



Winter Journal

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Fork



Free minds open hearts.

THE "INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF ALL EXISTENCE..."

Pat Gorman

Every one of us has moments that set us on our Spirit's path and bring us to where we are.

For me, the most important, most significant one happened when I was eight years old in our backyard in Queens.

It was a hot, sunny summer day, one of those endless days off from school, when I could just do what I wanted until evening chores kicked in.

I was squatting under our wide, densely-leaved maple tree, its shield of shadow creating a cool safety zone of damp air. A shaft of sunlight pierced its way through, lighting up the rock in my hand, the bits of mica shining back like hundreds of stars, like many tiny suns.

My father ducked under the low branches and

A note from the editor...

Those who join us each week at the Meetinghouse have journeyed to the UUSSF from many places. This Winter Journal tells some of their stories.

Martha Potter

squatted next to me. That's how everyone sat on the reservation, he had told me. Inside, there were hardly any chairs then, and outside it kept your butt from getting dirty.

We stayed that way in quiet for a while and then my father said, "Everything is alive, you know," watching me turn over the rock in my hands.

"Everything," I asked, "even this rock?"

"Yes," he said, "the world is alive and so is everything on it. It's like your own body. The trees are our lungs, breathing for us. The water is like blood, bringing everything that's needed everywhere. Precious oil and uranium, deep in the Earth, are the bone marrow."

"What about the rocks?" I asked.

"Well, those are the bones, of course," he said.

"How can you know they're alive?" I asked. "You can't talk to them."

I was just at that age where I didn't want to appear foolish, didn't want others to laugh at me because of my beliefs. No one else in Whitestone, the neighborhood I lived in, believed things like that. They were almost all Catholics, and beliefs were more like rules. Act this way - go to heaven. Have a bad thought - kid, you go to hell. At eight years old, I already knew I was hopelessly doomed. So even though I went to Catholic school, the more I learned, the less I *wanted* to believe.

"Well, yes," my father said, reaching slowly for the rock, revolving it around in the flickering light, "you can talk to rocks."

Now here I was, caught in something everyone would laugh at, something that would make me feel



Leyla and Flynn add their holiday wishes to our wreath.

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From the Minister

This is the season of resting. Animals know to hibernate in the winter. This is an instinctive—our ingeniously honed technology—response to the winter months when the temperature is freezing and food may be scarce. Be it days, weeks, or the entire season, animals hibernate as a way to survive the cold. Clever animals.

I will let you in on a not-very-tightly guarded secret: I hate the winter. Oh, I'll make do. With warm coats and jackets, furry boots, colorful scarves and hats, double gloves and mittens, I can bear the cold. But I'd so rather not. I can appreciate the beauty of a fresh snow, wood fires, hot chocolate. But honestly, if I could, I would burrow away the entire winter, huddled under blankets with a pile of books. I might come up for some of that hot chocolate, but like other animals, our bodies and our souls need rest.

Since I can't hibernate, I'll take some spiritual lessons from the season—and incorporate rest where I can. This month, we celebrated the winter solstice, which is literally a pause. The solstice itself is a moment in time. The sun, moving southward across the sky, pauses before resuming its movement northward. Our observance of the solstice is a reminder for us to pause. It is a beckoning, against the busyness that overtakes the holiday season—an invitation to be still. To consider what awaits us in the stillness.

I am reminded of this a little every day in my yoga practice. The foundation of yoga practice is the breath. The steady gentle cycle of inhalation and exhalation carries and guides the flow of movement from one *asana* to the next. In this way,

breathing links our minds and our bodies. I have been reminded this month, and so have been practicing, paying attention to the pause between the inhalation and the exhalation. I don't mean holding one's breath—which can exacerbate feelings of tension and stress. I do mean: noticing the slight and natural pause at the top and bottom of each breath. That no-man's-land—that space between the breaths is where the magic happens. In that space between the breaths, I let go of my attempt to control anything (everything!). I release my thoughts of what I've done, or of what I still need to do. That pause between the breaths is a moment of surrender. Not easy.

We can almost see the phases of the breath echoed in the cycle of the seasons:

Spring Equinox – Inhale

Summer Solstice – Pause at the top of the inhale

Autumn Equinox – Exhale

Winter Solstice – Pause at the end of the exhale

How will you answer this winter's enticement to pause?

Perhaps, you can give yourself a Sabbath to unplug from electronics: (television, tablets, cell phones). Or you may pause for a day from shopping or purchasing anything. Some may welcome a pause from any critiques or complaints. Or, a day; even a week; of no meetings.

As with our kin from the animal world, these rests are more than a luxury; they are a matter of survival.

Whatever manner of pausing draws you: consider what you might find in that stillness. Consider how you might extend that small pause into a more restful winter—a more restful life. Be it meditation, journaling, walking, swimming, reading—whatever slows you down, let this winter be a time to rest and to reflect on your past; present; future.

Kimberly Quinn Johnson

Spiritual Journey

Sue Penny

My own spiritual journey begins in Michigan in a warm, large Catholic family. My dad was quite religious – he was the Catholic one and Mom converted from a liberal Protestant church to raise us all under one religion.

I have a vivid memory of the priest coming in to speak to our Catechism class when I was twelve. He asked why we believe in the Catholic teachings. After various attempts like, “It’s in the Bible,” he gave us the answer. It was “faith”. My first internal response was, “No problem. I have that!” But as the years went on, that started to seem flimsy.

When I went to college I stopped attending Mass unless I was home. At that point in our life Dad never asked any of us if we were still practicing Catholics. He believed that he gave us the tools and now it was up to us. When I married and had children we decided to follow my beloved aunt’s choice of being a Unitarian Universalist. That led me from the Southold congregation to Water Mill where UU-CSF used to meet.

As I became involved in planning the Sunday services in Water Mill and arranged the many pieces of the worship experience, I had a profound feeling of faith. Faith that people would show up for whatever they had volunteered. Such trust in others, and the reassurance that it would be *still* be OK even if someone couldn’t show up, has replaced that “flimsy” feeling.

It is the community that we have created together that supports me and my evolving beliefs. I love being on the spiritual journey with folks I care about. For me our congregation has replaced that warm Michigan family, who are ever-present, yet can feel far away at times. Thank you all for this faith that continues to grow within your loving arms.

From the President...

I believe that words matter in how we use them, but my faith in them was greatly challenged with the triumph of Donald Trump, who knocked down politi-



cally correct words as if they were nothing but a child’s Lego tower. What has emerged is our 45th president, who could care less about the wreckage of words left behind, yet why should he? A lack of presidential words did not stop people from voting for him.

I am questioning the value of words for changing people’s lives nowadays. Alexander Hamilton, while never president, changed his and our country’s fate with well-chosen essays and words, as did so many others before and after him. He actually wrote his way out of poverty and into high society, to become one of our Founding Fathers, building the foundation of this country with his words. Lin-Manuel Miranda, writer and director of the smash-hit Broadway musical “Hamilton,” gained access into high political society by having his own way with words to move an audience. But is that it with the power of words? Are words relegated to entertainment status and not much more?

I think yes; and no. This past election season has taught me something. Words are not enough, no matter how lofty. Not even the message they carry is enough, whether religious or ethical. Words can be too “ivory tower” or “preachy.” But you cannot stuff action into any tower. A well-timed bit of action speaks volumes.

Martha Potter and other women are taking the bus to march on Washington on January 21, while some others of us are taking the train into NYC for a parallel march in midtown at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza. Join us. Let us know what we can do, *together*. There is so much we need to **DO**.

Pam Wittenberg

Here I am now...

Mark Potter

I would have been twelve years old, perched high in the right side balcony of our New England Congregational Church with my mother and five brothers and sisters to watch my father in a chorus performing Handel's Messiah. Our minister opened the performance with a prayer.

Perhaps because I was not in his direct line of sight, or because I had just turned twelve, it occurred to me to lift my head, open my eyes and look out over the congregation below. A full twenty-five percent of the people below me were *not* praying, heads up, staring respectfully ahead. Many of them, but not my father, were in the chorus itself.

That was when I realized that an adult's spiritual beliefs were personal. Like these people below me, I could decide for myself what to believe and what not to believe. This was 1957 and although I knew that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny were just for fun, I prayed mightily before bed, occasionally when I needed a bicycle, and whenever I heard the words, "Let us pray." Now it seemed OK for me to decide for myself.

"The divinity of Christ" was the first pillar to fall. As a farm boy who witnessed the astounding enthusiasm of bulls, stallions and dogs, and who with my own hands helped deliver calves awash in very mortal afterbirth, the concept of a divine birth had always been difficult for me to grasp. Of course the Genesis story, as presented, fell with it.

Mostly I made these decisions alone, wrestling particularly with the story of Abraham ready to sacrifice his eldest son, Isaac. As the eldest son myself, with a father who had a frightening temper, this was a troubling tale.

In my teen years with friends alone with me in cars and at parties, I began to share my questioning. Pascal's wager for example, holding that the consequences of disbelief were so severe that a wise person would choose for God, seemed an interesting but lame excuse for religion. And the argument that there must be a prime mover fell when someone asked me who or what would have given the prime mover its start. I finally came to believe that if this God were truly loving, and understood all, he or she would forgive my disbelief. Ultimately I lost interest in the issue, and I am sorry to report, on occasion demonstrating through my poor decisions that organized religion may indeed have a beneficial influence on moral behavior.

Not until one of my children ran into problems thirty years later did I begin to realize that hard work, imagination and success in the temporal world were not sufficient in themselves to live a satisfying life. I joined a 12-Step men's group. To participate, I needed to make an atheist's bargain with the concept of a higher power.

I wrestled with this for two or three years until I finally came to understand that I could best understand my higher power as a faith in humanity itself. This may seem foolish or willfully blind to anyone who can only see the depravity in human behavior, but my trust in others is amply repaid with their trust in me.

If you can enjoy a scientific proof of the good in us, consider your ancestors' lives. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature* Steven Pinker shows that over the millennia we are, in fact, civilizing ourselves, extending our circles of trust from our family, to our cousins, to our communities and perhaps ultimately to the world. To demonstrate our progress he begins with reminding us of the brutal stories in the *Old Testament* and in Homer's *Odyssey* and then shifts to counting clear evidence of violence in pre-historic skeletons. Even within history's last 2,000 years the measurable rate of violence has declined.

When my wife and I retired here to the East End we felt we had grown past our need for the 12-Step groups and decided to try another spiritual approach. We stopped one Saturday for a UUCSF tag sale at the Water Mill Community house, liked the people we met and returned again, and again. As a start, moving from Fairfield County, we had never met so many liberal thinking people in one place. And, as a plus for me, the simple community rituals, the hymns, the readings, the sermon were a comfort, as familiar as my old New England church, but without the confusing mystical assumptions of the trinity, rebirth or even God. As a Unitarian Universalist the choices are up to me, and I like it that way.

These choices can take us in new directions. For the past eight months or so, in addition to our Sunday services, I have been sitting for an hour on Mondays with our Zen Buddhist friends. Although I sit with them in silent meditation for an hour most weeks and share a reading afterward for 45 minutes, I am the rankest sort of beginner.

The weekly readings and the books I have read, like *Every Day Zen* and *The Snow Leopard*, offer

concepts available for me to adopt when ready: to give up regret for past actions and hope for future pleasures, instead to be right here now...to avoid experiencing life through the mask of ego...to view the events of my life as through the eyes of a child, a beginner, not as an expert...to accept my existence as a temporary junction of elements, a soluble part of the universe. For me all of this fits in easily with our Unitarian Universalist values.

But concepts and theory are only in our minds. The practice of sitting, *zazen*, has given me an immediate payoff, calming me, reducing my blood pressure, easing decades of insomnia, and hopefully making me easier to live with. For confirmation of that, you'll have to ask someone else.

Pat Gorman, continued from page 1

like a little kid, with what the nuns called, "an over-active imagination."

But a shiver went through me despite the heat, and I knew, just knew this moment was important, and that if it went one way, I would shut down the ideas of my father. Or it could go the other way, and I would start to learn things that didn't match what anyone around me believed; things I would have to keep secret to walk this path.

I made my choice.

"How can I talk to a rock?" I asked, choosing to believe my father's way of seeing.

"Well," he said, taking out a pack of Luckies and tapping one out, "everything that is alive has consciousness." He took a pack of matches from his shirt pocket and lit the cigarette, taking a long drag, holding it in, then letting the smoke out slowly.

"The thing is, everything has its own consciousness. Trees have tree-consciousness, air has air-consciousness, and rocks have rock-consciousness".

"What does that mean?" I wanted to know. Now that I had chosen my path, I had to know it was real.

"Imagine for a moment that you are this tree", he said, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "Close your eyes. Feel your feet like roots extending through the ground, tangling with other roots. Feel them taking nourishment up into your trunk, making you tall and straight." He stood up then, looking planted and straight and strong. I did the same. "But not too strong," he said. "You need to be flexible and bend with the wind, or it will knock you

over."

I swayed a little, as if the wind were blowing on me.

"... and now the branches are like your arms, reaching out, out, out as far as you can, feeling the leaves covering all over you. Breathe through the leaves, through every leaf.

I stood there feeling very much like a tree, feeling the damp soil, the air connecting me everywhere.

I began to feel very happy. Suddenly all these things *were* real - what tree consciousness was, what wisdom my tree-self had from my own past, each year recorded in rings, seeing into the future. And now I knew how to get into this state.

I didn't realize it then, but I was taking my first steps into becoming a *shaman*: a *shaman* of my father's tribe; a Healer whose skill emerges from living and breathing the interdependent web of all existence.

Today was my first day, but I still wanted to know how to speak to a rock.

"Well, in some ways it's very much like sinking into tree consciousness. But rock awareness is very, very slow moving. You must slow yourself way down. But rocks remember all time. It is really worth it to learn from a rock."

"Once you become good at this, at what I'm showing you, you can slip in and out of all of nature and it will tell you everything you need to know. The world becomes a living being."

Many years later, long after my father's death when I was in college, and after I had studied with many spiritual teachers and traditions, I found myself living around the corner from the new UU Meetinghouse. My husband and I went to our very first service out of curiosity.

Here was a place that had no enforced rules, but rather a list of principles. When I saw the words, "***respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,***" at long last I felt a calmness in my heart that I had not known for a long time. Here people understood something I wanted to live by. Here was a place where we could feel at home.



October 8th at the Interfaith Institute of the Islamic Center of Long Island, Westbury, NY

After a fabulous kebab lunch at a nearby Turkish restaurant, several of us from the UUCSF joined a wonderful, free-wheeling discussion on the topical question of Muslim women and their dress code, and on the many myths that surround women in Islam.

An Iranian woman who introduced the different forms of dress, modeled by members of the center (see photo), memorably noted that the wearing of hijab is not compulsory in Islam and in those countries that force a particular dress, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, it transforms the hijab from a woman's chosen humility to her humiliation. I have noticed in my own travels the great increase in the wearing of the hijab, even in some liberal Muslim countries, and associate it with growing Muslim identity, especially in the face of western hostility and prejudice since 9/11.

But for each woman who covers her hair, the reasons are complex and personal. One speaker pointed out, as I often have, that Mary the mother of Jesus covered her hair, as an observant Middle Eastern Jew. How quickly we forget.

The Institute was honoring Larycia Hawkins of Wheaton College, a Christian evangelical school,

who wore a hijab in solidarity with Muslim women. She was fired for this and for insisting that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Larycia's speech was fiery and inspirational.

I am so impressed by the Institute and their open-mindedness, their welcome, and their deep commitment to religious freedom and diversity, including their strong outreach to Long Island's Jewish community. We are hoping that more folks on the East End will reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters throughout Long Island to share stories and get to know one another better.

Ken Dorph

In memoriam



Paul Berman generally arrived late to service with a devious, yet inviting smile. He sported a pony tail and a scruffy beard and was often dressed in a disheveled fashion. He rarely missed an opportunity to light a candle. His diatribe, often politically based was full of smiles and tainted with

his special humor. He always ended with these words, "This is my religious home."

Paul was responsible for initiating the "Spend Down the Mortgage Program." At a congregational meeting Paul raised his hand and gave quite generously to the program. The UUCSF is not a wealthy congregation, but because of Paul's mighty effort we no longer carry a mortgage on our building. What a blessing he gave us!

Paul had three homes: an apartment in Manhattan, a condominium in Florida where he spent his winters, and the modest house he had built in Springs where he spent his summers. I was his handyman for this house. Some days he treated me like his best friend, but other days he acted angry and aloof and barely spoke to me. If I gently confronted him about this he would laugh and become my buddy again. He had a great sense of humor.

He was a character; a private man who did not get close to any congregants. Everything I know about him is from his anecdotes. He was a great storyteller. As I sat with him, he shared various childhood tales and I could visualize him as a boy growing up in the city. As far as I know, he was never married and was survived by a single nephew, who found Paul deceased in his Manhattan apartment.

Paul grew up in Brooklyn in a Jewish/Italian neighborhood in the Depression era. He said, "I was a little Jewish kid and I was often harassed by groups of tough Italian kids. I always carried a big rock in my front pocket. These kids would follow me and call me *Jew boy*. I was scared. Of course I was scared. This one time one of them pushed my head from behind. I had my hand on that rock the whole time. I spun around and hit the biggest kid in

the forehead with the rock. He was hurt. I think he was hospitalized. After that none of those kids bothered me again." He ended the story with a chuckle. I watched his eyes as he saw this old memory blossom. But later that day, with a sense of urgency, he came outside to where I was working and said, "Don, Don I never hit anyone with a rock. No, I would never hit anyone with a rock. I just knew how to punch."

"It's okay, Paul. I respected that you used a rock to defend yourself," I assured him.

Paul told me he made his living in the lumber industry. He was also an avid reader. Each time I arrived at his house he had his feet up on the paper-strewn kitchen table, reading and enjoying a cup of coffee.

One day he called me in a panic to say that someone had broken into his house and turned over his furniture, vandalizing the entire inside of his house. I insisted that he call the police. "No! Please come immediately. I need you, Don!" Upon arrival I noticed that there were signs of animal droppings throughout the house. There were extensive bite marks on the woodwork. It appeared to me that an animal had gotten into the house and had been trying desperately to get back outside. "Paul, it looks like you have raccoons living in your house. Also, I'm pretty sure that they may be living in the house right now"

I went down into the basement to investigate. A past tenant's belongings were piled haphazardly in two rooms. I returned with the news that I was certain there were raccoons nesting in the old furniture at the present moment and that the house was too dangerous for him to be living in. He walked directly to the coat closet by the front door and grabbed a baseball bat. "Go down there and kill 'em Don." After much back and forth debate, which included my refusal to do battle with the raccoons, I called a local pest control company. They came two times, and removed several raccoons.

In the winter of 2014 Paul had a pipe burst, and the entire upstairs of the house was rebuilt. He was interested in selling his home, and I introduced him to a young friend of mine who purchased his home. My friend told me how much he loved Paul and will miss him terribly. In the sales contract of the house there is a clause stating that Paul was welcome to come stay in the house any time he wanted, for the rest of his life.

Don Schmitz

On November 20th we hosted the annual East End Multifaith Thanksgiving Service and Potluck at the Meetinghouse



Participating Clergy.

Two weeks after the election, the community needed this.



Our Christmas Eve candlelight service.



Preparing lunches for Maureen's Haven Christmas guests

How I Grew Spiritually

Pam Wittenberg

I was not taken to church during my youth, but was left to my own devices to develop my own belief system. There was a big part of me that once believed that there were two different spirits: one that lived outside and one that lived inside. The outside spirit could only be found in nature, and the inside spirit could only be found in church. Since I was not raised in a church, I attributed nature as my main source of spiritual awareness for as long as I can remember.

Until my early thirties I satisfied my outdoor spirit with camping, hiking, taking bicycling trips, and exploring the beaches up and down the West Coast. My first graduate degree was in Environmental Studies & Planning, and I met my husband, Carl, while I was doing a thesis on the restoration of native California oak trees. For several years we

lived in an ecologically-run commune in Palo Alto, had no car, maintained a semi-vegan diet, and planted and maintained native oak trees and grasslands. And when Carl and I moved to the East Coast, the change in weather and scenery only heightened that kind of spirituality. It was sensory-based and reliable.

As life and family responsibilities grew, my interactions with nature for spiritual renewal became less frequent. But when my husband and I decided to become Unitarian Universalists, I discovered the “church” aspect of spirituality that I hadn’t yet developed. This congregation helped me to re-connect with nature through our UU Seventh Principle, *the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

I am grateful that this congregation has given me a way to express my “whole” spirituality in words, rather than only in feeling.



Walter Klauss directed our holiday chorus this year.

They were a special holiday treat.



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Special thanks to Tom Kochie for our photos of the Interfaith Service.

My Spiritual Journey

John Andrews

My spiritual journey has much in common with that of the Israelites, as told in the Book of Exodus. For the first thirty years of my life, I was in bondage to the belief system of the Catholic Church, though as I grew to adulthood I began seriously to question it. In the early 1960's, during the papacy of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, I held out hope that there might yet be a home for me there. However, the tipping point came when the next pope, Paul VI, issued his message confirming the prohibition of artificial contraception. I knew intuitively that had to be wrong. A system of dogmas is like a house of cards. If one part fails, the whole thing collapses. One morning, walking home after Mass, I suddenly told my wife Carol that I couldn't do this anymore. "I'm living a lie," I said. Her reply was, "Well, then don't."

For the next thirty years or so I wandered in a wilderness of searching and questioning, reading a lot about various religions and the arguments for and against each. For much of this time one of my main questions was whether it was at all possible that Jesus actually rose from the dead. My reading of the evidence presented by advocates of Christianity was that it was not enough to justify belief in such an extraordinary event without an additional input of pure faith. That had long since left me. I also wanted to know how likely it was that the universe was centrally planned by a supreme being, or, on the contrary, a laissez-faire operation acting on its own laws without any external guidance.

In the first decade of the new millennium, two things happened to me that were like coming into the Promised Land. First, I finally decided that in the relatively short time I had left to live, it was unlikely that I would achieve any definite answers to these and other religious questions, and that I would have to live with that. Second, I discovered the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Fork. Here was a loving community of faith. Not faith in particular dogmas, but faith in one another.

The Promised Land, however, is no mythical Eden. Even in a land of milk and honey, the milk often goes sour and the honey comes at the price of bee stings. Still, I was able to rest in two fundamental understandings. *One* is that what we believe about spiritual things won't affect what is or is not. Beliefs only matter insofar as they affect how we feel and what we do. Despite the threats of religious proselytizers of various traditions, each predicting eternal torture for those who adhere to any of the others (or to none), we won't be punished for guessing wrong. The *other* is that, for better or for worse, we humans can make choices that other animals can't. The continuance of conscious life on this planet, including human life, will depend on our actions. It may not be fair, but our companions on this green earth don't have a vote. It's totally up to us.



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