

WINTER 2019

SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

Depth through reflection

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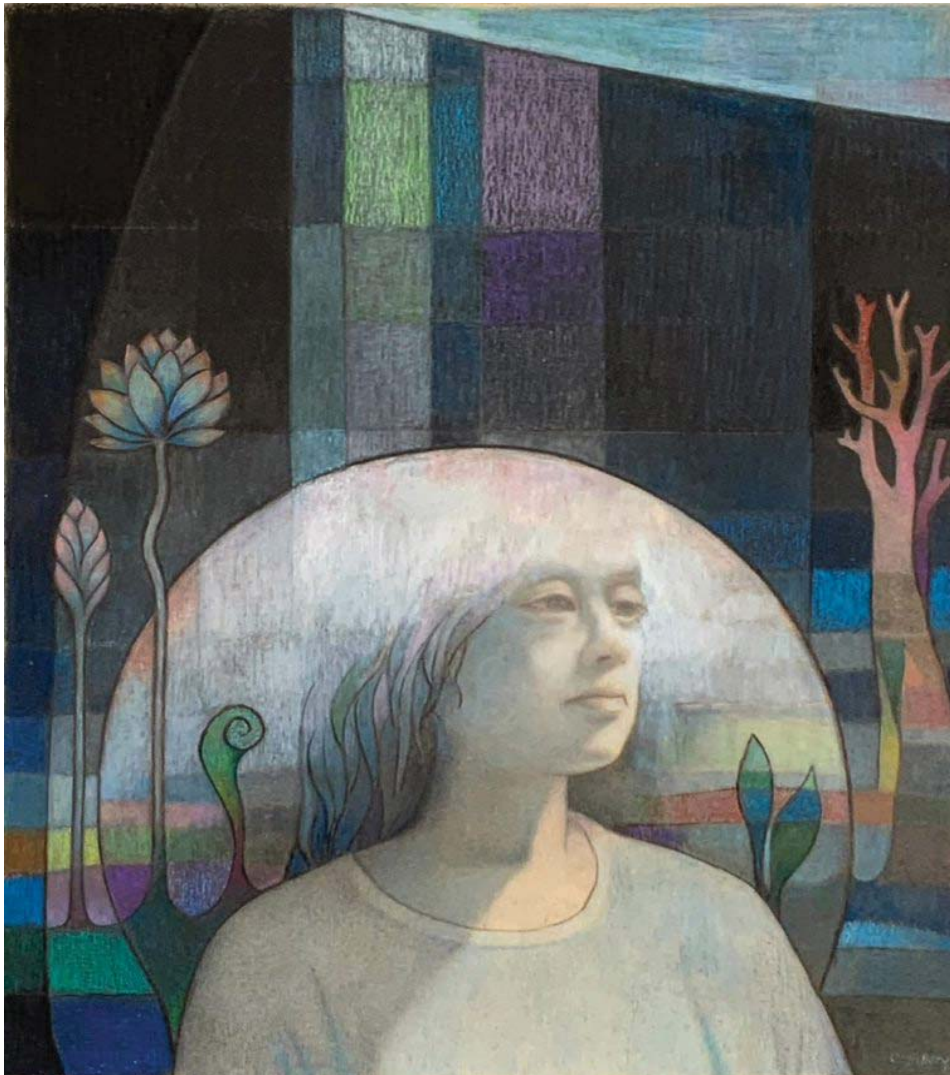
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"Moon Garden," color pencils and pastels image by Charles Pilkey

"... spirituality refers to the longing for deeper and more meaningful relationships with others and with the natural world and to that dimension of our lives that deals with values, truth, meaning, love, integrity, joy and happiness."

—FROM *RELIGIOUS HUMANISM* BY WILLIAM R. MURRY



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.

EXPLORING AND INTEGRATING OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE SPIRITUALITY

by Eve Stevens, Minister



On a Sunday in mid-September, I had the opportunity to be with our high school youth to begin contemplating our theme for this congregational year: “What We Hold Most Dear: Exploring and Integrating Our Individual and Collective Spirituality.” We began by exploring what we mean by spiritual. Without giving any further definition or explanation, I asked everyone to

reflect on a *spiritual* experience they’d had.

One by one we shared stories: laying outdoors on the grass talking with a few good friends in the middle of the night; hiking for days without speaking; laughing uncontrollably with a sibling; mourning a beloved friend with an auditorium full of classmates; noticing the beauty of a dragonfly; the comforting routine of family dinner.

We made a list of words and phrases that described these experiences: beauty, wow, solitude, surrounded by life, powerful, mundane, connected without words, fully present, spontaneous joy. . . .

We determined that when an experience is *spiritual* it involves getting in touch with/giving thanks for/celebrating/committing more deeply to what we hold most dear.

When we began discussing this year’s theme as a staff, Jay shared a quote by religious humanist, William R. Murry: “. . . spirituality refers to the longing for deeper and more meaningful relationships with others and with the natural world and to that dimension of our lives that deals with values, truth, meaning, love, integrity, joy and happiness.”

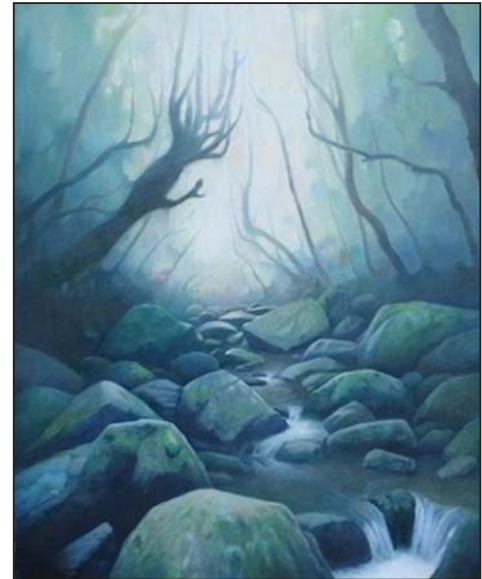
So much of our spiritual life, individually and collectively, involves paying closer attention to the longing Murry names. Longing connects our inner world with the outer world. Longing is the spiritual hunger that sets us in motion in search of community, justice and beauty.

This congregational year, as a staff, we are focused on how to create opportunities, through worship and programming for all ages, that allow us to connect,

individually and collectively, with our deepest longing.

The pages that follow provide reflections from members of our congregation who have already experienced a number of these offerings—exploring individual spiritual practices that build resilience and deepen our sense of wonder and gratitude, as well as opportunities to explore our collective longing as a people of faith.

Over the past few years, as a congregation, we have given our collective longing a number of names: Racial Justice, Environmental Justice, Cultural Justice, and Economic Justice. This collective longing has led us into the work of unlearning and relearning our own country’s history and reframing our understanding of the world. As you’ll read, participants in our Core Groups continue to



“The Light in the Forest”
painting by Charles Pilkey

unveil the ways our society has been set up to protect and empower those with the most privilege, exacting the cost from the lives of the oppressed and the environment.

As a people of faith, we long for a world in which our education, health, and legal systems, among others, help nurture, sustain and protect the worth of all human life. We long for a world in which all people have clean water to drink and clean air to breathe.

Our congregation is a community of spiritual seekers—people in awe of their interdependence with all existence; people pausing to make meaning from their experiences; people longing to channel their creativity and energy into lives of compassion and justice.

As this congregational year continues to unfold, we hope your experiences here inspire you to grow in your understanding of what you hold most dear and deepen your reverence for what brings you alive, and that you commit to go where your heart’s longing is leading you.

Love, Eve

SPIRITUALITY: A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS

by Martha Kniseley



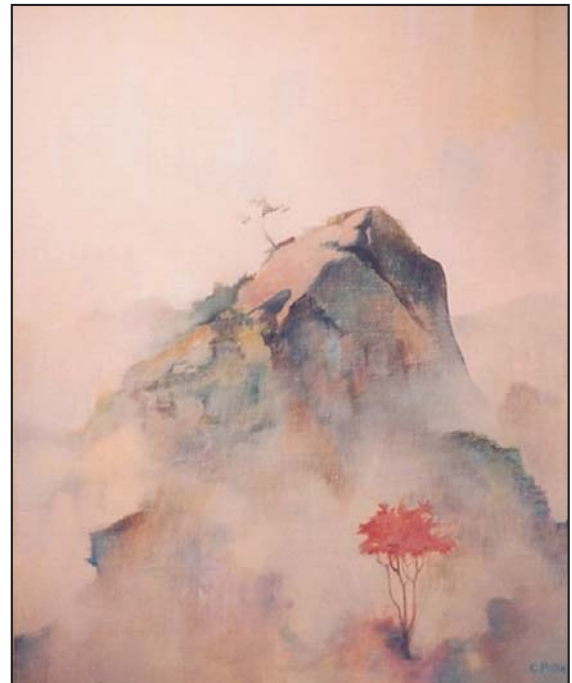
Last spring, our minister Jay Leach led us in a one-session class about Activism and Spirituality. He said that “spirituality has to do with the journey into the depths.” In response to our theme of Individual and Collective Spirituality, the Adult Religious Education/

Spiritual Development (ARESD) Team continued to offer programming this year to help us go deeper as we explore “what we give our hearts to.”

I asked our members who have enrolled in some of the classes how their experiences have helped inform or influence their spiritual journey. I referred to the fall classes such as Jay’s one session class on “A Snapshot of Religious Humanist Spirituality”; our minister Eve Stevens’ course on “Exploring the Seven Principles”; the discussion of the Henry Louis Gates’ four-part series on Reconstruction facilitated by Sharon Baker and Tom Cole; and the Reversing Runaway Inequality workshop held over two days in November, facilitated by Sam Singer and Shannon Maples.

In the first session of “A Snapshot of Religious Humanist Spirituality,” Jay credited author William R. Murry, suggesting that “spirituality refers to the longing for deeper and more meaningful relationships with others and with the natural world and to that dimension of our lives that deals with values, truth, meaning, love, integrity, joy and happiness. It has to do with why and how we live. . . . It is a way of being rather than a way of knowing.” One participant exclaimed, “I found that this is a daily lifestyle, not just a separate belief system. It encompasses taking daily action therefore it is deed not creed mentality.” The same participant discovered in Eve’s “Exploring the Seven Principles” that “these too are actions to be fulfilled in the moment not to be used to fix the past. They help us as Unitarian Universalists to build a better future and to seize the day. Again, this class taught me that spirituality, as well as our Principles, is a way of living to increase our self-awareness of our daily routines and our connection with each other in the web of life.”

I found that addressing the question of spirituality directly is not easy. That doesn’t mean that we’re not going deep or that we don’t experience the connection between societal, environmental and spiritual transformation. Rather, our members express their experience of spirituality in varying forms. When asked, “In what way did this course enhance your spiritual development?” participants from the Reconstruction series had mixed responses. While one admitted that the course made them “aware of how un-involved they are in racial justice and it made them want to be more reflective—to dig deeper.” Another reflected that it “deepened compassion, increased interest in acting now to further racial justice and equity.”



“Yama,” painting by Charles Pilkey

The recent training Reversing Runaway Inequality drew these reactions from its participants:

- “These workshops give us the grounding we need in order to be front-line advocates for Intersectional Justice. They give us facts to back up our passion!”
- The workshop experience “enforced my value that, though we all have specific values, interests and preferences, trying to evaluate ideas by what is best for the ‘greater good’ and being able to re-evaluate these ideas from time to time is important.”

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EXPLORATORY FUN WITH OUR KIDS!

by Kathleen Carpenter



Several years ago, one of our members shared her personal credo as part of our congregation's series that asks members to consider, "to what do I give my heart." As a mother of very young children, she spoke about the magic of that age, an age where children live in an almost constant state of

wonder. She expressed her joy and gratitude for the gift of being a part of their lives when everything is new and exciting, and amazing experiences happen almost daily. It's almost impossible, she observed, to take a walk with a child and not encounter a range of mysteries: from gravity, to life cycles, to the amazing diversity of life.

The experiences she described are spiritual. They acknowledge our connection to the world that sustains us, to the larger universe in which we dwell. And they highlight the innate spiritual nature of children.

All humans have a spiritual dimension. The popular Unitarian Universalist human sexuality program, *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) reminds us that we are all sexual beings from birth to death. Likewise, we are all spiritual beings from birth to death. We long for those feelings of wonder, awe, mystery, the holy. We long for a connection to God, the ultimate, transcendence. We long to be a part of something larger. And we long to contribute, to make a positive difference in the world.

Here in our Religious Education Program for our children and youth, we are focusing on these spiritual longings this year as we seek alignment with our 2019-20 congregational theme: "What We Hold Most Dear: Exploring and integrating our Individual and Collective Spirituality." Our curriculum and special projects were chosen with this in mind, while still reflecting our call to the work of justice.

We continue to use the SpiritPlay program with our youngest children. It utilizes story and ritual, play and creativity to develop an underlying sense of the spiritual and the mystery of life. It encourages independent thinking through wondering with an adult who does not mediate correct answers but truly wonders with the child. The children are provided the space to freely consider their answers to questions like: Why are friends important? Why is it important to treat others with kindness? How can you be alike and different at the same time?

In selecting curriculum for our elementary and middle school children, we looked to popular culture and the power of storytelling.

"Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

"It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends."



Elementary Youth using the "Harry and UU" curriculum to explore spirituality

If you're a Harry Potter fan, you may recognize these quotes from the series of books by J.K. Rowling. This year, our elementary children are experiencing the magic of their own version of the Hogwarts School with lessons based on the curriculum, "Harry and UU." There is a school banner and classes on wand-making, potions, and divination. But in addition to the wizardry fun, the program challenges our children to ponder hard questions around power and choices and whether violence is ever justified. By asking them to consider their own experiences and values to find the answers, the Harry Potter story provides spiritual and moral guidance as well as entertainment.

WHAT DO WE SWEEP ASIDE IN IGNORANCE?

by Ele Palmer



When I was growing up, environmental justice was not a blip on my radar. I did not realize that there were neighborhoods with garbage dumps, where streets were unpaved or the air more dangerous to breathe.

I did not grapple with environmental justice until college. I watched a research presentation on houses being built to replace those destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Instead of respecting or even asking for the opinions of the African American communities that lived there, celebrities were building modern homes that completely ignored the pattern of multi-generational homes that the communities were accustomed to. Sometimes helping can go awry.

Hurricane Katrina really showed me the depth of racism in this country and how it intertwines with environmental justice. It is the underprivileged that suffer the most in natural disasters, and they are the ones who will largely bear the burdens of global warming.

Last year I watched a YouTube video that shocked me further awake. The lecturer, a college professor, described the devastation that could happen when oil becomes more expensive to extract than use. For most of us, the lifestyles we are accustomed to would cease to exist. He also pointed out that the majority of life on Earth is livestock. Only 6% of animals are wildlife. Suddenly, the environmental club I'd ignored in high school looked a lot more important.

I joined the Environmental Justice Core Group because I grew tired of just passively listening to the news: Californians flee as their homes are destroyed by wildfires; it is the hottest year on record; the rainforest is burning; global warming is turning out to be worse than we thought it would be.

More importantly, I know I want to be involved in local politics and advocate on behalf of groups affected by harmful policies. Low-income communities should not have to bear the weight of landfills. The homeless should not be unprotected and exposed during heatwaves. Our rivers should be free of coal ash.

I cannot do anything of value so long as I am steeped in ignorance. There is a lot to learn where environmental justice is concerned. This is another reason I took the step to join the Environmental Justice Core Group.

So far, the group has taken a critical look at the underlying causes of environmental injustice. We have explored these issues through paired and group discussions.



"Tree Town," Technozoic Dream art by Charles Pilkey

A major cause is the very system we live in, the philosophies that guide our day-to-day actions that we do not contemplate enough. For one, capitalism thrives on growth. Spending is seen as a major, positive economic indicator. Those who dare think in alternatives to capitalism are often mocked and looked down upon as naive. Yet it is a fact that our resources are

limited. One day we will hit a wall and will be forced to restructure our way of life.

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UNDERSTANDING ISSUES OF RACIAL JUSTICE

by Mary Ann Lawler



I have struggled with understanding issues of racial injustice since I was a child. When I was nine, my family moved to an Air Force base in Georgia. There I saw segregation firsthand: “colored” drinking fountains, Black people in the backs of buses, “whites only” signs, and much more. And I saw hate. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of our

Catholic Church. That was the 1950s. Why are we facing many of the same issues so many years after the Civil Rights Act?

I am ashamed by the white supremacy culture in our society. I want to understand more about whether I might be doing something that perpetuates it. I am deeply worried about white supremacists spouting hate. I applied to join the Racial Justice Core Group to learn what I can do as an individual and as part of our UU community to try to end racism and help in dismantling the system of white supremacy.

Our Core Group is twelve strong. We are doing a deep dive meeting once a month, reading material, and having serious discussions.

We have learned the history of slavery and the slave trade. We know that when the English established the colonies they were motivated by greed. They needed laborers to work their land. The first African slaves were brought in 1619, mixed with poor indentured servants from Europe. African slaves were preferred because they had skills which neither the American Indians nor the Irish had. The Africans were farmers. And they knew how to build houses, make bricks, and rope. They could work metal and smelt ore for iron.

In 1676, poor men—Black and white—burned down Jamestown in Bacon’s Rebellion. After this event,

landowners began to separate poor whites from poor Blacks and the idea of race began to be perpetuated. The passing of laws reinforced the newly created hierarchies.

The first set of laws were those that made African slavery permanent—enslaved people were property until death. Other laws were passed against interracial marriage, which had been common. Some laws promoted harsher punishment for Africans versus white Christians.

But there is no such thing as race. It is “a specious classification of human beings created by Europeans (whites) which assigns human worth and social status using ‘white’ as the model of humanity and the height of human achievement for the purpose of establishing and maintaining privilege and power” according to Ronald Chisom and Michael Washington in *Undoing Racism: A Philosophy of International Social Change*.



“Emergence,” woodcut by Charles Pilkey

Similarly, we learned that white supremacy is a “historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nationals, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege,” from *Challenging White Supremacy Workshop* in San Francisco, California.

Our group is investigating the ways our legal system has created, sustained,

and defended white supremacy through the Declaration of Independence, Constitution of the United States, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the Dred Scott case of 1857.

We are also learning about one another. Each of us has a partner and each month we meet to discuss topics like our home, neighborhood, school, faith community, and social setting, and what lessons we learned about “race” growing up. I am finding these personal discussions and our monthly meetings full of meaning and of learning. I did not realize how much I did not know.

BLACK LIVES UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

by Kelly Greene



Last month, I attended Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism's (BLUU) Harper-Jordan Memorial Symposium in St. Paul, Minnesota. Named after Black Unitarian, abolitionist, suffragist and author Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the first Black

ordained Universalist minister, Rev. Joseph Jordan, this symposium gave me a different perspective on the past, present and future of our faith.

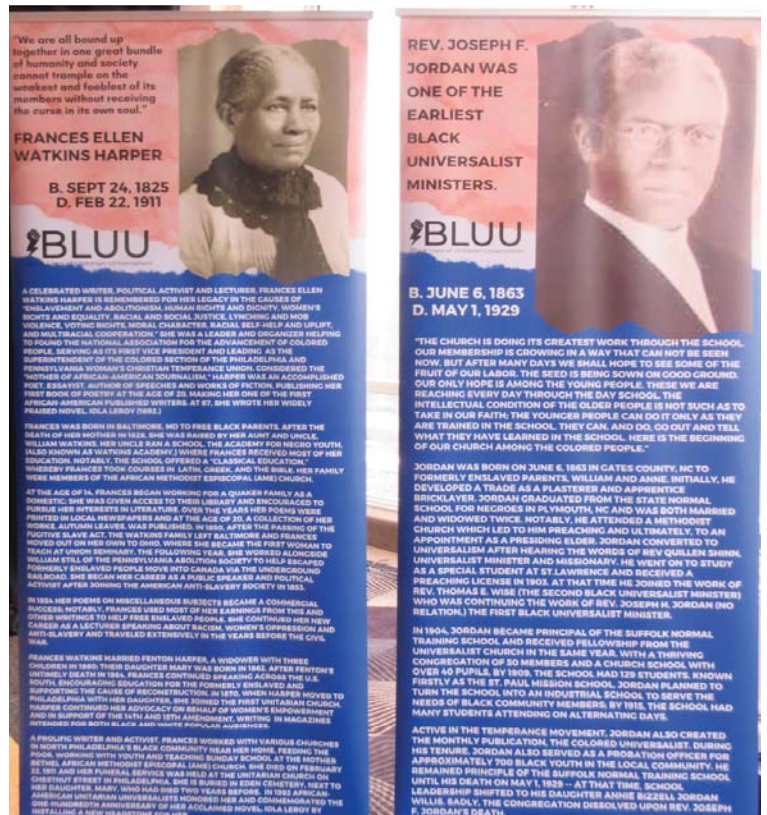
I had been unaware that Black people have been involved in Unitarianism, Universalism and Unitarian Universalism (UU) at least since the 1700s and that there have been Black congregations in places such as Harlem, Atlanta and Detroit. Last century, there was even a monthly newspaper published in North Carolina called the *Colored Universalist*. And there is currently a Black UU congregation, [Abundant LUUy](#), in Decatur, Georgia.

Since I became UU in the 1990s, I have experienced the culture of UU as being primarily and even proudly upper middle class white. This has been true at the national, regional and local gatherings I have attended. UU has been described as individualistic and concerned with intellectual freedom. Black religion tends to be more collective and concerned with bodily and economic freedom as well. It was such a joy to participate in a gathering that was, as one panelist described himself, “fully Black and fully UU”.

Throughout the four days, we had six plenary sessions and worship each day. Panelists discussed topics such as the history of Black people in UU, Black UU theology and shared their experiences as Black UUs. They named themselves as UU, Humanist, Christian, Pagan, etc.—just as you would expect from a gathering of UUs.

There was talk of the good news of UU and evangelism. There was love for our religion and a desire to share it and build the movement.

Worship was an experience I hadn't known I needed. There was an altar on which participants could place sacred objects and where the chalice was lit. During one service, elders were named and honored with stoles. In another, a candle was passed to each person in the room as we sang to each other. That candle was then used to light our chalice. In every service, there were moving words and music. We did not use orders of service or hymnals. We sang songs like “Voice Still and Small” and “Hush,” which are in our *Singing the Journey* hymn book and which we sing here. We also sang, “If anybody asks you who I am . . . tell them I'm a child of god” and “let your little light shine . . . there might be someone down in the valley trying to get home.” There was clapping and dancing. For me, there was lots of emotion—including joy. During the last service, I cried almost the whole time.



Unitarian writer and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, N.C. Universalist Minister Rev. Joseph Jordan. Panels from the BLUU Harper-Jordan Symposium, photographed by Kelly Greene

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- “The better I understand my place (privilege) and the better I can understand facts and gain tools to use it for the common good, for justice (and equity) and the interconnectedness of all of us, the better I will be able to support and articulate what may be done...”

And one participant, who has spent much time working with our community partners, admitted that she’s still struggling to answer the question about how the course enhanced her spiritual development.

I’d like to suggest that we are embracing the notion expressed by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Upon returning from the march with Martin Luther King in Selma, he was asked if he had much time to pray there. He responded, “I prayed with my feet.”

In fact, this may be what underlies the resistance and denial towards global warming. Actually addressing global warming requires reinventing how we live. Admitting we have a problem is an existential threat to those steeped in materialism.

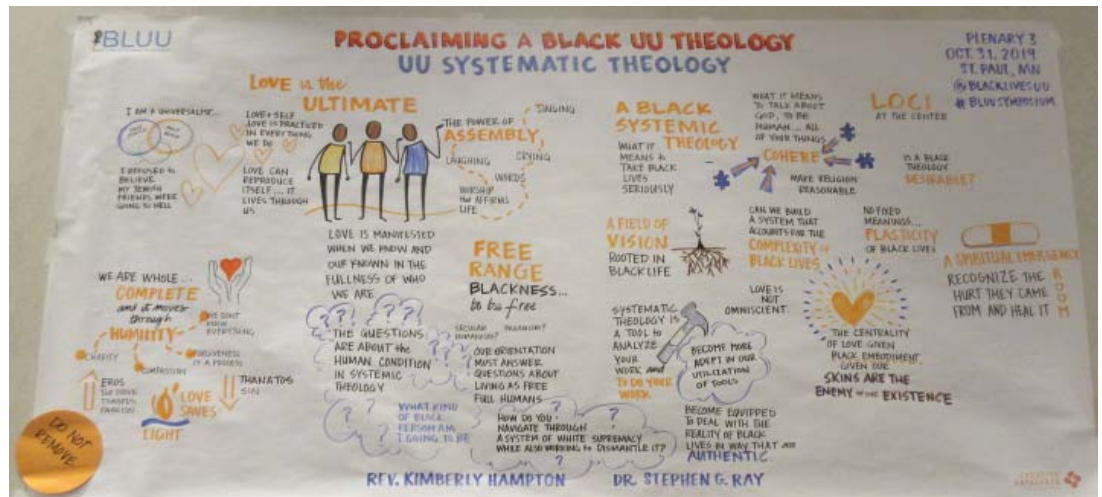
Another major cause resides in power structures, especially white supremacy. In order for capitalism to thrive, there must be winners and losers. The losers are often people of color, who bear the burden of neglected infrastructure and waste. This is a pattern that has continued since the earliest days of colonialism.

I look forward to learning more as I continue attending the Environmental Justice Core Group. I do not want to be a person who sweeps aside entire communities in ignorance. Let us fight with them instead.

“Black Lives Univarian Universalist” continued from page 7

Though I was raised in a Black Episcopal church where we sang old English hymns and recited the same prayers for decades, this worship grabbed me and did not allow me to be just an observer.

The lived experiences and histories of Black folks in this country are different from those of non-Black people. What people bring with them and want from their religious experience is different. Participating in most UU congregations necessarily means participating in upper middle class white culture. While Black people might be welcomed, the life of the congregation has been created and maintained with other people in mind. BLUU announced that next year, they plan to launch BLUU Havens and BLUU Harbors. My understanding is that Havens will be Black UU-centered, Black UU-led gatherings that might or might not exist in churches and that BLUU Harbors will be Black UU congregations. This is one way to grow Unitarian Universalism.



Poster from the BLUU Harper-Jordan Symposium Plenary Session: “Proclaiming a Black UU Theology” created by Creative Catalyst; photographed by Kelly Greene

I love and am dedicated to this congregation. And if there is a BLUU Haven or Harbor nearby, I think it could only strengthen my faith to spend time there as well. It is my hope that we will support these efforts to grow this religion which has had such a live-giving impact on so many of us.

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Mary Lann Lawler

Mary Ann and her husband Neal Sigmon moved to Charlotte seven years ago. Mary Ann has coordinated volunteers from UCC for A Child's Place and has tutored children through that program. She was also drawn to the groups who helped create a Green Sanctuary and address

Environmental justice issues after having spent her career as a civil servant in the Department of the Interior in Washington. Working on the grounds at UCC makes her happy because she was heavily involved in native plant conservation issues after she retired, not to mention that she doesn't have a backyard anymore.

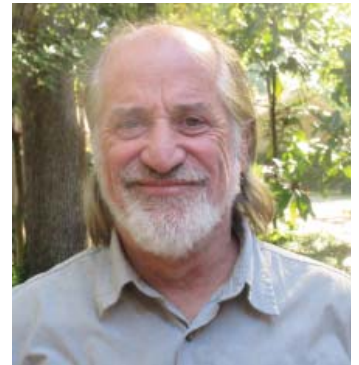
Ele Palmer

Ele Palmer is a web application developer by trade, with an interest in writing and social justice issues. She lives together with her mom and younger sister in South Charlotte. In her free time, she enjoys tabletop games, books, and hanging out with friends.



Charles Pilkey

Charles was born with a hammer in one hand and a box of crayons in the other ... ready to rumble. Six decades later he's still rumbling. His work is an attempt to express the inexpressible—the beauty, wonder and terror of the world and when necessary, to protest the world's injustice.



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