

MARCH/APRIL 2018

# SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist  
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

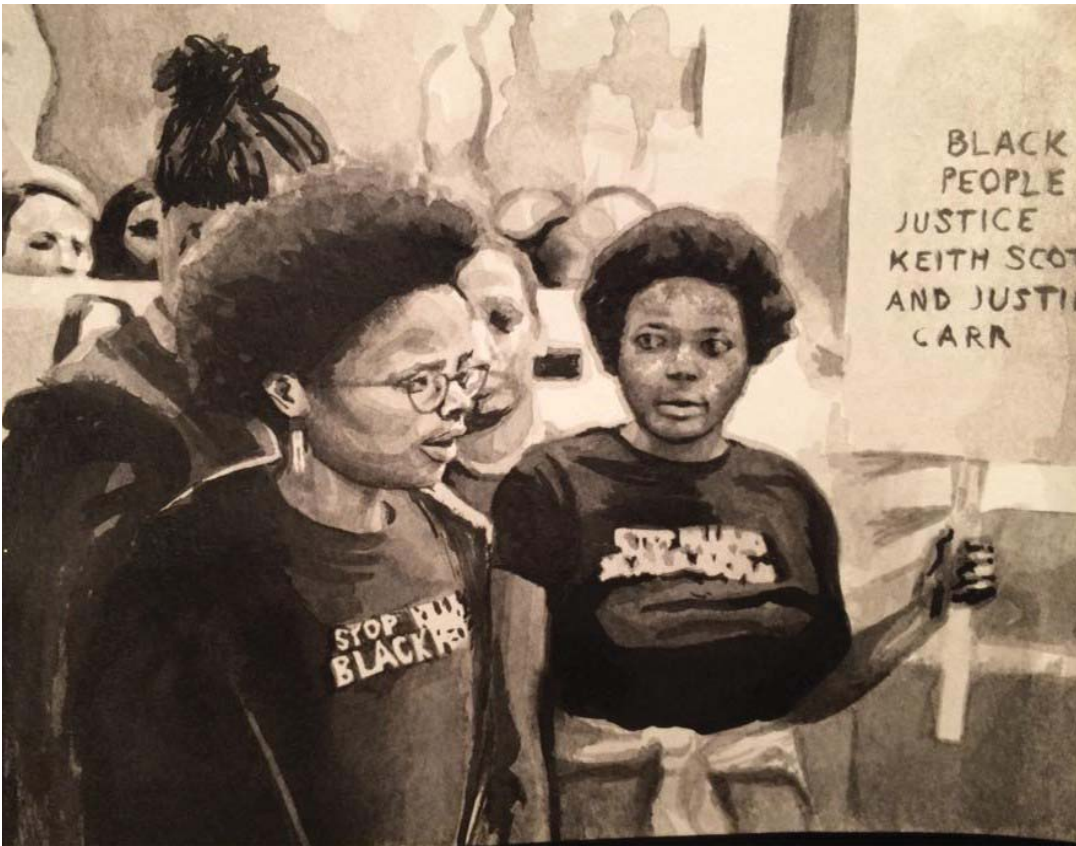
*Depth through reflection*

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Protesters, ink drawing by Beth Mussay, based on a photograph by Alvin Jacobs Jr.

*“Listen* with humility and respect  
as we *learn* to become more powerful agents  
for transformative change in ourselves and in our world”

—FROM THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE’S  
“CALL TO ACTION,” ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES,  
FEBRUARY 2017



*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*

## BREAKING THE UNSPOKEN SILENCE

by Jay Leach



A while back, I got the genealogy bug. Before long, I was staying up late, perusing internet sites, identifying obscure connections to my lineage. My family tree began spreading its many branches, generation leading to generation ever further out.

There was one line I could not trace. I knew my maternal grandmother's father, William Charlie Manuel—and identified his father, Virgil Wilson Manuel. But, then false leads and misinformation frustrated my further search.

I discovered a genealogy site based in the rural South Carolina county where my family had resided for generations and posted a plea for help. In time, a reply came from a man quite familiar with the Manuel family. It disclosed a sordid family tale.

Virgil Manuel's mother and a well-known married man in that small, tightknit community had engaged in an affair. From that liaison, my great-great grandfather was born. Because of the situation of his birth, he carried his mother's last name, Manuel—not his father's, which, I learned, was Cope.

That email also included a cautionary message. Another family member had embarked upon her own genealogical pursuit years earlier. However, my correspondent revealed, "she was told by her aunts not to look back too far." *Don't look back too far.* Some stories, those aunts evidently believed, are better off left untold.

The secret generational shame about a moral failing in my family's history is magnified many times over in



Gravestone of Virgil Wilson Manuel  
photographed by Jay Leach

our nation's history. Instructed by our Board's "Call to Action" to "listen and learn," for months our Racial Justice Core Group has been deliberately exploring four centuries of that history. We've repeatedly found ourselves exclaiming: "Why weren't we ever taught this?" "Why don't we know this?" "How is it that we've never learned this part of our history?"

Why weren't we taught that the concept of "race" was developed by European colonizers who used it to defend their claims of superiority? Why weren't we taught about the prevalence of slavery in northern colonies? Why didn't we know that the language of white supremacy was intentionally enshrined in the U.S. Constitution? Why didn't we know the details of what helped undermine Reconstruction? How is it that we never learned about segregationist Supreme Court decisions, legislated voter suppression efforts, Federal white supremacist social engineering?

The answer to our repeated queries is found in a collective echo of the silencing those aunts expressed to a family genealogist. *Don't look back too far.* Don't ask too many questions. Don't risk removing heroes from their pedestals or revealing the immense privilege that has come with being "white." And, most certainly don't reveal our nation's long collective commitment to white supremacy.

We've spent months learning about both environmental and racial injustice. We've broken much of the unspoken silence in these two arenas. We've faced the racism inherent in much of the environmental movement and how environmentalism alone won't address the planet's deepest pain. We've risked recognizing just how prevalent white supremacy has been and how simply being kind, welcoming people won't ever move us toward transformation. It feels hard, often painful, sometimes discouraging. And, it seems absolutely essential.

We're becoming much more informed. We understand that our knowledge alone won't change anything. However, without it we risk repeating a history we never even learned.

This issue of *Soundings* offers an update, a glimpse into the hard work underway. I'm proud of our commitment to do this necessary work. In our core groups, in educational offerings for children, youth and adults, in our Sunday services, and in engagement in the larger community, we're listening and learning.



## “WHAT ELSE DO WE NEED TO KNOW?”

by Martha Kniseley



As we consider our focus on environmental and racial justice, it is my job and that of the Adult Religious Education & Spiritual Development Team (ARESD) to keep asking the question, “What else do our members need to know?”

As I look back over the past months, I am confident that we offered opportunities for learning and deeper engagement. The film documentary *Burned* gave us another example of environmental injustice playing out once again in North Carolina. Our forests are being depleted to support the biomass industry and the export of wood pellets. The Dogwood Alliance paints the picture of its impact: “Our communities in the South who depend on these forests suffer the most. Industry offers to buy land and promises jobs, but often the jobs don’t stay. Communities end up with a degraded infrastructure and limited resources. Communities can suffer abysmal rates of asthma and other pollution-induced health problems. . . .”

A dozen of our members engaged in a book study for six weeks. For some, the discussion around *Waking Up White* was the first time they had looked closely at issues of racism, white privilege, and systemic injustice. While others may have felt they were a little further down this road, one participant admitted, “It gave me a good opportunity to think more deeply and clearly about the racial biases that, despite my best efforts, I know I still carry around. . . .” Another member said, “It deepened my understanding of how my white background, family advantages, and my own ‘accomplishments’ have been enabled by a system of racism, that we are not aware of. . . .”

Some members have been asking about the role of spirituality—“Isn’t that one of the reasons that we come to the UCC or join a church at all? How do I fill my soul?” Our visiting minister, the Rev. Kathleen McTigue, brought us the workshop “Talk the Walk: Speaking Justice in the

Language of our Faith.” She reminded us that we need grounding practices that will “quiet down the chatter in our brains and make room for feeling, intuition and wisdom . . . anchor us in deeper waters . . . lessen the space that fear can occupy.” Bob Bushorn built on these ideas with his course “Nurturing a Spiritual Base for Activism,” reminding us that “Insight without action is a dream and action without insight is a nightmare” (from a Japanese proverb). He and co-leader Vivian Brenner created a sacred space for this work using examples of practices that can support us as we go forward and out into the community.

In the coming months, the congregation can expand our knowledge of state and local issues. Members of the Environmental Transformation Team and Green Sanctuary group will share the documentary *Cowspiracy*, with a discussion about the impact of CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) on our food and water sources. As we begin to think about forming partnerships in our community, we will have the opportunity to hear from a Charlotte activist who has been on the frontlines. Ash Williams will facilitate a three-part series: “Ally-ship, Accomplice-ship and Advocacy,” defining what it means to be an ally in this political movement, what it means to be in relationship with directly impacted folks, and how to advocate for issues in a way that centers those who are most directly impacted.



Members of the Environmental Justice Core Group with Dr. Robert Bullard—the “father of the environmental justice movement.” (L-R Dave Walsh, Elizabeth Pruett, Dr. Robert Bullard, June Blotnick and Thomas Elijah, III)

The learning is endless but with great purpose. The work we do together has everything to do with spirituality as we share in our grounding practices. Each time we gather, do we bring compassion, curiosity and openness? May we

embrace Joanna Macy’s idea of Active Hope: “Active Hope is a practice. . . Active Hope is not wishful thinking . . . Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act. We belong to this world. The web of life is calling us forth at this time . . . Active Hope is a readiness to engage. . . to discover the strengths in ourselves and others . . . None of this can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.”

## STOMP YOUR FEET! PUNCH THE AIR!

by Kathleen Carpenter



*If you like justice and you're frustrated, stomp your feet!*  
(stomp, stomp)

*If you like justice and you're frustrated, stomp your feet!*  
(stomp, stomp)

Want to get kids fired up about social inequities and power imbalances? Give

them a chance to consider how injustice feels and then let them put those feeling into a song. We did just that in our January Children's Chapel by asking the children present to come up with a movement for each of their named feelings. The result was their own version of "If You're Happy and You Know It" which included frustrated (stomp your feet!), angry (punch the air!), sad (wipe your eyes!), hopeful (give a smile!), and scared (hug a friend!) It was a rocking good time which made the point that when things are unfair, we can feel many different emotions and it's what we do with those emotions that counts.

Our Board's Call to Action is powerful and challenging. And it's not just for our adult members. If our children are to carry on our faith tradition of working for justice, we must invite them into discernment, action, and reflection with us. As I shared in previous *Soundings* articles, we are doing just that in our CYRE Program this year. What happens in our nine classes each week differs dramatically based on age, but it is all designed to address the issues that impact justice: truth, love, respect, kindness, marginalization, power, and fairness. We are asking our children to identify their own experiences and perspectives and to look beyond them to seek out, care about, and respect those of others.

One particularly effective and concrete tool used by our elementary teachers is the Gems of Goodness activity. It teaches the importance of empathy, action, and the importance of good listening. Each Sunday, the children are invited to stand up, and tell the group about an act of goodness they engaged in or witnessed that week. They then place a gem in the gem jar. This activity is prefaced by holding up the Moral Compass poster (see photo) which includes a list of the virtues the group has explored in previous sessions. The children are encouraged to think of acts of goodness related to these virtues, as they share their gems. Listening respectfully is an expectation as this is a time "we share what's in our hearts."

At the other end of the age spectrum, our older youth have devoted many of their Sunday classes to discussions around racial injustice, deepening their understanding of terms like white supremacy, intersectionality, and white privilege and how these play out in their lives and in society's larger systems.



Moral Compass Poster  
photographed by Kathleen Carpenter

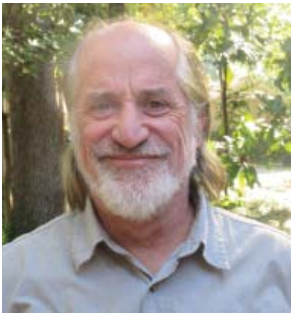
This year, our high schoolers made the conscious decision to incorporate the theme of justice into their annual youth con, a weekend gathering of 50+ Unitarian Universalist youth from around the Carolinas. With the audacious name, "Save the UUniverse!," the youth devoted the Saturday morning time slot to workshops on environmental justice (by watching and discussing the 2014 documentary, *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*); controversial issues involving race (by engaging in a series of debates); and activism (by learning how to be effective social

and/or environmental justice advocates). In addition, youth participants were given a choice to participate in an afternoon of field games or an afternoon of volunteering and supporting a local church vandalized for its LGBTQ advocacy work. Our youth heard stories from some of that church's black members about the increased discrimination they receive as gay or trans people of color. A real-life lesson in intersectionality.



## WHAT THEN MUST WE DO?

by Charles Pilkey



Tolstoy saw it long ago—despair etched in the faces of the poor. Born an aristocrat, yet gifted with infinite compassion, he was so appalled by the grinding poverty of the peasants that he went out one wintry night and gave all his money to the homeless. A selfless act, to be sure—but one that did

little to ease long-term suffering. Doubtless, there was a run on the vodka that night, but after much revelry, the homeless awoke the next day, hung-over and as impoverished as ever. Eventually, Tolstoy's almsgiving and quest for a simple life close to nature led to his wife's estrangement and a ruined marriage. Good intentions alone, it seems, are not enough.

A century after Tolstoy's death little has changed. True, we have marvelous new technologies that bedazzle with digital magic. But the poor are still poor. And some among us have personal wealth exceeding that of entire nations, yet rarely share that wealth, believing an innate right to amass profit overrides any incidental social and environmental costs. With such base companions do we walk the streets of Babylon.

I joined the Environmental Justice Core Group from a sense of outrage, born in equal measure of despair and anger—despair at our failure to achieve racial and social justice, anger at the wanton destruction of the biosphere. The last election was the catalyst that woke me from my intellectual slumbers, for I knew what rough beast slouched toward Washington to be born.

Environmental justice focuses on how environmental problems unduly affect marginalized and low-income communities. A noble enterprise, but one that is inherently human centered. This is unfortunate, for it blinds us to larger issues requiring our attention. Roughly 75% of all species alive today will go extinct in the coming centuries, victims of our technological hubris. What does it profit a person (to rephrase Scripture) to save a community but forfeit an entire biosphere? We need to save both. We need to gaze Janus-like in two

directions at once, locally to address social injustice in poor neighborhoods and globally to try to stave off the 6th Extinction. Our own survival may well depend on the latter.

"The world," said the Buddha, "is full of suffering." But the world is also full of ways to alleviate suffering. Everywhere, citizens are gathering to protest environmental injustice in its various guises: Greek villagers opposing a Canadian company using cyanide to mine gold, an alliance of Texas ranchers and environmentalists fighting a proposed oil pipeline, Pacific Islanders suing rich countries for causing sea-level rise. The resistance has begun. Yet, the old maxim remains: Capitalists always win—or do they?

These are troubled times—increasing disparity of wealth, democracy eaten from within, wilderness debased as commodity, a million species vanishing like stars at dawn, and at the edge of our darkest musings, the ever-hungry sea, rising unnoticed to reclaim the lands it once ruled.

Is it too soon to board the next Mars shuttle? No—better we resolve our follies on this world, lest we export them to another. We must seek an answer to the question that plagued Tolstoy, the question (first framed in the Gospel of Luke) whose answer is the key that will reopen the locked Gates of Eden, allowing all to enter: *What then must we do?*

I think the answer lies (at least in part) with collective resistance. One person cannot summon the future. But an army can. An army of compassionate resisters. A planet-wide band of brothers and sisters, whose sheer weight of numbers will transform the hard rock of the world into fertile soil to sow the seeds of a greener tomorrow. Such an army, I believe, will one day complete the quest begun by Tolstoy and others for a moral and ecological community.



*Tree of Good and Evil*  
metal sculpture by Charles Pilkey

## PART OF THE WHOLE (PROBLEM)

by Megan Van Fleet



I have always worn my environmentalist badge proudly, from an early start in vegetarianism and organic gardening, as well as focusing on reducing my consumption of our planet's resources. I thought I had the fix—to change my own behavior, inspire others to change theirs, and topple the beast that is climate change.

Girl, was I wrong . . . and a little right.

Through the work of the Environmental Justice Core Group (EJCG), I am starting to understand more fully my role, not only as an individual, but as part of a larger system. It is not enough to change my own actions and call it a day. I must work as part of something larger than myself in order to affect change and make a true difference in the world.

What I learned from the Ecowomanists (highlighted during a generous Skype session with the Core Group by Rev. Sofia Betancourt, former interim co-president of the UUA), is that understanding the intersectionality of oppression by gender, race, and economic status can lead us to change our ways of thinking about how we move in the work of justice, and how we ask questions about the future of our place in the world. Ecowomanism implores us to follow the lead of those most impacted by environmental crises. Ecowomanist scholar Melanie Harris says this: “Uncovering parallels between acts of violence against the earth and systemic patterns of violence (racism, sexism, and heterosexism) faced by women of color reveals the need for a fresh environmental justice paradigm; one that honors all earthlings and their approaches to earth justice in a community of life.” Seeing myself as part of a larger whole is both a spiritual practice, and a requirement to enact meaningful change.

Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (an EJCG reading that both Thomas Elijah and Tricia Bernard discussed in their writings in the January/February issue of *Soundings*), dares us to challenge basic tenets of our capitalist

system, making the case that extreme capitalism is inherently unsustainable and incompatible with a healthy planet.

What stands out for me among these theses, is the call for less reliance on an individual to change themselves only, but to fight for change of systems, and of large-scale ways of thinking. Just as simply being non-racist will not topple the systemic racism that built this country, it is not enough simply to recycle or go solar. We must actively seek the true source of issues and dismantle the system that allows the problems to thrive.

Our congregation's Vision, and subsequent Board's Call to Action, require that we listen and speak up. The education I have received in the EJCG has been invaluable in building my confidence and ability to speak up on environmental justice issues facing our state, nation and planet. It is overwhelming to think of changing the world, but in North Carolina we are leaders in both causes of, and solutions to, climate change. I am grateful to UUCC members who have dedicated their careers and time to environmental justice work, and who have chosen to take on leadership roles in the community as well as within our congregation. June Blotnick, Luis Rodriguez, Charles King, among others, have all been incredibly inspirational and informative throughout this learning process.

Because of our congregation's commitment to understanding environmental justice issues, there are many opportunities to gather and learn about issues facing our planet, as well as issues with special relevance for our state. I encourage you to come, listen and learn more about our responsibility as individuals and as parts of the larger system.



African Art Courtesy of Manny Allen & Tawana Wilson-Allen  
photographed by Chris Clark



## DISCOVERING THE TRUTH

by Sharon Baker



I was in middle school and studying American history when I first learned about the three-fifths compromise in the U.S. Constitution. I remember feeling shocked. My idealistic and naïve pre-teen mind refused to believe that blacks and whites had not been treated equally

by our founding fathers. Outraged, I stormed out of my bedroom to confront my parents with this newfound knowledge. Did you know about this, I demanded? How could this possibly be true?

I had so much to learn.

Flash forward several decades, and I have fully immersed myself in learning more about this country's racial history and current reality. I began my educational journey in earnest more than two years ago. On the cusp of becoming an empty nester, I was eager to make the most of my newly gained freedom from full-time parenting. I had been a vocal advocate for women's reproductive rights and gay rights for most of my adult life but had done little in the way of fighting against racial oppression. The rising number of police shootings of black people, as well as UUCC's focus on racial justice, compelled me to turn my attention in that direction. To begin, I participated in the six-part "The African-Americans: Many Rivers to Cross" PBS series at the church in fall 2015 and then began reading books about race relations like *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. It seemed like a natural progression to examine the issues



*Stop the Killings*, ink drawing by Beth Mussay based on a photograph by Alvin Jacobs Jr.

I was learning about in more depth as part of the Racial Justice Core Group.

To complement what I was about to undertake with that group, I attended the eight-part Racial Justice Advocacy series offered by Rabbi Judy Schindler at Queens University this past fall. Between that series and the intense work we are doing in the Racial Justice Core Group, I have discovered some hard truths about the United States' racial history as well as my own beliefs and actions.

I've learned that the concept of "race" and "othering" were created as a way to allow one group to obtain and retain economic privileges that they deny to others. I've discovered that racial injustice is embedded not only in our Constitution but also in other major documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. I've watched videos showing how Reconstruction gave black people real political power, only to have it violently obliterated by white supremacists unwilling to give up their own power. I've read articles detailing how black people have been marginalized in this country for centuries, first through slavery and then through systemic, institutionalized oppression that continues to affect their access to housing, education, employment, finances and politics. I've listened intently as Racial Justice Core Group participants talk about their personal experiences with racial injustice and reactions to what we're learning. And I've had heartfelt discussions with my group partner about when we first noticed racial disparities, our understanding of privilege and power, and our own implicit and explicit biases.

The readings and discussions that the group engages in are often painful and uncomfortable, but I also feel as if this work has lifted me out of my "white privilege" fog. I've been forced to closely reexamine my own actions and relationships with black, Hispanic, and other people who do not look like me, and now know that many of those actions, however well intentioned, were deeply hurtful. While I can't change the past, I am grateful for the opportunity the UUCC has given me to try to transform myself and my community now.

## REMEDIAL RACIAL JUSTICE

by Beth Mussay



When I spoke with Melissa Vullo about her trip to the UU General Assembly, she seemed truly transformed by her experience at a workshop about unlearning racism. I jumped at the chance to join the Racial Justice Core Group

that she, Joan Davis, and Jay Leach were facilitating. I'm embarrassed to say I was surprised and a little dismayed at the sea of white faces at the first meeting. But why should I have expected otherwise? Our congregation and denomination is vastly white. I realized that this group is actually Racial Justice for White People; in other words, Remedial Racial Justice. The only reason people of color would join this group would be to teach with patience, generosity, and grace (thank you, Joan).

We prepared ourselves to be challenged and upset. The facilitators definitely challenged us academically, but kept a gentle pace emotionally, with lots of check-ins to see how people were doing. When we ended one teaching session a half hour early to process emotions, I was surprised. We had been learning about America's racist history in depth; but surely it didn't come as a shock that our country has been racist all through its history. Hadn't we already taken the founding fathers off their pedestals? I was even more surprised to find how many people really needed this time to process their emotions. Some people were struggling and even overwhelmed. I was glad our facilitators were doing what was right for the group, but I realized I was in the minority. I began to wonder if this class was the right place for me.

It dawned on me that while the curriculum aspect of this group was not an emotional struggle for me, being in a group is. When we go around in a circle and say how we're feeling, I say, "I'm fine thanks!" and think to myself, "If I weren't fine, I wouldn't be

talking about it with 20 people. "I'm used to going at my own pace. Moving with a group is unfamiliar and uncomfortable for me.

At church, I tend to stay within a bubble and talk to people who I already know, who are on the same page as me. (Sound familiar?) I also listen to Jay every week; I'm on the same page as him concerning racial justice. I'd assumed we all were on that page. Clearly I need to get to know my congregation better.

I have readjusted my expectations of this class. My focus is on the excellent knowledge being presented by the facilitators. I am sheepishly learning not to expect a group to tailor their pace to me. I'm also not afraid to reach outside this congregation for groups that are more "radical." So-called radicals frequently turn out to be right.

My kids are white belts in Tae Kwon Do. I learned that the meaning of white belt is "pure, no knowledge, humble." We can pretend we're black belts at racial justice and look ridiculous, or we can gratefully receive lessons, gentle and harsh, with humility.

As UU's, we belong to a white supremacist institution. We can deny it and watch our relevance and credibility go down the drain, or we can own up to it and get to work at fixing it. The only way to get out of a remedial class is to work hard and catch up.



*Sitting Female*, ink drawing by Beth Mussay



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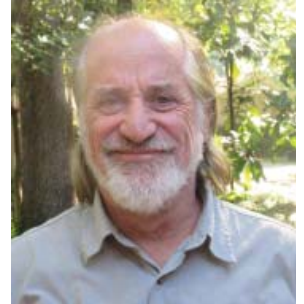
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Sharon works as a freelance editor and volunteers at Levine Children's Hospital and Theatre Charlotte. She and her husband Pete Moore have been Unitarian Universalists for 25 years and raised their three children at UUC. Her favorite activities include reading, traveling, and attending musical and performing arts-related events with her family.



### **Charles Pilkey**

Charles Pilkey is a former geologist turned sculptor, writer and illustrator. He grew up in the green hills of the Carolina Piedmont, where he was weaned on a steady diet of hard work and Sunday sermons. His sculptures lie scattered, as weeds are scattered, across three continents.



### **Chris Clark**

A UUC member since 1999, Chris Clark says he tries to take photographs of things other people might not notice. He writes software for a living.



### **Megan Van Fleet**

Megan has been a member of the UUC since 2008, with her husband Jim and their two kids. She enjoys gardening, cooking, and crafting.

### **Beth Mussay**

Beth Mussay is a painter and illustrator originally from Indianapolis. She feels proud and lucky to come from a family of compassionate, politically conscious musicians. Beth is inspired by the beauty and complexity of people and the natural world. She aspires to contribute to the global political and artistic conversation.



### **Manny Allen & Tawana Wilson-Allen**

Emmanuel and Tawana Wilson-Allen, have been married 40 years and have three children and seven grandchildren. Emmanuel retired last year after 30 years with IBM, 10 years owning a paper and party store, and 12 years with FedEx. Tawana is a political organizer and campaign consultant. She spent 22 years as a congressional liaison with the office of Congressman Mel Watt.



# SOUNDINGS

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