

NOVEMBER 2016

# SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist  
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

*Depth through reflection*

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*the leaves believe  
such letting go is love  
such love is faith  
such faith is grace  
such grace is god  
i agree with the leaves*

– LUCILLE CLIFTON

“THE LESSON OF THE FALLING LEAVES”

photograph by Phyllis Bertke



*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*

## FAITH AND THE EARTHQUAKE OF DOUBT

by Carol Gay



Carol Gay

I remember vividly the time and place when my most life-changing crisis of faith happened. I see myself on a Thursday night in October, just before Homecoming weekend during my junior year in college. I sit alone in my dorm room, trying to study. My mind wanders, though, and doubts about my Christian faith swirl

through my brain. My uncertainty is agony, because my whole background is at stake.

I was raised in a Southern Baptist family that was so actively involved that we attended every time the church was open – three or four times a week. I read the Bible every night and memorized scores of Bible verses. My family even had daily devotions at the breakfast table. This absorption in our religion and the support of our church community was, of course, very meaningful to me. And I rested in that sweet promise that after death I would be personally reunited with everyone I loved.

But some things I was told just didn't make sense to me. I wondered, "Who did Adam and Eve's children marry? Each other?" And "How could God send someone in Africa to Hell, who had never even heard about Jesus?" When I got to college my liberal professors raised compelling questions about the divinity of Jesus, and whether Jesus' resurrection even occurred. I also couldn't fathom how an all-loving, omnipotent God could allow so much suffering and injustice in the world.

My mounting doubts came to a crisis, and an earthquake started under the once sturdy wall of my faith. Bricks split, mortar cracked, and one brick too many fell out of the center. With great honesty and fear, I stepped out into the religious and spiritual unknown, as my faith in the religion of my childhood and teen years collapsed. That October night in my dorm room changed the rest of my life.

At first I wished I hadn't questioned so deeply that I doubted the comfortable faith I'd had for so long. I was in a vacuum with nothing to put in the place of that faith.

But I couldn't go back to those beliefs, even if I wanted to. I searched some, but couldn't find any religious substitute that worked for me, so for many years I was thoroughly secular.

I didn't know then that Unitarian Universalism, with its questioning perspective and lack of dogma, was what I needed. This faith has helped me to see that having my wall of Christian beliefs fall was not simply a turning away. It was also a turning toward, an affirmation of a broader humanism. I didn't imagine that some day I would find a more welcoming religion, one that challenges me like never before to commit to making this world better.

Now I still have both faith and doubt. I try to have faith in humanity, that the arc of history bends toward justice and goodness. That we humans are slowly progressing upward in our abilities to be more compassionate toward each other and toward the earth. Then I hear about wars, dictators, inertia, brutality beyond imagining, cruelty and selfishness. And I doubt our progress, and I fear for our future.

Sometimes I have doubts about myself, about my abilities, my commitment, and my physical and emotional strength to do significant things in life. Yet Unitarian Universalism helps me to have the faith that my life, as uncertain and mysterious as it may be, can be profoundly meaningful.

I know now that my doubt shapes me and my faith keeps me going.



photograph by Rocky Hendrick



## WHEN FAITH AND DOUBT LEAD TO CURIOSITY AND LOVE

by Josh Sarratt



Josh Sarratt

My personal experience with faith and doubt has to do with my religious beliefs that have evolved into my own unique fluid spirituality. I grew up a devout Christian, the faith of a majority of my family for generations. Growing up I thought Christianity was the only true faith and anyone or anything outside

of Christ's teachings was sinful.

This reality changed very quickly within the first few weeks of starting college. Where I attended college, it was mandatory for men and women to live in separate dorms their first two years, but by accident I was placed in a co-ed dorm that also housed all of the college's foreign students. My college roommate, a fellow American who was also accidentally placed in this dorm, turned out to be an atheist. Our first few days as roommates were interesting because it was my first real exposure to an atheist and his first close exposure to a devout Christian. The great thing is that we learned a lot from each other and talked often about what we did, or didn't, believe and why.

While living in the foreign student dorm, I became friends with students from other countries. Naturally some of them didn't share my faith and beliefs as they were raised in other faiths, or they were atheists. Up to this point in my life I believed in my mind and heart that if someone did not believe in Christ, they were sinners. But the students that I befriended were just as devout and faithful with their own beliefs as I was with mine. And they were some of the most friendly, open and honest people I had ever met – so I started to wonder how they could be sinners.

Confronted with such good people outside of my faith, I began to question the notion of sin within my faith. This then drove me to start questioning why I believed what I believed because what I grew up believing just didn't feel right anymore.

A great curiosity overtook me. I started to research other faiths, traditions and science trying to understand why I and others believed what we believed and why we held such reverence for the concept of faith itself. I began to study Gnosticism, Islam, Sufism, Judaism, Kabbalah, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Paganism, Shamanism – and even quantum physics. I enjoyed Gnosticism, Zen Buddhism and Shamanism so much that I began to practice them while still holding onto my Christian faith, a situation that – unsurprisingly – I felt the need to hide from my family. What I discovered is that all these varying paths led me to a life centered in love.



*LOVE at the Democratic Convention*  
photograph by Nancy Pierce

There is so much evidence in the world to support doubting everything that I see, hear and think I know. Oddly enough, this is just fine with me because I use this doubt to propel my curiosity – keeping an open mind and seeking to learn something new. To me, faith and doubt are part of my ever changing spiritual belief and practice of “love is everything and everything is love.” In a world with myriad paths to faith – as well as myriad ways to doubt – love is the one thing that I can always count on.



Jay Leach

"Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream." So begins John Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row*.

Among the curious characters depicted in that curious community is Henri the painter.

We learn immediately that he "was not French and his name was not Henri. Also, he was not really a painter."

While Henri is mostly posing as a painter, Steinbeck relates, "as a boat-builder he was superb." Henri lives aboard a boat that he is in the process of crafting, sharing the cramped cabin with a rotating array of romantic interests. Because it is in process, Henri's boat is not in the water but, rather, sitting "among the pine-trees on a lot Henri rented."

Of the project, Steinbeck writes:

The boat was sculpted rather than built. It was thirty-five feet long and its lines were in a constant state of flux. For a while it had a clipper bow and a fan-tail like a destroyer. Another time it looked vaguely like a caravel. Since Henri had no money, it sometimes took him months to find a plank or a piece of iron or a dozen brass screws. That was the way he wanted it, for Henri never wanted to finish his boat.

Henri the painter/not painter is a master boat-builder who is afraid of the water. All that effort – building and rebuilding, adding to and taking away, crafting and changing – is intentionally ongoing. His primary project in life is dominated by anxiety, a consuming caution that keeps him from ever actually venturing forth.

Steinbeck's maddening, endearing character Henri is portrayed as something of an absurdity. And yet, as is often the case with such figures in literature, because his utter contradictions are magnified, we may see something of ourselves in him.

Anxiety, caution, hesitation, reluctance to commit to something bold and challenging – who of us does not experience such things? We may not don a beret and pose as a painter, we may not literally create and undo something significant, but, in subtler ways we may embody similar traits.

We all know the truth in the simple maxim "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Impulsively embarking on momentous life changes is not admirable. Some restraint is obviously reasonable.

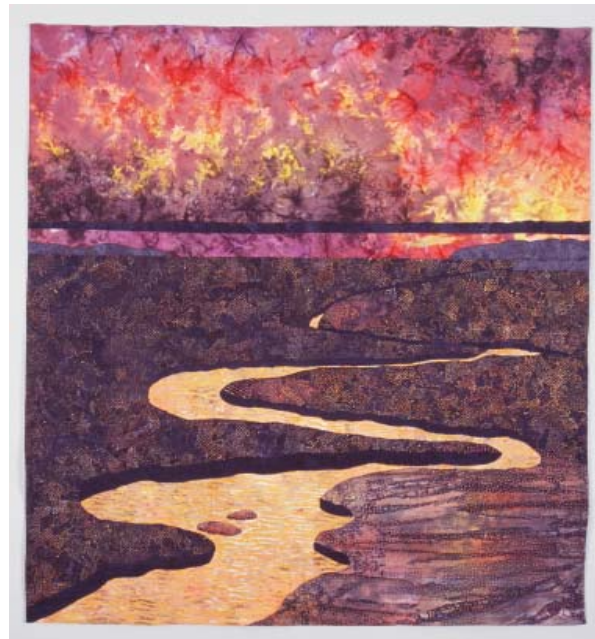
But, do you ever feel stuck in a cycle of overly cautious concern? Are you ever held back by inhibiting fear? Or, might Life be calling you to take some risk, to accept some challenge, to step boldly in some new direction trusting that, while the ultimate destination may remain

unclear, the launch should be delayed no longer?

What poet Lucille Clifton says of writing and of making art may be applied to the art of living: "You cannot play for safety and make art." She continues:

It's all right to be afraid. It's human to be afraid – there are fearful things in the world – so I think you almost *have* to be afraid, but if you draw back from what frightens you, then you may as well stop writing because, in a way, everything is frightening. Every morning you wake up to the unexpected, to what might kill you, but you have to do it anyway. Once you decide, "I will see clearly, I will speak clearly, I will say what I see," then you have to do it all.

Put it another way: there is no life of depth and meaning devoid of doubt. That's why life requires . . . faith.



*Crescendo*, art textile by Nancy Cook

*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 MAZE

by Belinda Parry

The entrance to the corn maze was eight feet tall on both sides.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” eleven-year-old Alesha asked.

“What if we can’t find our way out?” questioned ten-year-old Demian.

At that moment, a group of laughing teenagers burst out of the exit, which was about eight feet to the left. A girl said, “I thought we’d never get out of there!” Her friends agreed as they headed away from the maze toward the red barn on the hill.

“See?” Demian said, gesturing at the teens.

“But they did get out,” piped Demian’s sister Jess, who at eight was the youngest and smallest. She had been looking forward to this for weeks, and she was ready to go.

“Jess is right,” their dad said. “Let’s see what happens. Remember, stick together.”

“See, Dad! Even you think we could get lost. Otherwise, why would we have to stick together?” Demian said.

“At least we’ll be lost together!” Jess said, pulling Demian’s hand. Demian dragged his feet. He did not feel better, but he followed her.

They entered the maze. All around them, the corn was thick. They could hear other people – laughing, shouting--but they couldn’t see anyone else. The path ahead of them went for a few feet and turned either left or right. They chose the left path. The exit was to the left, they reasoned. After a few feet, that path turned right and dead-ended in a wall of cornstalks. They had to turn back.

The path to the right twisted and turned. At the next intersection, they turned right but had to turn back when they reached another dead end. Several times they made a wrong turn and had to turn back. Pretty soon they had turned around so many times that they forgot which direction the entrance and exit were.

“We’re lost!” Demian said, stopping at a place where the path made another T. “We keep going the wrong way! I feel like we’ve been here before!” He was frustrated and scared.

Alesha looked up. “If we could see the sky, maybe we could figure out which way we need to go.”

“How would that help?” Demian complained. “Can you tell direction from the sky? ‘Cause I can’t!”

Dad put his arm around Demian. “Calm down, kid. We’re –”

Demian interrupted, pointing at a place in the corn wall where someone had made a shortcut, “Look! Someone else was lost and made their own path. Let’s go that way!”

Jess peered through the broken stalks. “It doesn’t really go anywhere. Just to another path like this one. And I see feet!”

“Let’s stay on the path that’s already laid out,” Dad said. He squeezed Demian’s shoulder. “I trust that the farmers built this maze so that if we keep going, we will find the exit. They don’t want us living in their corn.”

“That would be cool!” Jess said. “But I think Dad’s right.”

Demian shrugged, uncertain.

Alesha said, “We saw people coming out...”

“Come on, Demian!” Jess whined. “There are donuts in the barn.”

They started walking again. After several wrong turns and even more right turns, they finally emerged into the sunlight.

“Let’s do it again!” Jess said.

Demian hesitated, then said, “Yeah!”

But their father said, “I want a donut,” and began the climb to the barn.

### Questions:

- Can you think of a time when you started something you weren’t sure you could finish?
- Does it help to be with people you trust when you try something scary or new?
- What helps you have trust in yourself?
- What might make you doubt your decisions?





*October II*, art textile by Nancy Cook

### *Fall Garden*

Working my way through  
 the morning's measure of chores  
 I snip spent blooms  
 papery petals wrapping seed pods.

Hidden among thick stems  
 leaning this way and that  
 one late sunny blossom surprises.

I expect no prediction  
 no promise  
 accept the gift  
 of now

as if a search  
 had gone on so long  
 I had forgotten  
 what I was looking for  
 forgotten I was looking.

– Doris Thomas Browder

### *Please Have Your Boarding Pass Ready*

Births, Deaths, Arrivals, Departures,  
 On Interstellar Spaceport Earth,  
 On the way to becoming,  
 On the way to being,  
 An instrument,  
 Finely tuned,  
 As in you  
 And  
 I.

– Joe Spencer (2015, 2016)



*Out of This Word*, digital art by Liza Parks



painting by Edie Gelber-Beechler

### *Faith & Doubt*

Those,  
(who do not doubt)  
do not know true faith.

For,  
how can joy be known,  
when one has never felt sad?

Courage?  
When one has never felt fear?

Though none of these are ever seen,  
they are felt with certainty.

Faith,  
(nor doubt)  
is a full spectrum,  
a full range of color.

However,  
they feed each other and grow together,  
spiraling ever bigger and bigger.

--Emily Robinson

## 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: December – Peace; January – The Common/Greater Good; February – Commitment; March – Spirituality. 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 UUC professional staff – will review all submissions and contact the authors regarding suitability for publication.

Please send submissions to  
[uucc@uuccharlotte.org](mailto:uucc@uuccharlotte.org)



*No Two Snowflakes*, photograph by Phyllis Bertke

## FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

*Below you will find a list of books, reflections, movies, lectures and much more for further engagement on the subject of Faith/Doubt*

### BOOKS:

#### Adult

*The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*, by Reeve Robert Brenner, 1997

*In a Dark Wood: Journeys to Faith and Doubt*, edited by Linda Jones and Sophie Stanes, 2004

*Faith and Doubt: An Anthology of Poems*, edited by Patrice Vecchione, 2007

*The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*, edited by Bob Abernethy, 2007

*Fresh Air: Faith, Reason and Doubt*, by Terry Gross, 2008

*Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt*, by Richard Holloway, 2012

*Against Dogmatism: Dwelling in Faith and Doubt*, by Madhuri M. Yadlapati, 2013

*The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty*, Stephen Batchelor, 2015

*Wrestling With God: Stories of Doubt and Faith*, by Barbara Falconer Newhall, 2015

#### Preschool/ Early Elementary

*The Lion and the Mouse- Aesop's Fable*

#### Older Elementary

*Polar Express*, by Chris Van Allsburg, 1985

*Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?*, by Sandy Lynne Holman, 1998

*Mr. Lincoln's Way*, by Patricia Polacco, 2001

*The Three Hard Questions (Based on a story by Leo Tolstoy)*, by Jon J. Muth, 2002

*Busing Brewster*, by Richard Michelson, 2010

#### Teens

*Philosophy for Teens: Questioning Life's Big Ideas*, by Sharon Kaye and Paul Thomson, 2006

*Lord of the Rings, Fellowship of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien

### MOVIES:

*Agnes of God*, 1985 (PG-13)

*Contact*, 1997 (PG)

*Oh Brother, Where Are Thou?*, 2000 (PG-13)

*A Beautiful Mind*, 2001 (PG-13)

*Signs*, 2002 (PG-13)

*As It Is in Heaven*, 2004 (Swedish)

*Doubt*, 2008 (PG-13)

*The Blind Side*, 2009 (PG-13)

*Of Gods and Men*, 2010 (PG-13)

*Soul Surfer*, 2011 (PG)

*Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, 2011 (PG-13)

*Life of Pi*, 2012 (PG)

*The Letters*, 2015 (PG)

### VIDEOS:

Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero, 2002, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/video/2120639608>



**Phyllis Bertke**

Phyllis has been a passionate amateur photographer since she discovered that experiences are richer if she has a camera nearby, even if she's not taking pictures. Her camera helps keep her present in the smallest of moments.



Phyllis Bertke

*Portfolios: The Natural World, 2012.* Two of her quilts can be seen in 500 Art Quilts. She was a 2004 Summer Affiliate Artist at the McColl Center for Visual Arts.

**Edie Gelber Beechler**

"For me, painting is all about color. Mixing colors, choosing just the right ones, excites me. For instance, if I've put a tiny line of blue somewhere where it just has to be, and it makes that one-inch section perfect, then I'm thrilled – even if the rest of the piece doesn't work that well! Painting reinforces my spiritual path when it takes me out of time. All I know is the moment, the canvas, the paint, the brushstroke. That's all that matters."



Edie Gelber Beechler  
photographed by Elsa Lafferty



Doris Thomas Browder

**Doris Thomas Browder**

A South Carolina native, Doris Browder came to the UUC in 1970 from Houston, TX. Doris has taken poetry courses from Susan Ludvigson, Diana Pinckney, and most recently (for the last 10 years) from the incomparable Anthony S. Abbott, retired Davidson professor. Her chapbook, *Searching for Maypops*, was published in 2015

by Finishing Line Press and is available in the church bookstore.

**Rocky Hendrick**

"I first started taking photos of race cars in the early 70's. After my first spectator race at Road Atlanta, I was hooked. I purchased a Minolta X-700 35mm camera and never stopped. Now, that I am retired I enjoy capturing moments. The photo in this issue was taken around 6:20 a.m. outside of Blowing Rock, North Carolina. I found it to be very peaceful just being out and being able to witness one of nature's miracles. Sometimes life gets in the way and don't see the beauty. It helps to heal the spirit, to be able to take in Mother Nature's entire splendor."



Rocky Hendrick

**Nancy Cook**

Nancy has been working in the textile medium since 1994. Her art is in public and private collections throughout the USA and she has won numerous awards. She has exhibited in over 50 juried, invitational and traveling exhibits on five continents and the USA. Cook's art textiles are widely published. Martha Seilman selected her as a featured artist in *Art Quilt*



Nancy Cook

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



Liza Park

**Liza Park**

"I use art as an outlet for self-expression and a way to convey emotions that can't be voiced. Typically I try and create work that illustrates a subliminal message; whether it be personal, concerning the world around me, or simply just a way to get my ideas out onto a canvas. Though I have a strong

foundation with traditional art, I've been experimenting with digital art (using programs such as Photoshop, SAI, or GIMP.) Art is both a calling and a passion of mine."



Emily Robinson

**Emily Robinson**

"I have just begun my sophomore year at East Mecklenburg High School. I enjoy horseback riding, art and of course, writing poetry. I have written poems for the UCC on multiple occasions including both Middle and High School services. Outside of the church, I have written poems for school and won honorable mention in a state wide poetry contest. I hope you enjoy!"

**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.



Nancy Pierce

**Joe Spencer**

"I discovered photography at about age 12 and was happy recording the external world of things, animals and people — which heightened my appreciation of all things. In college I saw much that could not be adequately captured in a photograph and so, began to write essays. Poetry sprang from that — my attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the moment than an image alone might suggest. A poem that gets the reader's "Aha" — seeing Life through his better, inner light (as writing the poem has done for me) is very fulfilling. My poetry attempts to capture "Poetic moments" that most of us have experienced, but may not have photographed or wrote about."



Joe Spencer

# SOUNDINGS

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MONDAY-FRIDAY, 9 AM - 5 PM

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