

Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis (UUCD)
Theme Journal – March, Suffering



"The tree of compassion grows on the banks of the river of suffering."

- Ken Ford

The Committee on Ministry prepares a quote and focus question on the theme of the month (see page 3). This month their question is, "Can you think of a time when an experience of suffering changed you?"

When we're suffering it's natural to do whatever it takes to take change of our life to stop the pain. The source of our suffering could be the loss of a spouse or partner, illness, or any number of life changes that make our true vulnerability undeniable. Once, when I was in the midst of a pretty terrible patch in my life, I enrolled in a Mindfulness Meditation class. The informational pamphlet showed people who were peaceful and content. They positively glowed, and that's exactly what I wanted to experience.

I enrolled in the class with the expectation that I could attain my own version of their contentment, and I wanted it pronto. But instead of being given the tools to attain that shining inner light of peace, the instructor said that I should savor the suffering. Savor it!? He felt sure that I wasn't in life-threatening pain, even though I was completely miserable. He decided that if I would pay close attention to the pain, there was an opportunity for new strength and discovery. This was far from the guidance I had hoped to receive.

My spiritual guide was relentless in insisting that I not wish away emotional anguish. It took a very long time, but eventually I accepted that I wasn't going to feel better in the near future. I slowly started to see my grief as if it was an amazing and novel part of life and I became curious about what lessons it had to teach. I can't say that I ever willingly welcomed suffering into my life, but I stopped constantly struggling against its presence.

Sometimes friends would help me carry it. Music or walking beside the ocean meant there was no space for it in my awareness for awhile. Yet, it was always there, waiting for me.

At some point, I remember saying, "OK, you're with me. What do you have to say for yourself?" At first it was mute but, over time, suffering had quite a bit to say. It was the beginning of internal shifts that made my capacity for compassion grow, and that included compassion for myself. When the time for suffering comes again, I expect I'll resist it. I hope I can more quickly see how it is a new chance for wonder and some new worthy discovery.

- Rev. Beth Banks



This Little Light

A few years ago I worked as a chaplain at a long-term specialty care center. The facility housed folks living with traumatic brain injuries, Alzheimer/dementia patients with behavioral issues and folks living with Huntington's disease (HD). I worked with the folks who had HD.

Huntington's disease is absolutely horrible. It is a fatal genetic disorder that causes the progressive breakdown of nerve cells in the brain. First, it robs you of control of your movements. During this period of the disease patients suffer many falls and injuries. It can also affect your behavior and your cognitive ability. Personality changes and memory issues are common. In its later stages, most patients are unable to move or talk. Many describe it as having ALS, Alzheimers and Parkinson's disease all at once. The progression of the disease takes about 10-15 years from the onset of the first symptoms. It ends in death, but not before it takes away your job, your hobbies, your freedom, your independence, many of your friendships, and often your ability to even live with your family. Symptoms usually begin showing when a person is 25-40. The disease is passed down to 50% of offspring. Suffering is certainly a word the comes to mind when I think of the patients and families who live with this disease, although it seems too small in its scope to hold the long term grief and pain associated with this disease.

I met Michael toward the end of his life. He could not speak, walk, feed or toilet himself. Every week at the end of our chapel service we would sing "This Little Light of Mine". The music therapist would always go around with his guitar and get close with the residents enthusiastically encouraging them to muster up a clap or a nod of their head. When he would come to Michael he would lean into him and sing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it..." Michael would twist and turn in his chair, breathe in deep and then belt out "Mmrrighm!"

Suffering is the experience of profound loss, grief and pain. It is misery, torture and anguish. But, it does not have the capacity to snuff out that light which burns within us all...that light that says, "I'm here." We can say that suffering has meaning; it nurtures our compassion, resiliency and sometimes serves as a wake-up call. Sure. But, other times it just plain sucks. There is no value in the suffering imposed by Huntington's disease. We cannot look for what suffering gives us in this case, but rather we must look for the things that it is unable to take away. Suffering is never all of the story and it is never the end of the story. We continue to learn new ways to keep our lights shining.

– Laura Thompson, Intern & Campus Minister

Public Domain Image: <https://pixabay.com/en/top-night-bulb-light-dark-cable-1145474/>

Sing

Hymn of the Month: "When Jesus Wept," #261. References to Jesus weeping are found throughout the Christian Scripture, and invariably his tears are for injustice. This is the compassionate Jesus who yearns for justice for all, and feels the suffering of the world. Sung slowly, the text is mournful; sung quickly, it's almost like a dance.

William Billings is one of the first major American composers of the 1700s. When he was 14 years old his father died and he supported the family as a tanner. Uneducated and lower-middle class, he studied music as a young man and became a chorus leader in his early 20s. He created fugues (rounds) and wrote, "[They] should be sung as an echo, in order to keep the hearers in agreeable suspense till all the parts join together in a full chorus, as sweet and strong as possible." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOVsfYFhNZw>



Last weekend my family went to the Chinese New Year parade in San Francisco. It was a great day! Even so, there were little arguments about where to stand and how to get our toddler near the front. We ate too many Chinese sweets, which caused some gastrointestinal distress, and all of us were so exhausted we could barely get back to the hotel. Even in the midst of all the fun, there was suffering.

Now some people say there is a difference between pain (physical distress) and suffering (the mental/emotional distress we lay over the top). Sometimes we hear that pain is inevitable and suffering is optional, but we do and should feel grief in loss, panic when children get lost, and angst as we wonder what to do with our lives from time to time. At the end of the day, both pain and suffering are inextricably mixed together with the human condition.

As faithful people, many of us also work hard to relieve human suffering. Whether we are on a path of self discovery, feel called to offer meals, hugs, and pastoral support, or we are filled with passion for social justice, our spiritual work is often focused on limiting the suffering of ourselves and others.

On this journey, we will ask three big questions about suffering. These questions do not have singular, simple answers. They are like zen koans to ponder on our spiritual journey:

1. What is the purpose of suffering? Distress is so much easier to bear if we can figure out why it is happening. Sometimes there are helpful answers, and sometimes the answers keep us stuck. How much are we willing to challenge our own notions that suffering is meaningful or random?
2. How much suffering is too much? From deciding it's time to stifle flu symptoms with medicine to seeking out a grief group, to avoiding helpful lifestyle changes, we are always dialoging with this question. Our drive for social and political justice comes from saying: enough is enough!
3. How should I respond to suffering? Depending on whether we feel suffering is sent to us as a spiritual test, or is our own fault, or is imposed by others, or is

more or less dealt by chance, we are going to respond differently. In this narrative we might start describing our identity differently. Some identities we often hear include veterans, cancer survivors, alcoholics, and middle children—each describing a different kind of suffering. Someone who is afraid of heights and chooses to respond to life's anxieties with earth-centering practices has chosen to respond to her suffering with an identity as an earth-centered being.

There are so many ways to think about and work with suffering that it can be and often is the central balance point of our spiritual journey. During this month, I invite you to look at one kind of suffering that bothers you, or talk about it with family and friends. Ask these three questions and see how they move your spirit.

– Adrean Dills, MDiv, Interim Director of Lifespan Learning

Public Domain Image: <https://pixabay.com/en/crack-asphalt-road-nature-green-1118098/>

Reflect **The Committee on Ministry** (Lucas Frerichs, Stefan Harvey, Hiram Jackson, Lisa Oakes, Susan Steinbach, Karen Urbano) invites you to make the theme part of your spiritual practice:

Although suffering is a universal experience, it is a lonely experience and the search for its meaning is an individual's unique challenge....also a person can suffer enormously at the distress of another... Choosing your reaction to a blow of fate can give meaning to suffering....When we are no longer able to change our situation—we are challenged to change ourselves.

– Dimitrios G. Oreopoulos, M.D., Toronto, Canada

Can you think of a time when an experience of suffering has changed you or those around you? What happened for you/to you? What did you learn from that time?

Give

Donate anytime: <http://tinyurl.com/DonateUUCD>



Public Domain Image: <https://pixabay.com/en/graffiti-wall-paint-cracked-paint-1109998/>

March 6, 9:30am, Uniting for Racial Justice Committee. Music: Ray Frank.

March 6, 11:15am, *Lord, But It Hurts: Suffering that Breaks the Heart and Soul*, Rev. Beth Banks; Ray Frank with Jane McKendry on Dobro. First Sunday with children and youth present for first 20 minutes: they'll have an opportunity to lead worship and sing. Musician, Dr. John said, "Why listen to the blues? Because it's real. There's a million kinds of blues because there's a million kinds of people." – *The Language of the Blues from Alcorub to Zuzu* by Debra Devi. Concert & worship: Bring your favorite mug, get some coffee or tea, settle in and hear a wide range of songs about many kinds of suffering. You may find you want to sing along. We'll also offer the words of authors and poets who wrote about suffering of love, physical pain, the agony from society's injustices, and more.

March 13, 9:30 & 11:15am, *What's So Beloved About These Conversations?* Rev. Beth Banks & Tim Burkhart; Donna Sachs, Worship Associate. 18 members from UUCD and UUSS are enrolled in *Beloved Conversations*. Tim and Rev. Beth help lead this extensive curriculum designed to build fluency for multicultural multiracial conversations and relationships. Come hear some of what we've learned so far. Bring your curiosity, humbleness, and willingness to be present.

12:30pm: Membership Meeting to vote yes or no: "*The Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis shall prominently display on church grounds a banner stating Black Lives Matter.*" More on page 5.

SATURDAY March 19, 7:30pm, Diving Deep: *Transylvanian Communion*; Revs. László (Laci) Major, Beth Banks, Lucy Bunch; Amanda Caudle, Worship Associate. The Lord's Supper can be understood as a real or imaginary communion with the divine. The Unitarian position is close to Jesus' statement, "Do this in memory of me." The communion is asking, calling, evoking, devoting and opening a world before us of love, purity, joy. It is the sacred moment of being face to face with ourselves, our conscience, when we renew our connection with our chosen faith. We'll use an historic communion chalice from UU San Francisco, believed to date back to Rev. Thomas Starr King (1860-1864) or Rev. Horatio Stebbins (1864-1900). Juuliebells perform. We've invited UUSS to join us. Balazs Scholars program <http://tinyurl.com/SKSM-Balazs>

Rev. László (Laci) Major is the Balaz Scholar in residence at Starr King School for the Ministry, 2015-16. Rev. Major is parish minister in the Unitarian Congregation of Dattk, which has 350 members in a Unitarian village of 500 people. He is completing masters in theology and pastoral care at Babes-Bolyai University. <https://www.sksm.edu/meet-us/graduates/balazs-scholars/>

March 20, 9:30 & 11:15am, *Blessed are the Humble!* Revs. László (Laci) Major; Worship Associates: 9:30am, Laura Thompson, 11:15am Rev. Beth Banks. It may be said that humility should be for a UU what enlightenment is for a Buddhist, realization for a Hindu, sincerity for a Confucian, righteousness for a Jew, surrender for a Muslim, and annihilation for a Sufi. Bela Bartok music played by Louise Bettner. Juuliebells perform.

Special Collection: Dove and Serpent, Partner Church. *Make checks out to UUCD, memo Dove.*

SUpper Sunday: Join us after worship for soup and programming for all ages (Women in UU History). \$3-5 suggested donation. Recipe by Chef Laura Thompson, Hungarian-inspired flavors.

When they hosted, "Green Sanctuary arrived to find the ingredients and recipe waiting for us in our fully equipped kitchen! No planning or effort on our part, just show up and cook together. We set to work cheerfully, humming to the music from the service,



chopping kale, carrots, onions, celery. We steamed the rice and mixed the corn bread. All simple, nourishing, pleasing tasks. Voila! A hearty lunch awaited the worshipers, and we served till everyone was satisfied. We even enjoyed doing the dishes as the final step together. I can't wait to try Laura's next soup! Thanks for the fun invitation." – Lynne Nittler

March 27, 9:30 & 11:15am, *Easter Hope and Hallelujah*; Rev. Beth Banks & Laura Thompson; Amethyst McKay, Worship Associate. UUism began as a liberal Christian faith. Our worship is inspired by Christian scripture as it applies to our human lives. How have we been changed by suffering? Consider the Committee on Ministry reflection (page 3) and think about your personal answer when you come to worship. Juuliebells & Sparks Choir perform.

After this service, we're ready for the April theme: Transformation! We've asked poets in our congregation to write poems of hope and healing. As you leave the sanctuary, reach into a basket and take home a poem; receive the gift of inspiration.

♦ **Adult Religious Exploration, Liberal Christianity Group:** For those who identify as a Christian or want to explore what liberal Christianity has to offer. 3rd Wednesdays, 7–8:30pm, in the Library. re@uudavis.org

Listen

Download or stream edited Sunday services at www.uudavispodcast.org



Attend **Interfaith Climate Conference**, March 5, St. James. Suffering is probably why we veer away from the topic of climate change. We picture adorable but threatened penguins and marmots and the distressing photos of floods, heat waves, and droughts. The suffering is palpable, and we turn away feeling helpless. Fortunately, there's so much we can do and the cumulative impact of small, individual actions adds up. For example, in January, Green Sanctuary cooked for SUUper Sunday. We came in and the recipe was laid out along with all the ingredients! What's more fun than chopping veggies with friends while the Sunday service wafts in through the speakers? Everyone was grateful for the warm, nutritious, and delicious (meatless) meal shared with friends. Meatless Monday—or Sunday—is one place to reduce suffering. When we eat lower on the food chain we help alleviate world hunger and cut emissions simultaneously. It's one simple thing we can do, with a big impact. Join us to learn more simple things we can do: www.cooldavis.org/news (scroll down). UU Green Sanctuary Co-Sponsor.



Act

Membership Meeting: Black Lives Matter, March 13, 12:30pm. Vote by written ballot (we'll enjoy cookies and singing while the votes are counted), Yes/No: "The Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis shall prominently display on church grounds a banner stating 'Black Lives Matter.'" UUCD Members may vote if they are age 18+, have been Members for 30+ days, and have made a pledge or financial contribution of record during the preceding 12 months. Quorum = 15% of Members; all are welcome to attend. Absentee and proxy ballots will not be accepted. No amendments.

Suffering from racism: Why I support the Black Lives Matter banner

Racism is still causing enormous suffering, despite the progress made since 1961, when I was in the second grade. At that time, a professional photographer hired to take class pictures at my elementary school in mostly white Eureka, CA, called my only African American classmate, Joseph, "Little Black Sambo." I listened to my teacher, Mrs. Turner, angrily correct the man, and later, back in our classroom, sternly warn us that such name-calling was insulting and would not be tolerated. Her respect for my classmate Joseph was palpable, as was her desire to avoid him suffering this insult again. Mrs. Turner taught a powerful lesson that day.

African Americans continue to suffer many types of insult, including a criminal justice system still rife with racism. Social science research has established that at all points of engagement, including arrest, prosecution, sentencing, and parole, blacks (and other people of color) are treated more aggressively and harshly than whites. The Centers for Disease Control Violent Death Database records 1.5 black deaths for every white death at the hands of police between 2009 and 2013. There are about six times as many whites as blacks in the United States.

The Black Lives Matter movement is standing up in the face of the unacceptable, yet widely accepted, unequal treatment of African Americans by a powerful branch of our own government. Thanks to Mrs. Turner, I am standing with them. I urge you to do the same, and endorse the display of a Black Lives Matter banner on our church property. Please attend and vote "yes" at our congregational meeting on March 13.

– Robin Datel, Co-chair, Social Justice Coordinating Committee