

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2018

# SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist  
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

*Depth through reflection*

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*\*This issue of Soundings features artwork by our member Elaine Connors. See page 9 for more information about Elaine and her artwork.*



*Poem to the Earth, painting by Elaine Connors\**

*Our policies, programming and practices reflect an integrated understanding and experience of spiritual, societal and environmental transformation.*

—FROM THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE ENDS STATEMENTS,  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, FALL 2017



**The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte:** *Challenged by our liberating faith, we discover deeper spiritual meaning, nurture loving community, cultivate courageous connections, and partner in the work of justice.*

## A NEW ROUND OF LISTENING AND LEARNING

by Jay Leach



If you had ventured past the door to the Bernstein Room on recent Tuesday evenings, you may have been surprised to overhear discussions of gentrification in Charlotte, colonial heresy trials, our city's gaping opportunity chasm, the restrictive ethic of the *New England Primer*, land distribution, eighteenth-century British naturalization laws, indentured servitude among

early colonists, or heteronormativity in the Puritan moral code.

On other evenings, you might have heard empaneled voices speaking to groups of our members and others about the refugee experience in Charlotte, LGBTQ issues in Mecklenburg County, immigration resettlement in our area, or trans identity and experience. Or, it may have been the sound of a film about climate change or exploring the life of an intersectional civil rights heroine.

What accounts for such a wide and rich range of topics? And what does all of this have to do with our liberating faith?

We're now months into a new round of "listening and learning." After our initial focus in the 2017 – 2018 congregational year on Environmental and Racial Justice, we've added additional focus this year on Cultural and Economic Justice.

All of this reflects our effort to answer our Board of Trustee's challenging "Call to Action" and to embody the ambitious Vision and Mission approved by our members in recent Congregational Conversations.

We continue this year with the premise that in order to most effectively engage in the work of transformation beyond our walls, we must first spend time within these walls learning about how systems perpetuating injustice have come into being and about how some on the front lines are now attempting to challenge such systems.

We recognize that many in our congregation are anxious to act, to do, to engage, to "get on with it." And, on other fronts, the groundwork is being laid for opportunities for supportive work with new partners in the work of Environmental and Racial Justice. However, we're slowly growing in our awareness that much of the busyness and activity we see in our city and region only serves to perpetuate systems of injustice. And so, dozens of us are working to deepen our understanding and to inform ourselves for the days that lie ahead.

This issue of *Soundings* offers an overview of the experience that some of us are having this year whether in our Children and Youth Religious Education program, our Adult Religious Education and Spiritual Development offerings, or in one of our two Core Groups.



*The Mystery of Life*, mixed media art by Elaine Connors

For those who continue to wonder what we are about as a congregation, a careful reading of these pages will offer a deepened understanding of where much of our energy and effort is going. To be sure, we're continuing every week to nurture a loving community, reaching out in times of need, offering Discovery Circles, services, discussion groups and other ways for members to connect and care. We're continuing to offer services, a few on Cultural and

Economic Justice, many more on other topics of interest and concern. We're continuing to dance on occasion and to meet and talk over coffee often. And, were offering a whole new approach to Family Ministry this year.

So, these pages reflect only a portion of the work supported by our pledging members, guided by the efforts of our Teams and professional staff, envisioned and monitored by our Board.

Our hope is that this interim report of this year's focus will inspire more of us to get involved, to take advantage of rich offerings in the coming year, to show up more regularly, to listen, learn and care.

## CHANNELING CONCERN AND OUTRAGE

by Sharon Baker



Refugees. Immigrants. Dreamers. Asylum seekers. Separated families. Children living in cages. Every day, my concern and outrage grow as I read or hear yet another story about how cruel the current administration's policies and rhetoric are toward people who were not born here. In

my desire to learn more about what's been happening—and possibly discover opportunities to help—I attended the three-part Immigration Series recently held at UUC and sponsored by the Adult Religious Education and Spiritual Development team, of which I am a member.

The first session, led by Marsha Hirsch, executive director of Carolina Refugee Settlement Agency (CRSA), gave me a better appreciation for the hardships refugees face and the hoops they must go through to enter the United States. By definition, refugees are people who flee their home country (i.e., Syria, Sudan, Bhutan) to escape war, political or religious oppression, or natural disasters. They resettle in refugee camps and register for refugee status with the United Nations.

I learned that refugees must go through an arduous 20-step screening process to gain entry into the United States, which can take years. Once refugee status is granted, refugees and their families are transported to a U.S. city and connected with agencies like CRSA, which provide eight months of services, such as financial aid, interpreters, and school and job placement. At the end of eight months, refugees must be self-sufficient. Refugees do have a path to U.S. citizenship—they receive a green card within a year of arrival and can apply for naturalization within five years. Under the Trump administration, the number of refugees arriving in Charlotte has dropped dramatically.

In the second session, Becca O'Neill, an immigration lawyer and director of the Immigrant Justice Program at the Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy, helped me understand the difficulties immigrants, including unaccompanied children, face upon arrival in the United States. Most immigrants flee their home countries to escape gang violence and dire economic conditions and

undertake treacherous journeys to reach the U.S. border. Upon arrival, they can apply for asylum to remain in the United States legally and must present their cases in court. In Charlotte's Immigration Court, one of the country's harshest, judges typically deny up to 90% of asylum applications.

In the series' third session, I heard about a program specifically designed to help children cope with living in an unfamiliar country. ourBRIDGE for kids is an afterschool nonprofit organization for elementary and middle school-aged children of immigrants and refugees. Salma Villarreal, community engagement coordinator, talked about the academic, literacy, and socio-emotional support the program offers these children, and shared ways in which people could help.

Attending this series has led me to reflect more deeply on my own family history. My paternal great-grandparents immigrated (separately) to the United States from Poland in 1890. My grandfather and his five siblings were born in Buffalo, New York and were often ridiculed and discriminated against because of their Polish name (Juchnowski). My grandfather became so frustrated at being denied employment solely because of his last name that, when he was in his 30s, he legally changed it to "Baker," a vocation he had learned from his father.

However, my ancestors never had to worry about being deported. Once they moved to the United States, they knew they were safe. Historically, that has not always been true for immigrants in this country. These days, the political environment is especially hostile toward non-white immigrants, creating fear and anguish within that community. That's wrong and deeply upsetting. And I'm ready to channel my concern and outrage into action.



*Contentment*, painting by Elaine Connors



## RESPONDING WITH COMPASSION

by Kathleen Carpenter



This year, our children and youth are diving deep into the issues of cultural and economic justice along with our adults. They are hearing stories, taking field trips, examining photographs, culling books, playing games, listening to experts, writing prayers, leading workshops,

and processing, processing, processing.

Our youngest children are responding with compassion and curiosity to their weekly stories. Our elementary children are reflecting on how qualities of our Unitarian Universalist faith—i.e. integrity, courage, love—can be tools for addressing social injustice. Our Middle and High School youth are examining their privileges and biases as they imagine their role in creating a more just society. At all levels, there is constant reference to this work as soul work, relational work, the work of Unitarian Universalism, to create a sense of belonging to something bigger, that we are in this together as friends and conspirators for justice.

In this issue of *Soundings*, we'll take a look at two age groups: our Kindergarten/1st graders and our high school youth.

Our Kindergarten/1st-graders began the year with a focus on poverty. While few six-year-olds can grasp abstract concepts, there are many picture books about justice issues that fit well with our SpiritPlay story-telling model. Below, one of the K/1st teachers shares her observations on the children's reactions to some of the stories heard so far:

I remember one [child] . . . retelling a story that I had read in class a couple of weeks prior . . . about a new neighbor moving in who was different. . . This child recounted the story perfectly and really seemed to grasp the message. I think it shows how these stories are . . . putting a narrative behind the people they pass on the street and opening their minds.

There was another story that involved mental illness and homelessness. One of the children shared that their grandmother was/had been

homeless because of mental illness. That was a HUGE share and she just came right out with it. That was beneficial for us all, because we realized how close this issue is to us. It also helped to normalize something that seems so alien to many.

The most recent story I read in class was about Thursdays being hard for a family who get a paycheck every Friday. It introduced them to something they

had never considered: having to put off a reward . . . because there was no money to spend. They learned the importance of being patient and being grateful for the love we receive, because that is the real gift.

At the other end of the age spectrum, our high-schoolers have been discussing immigration. One Sunday was spent at a Doctors Without Borders exhibit on refugees. Below, two of our youth reflect on how their participation impacted their views on immigration:

Most of the time when we hear about immigration on the news, we only hear the policy side, rarely from refugees themselves or those who have assisted refugees. This experience gave me a sense of why it is so difficult to solve the refugee crisis: the people making decisions are rarely those that have experienced it . . . and [it] brought up a lot of questions for me: What are the most valuable things in my life? Should our goal be to shelter others or to stop the violence that causes a need to shelter others? How can we “solve” immigration without fully understanding the issues?

The next issue of *Soundings* will highlight our Elementary classes, as the children gain a more focused understanding of economic and cultural injustice through the use of stories, special guests, and hands on projects.



Lakeview, painting by Elaine Connors

## LISTEN BEFORE YOU LEAP

by Suzanne Clements



When I saw there was a Cultural Justice Core Group forming, I was intrigued. I had been considering new ways to connect in our congregation, while also wanting a way to explore my role in the larger social justice landscape.

Cultural Justice is a topic that has at times created

uneasy feelings within me. I recently read an article in *The Atlantic* entitled “The Birth of a New Aristocracy” and I wondered how I have both benefited from and perpetuated some of the things I found most disturbing in the article. By participating in the Cultural Justice Core Group, I hope to face how decisions and choices I’ve made have impacted my community. Is there a byproduct of my decisions that contributes to the systemic imbalance? How do I reconcile acknowledging my privilege while also remaining proud of the hard work and sacrifice to create the life I have?

I previously sat on a Multicultural Advisory board for six years. The majority of the work done in this group was approached with positive intent. My frustration was that it was decidedly left leaning and there was a general intolerance for opinions that skewed to the right. It seemed to me that the leadership of this task force felt the measurement of their success was in changing the opinions of those to the right, without a desire to understand their perspective more. I strive to define the difference between what I find intolerable and what is a different valid opinion. I continue to grapple with trying to tolerate the intolerant, and who gets to define the terms.

During our first meeting our group took the time to really explore the meaning of the words culture and justice. This exploration makes me want to be more deliberate with my own language. I find that it’s easier to point out when others speak in a way I find offensive than it is to be sensitive to my personal language choices. I thought about how my children



*Organica #13*, painting by Elaine Connors

display a fluency when talking about social issues that doesn’t come easily to me. I often ask them to define their terms and to explain acronyms. I admire how natural it is for them to view issues on a spectrum, while I find my tendency is to boil things down to binary choices of right or wrong, left or right.

When I first expressed interest in this group I had goals of personal growth and individual change, but I now hope to learn how to shine a light on systemic injustice and how to amplify the voices and concerns of those most directly impacted. I have much more work to do listening and learning. As a professional facilitator I was trained to get two sides to come to agreements and reach beneficial conclusions. I want to learn how to be a good ally and understand and listen more than assuming I know enough to speak on someone else’s behalf. I look forward to the continued work of this group and to help extend what I learn to the greater congregation as we continue to work toward our vision and mission goals.

## BE CURIOUS, BE VERY CURIOUS

by Jinny Sullivan



I have enthusiastically joined the Cultural Justice Core Group because I am curious. I actually thought I did not have a culture. Then, I began to understand that my culture was unconscious and undefined. I had used it without understanding it. My path was smoothed and broadened simply by my birth alone because I am

white and middle class.

My first task was to understand oppression. Through our discussion of Iris Marion Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression,” I began to understand oppression as a cultural phenomenon. We humans seem to beat each other up, even over minor cultural differences. My question now has become: “Why do we do this to each other? Do we have some kind of primordial need to be better than someone else?”

Well, back to “The Five Faces.” They are: Exploitation, Marginalization, Powerlessness, Cultural Dominance, and Violence. I found this explanation very logical and evident in what I have seen over the years. With exploitation, one group can benefit financially by not paying people of another culture what they are really worth. Perfect planning for the capitalistic system!

Marginalizing people means we might not have to associate with them in our daily lives. We can even make up myths about them spoiling our neighborhoods, contaminating our schools, or creating crime waves. Anything to create distance, and thus, of course unfamiliarity, making them even more strange and scary.

Powerlessness excludes “those people” from the power to participate in decisions over their lives, in the workplace, in government, and other sources of power in our culture.

Cultural dominance states that the white, middle class culture is the “right” way. Minority cultures get defined as deviant or exotic. It also forces individuals

of a minority culture as representative of that whole group of people. Talk about pressure!

The last is violence, and I am well aware that the dominant culture is represented by law enforcement, government policies related to mass incarceration, and laws which exclude refugees and immigrants. Violence toward the marginalized and powerless is all too frequent in our daily newscasts.

I still have a lot to learn, and I am grateful for the opportunity to learn it in my congregation, where I expect to follow my learning with some concrete ways to change the narrative, the actions, and the culture going forward.



*Simple Pleasures #6*, mixed media art by Elaine Connors



## ENGAGE WITH THE PRIVILEGE

by Melanie Greely



This autumn, I stepped out of my comfort zone to join the Economic Justice Core Group. I was nervous about this choice not only because I know little-to-nothing about economics, but because joining a group of passionate, intelligent adults opens a person to vulnerability in knowledge and acceptance. It was a leap I was able to make only when I remembered something I had read in an

article in *Psychology Today*: “We cannot run away from having privilege once we have it. The only choice . . . we have is how we engage with the privilege. . . . [One way] of engaging . . . is a deep and conscious shift from possessing to stewarding privilege.” I’ve learned enough to know that I have—and benefit from—privilege, but I am woefully inept at stewarding my privilege. Thus, I joined a core group.

I chose the Economic Justice Core Group partly because I know so little about economics. Knowing that I have economic privilege, but lacking an understanding of systemic inequities, leaves little room to steward. My role as steward is to clearly understand what that privilege is, and how to engage it purposefully. I would unknowingly perpetuate systemic injustice if I expressed only denial and guilt. If, instead, I understand the systems in place—what resources I have thanks to my privilege—I might know better how to leverage those resources for the betterment of all. Add to that my own two economically privileged children,

desperate for a role model of the values learned in Children and Youth Religious Education, and I was left with no option but to join this group.

More profoundly, however, my life’s passion is working towards a more peaceful world through education. The school system, education in general, and social capital are so intimately tied to wealth and upward mobility that without economic justice, there can be no justice in education. Public school should be a place where all children, regardless of their background, have access to quality instruction, practical skills, and caring adults. These environments should be a place where teachers and administrators can leverage resources to reach all children in a way that allows those children to see their own potential and gain the skills needed to reach it. Schools should not be establishments that perpetuate systemic injustices, but great equalizers for the next generation.



*Simple Pleasures #12*, mixed media art by Elaine Connors

My hopes for my experience in the core group are wide and varied. Aside from the assigned texts, I have already been exposed to a plethora of informational pieces that have laid a strong foundation for future work. Additionally, I’ll be reading the book *Dream Hoarders*, by Richard Reeves, and sharing my findings with the group. Through the readings and videos, I hope to get a clear picture of what our local and national injustices look like. Through group conversations, I hope to learn how to steward my own privilege to help balance these injustices.

And through my participation, I hope to model for my children, my students, and other church members an active engagement with UU Principles.

## THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

by David Reynolds



When our minister, Jay Leach, presented the vision and framework for how the various core groups would engage with the congregation and the outside community, it piqued my interest. Having a deliberate approach to how these teams learn in a group setting before engaging in outside activities in the community

was an important factor in choosing to raise my hand to give my time to the effort. In September I volunteered to join the Economic Justice Core Group, and I'm excited about sharing knowledge learned including the intersectionality of economic with racial, environmental and cultural justice.

Economic justice is a topic that resonated with me personally as a native of Charlotte. In recent years, Charlotte has been put in the national spotlight as a place where if you are born here in poverty, you are least likely in comparison with 49 other metropolitan areas to get out of poverty. The opportunity to learn more about the macro and micro factors that contribute to this ranking is something I'm really thankful for. The more that I'm able to learn about this topic, the more empowered I feel to have meaningful conversations not only with people in the congregation but also with elected officials and policy makers.

The first two meetings of our core group have been great! Everyone brings a different perspective to the table with personal and professional experience. Being amongst a group of people who have chosen to take the extra time out of their lives to learn more

about the topic and how to have a positive impact in our community is powerful. Our first assignment was to learn more about the 10 principles in Noam Chomsky's work: *Requiem for the American Dream*. Two of those principles were more relevant in my experience. The "reduction of democracy" principle is alive and well as our state continues to operate under gerrymandered districts that support one group of people over another. The "run the regulators" principle is something I've seen in practice in my experience working for several financial institutions and seeing multiple Presidential administrations over the years install revolving doors between corporate executives and leadership positions within government agencies.



*The Calm in the Storm*, mixed media art by Elaine Connors

Everyone in the group has also chosen to read at least one book around the topic of economic justice. My selections are: *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* by Anand Giridharadas and *Squeezed: Why Our Families Can't Afford America* by Alissa Quart. My hope for the experience with the Economic Justice Core Group is that we will maintain our energy to learn and

make meaningful connections with members that we don't know and deepen the connections with others that we do. I also hope to gain some perspective on my own economic status and how choices I make could impact others. The formation of these core groups shows me that this congregation is taking action that aligns with our bold mission statement and I'm excited about all of the learning and growth as a result.



## THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS:

### Sharon Baker

Sharon and her husband, Pete Moore, have been Unitarian Universalists for more than 25 years and raised their three children at UUCC. She inherited her Polish grandfather's love of baking and honors his memory each Christmas season by using his rolling pin to make cookies based on his family recipe. Sharon works as a freelance editor, sings in the UUCC choir, volunteers at Levine Children's Hospital and Theatre Charlotte, and travels with her family as often as possible.



### Elaine Connors

Some years ago, Elaine received a cancer diagnosis. On the other side of the fear and shock, she noticed that there was a part of her that was deeply at peace. She called it a state of "connected awareness." She started paying attention and noticed that when she was in this state of awareness that everything was all right. She has tried to capture the feeling of that state of awareness in her artwork. If she inspires in the viewer "a hint or an echo of their own remembering, in even the slightest degree," she believes she has done her job.



### Suzanne Clements

Suzanne Clements was introduced to the UUCC when her children attended Open Door School. She has taught Children and Youth Religious Education, facilitated Our Whole Lives, chaired the Open Door Council and served on the recent Minister Search Team. She has been married to Thad

Clements for 23 years and they take continued delight in their children, Grace and Aidan.



### David Reynolds

David Reynolds quickly got involved in the life of the UUCC upon joining a few years ago. Most of you have seen him serving coffee in Freeman Hall on Sundays, but some of you also may have seen him participating in our Readers' Theatre production, or spent time with him at his home for our Summer Suppers' group. David now serves on our Board of Trustees.

### Melanie Greely

Melanie has been attending the UUCC since 2008. As a public educator, her passion is advocating for the inherent worth and dignity of all children. She has two children of her own, ages 7 and 4, who love our Children and Youth Religious Education Program and the Open Door School.



### Jinny Sullivan

Jinny has been a Unitarian Universalist since 1963, but not continuously. After moving to Charlotte from Ohio in 1981, she spent 25 years at Myers Park Baptist before returning to UUCC. She is a retired nurse with teaching and a therapy practice in her latter career years. Now, she is a professional volunteer and substitute teacher. She is a grandmother to four, great-grandmother to three, and great-great grandmother to one.



# SOUNDINGS

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