

JANUARY 2017

# SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist  
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

*Depth through reflection*

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## THE COMMON GOOD

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Opening Day at the North Carolina 2015 General Assembly  
photograph by Nancy Pierce

... the only way we can ever be human is together.  
The only way we can be free is together.

— ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU  
IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO *BELIEVE*



*The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte is to inspire children, youth and adults to discover and articulate deeper spiritual meaning evidenced in lives of integrity, compassion and stewardship of the earth.*

*La mision de la iglesia Unitaria Universalista de Charlotte es inspirar a los niños, jóvenes y adultos para que descubran y articulan un significado espiritual profundo, evidente en una vida de integridad, compasión y en el manejo de los recursos de la tierra*

## “HIS NAME WAS EDGAR . . .”

by Michael Elder



Michael Elder

It was a dreary day in Baltimore in 1971. I was accompanying one of the ministers in the ecumenical parish I had been assigned to as part of my service as a conscientious objector. The parish was in an area of what were once stately row houses, two and three stories tall. Most of the houses had been turned into multiple apartments that

were dilapidated, rat infested and inadequately heated.

We climbed the dark stairway to a second-floor apartment in a particularly run-down brick row house to visit one of our homebound members. I don't remember all the details of that visit but I will never forget seeing this elderly African American woman sitting in a dirty, dimly-lit apartment and watching as mice climbed out of the food-encrusted pots on her stove. This was one of my first opportunities to move from a theoretical understanding of poverty and disparity, to confronting it in a very personal way. What did loving my neighbor and working for the common good require of me and of our community?

Growing up in the shadows of our nation's capital in the late fifties and early sixties greatly contributed to the formation of my social awareness around the concept of common good. I was also heavily influenced in those formative years by growing up in a religious tradition that took very literally the teachings of Jesus, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another . . .” (John 13:34). I readily embraced that admonition but did not really understand how trying to live it out and work for the common good would transform and challenge me throughout my life.

If you were to ask me to name the people that have influenced my journey over the last 68 years, there would be many familiar names. There would also be a less familiar name, Methodist minister, Edgar Helms. In the late nineteenth century, Rev. Helms founded settlement houses, fresh air camps, childcare services, job training and employment programs in Boston to help residents of its poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods. His work and life ministry became what we now know of as Goodwill Industries. That work continues to this day throughout the U.S. and Canada, providing opportunity and access to family-sustaining employment for hundreds of thousands of individuals and families each year.



Needlework by Vivian Brenner

Toward the end of his life he left this challenge . . . “Friends . . . be dissatisfied . . . until ever person in your community has an opportunity to develop to their fullest usefulness and enjoy a maximum of abundant living.” While the words may be antiquated, I have found them to be a good practical definition for my understanding of the common good. We are inextricably linked one to another. I cannot be truly satisfied and at peace if my neighbor does not have the freedom, justice, and opportunity to live life to its fullest. Over the last 42 years, my work with Goodwill has been one of the ways I have tried to work for the common good.

The UUCC has given me new opportunities to live out my commitment to the common good while challenging me to examine my actions with a more critical eye. While I am still dissatisfied that we have so far to go—that the realization of the common good is the rule and not the exception—I am encouraged and inspired by our new vision which calls us to spiritual, societal, and environmental transformation as individuals, as a congregation, and as a community.

## LOOKING UP FROM THE BASE OF MOUNT EVEREST

by Ann Doss Helms



Ann Doss Helms

As a white person with a conscience and a Facebook account, I live in confusion.

I've come to realize that the very foundations of my life, including some of my deepest values and

personality traits, have been shaped by a society that grants me peace and protection denied to others, even as it assures me I'm blameless.

Thoughtful friends share a stream of essays urging me to speak up, resist racism and renounce privilege. And for every one of those, there's a link to another equally persuasive piece explaining why the actions of people like me are often more self-serving than righteous. I am reminded that every time I speak I may look foolish, give offense or burden people of color with my own needs.

It can be paralyzing. I'm tempted to focus on my family, my career, and my own spiritual development. I've been fortunate enough to meet people who have made a lasting difference for the common good—and I'm realistic enough to doubt I will join those ranks. Maybe I should be content to chronicle their deeds.

And yet . . . it feels like we are entering an era of history where common people are called to great courage, where failure to act could shape my legacy and my descendants' lives as surely as any act of heroism.

I want to prepare, and I don't know how. The only thing I'm sure of is that I need to be part of a community that's working for justice.

So I fight my inclination toward armchair activism. I read, but I've come to appreciate how much more that means if I talk about what I've read with people outside my daily circle. I interact on social media, but I make sure some of those "shares" and "likes" turn into real-world interactions.

I try to show up for services, marches and forums that focus on the common good. Sometimes I go as a reporter, knowing that if I offer to cover something it will get wider recognition. Sometimes I go as myself, believing that even if no single event changes the world, it matters to look into the faces of others who are trying to make a difference.

The truth is, very few of us will make headlines and history. But I believe it's important to be part of the fabric of change. So far my greatest strength has been in making connections—sharing a story, offering a word of encouragement, articulating an idea, all small steps toward building the kind of community I want to live in.

Our church is an integral part of that. I recently signed on for the Stewardship Team—the furthest thing I can imagine from my youthful dreams of putting my life on the line to change the world. But if we manage to fulfill our vision of becoming a transformational force in the community, simply helping to keep the lights on and the staff paid may be one of my greatest contributions to the future of Charlotte.



photograph by Nancy Pierce

And perhaps my turn will come to step into history. It feels like we're all looking up from the base of Mount Everest: No amount of preparation guarantees we can reach the peak, but lack of preparation assures failure.

My biggest obstacle may be the temptation to retreat into comfort. That's why I'll keep coming together with all of you for inspiration and challenge. Have courage. Our time is coming. May we be ready.



Jay Leach

In 1630, the Puritan John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, laid out the defining social contract for that new colony in his celebrated "City on a Hill" sermon. Winthrop's central image has been a dominant metaphor in our national history. "We shall be as a city upon a hill," he declared.

"The eyes of all people are upon us."

In modern times, many of those running for office have made mention of Winthrop's trope. Presidential aspirants from both parties—Kennedy, Reagan, Mondale, Dukakis, Bill Clinton, Romney, McCain and Obama—have cited Winthrop's text.

As a portion of his acclaimed homily, Winthrop explicated the social contract with these terms:

We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.

There is something inspiring about this impassioned appeal to entwine personal and communal well-being. In Winthrop's clarion call to "Make others' conditions our own," self-interestedness is tempered by concern for the community.

A careful excerpting of Winthrop's text, along with an overly generous leniency toward our history, will give us a mistaken impression about what he meant when he said "we" and "our" and "us." Who are the members of "our community"? Clearly for Winthrop and the other Puritans fleeing England for the freedom of the colony, these terms applied only within the bounds of strict and narrow definitions.

"We," "our," "us": these words did not refer to religious dissenters opposed to the Puritan way of it. These words did not mean all who will join us in this new land. And, these words obviously had not a thing to do with the Native Americans already occupying the land that the Puritans would claim for themselves.

In 1630, the Puritan John Winthrop laid out the defining social contract for the new colony. But in so doing, he also laid the foundation for a fundamental

tension that has existed on these shores from the Puritans to the present. When we say "we" and "our" and "us," who will be included and who will be left out? When we declare our intent to "always have before our eyes our community," who gets noticed and who gets overlooked? whose voice is heard and whose is ignored?

Our liberating religion offers a particularly expansive response. Between the polarities of our principles, we find guidance for these sorts of quandaries.

Since we begin with the ubiquity of worth and dignity, we cannot exclude some as unworthy, no matter who they are, where they are, or what they've done. "Us" becomes a very broad term encompassing all with whom we share this community, this nation, our world.



Mixed Media Art by Sherry Sample

And, since we conclude by affirming our awareness of an interdependent web of which we are all a part, we understand that the common good doesn't ultimately mean me sacrificing and someone else benefiting. The common good is about what is good for all of us.

Aspiring for the common good is not an act of charity. Aspiring for the common good is not an altruistic act. Aspiring for the common good imagines a collectively beneficial ideal.

"We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body." Yes, we must. And, we must do so in ways far more inclusive and expansive than the author of these words or most of those who've quoted them since could have ever imagined.

*Our spiritual journey begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. We invite parents to use the material presented in LET'S DIVE IN! to engage their children in this journey.*

## THE MONSTER STORM

by Belinda Parry

The Monsters could see a storm brewing in the distance. It was going to be a bad one.

“We must get ready,” Red Monster said.

“We have to build a shelter,” Blue Monster said.

“Big enough for everyone,” Green Monster said.

“And strong enough to stand through the storm,” Brown Monster said.

“I will help,” Orange Monster yawned, “right after my nap.” And it curled up under a tree and began to snore.

The other Monsters were angry. They wanted Orange Monster to help. But the storm was coming, and they had to get ready. Grumbling, they lumbered off to collect what they needed to build a strong shelter.

While the Four Monsters gathered rocks and branches and mud, the storm blew closer and Orange Monster slept. The Four Monsters battled the rising wind to put the shelter together and make it sturdy. Orange Monster curled into a tighter ball of Orange Monster fur and slept some more.

Just as the rain began to fall, the shelter was finished. Worn out, the Four Monsters dragged themselves into the shelter and fell in a heap on the floor and began to snore. Orange Monster stretched and looked around. It saw the shelter and felt the rain falling on its shoulders. It quickly gathered buckets of mud and branches and joined the other Monsters in the shelter. Using the mud and the sturdiest branches, Orange Monster sealed the doorway against the wild wind and the drenching rain. Then it sat down and waited.

The storm raged outside the shelter all night. The Four Monsters were tired from building the shelter and slept right through it, but Orange Monster waited, awake and alert. When the wind blew a branch from the top of the shelter and the rain began to come through the roof, Orange Monster patched the hole with a branch it had brought inside. When the rain fell so heavily that

it puddled up and began to seep under the walls of the shelter, Orange Monster used mud to seal the cracks and keep the water out. The Four Monsters slept, and Orange Monster kept them safe and dry.

Eventually, the storm lessened and the Four Monsters woke up. When the sounds of wind and rain outside finally stopped, Orange Monster took down the branches that covered the doorway, and sunlight streamed into the shelter. Morning had come.



photograph by Jay Leach

The Four Monsters looked around the shelter. They saw the patches Orange Monster had made from branches and mud, and they knew that Orange Monster had kept them safe and dry while they slept.

“We missed the whole storm,” Red Monster said.

“We slept right through it,” Blue Monster said.

“But we’re all safe and dry,” Green Monster said.

“Because Orange Monster looked out for us,” Brown Monster said.

“It was easy,” Orange Monster yawned, “because of the shelter you built. I’ll help you take it down. . . right after my nap.” And it curled up under a tree and began to snore.

### Let’s Talk About It:

- Is what Orange Monster did during the storm as important as what the other Monsters did before the storm? Why or why not?
- What might have happened if all the Monsters were like Orange Monster?
- What might have happened if Orange Monster was like the Four Monsters?
- The Four Monsters were angry that Orange Monster didn’t help build the shelter. How did they feel when they saw that Orange Monster had kept them safe and dry through the storm?



Witness Event at General Assembly in Minnesota  
 photograph by Nancy Pierce

### *Common or Greater*

Do it, they say,  
 It's for the common good.  
 But I don't want to be common.  
 I don't want to be plain, commonplace, ordinary.  
 I want to be better.  
 I don't want to make the world a more common place.  
 I want it to be better.  
 Not trivial, mediocre, and everyday.  
 After all, isn't that what common means?  
 No, they say.  
 You don't understand.  
 Common is for us all. But here, there's a better way to  
 think of it.  
 It's for the greater good.  
 Greater? Better, higher?  
 Yes!  
 I will make the world a better place!  
 And if greater good is the same as common good-  
 Then does that mean greater is the same as common?  
 I see now!  
 I will do this!  
 For the common good!  
 And so can you.

-Samantha Flynn

### *Enough*

When will it be time?  
 Are we not tired yet?  
 We stand so proud  
 But we follow like sheep  
 Rhetoric that proclaims  
 Anything but unity  
 And judges us  
 And divides us.  
 When will we say enough?

When will it be time?  
 Are we not tired yet?  
 When will we come together  
 And stop taking sides  
 And stand side by side  
 And look at each other with new eyes  
 And tear down the walls the past  
 Has erected?  
 When will we say enough?

When will it be time?  
 Are we not tired yet?  
 When will we stop fighting each other  
 And fight for each other?  
 When will we break the bonds of  
 Religion and culture  
 And run to each other  
 Not away from each other?  
 When will we say enough?

When will it be time?  
 Time to say enough.  
 Pas plus, non piu, no mas!  
 When is it time to  
 Not just talk the talk  
 But walk the walk  
 Hand in hand  
 Together  
 For the common good?

- Melba Evans

## FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

*Below you will find a list of books, reflections, movies, lectures and much more for further engagement on the subject of The Common Good.*

### BOOKS:

#### Adult

*For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, by Herman E. Daly, John B. Cobb, Jr., 1994

*The Greater Common Good*, by Arundhati Roy, 1999

*The Common Good*, by Noam Chomsky, David Barsamian, Arthur Naiman, 2002

*Low Pay, High Profile: The Global Push for Fair Labor*, by Andrew Ross, 2004

*Journey to the Common Good*, by Walter Brueggemann, 2010

*White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, by Tim Wise, 2011

*Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good*, by Heather Menzies, 2014

*Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015

*Wilderness and the Common Good: A New Ethic of Citizenship*, by Jo Arney, 2015

*Reading for the Common Good: How Books Help Churches and Communities Flourish*, by C. Christopher Smith, 2016

*United: Thoughts on Finding Common Ground and Advancing the Common Good*, by Cory Booker, 2016

#### Preschool/ Early Elementary

*Frederick*, by Leo Lionni, 1973

*Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni, 1973

*Miss Rumphius*, by Barbara Cooney, 1985

*One Grain of Rice: A Mathematical Folktale*, by Demi 1997

*Stone Soup*, by Jon J. Muth, 2003

*Yo? Yes?*, by Chris Raschka, 2007

*What If Everybody Did That?*, by Ellen Javernick, 2010

#### Older Elementary

*Chicken Sunday*, by Patricia Polacco, 1998

*If the World Were a Village: A Book about the World's People*, by David J. Smith, 2002

*The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Saved Jews During the Holocaust*, by Karen Gray Ruelle, 2009

*Real Kids, Real Stories, Real Change: Courageous Actions Around the World*, by Garth Sundem, 2010

#### Middle-High School

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*, by Mark Haddon, 2004

*Stick Your Neck Out: A Street-Smart Guide to Creating Change in Your Community and Beyond*, by John Graham, 2005

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie, 2009

### MOVIES:

*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1930 (no rating)

*Ferdinand the Bull*, 1938 (no rating)

*A Far Off Place*, 1993 (PG)

*Pocahontas*, 1995 (G)

*Pay it Forward*, 2000 (PG-13)

*Brave*, 2012 (PG)

*Selma*, 2014 (PG-13)

*Timbuktu*, 2014 (PG-13)

## THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS OF ART, POETRY, AND READINGS:



### **Vivian Brenner**

Vivian's Ukrainian grandmother, Zenaida, taught her to crochet when she was six years old, followed by embroidery and basic sewing skills. Over the years, she's learned how to knit, make tatted and bobbin lace, spin cotton, wool and silk, needlepoint, and she is now learning to weave. Her

interest in crafts took her to the Peace Corps for two years (1979-1980), working in a handicraft center in rural St. Lucia. Reading textile history and learning how people created their skills is fascinating, and gives an additional richness to her work.

### **Michael Elder**

Michael Elder is President & CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont and has served in that position since 1976. In 2016, Goodwill provided employment and training services to 10,500 individuals with barriers to employment and placed over 2,300 people in competitive employment with area employers. He currently serves as Chair of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Partners and serves on the Charlotte Chamber Advisory Board, the Charlotte Works Board and the FreeMoreWest Partners Board of Directors.



### **Melba Evans**

Even as a child, Melba Evans enjoyed great literature and poetry. Her mother gave her a collection of over 700 poems by the great poets when she was 9 years old and she has been enamored with poetry ever since. As a child, she wrote rhyming poems but now enjoys free verse. Melba says, "Poetry

is emotion. Anger, sadness, joy, despair can all be put into a poem. Poetry is healing because you can get lost in the word play with figurative language." Melba writes mostly for family and friends but also enjoys sharing her love of "words" with her students at CPCC.

### **Samantha Flynn**

Samantha is a passionate lover of literature in all shapes and sizes, and started writing poems in third grade. Since then, she has continued to pursue this love in her spare time. She loves reading poems as much as writing them, and often draws inspiration from some of her favorite books and the world around her. Samantha is currently a freshman at Myers Park High School.





## THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS OF ART, POETRY, AND READINGS:

### **Ann Doss Helms**

Ann Doss Helms has been a member of UCC for 22 years and a reporter for the Charlotte Observer for almost 30 years. She lives in Belmont with her husband (of 33 years), adult son and two dogs.



### **Sherry Sample**

From an early age, expression through art has been a passion for Sherry. Over the years she has created works in many mediums including acrylic, watercolor, mixed media and professionally as a product designer in trend and design. Sherry loves the joy she finds in creating art.



### **Nancy Pierce**

UCC member Nancy Pierce has worked as a documentary photographer all her adult life. Her client list reflects her interests in land and water protection, sustainable communities, active transportation, social justice and the common



good. In addition to her corporate, nonprofit and editorial work, Nancy was commissioned for the recent exhibits Families of Abraham (Levine Museum), River Docs (Light Factory) and City of Creeks (Projective Eye Gallery). She has photographed General Assembly for the Unitarian Universalist Association every year since 1993. Nancy and her husband Mickey Shaver raised two sons in the UCC.

## CREATIVE SUBMISSIONS FOR SOUNDINGS

The editors of Soundings invite members of the congregation to submit creative written and visual material for publication. Submissions should reflect one of the congregation's upcoming Second Sunday themes: February—Commitment; March—Spirituality; April—Interdependence. Written pieces (poems or prose) should be no more than 150 words. Visual works can include photographs or high-quality photographs of paintings, sketches, fiber art, sculpture, etc. All submissions must be original. The editors—the UCC professional staff—will review all submissions and contact the authors regarding suitability for publication.

Please send submissions to  
[ucc@ucccharlotte.org](mailto:ucc@ucccharlotte.org)

# SOUNDINGS

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