are detained are deemed by those in power as not worthy and therefore not fully human. Police have been deployed not to protect the detainees, but to diminish the protestors and stop them from organizing. We have people who have believed the lies and

work to uphold the systems that in the end will hurt them too.

This is the cancer on our collective souls.

As people of faith, it is incumbent on us to resist narratives that dehumanize anyone. When we believe narratives that justify genocide anywhere in the world, we justify genocide and dehumanization everywhere in the world. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny, whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

The Nazis destroyed the lives of over 11 million people and caused the entire world to be at war to end their brutality.

The Israeli government is committing genocide against the Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West Bank and now Lebanon, all in the name of "safety." This brutality has only escalated war in the entire region and now the war with Iran has caused worldwide havoc across hundreds of industries, most notably oil.

In the United States, immigration enforcement has been used as an excuse to terrorize communities and rip apart families.

The lie of supremacy thinking is not that one group is better, it is the lie

AISHA HAUSER, MSW
Lead Ministry Team



of separateness. Human beings have never been separate and will never be separate. What any one group does impacts everyone eventually. The lie of dehumanization of any group is that somehow you can maintain your own humanity when you dehumanize others. This is impossible.

As Rev. Dr. Donte' Hilliard has said many times, "When you try to dehumanize anyone, you dehumanize yourself."

We do not have to live this way. We can tell a different story, one of humanizing each other, one of equity and interdependence. All life on earth is dependent on each other. We are not, nor have we ever been separate.

What can you do? Be loud in your opposition to supremacy thinking and dehumanization of anyone. Those of you living in the U.S. can write to your representatives and urge them to end the brutal immigration enforcement practices. Those of you living across the globe can write to your government representatives to end military aid to Israel.

We are not powerless. Those of us who believe in humanity, care and liberation, can do what we can where we are. It is imperative that we maintain our agency and put our faith in action. ■

Notes From CLF's Annual Meeting

The CLF annual congregational meeting was held on Sunday, 6/7/26. Board Chair, Julica Hermann de la Fuente and meeting moderator, Aisha Ansano, led the meeting.

Members voted for a slate for elected positions presented by the nominating committee and for the CLF congregation to ordain cristy cardinal. Both votes passed overwhelmingly. 269 members voted either in person or by mail.

- For the slate of nominees, there were 257 yes, 1 no, and 11 abstentions
- To ordain cristy cardinal, there were 260 yes, 2 no, and 7 abstentions

We said goodbyes and gratitude to Julica Hermann de la Fuente for her 6 years of service on the CLF board, 3 as chair of the board. And we welcomed board member Erin White, who had been serving as vice-chair, into the chair position. Note that the CLF bylaws call for election of the treasurer and clerk, and for the board members to select their own board chair and vice chair.

The CLF Lead Ministry team, Aisha Hauser and Michael Tino, offered a report.

The Leads made an exciting announcement at the meeting: The Church of the Larger Fellowship



cristy cardinal (they/them) was affirmed to be ordained by an overwhelming YES vote at the CLF's 2026 annual meeting on June 7.

has received a generous challenge grant of \$150,000 each year over the next seven years from a family foundation that believes deeply in the CLF mission and ministry. This extraordinary gift is intended to inspire others to support the CLF and strengthen our ability to serve a global community for years to come. We are profoundly grateful for this vote of confidence in the work we do together. We hope this challenge will encourage others to join in sustaining and growing the CLF's ministry. Together, we can ensure that the CLF remains a vibrant spiritual home for all who seek connection, community, and faith beyond walls.

The leads also highlighted our work in leading all of UUism in the study/action issue of Abolition. One major accomplishment this past year was

the launch of the new clfu.org website, built to enable visibility and access to all that there is to engage in within CLF. The leads lifted up the new CLF monthly themes liturgy, areas we have been increasing the use of volunteers, our vision for continuing to reach our incarcerated members across ever increasing barriers created by the carceral system that tries hard to isolate and dehumanize.

The Board Treasurer, Darbi Lockridge and Executive Director, Jody Malloy, offered a financial report.

Having completed the agenda, the meeting adjourned. ■

*"WE'RE BEING INVITED
INTO THIS COSMIC DANCE
OF RENEWAL AND JOY
AND JUSTICE.*

*BUT YOU HAVE TO MAKE
THE JUSTICE; IT DOESN'T
JUST SHOW UP WITHOUT
OUR PARTICIPATION, OR
OUR EFFORT."*

*—DR. TAKIYAH NUR AMIN,
THE CALL OF OUR FAITH*

Relational Justice *continued from page 1*

It is not only about consequences after harm occurs, but also about whether people have what they need to survive and thrive in the first place. It asks whether our systems reduce suffering or increase it.

In many ways, my understanding of justice also connects to some of Michel Foucault's ideas about power and social control. Foucault argued that societies often maintain order not only through force but also through systems that teach people to regulate themselves through fear, surveillance, punishment, and rigid ideas about what is considered "normal" or acceptable. Institutions

like prisons, schools, and even religious systems can shape behavior in ways that reinforce existing power structures while claiming to protect society. That perspective resonates with me because I was raised to question systems that rely heavily on fear and control. It pushes me to think critically about whether punishment actually creates justice or sometimes serves more to maintain the established social order than to truly address harm, promote healing, or ensure accountability.

My UU background also makes it difficult for me to accept the idea that anyone is disposable. If we

truly believe in inherent worth and dignity, then that belief has to extend even to people who have caused harm, struggled, or failed. That can be uncomfortable, especially in a culture that often prefers simplistic categories of "good people" and "bad people." But I believe justice becomes more meaningful when it is rooted in both accountability and humanity. To me, justice is not about revenge or fear-based control. It is about creating the conditions where healing, responsibility, transformation, and human connection remain possible. I encourage everyone to examine their own views of justice in relation to humanity. ■

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.

What is your vision of justice?

In this space, you are invited to draw a picture of your understanding of justice.



Angus MacLean
Church of the Larger Fellowship, UU
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

You can read back issues of *Quest Monthly* or get electronic versions of the text to share with friends (and much more) at clfuu.org/quest.

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 manager*; Cameron Seymour-Hawkins, *tech manager*; Paul Spanagel, *administrator*

Learning Fellows: Donte' Hilliard, Katherine Hofmann

Website: clfuu.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**

Copyright 2026 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest Monthly* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. ISSN 1070-244X