Foreword

by Rev. Susan Karlson

Baton Rouge Summer of 2016: Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge starts in early July after the killing of a black resident, Alton Sterling, by Baton Rouge police. Protests occur and the city police, photographed dancing and talking to the peaceful protesters earlier, are next depicted in riot gear when no riot has occurred. Fast forward to a Sunday worship when UCBR members hear police, helicopters and sirens, ubiquitous at this time. Later they discover that three Louisiana law enforcement officers have been killed that day. We learn their church is located near where the shootings took place. Fears, anger, and divisiveness shake everyone. Then the storm waters rise, physically flooding Baton Rouge and the surrounding communities, already experiencing emotional and spiritual flooding.

Baton Rouge Summer of 2016 represents more than just one congregation’s response. In this book, you will find people responding with tears and testimonials, feeling their feelings, telling their stories. Members share with one another but they also help each other think through what is needed. During critical incidents, the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry (UUTRM) often finds that people are flooded with feelings so that they can’t think; people can’t remember the coping mechanisms that usually work for them. UCBR shared feelings and experiences but they also thought about what was needed. They reorganized worship to include ritual and pastoral care, to tend to the people hurting and distraught and to outline what people could do and where they could go. As their senior minister, the Rev. Dr. Steve Crump, said, “You know more than I what you can do, so take that one extra step today to support what you can where you can.” They took up no offering that first week but gave examples of actions members could take, working in solidarity with Together Baton Rouge, the Interfaith Federation, Black Lives Matter, Black Lives UU and the Baton Rouge Walls Project or donating to those organizations.

Associate minister Rev. Nathan Ryan offers insightful testimonials, blog posts and sermons about what happened in the city and the congregation he loves. He writes a letter to the Baton Rouge City Council. He names his fears and captures hope emerging when people know Alton Sterling’s name, “the first time that a black person was killed in Louisiana and the nation paid attention.”

There are many riveting reflections and stirring poetry here: Bobby Thompson’s (UCBR’s volunteer Director of Social Justice) Rain; Emily Toth’s piece about refugees; Abel Thompson’s BR16; Venessa Lewis’ FloodMommas; and Leslie Grover’s Flood Testimonial about her own surreal experience in the flood are among them. People came up with a litany of deeply poignant and sometimes humorous names for the infamous Summer of 2016. Dottie Kelly, communications director, chronicles how UCBR helped organize volunteer efforts and donations in the wake of the flood.

Baton Rouge Summer of 2016 resonates with me since I worked as the Disaster Response Coordinator after Superstorm Sandy. Individually Unitarian Universalists did some really good work but generally our congregations were unprepared. We used every ounce of our reserves to keep things going PLUS
we responded to the needing community needs. Thus, the grant position of Disaster Response Coordinator was born. I often imagine how things could be better if Unitarian Universalist congregations learned about disaster preparedness, partnered with organizations serving the needs of frontline communities first hit by climate change, addressed environmental injustice, racism and oppression and worked within their communities BEFORE disasters struck.

UCBR offers us a look at one congregation’s response in real time to the disaster that was the Baton Rouge Summer of 2016. Take in their narrative and prepare yourselves for critical incidents, cultivating partnerships with frontline communities in your region. Insure that you are able to care for your own members but don’t stop there. Consider the partnerships that UCBR made with Together Baton Rouge, the Interfaith Foundation, the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal (in New Orleans), Black Lives Matter, Black Lives UU and the Baton Rouge Walls Project that help them to be more effective, responsive and resilient. They worked with the Dialogue on Race and Beloved Conversations before and they continue those programs still.

Will the Baton Rouge Summer of 2016 help them transform their congregation to be more active and responsive in their communities? We don’t know but it does seem they are poised to look deeply at their congregation and the intersection of racism, white supremacy, violence, and trauma in their midst after the Summer of 2016. The life cycle of a disaster points out that there are anniversaries when people may be triggered by loss and trauma. The one year anniversary is a good time to plan an annual vigil or service of remembrance to make sure people are taking care of themselves and each other while standing in solidarity with the communities that call them out of complacency and into just relationship.

This is a critical time in Unitarian Universalism with the issues of racism and white supremacy being called out. This book about the Baton Rouge Summer of 2016 is timely in that regard. The Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry board hopes this book will help congregations prepare for critical incidents through congregational assessments, plan Safety Teams, learn about long term recovery groups and organizations active in recovery and disaster. It is our hope that this book will be a catalyst for us to think more deeply about the intersection of systemic racism, interfaith efforts and trauma response.

Rev. Susan Karlson is a member of the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry. She serves on the Advisory Board of the Green Sanctuary and is a GreenFaith fellow. Susan has served as parish minister at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Gulfport, Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. She was the Disaster Response Coordinator for the Central East Region from 2013-2015 in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, organizing Unitarian Universalist volunteer trips and working with interfaith partners and community partners in devastated communities throughout the boroughs of NYC, Long Island, NY and New Jersey. She currently serves as a chaplain with Hospice Savannah in Savannah, Georgia.

Preface

This journal was compiled to chronicle the events of the summer of 2016 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and to foster an understanding of the same. This is not a complete synopsis of what happened; that would not be possible. Instead, this is a collection of one church’s attempts to cope with—and perhaps even name—inesvitc, violence, tragedy, sadness, grief, and racism.

This journal was created to help us discern the story of our summer from the perspective of the church’s ministers and members. We hope it will help you, the reader, to discern your own story.

We hope that we can all learn from this account of what one church, the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, learned in real time amidst a collection of tragedies.

July 3, the week in which Alton Sterling, a black Baton Rouge resident, was killed by police, marks the beginning of a tension-filled summer with conflicts between Baton Rouge residents, many, but not all of them black, and law enforcement officers, many, but not all of them white.

Later in the summer, historic flooding in central Louisiana devastated the homes and properties of Baton Rouge residents, black and white, without distinction, without mercy.

These are the events that framed the context of the summer of 2016, a summer impossible to put into words by those of us in the midst of it, although on September 11, we tried just that.

Organization

This document is organized by week, Sunday through Saturday. With the exception of the first and last weeks of our summer, July 3 and September 11, each week begins with an order of service.

In a standard service, readings accentuate the sermon, present interesting ideas, and different perspectives on the morning’s topic. Readings are usually taken from published authors. During the Summer of 2016, however, readings were often in the form of reflections given by Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge members. In that case, the reflections are included within the context of the service (in this document). Other, more formal readings, are listed alphabetically by author in the section entitled “Readings.”

As you read through the orders of service, please know that every Sunday service includes the Placement of Stones, in which the congregation is invited to place a stone in a Chalice bowl; the Lighting of the Chalice; and a Doxology.

Within this document, entries are placed in the order in which they were created with the exception of formal readings, which can be found under “Readings.” Footnotes are included to elaborate on acronyms, places, and events that might be unfamiliar to persons living outside of Baton Rouge.

About the Ministers

The Reverend Dr. Steve J. Crump

The Reverend Doctor Steve J. Crump, Unitarian Universalist Church Baton Rouge senior minister, has chief responsibilities of supervision of the staff along with the ministerial responsibilities of pastoral counseling, conducting worship services, celebrating rites of passage, teaching, preaching, writing, and working in areas of social justice both within the congregation and in community outreach. The Reverend Crump began his ministry at our church in 1983. He received his M.A. from the University of Chicago Divinity School and Doctorate of Ministry from Meadville-Lombard Theological School in Chicago.

The Reverend Nathan A. Ryan

The Reverend Nathan Ryan, associate minister, has served Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge since 2012. He is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist from Louisiana and was ordained by the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge congregation in the summer of 2013; it is the only ordination in Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge’s history.
Timeline: Alton Sterling was shot just past midnight on July 4, 2016

This week, the week that Alton Sterling, a black Baton Rouge resident, was killed by police, marks the beginning of a summer that began with tension between Baton Rouge citizens, many, but not all of them black, and law enforcement officers, many but not all of them white, and ended with historic flooding in central Louisiana, flooding that devastated the homes and property of Baton Rouge residents, black and white, without mercy.

Order of Service July 3

The July 3 Order of Service announced upcoming July services:

July 10:  Fear Itself—Religion, America, & Us
Consider the terrifying thrill of roller coasters, the horrific realities of everyday violence, our own fear, and the fear of others. The Reverend Darcy Roake returns to our pulpit and explores the work of “scare specialists,” the wisdom of the Hebrew Bible, and the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the context of recent fearful events.

July 17: Welcome Home
In this service, several church members reflect on how this church became their spiritual home. As you listen to their stories, think about your own experience in choosing to make this church a part of your life.

July 24: UU 101
Want a refresher on Unitarian Universalism? Ever wondered where this church came from? We’ll explore it this month. This is a great Sunday to bring a friend.

July 31: UU 201
Join us as we explore the deeper expressions of Unitarian Universalism. This is a great Sunday to bring a friend.

The July 3 service went off as planned. That would be the last time all summer that the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge had a normal service. After seeing how profound and important the July 10 Sunday would be in the life of Baton Rouge, Reverend Roake reworked the entire service. She and Reverend Crump spent most of Saturday, July 8, sending ideas back and forth. They decided to toss the Order of Service and create a new worship service that would serve the congregation in its current state—outraged, worried, yearning for justice.
When I was 12 more than half of the white adults in the city I was raised voted for the former grand wizard of the kkk to be their next governor. When I was 25 I watched the president of my country do nothing for days while tens of thousands of, mostly black, mostly poor, New Orleanians were abandoned after the levees my country built couldn’t keep them safe. Just a couple of months ago my legislature responded to the Black Lives Matter movement – that is to say black people demanding that their very lives be valued – by passing a Blue Lives Matter bill.

While I was heartbroken when I heard of Alton Sterling’s death, even worse, my first thought wasn’t “How could this happen here?” Instead it was “How could this not happen here?” Sadly, it is not a surprise that a man would be killed by a police officer in the black half of my city, where over the past 12 months more than 50 people have been killed by guns with virtually no national media coverage.

The easy explanation is to say that this is a bad cop. The easy explanation is to say that Mr. Sterling shouldn’t have had a gun. The easy explanation is to say it was an aberration, or that it is something isolated to Louisiana or the south. But today does not call for an easy explanation.

This country was founded on the backs of enslaved people. This country’s economic prosperity is directly tied with the devastation of black bodies. The entire system was built to give people who look like me safety and wealth at the expense of black people.

Alton Sterling’s death is not an aberration. It is the system acting exactly as it was designed. But I see hope in the response. I see hope in the fact that the nation is, for the first time I can remember, saying that a black man killed in Louisiana or the south shouldn’t have been.

I see hope in the fact that Alton Sterling’s death is not invisible.

I believe in a God that is a perpetual march towards justice. I believe the system can and will be changed. I believe that his family deserves justice. I believe that each generation our world gets a little closer to justice.

#BlackLivesMatter #AltonSterling

Dawn Chanet Collins
July 8
Citizens want to know where the city’s “leadership” is #WhereIsKip

Nathan Ryan
July 6 Baton Rouge

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#BlackLivesMatter #AltonSterling
Together Louisiana is a statewide network of more than 250 religious congregations and civic organizations across Louisiana, representing more than 200,000 people. It is considered one of the largest grassroots organizations in the history of Louisiana. Its mission is to give faith and community-based organizations an opportunity to develop leadership in their members and affect change that they could not achieve alone. Together Louisiana is working on issues that include tax fairness, access to healthcare, access to healthy food, workforce development, criminal justice reform, reforming payday lending and improving infrastructure and transportation.

Black Lives of UU provides information, resources, and support for Black Unitarian Universalists and works to expand the role and visibility of Black UUs within Unitarian Universalism.

The objective of the MURAL HOME PROGRAM is to offer 20 of Baton Rouge’s unemployed youth an opportunity to assist 10 internationally recognized public artists in painting 10 derelict houses in the Old South Baton Rouge Community over a period of 6 months, transforming the property and the youth in the process.

July 10 - 17

Timeline: July 10th major demonstration at the State Capitol

This was an unusual service in at least two ways. For one thing, our guest minister, Reverend Darcy Roakes, reworked her homily the morning of in order to reflect current local events, and two, the church did not pass an offering plate. Instead, in the spirit of honoring the moral imagination of the Baton Rouge community, Reverend Crump asked that instead of passing an offering plate, the congregation take action steps in support of initiatives that have sprung from the imagination of this community. Steve asked that we:

- Go to the vigil that afternoon at 4:00 p.m.
- Email Steve Crump, senior minister, or Bobby Thompson, social justice director, to join Together Louisiana.
- Give to Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge with the explicit purpose of furthering the work of Black Lives Matter or give to Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism through the UUA.
- Give to the Museum of Public Art to support the Mural House Program in Old South Baton Rouge.
- Rest, engage in nature, arts, God (if that is what your body is telling you).

Order of Service July 10

Congregational Hymns
- Blessed Spirit of My Life
- How Do you Mend a Broken Heart?
- Voice Still and Small
- We Are a Gentle, Angry People
- Winds Be Still

In addition, we listened to recordings of the Reverend Al Green performing "How Do You Mend a Broken Heart?" and Nina Simone performing "I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to Be Free."
I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which will carry the present situation of our Nation impels. [See APP note, below.] This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14473

Conversations
by Reverend Darcy Roake

Act 1: Conversation

I don’t claim to understand it, but I do know that the world spins as it spins, the spirit moves as it moves, and great words are pushed aside for powerful emotions—pain, anger, confusion, and, yes, fear, as, in fact, the words I planned for today’s homily were pushed aside and transformed as the spirit moved.

This week, three tragic events have dominated our minds and hearts. Alton Sterling, a citizen in your own beautiful Baton Rouge, was killed by police. Philando Castile, a citizen in St. Paul, Minnesota, was killed by police. Roshon Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, and Lorne Ahrens were killed by a lone sniper, Micah Thompson, who also died, at a peaceful Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas. There have also been other countless joys and sorrows in your own lives. The world continues to spin. But this tragic week, these three events will frame the context for our journey in three acts. This is our time of conversation. There will be a time for lamentation. And finally, we will search for moral imagination.

Our time together will not be everything to everyone. But it will be something to someone. You are Unitarian Universalists. You are dear to me.

When I worked as a Chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital, my biggest fear was the knock. That moment when I needed to enter a room of a patient that didn’t know me from Adam (or Eve in my case), a patient that may have an angry visceral reaction to me based on my gender, religion, hospital affiliation—you name it. Reactions based less on who I am and more on what I represent. The knock also engendered the fear that I, a 20-something who had yet to truly experience life as it is, would be safe. I needed to be protected. And that protection was a system of checks and balances. I was perhaps too wide. That spark of divine connection never truly lit. But mostly, connections burned blindingly bright. I shared Tupperware meals with a 15-cousin family and blessed a man’s hands, feet, head, and heart. I witnessed solitary deaths and rejoiced in small miracles. Something—grace, humanity, God—was fear realized—death, pain, suffering, misunderstanding, isolation. That lead to real-life consequences in our laws and in our lives. Alton Sterling killed for the crime of selling CDs. Philando Castle killed for a broken taillight. Eric Garner killed for selling loose cigarettes. Tamir Rice killed for playing in a park. It seems that there is little space in this vast country where people of color can ever feel safe in their bodies or when their children ever, ever walk out their door. And our own “Yes, of course” or smaller “misunderstandings” that Claudia Rankine writes of in “Citizen” seem to come too late if they come at all. Don’t they? See Claudia Rankine in “Readings.”

In 1942, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the very same President who warned us against “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror,” signed an executive order for the relocation and incarceration of almost 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, the majority of them American citizens. More than 50 years later came an official apology from the US government for this cowardly act.

Perhaps in a time so many conflicting emotions it is not the time to warn us all of how unreasoning fear can so easily infect us. Also, perhaps no time is better. Let us remember, even amidst our confusion, hurt, mourning and rage, that seemingly moral, right-thinking people fall prey to fear. It can happen to them. It can happen to us. Or, perhaps more appropriately, we may remain silent amidst unreasoning fear. In this silence we are complicit. Black Lives Matter. Alton Sterling’s life in Baton Rouge mattered. It matters to a family and community who will never, ever be the same. It matters to a community that even now has members sitting in Baton Rouge jail cells after another call-to-action protest last night. We must knock.

Something has crashed (or perhaps opened) not just this week, but this year, from Orlando to Istanbul, Baton Rouge to Britain, taking a form whose shape we are not yet able to discern.

It is real to fear death or the loss of someone you love deeply. It is real, and monumentally unjust and sinful that Unitarian Universalists of color and people of color across the United States fear continually for the lives of their children at the hands of the State.

It is real to fear that our democratic process, our interdependent web, our belief in the inherent worth of human life and dignity, may come to ashes.

It is real to fear disconnection and isolation. We have people in this Congregation, in this faith, in this world who can teach us a thing or two about real fear. I don’t know you as much as I’d like, but I do know a bit of your history. I know as a Congregation you’ve encountered deep tragedy such as the deaths of members and loved ones, some through violence, natural disasters, illness, pain. I also know that you continue to work to understand how the very ground we plant our feet on today in this sanctuary was the site of deep tragedy, the enslavement of 44 human beings.

You are here today. You are surviving. Some days, barely, but you are here. If that’s not hope, it’s also not hopelessness.

Let us lament.

Act 2: Lamentation

Our Universalist faith tells us of a God of immense love and mercy. It tells us that all souls, whether sinful, lost, or alienated, will ultimately be reconciled through this great love.

Our Universalism tells us, too, that it is our responsibility—to bring the spark of divinity forward into THIS world. There is always work to be done; there is work that we will do.

Today was a knock for me—speaking to a beloved community that barely knows me—in a time of immense suffering. Most days—as a minister, as a human being living in a body of a white woman trying to do things, particularly in our nation’s justice system—I include to try to know other people’s experiences that I can never do. I am knocking to engage as a person of faith—engage my blindness, my comfort, and my fear. My fear that this engagement will leave me forever changed. And I am forever changed.

“The nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes” that Roosevelt spoke of in our reading today is a different fear than the knock. It is a fear that is manufactured for us and by us to separate us. Think of the recent comments in our Presidential elections about people of the Muslim faith, the hateful legislation surrounding transgender folks, and now most heartbreakingly, the fear that has been stoked for generations by our United States—unreasoning fear of and violence to people of color. Unreasoning fear that lead to real-life consequences in our laws and in our lives.

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Readings
• Lisa D’Ooge: The Cup of Life
• Claudia Rankine: You and Your Partner
• Thomas D. Roosevelt: Fear Itself: Religion, America & US (excerpt)
And yet, and yet, in the chaos of this week, this month, this year, the Biblical Lamentations 2: 11 cries out:

“My eyes fail from weeping, 
I am in torment within; 
my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, 
because children and infants faint in the streets of the city.”

In the following moments I ask that you cry out a name, a feeling, a prayer, a hope, a despair. Heaven Help Us All. Lament.

**Act 3: Moral Imagination**

So where do we go from here? I do not claim to know. But I try to imagine.

In his book Moral imagination: The Art & Soul of building Peace, John Paul Lederach speaks of peacebuilding as a learned skill and art. This art requires a worldview shift, a creative act Lederach deems the moral imagination.

Seeing the world and its people in entirely new forms, entirely new ways. Finding connections, building relationships, building empathy and, slowly, slowly envisioning something new in ourselves and in the world.

We sometimes call on our moral imagination, and sometimes it calls on us.

When the deeply Christian Leo Tolstoy began the novel Anna Karenina, the tragic tale of a woman who, in 19th century Russia, leaves her husband and child and “respectable” society to pursue a passionate affair, he intended it as a morality tale on the evils of adultery. But the more he wrote Anna, the more he empathized with her, the more he understood the plight of a woman trapped in a stifling world where her worth and security were tied not to who she was married. Tolstoy’s moral imagination got the better of him. By book’s end, Anna’s unraveling becomes less a lesson in the morality of one woman than an indictment of the hypocrisy and cruelty of a patriarchal society. Anna becomes a flesh and blood character, flawed and beautiful, not simply a tool for a tale to be told.

In today’s world, in this moment, we are seeing moral imagination play out in the work of Black Lives Matter activists and supporters throughout the country and in Louisiana in particular. And lest we forget, people of color have always used their moral imaginations. They had to, to survive in this world. Some of us were given a comfortable space in a small box. No imagination needed.

So now, amidst a world of chaos, can we ever, all of us, use our moral imaginations to create a world of empathy, to create something radically new? Your guess is as good as mine. But I do know we can knock.

So In the words of Reverend Crump, “You know more than I what you can do, so take that one extra step today to support what you can where you can.”

Let us breathe in together, gird ourselves, and go to work.

You are Unitarian Universalists, and you are dear to the world.

Amen.

*Benediction* by Reverend Darcy Roake

There is too much hardship in this world to not find joy, every day

There is too much injustice in this world to not right the balance, every day

There is too much pain in this world to not heal, every day

Each of us ministers to a weary world.

Let us go forth now and do that which calls us to make this world more loving, more compassionate, and more filled with the grace of divine presence, every day

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*FACEBOOK POST*

Dawn Chanet Collins
July 10
Youth-Led Protest inspires diverse participation #AltonSterling #PhilandoCastile #TheWave #YouthOrganizing

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Youth-Led Protest inspires diverse participation #AltonSterling #PhilandoCastile #TheWave #YouthOrganizing
July 10: Organized by high school students from the Baton Rouge Youth Coalition

The tragic killing in 1992 of Yoshi Hattori, a Japanese exchange student, and the ensuing push for gun-control legislation spearheaded by his Unitarian host family and supported by many members of the congregation, resulted in worldwide exposure for the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge. At the dedication of Peace Stones on the church grounds in 1996, Reverend Steve Crump called the one on the left, “Fear Less,” and the other on the right, “Love More.” In memory of Yoshi, the Peace Stones symbolize UCBR’s ongoing quest for peace and justice for all peoples.

I am not sure what happened for the police to start throwing tear gas at the crowd today. I left before that happened; however, I do know that now more than ever people need to start opening their eyes to love. Martin Luther King, Jr., says it best. Let us follow his lead. My heart goes out to the innocent people who are there now dealing with the mayhem. Be safe. Stay on the side of love. Do not get blinded by fear. Do not follow the footsteps of violence.

People protested after a Baton Rouge police officer showed no restraint and killed a man. The Baton Rouge police responded to the protests by showing no restraint.

This is not one bad cop. One bad cop does not send military weapons and military vehicles into peaceable neighborhoods. One bad cop does not send hundreds of police officers in riot gear in military alignment into peaceable neighborhoods.

I hope someone is investigating who is sending these orders.

I understand cops are afraid. Their job can be terrifying. We need police to keep us safe. These are not behaviors that keep people safe.

Also, those sound cannons the police are using have been known to cause permanent sensorineural hearing loss.

#BlackLivesMatter #AltonSterling
It's a brutal time for my hometown, Baton Rouge, and the nation. I have felt shock, anger, fear and hopelessness. As an adult, I have learned how lucky I was to be raised in white privilege. As I savored the meal, I realized the staff and patrons were a diverse group. Black and Hispanic and Asian working and eating side by side. We carry our own trays now and we break bread together too. This simple thing, a diverse gathering of people eating and working together would have been impossible to imagine 50 years ago. I do, however, miss the piano.

I've heard over and over this week that things are worse than ever. But I realized at church and at Piccadilly that they are not. What has changed is technology. Because of videos, smart phones, and social media, we are now seeing for the first time what has been happening all along. Many still delude themselves and want to blame the victim. It's hard to change what you believe to be true. I'm a bit of a Pollyanna, but I'm not naive. I feel a glimmer of hope. We have moved forward. It's a slow, painful and often brutal journey. As my minister said, I believe in a God that moves us toward justice. I have to believe that love and peace and justice will win the day.

My sweetie was raised Catholic, but I can bribe him to come with me to my church if I tell him we're going to Piccadilly afterwards.

This Sunday may sound the same as the segregated southern town I grew up in, but a time traveler from 1966 who landed in 2016 would not recognize it. I drifted away from the Southern Baptist church during my college years. As I got older, the answers it offered to life's difficult questions no longer made sense to me. I found the Unitarian Church when I was expecting my biracial daughter. Her father is Chinese and Buddhist, and many of her cousins are Muslim. It was important to me to find a faith community that was not going to tell her that her father and family were going to Hell because they weren't "saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, amen."

What I didn't know when I joined 26 years ago, was the church's history of social activism. The Baton Rouge church began in the turbulent 60s when bus boycotts and downtown riots were happening. It was always a church where blacks and whites could worship and strive toward justice together. This was an idea that was so threatening to some that in the 60s the church was visited by the K.K.K. and told to stop. But the church didn't stop, and we still come together to strive for a more just world more than 50 years later.

This is the church I attended Sunday to be uplifted. It's my place to grieve the past week in sacred community. It's a place to support the protesters and the cops. It's a place where we try to envision a more just community. It's a different kind of church than the one in which I was raised.

After my spirit was comforted, I got my southern comfort food fix. I deluded myself into thinking I was eating healthy because I was just eating vegetables—cooked in butter and bacon—and I didn't get that slice of pecan pie. We were in our Sunday best, and I realized with a sip of sweet tea that Baton Rouge has changed since my childhood. As I savored the meal, I realized the staff and patrons were a diverse group. Black and Hispanic and Asian working and eating side by side. We carry our own trays now and we break bread together too. This simple thing, a diverse gathering of people eating and working together would have been impossible to imagine 50 years ago. I do, however, miss the piano.

I've heard over and over this week that things are worse than ever. But I realized at church and at Piccadilly that they are not. What has changed is technology. Because of videos, smart phones, and social media, we are now seeing for the first time what has been happening all along. Many still delude themselves and want to blame the victim. It's hard to change what you believe to be true. I'm a bit of a Pollyanna, but I'm not naive. I feel a glimmer of hope. We have moved forward. It's a slow, painful and often brutal journey. As my minister said, I believe in a God that moves us toward justice. I have to believe that love and peace and justice will win the day.

My sweetie was raised Catholic, but I can bribe him to come with me to my church if I tell him we're going to Piccadilly afterwards.

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Hangin at the Triple S
By George Judy

Brown Lives
White Lives
Black Lives
No Matter.
Corner Convenience.
Pickin’ up a six pack
Full of no harm; no foul...
Blue Lives
On the job
Takin’ the call
Suspicious facts:
Aggressive and armed
Hustlin’ CDs, dispelin’ Diss-order,
Triggerin’ unclear but present danger

Black. Blue.
Distrusted Lives.
Busted Lives
Provokin’ anger.
Don’t move! Don’t run!
If you move you’re—
Gun! 1

Provokin’ anger.
Busted Lives
Don’t move! Don’t run!

Reverend James Bevel
Rollin’ down the road
I didn’t know to keep my mouth shut
I didn’t know to keep my mouth shut

Back at the Triple S

Amendin’ my mind
Second by Second
Expendin’ rounds;
Growin’ heavier
In my hand,
Still warm too,
The weight of the weapon,
Found.
Lost.

Black Body
Still warm,
On the ground.

Purple
Gray
Silver Transmission Fluid;

Weepin’ from the riddled
Black Body
Still warm,
On the ground.

Lost.

Point tippin’ and tightenin’
The dark, dampenin’ Dew

Just Streams
No Starts.
No Screams.
Enforced Confusion.
Excessive Silence.

5 6 Conclusion.
4 Gone
3 Serve
2 Protect
3 Serve

4 Gone
S 6 Conclusion.
Excessive Silence.
Enforced Confusion.
No Starts. No Screams.

Just Streams

Of un-dammed Conscience...
The dark, dampenin’ Dew
Point tippin’ and tightenin’

My chest
My heart
My collar
My breath.
No trees stranglin’ strange fruit
Just cameras closin’ the Local Noose

Circlin’,
Workin’
Suspendin’
Descendin’

From a long line once heard by a bunch of Dead
White Jerks;

Forgotten;

FACEBOOK POST

Marie Flowers
July 12
Working @ Triple S voter registration booth

Hangin’ at the Triple S.

Skin in the Game and 4 Conversation Tips

Skin color and police force have defined this month in my community. Many of us feel that one is undervalued, the other used in excess, and opposing views on these topics have become uncomfortably heated on social media and in conversations. Unfortunately, the impotency of many heated exchanges has paralyzed true communication and stretched the divide, mostly notably among white friends and family.

I haven’t struggled to find my position on the topics, but I have struggled to find my voice, an effective voice.

I’m putting my skin in the game.

In my middle-aged whiteness, I’ve reached back to my own experiences to find truths in current events.

I know skin color matters.

Flashback 39 years ago. I was head lifeguard of the city pool of a small town. I had a twenty-minute commute to work on a rural highway, up a Smokey foothill, and I loved to speed.

The inevitable happened: one afternoon, a sheriff’s deputy pulled me over. I was doing about 90 mph in a 50 mph zone.

What didn’t happen? I didn’t get a ticket, not even a written warning. Just a verbal, “You need to slow down on these highways, missy.”

I know my skin color mattered. The blond hair and golden tan were fortuitous as well.

I know some policemen use excessive force.

Flash forward 20 years from my unticketed speeding stop. I was a young mother, leaving a city park with my 7, 4, and 2-year-old children. We were leaving the way we came in and the only way I knew out of the park.

A cop held up his hand to stop me. I rolled down my window, “I’m just trying to get out.”

“You need to . . .!”

“I said turn around! Now!”

“But how can I . . .?”

He slapped his hand on my windshield, next to my inspection sticker and inspected the date. (Whew! It’s current.)

His face was red as he screamed louder and louder. My kids joined in, screaming, crying, terrified by this man in blue with one hand on a gun and another slapping my windshield and pointing us in the other direction.

I submitted, turned around, pulled over a few minutes to collect myself.

I stepped back from the airline of and toward the direction of my Blanco.

Flash forward 20 years from my unticketed speeding stop.

I’m putting my skin in the game.

I’ve reached back to my own experiences to find truths in current events.

I know some policemen use excessive force.

I have struggled to find my voice, an effective voice.

I have struggled to find my position on the topics.

I have struggled to find my voice, an effective voice.

Most policemen don’t but I know that policeman used unnecessary force. But the Force did not want to engage in real conversation about it.
Furthermore, I know my skin color mattered, again. It’s speculation, but not ludicrous to imagine that my perceived impropriety would have had less a trivial outcome for a black parent.

Sadly, this statement is not facetious: “I’m white, so I lived to write the story.”

The disastrous marriage of racial prejudice and excessive police force is nothing new in this country. The problem isn’t escalating. The difference now is that the ubiquitous camera and the activist movements are pulling away the veil and exposing the inequities and crimes. We have work to do. All of us. This work requires unity and conversation.

Stay in the Conversation

Staying in the conversation is strenuous. Standing in the middle to work through a conflict is challenging, sometimes confusing. But bringing our voices and efforts together is the only way through.

If the conversation and the conflict aren’t over and you throw your hands up (“I’m done!” “I’m over it!”), you also surrender your voice and will not be part of the conversation or solution.

What is conversation?

This is what it’s not. It’s not a bumper sticker. It’s not a tirade of insults. It’s not a clever tweet. It’s not a series of Facebook slaps. It’s not one-sided.

Conversation is a communicative exchange, a give and take. Two sides. Two tasks. Listen. Speak.

The Center for Nonviolent Communication offers information and training in what is sometimes called compassionate communication, a process developed in the 60s. The NVC website details its mission and principles. Their communicative model is the takeaway that could help guide us through conversation around conflict:

The LISTEN side of this NVC model is painfully absent in most “discussions” about race and police abuse. I’ve steered clear of most interpersonal and social media “conversations” on the topic, not because I’m unsure about my position, but because most seem to deteriorate into an escalating series of taunts and baseless but orange! but apples, but elephants! comparisons.

For my part, I’m listening, lifting my voice in prayer and peace as I seek real conversation. I want more communicative and unifying communication, so I offer these four tips for jumping into, out of, or clear of a conversation:

If you’re not informed, steer clear. Listen and read before you jump in. If you haven’t done your homework, you don’t have any ground to stand on as you express an opposing view.

If you have something to offer, express it with respect, empathy, even love. Dagger tongues and poison pens never advance a conversation or solution, especially not on social media platforms.

If the conversation is about apples, don’t jump in with oranges and elephants, unless the point is fruit genus or size (apple vs elephant mouth). Tackle one conflict at a time.

If the other parties diminish the conversation by trying to sustain it with barbs and misinformation, jump out! My dear cousin recently advised my daughter during a Facebook conversation scuffle with a quote that (malus vs. citrus)advance a conversation or solution, especially not on social media platforms.

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If the other parties diminish the conversation by trying to sustain it with barbs and misinformation, jump out! My dear cousin recently advised my daughter during a Facebook conversation scuffle with a quote that Brent Brown shared on her website: “Don’t try to win over the haters. You’re not the jackass whisperer (Scott Stratten).”

Empathetic and Responsible Reading and Listening

I saw a meme last week that said: “We’re drowning in information but starving for wisdom.” Seek out thoughtful, factual articles and commentaries.

Racial Equity

If you’re asking yourself, “What can I do?”, this post by Justin Cohen offers good advice for white folks who want to be an ally.

If your response to Black Lives Matter is All Lives Matter! or Blue Lives Matter!, there is a misunderstanding, and chances are you haven’t visited the BLM website or read the guiding principles. This is not a “we matter, but you don’t” movement.

Police Misconduct

This article explains General Honoré’s thoughts on the militarized response in my city. I was appalled that this is what protesters faced at the conclusion of their peaceful march.

That said, I’m not anti-cop. Our police forces have an exciting, thankless, and underpaid job. That doesn’t excuse misconduct. I am anti-misconduct. I expect the police force to own and address the problems in their ranks, and the law to hold officers responsible for misconduct.

Coming Together

Real conversations aimed at uniting us are happening online and in real spaces. Join in. Put your skin in the game. Listen with empathy. Express yourself honestly. Come together. Be part of the solution.

July 17 - 23

Timeline: Three law enforcement officers were shot and killed on July 17.

At the time of the first morning service on July 17—the annual Worship Guild Service—we didn’t know why police cars and military helicopters were speeding past the sanctuary windows on Sunday morning, July 17.

Many church members assumed they were rushing to another protest at the police station. The police station, just a block from the church, had seen two weeks of protest in response to the video of a white police officer shooting Alton Sterling, a young black man, in the chest on July 5. Hundreds who peacefully protested were arrested by officers in full riot gear. We didn’t know that less than an hour before we started the service, a man from Kansas shot three law enforcement officers just one block from the church.

We started the 9:30 service not knowing what was happening around us. The speakers had to pause time and time again as sirens blared past the church. In between the two Sunday morning services we learned what had happened. (Actually, we didn’t have accurate information. We wouldn’t have that until Sunday evening.)

We decided to go ahead with the 11:15 service. We told church members that we knew what was going on, but for a sake of normalcy, we would deliver the service as planned.

The Worship Guild led a service that explored what it is to be a Unitarian Universalist. At the heart of this annual service, which has taken many forms over the past years, are the diverse and personal stories of our church members and their UU experiences.

The theme was “Welcome Home.” The church members who share their stories answered some or all of the following three questions:

• What do I remember about my first time attending this church?
• What made me decide to sign a pledge card?
• How did I know this was my church home?

The congregation was asked to reflect on their own experiences as they listened.

Order of Service July 17

Congregational Hymns

• Come and Go With Me
• Find a Stillness
• I’m Going to Go Back There Someday
• Love Will Guide Us

We also listened to a recording of Lionel Bart performing “Where is Love?”

Readings

• James Luther Adams: I Call That Church Free
Conversations by Church Members

Conversation 1: Scott Ross

Why I’m a Unitarian: I remember the first time I came to this church; it was in 1978, almost 38 years ago. My friend and I were heading east on Goodwood Blvd. when we passed up the driveway and had to make a U-turn. There was only a small sign by the street. It was the “Wayside Pulpit,” or as it was often called, the Wayward Pulpit. “The message was replaced frequently with a good, uplifting, or thought-provoking message. The Church was set way back in the southeast corner of a large parcel of land. The service was held in what is now the Fellowship Hall. I don’t remember the service that day, I do remember coffee, in little ceramic coffee cups with saucers and small stirring spoons. We went back several times. We even attended a Jazz Brunch where people ate qui creole while a really good piano player jazzed it up.

Cindy, the friend that introduced me to this church, was to become my wife about a year later. She had learned about Unitarian Universalism from her older brother. She was an active member of the UU church in Shreveport but had moved to Baton Rouge to finish her education at LSU. She had moved next to me in a rundown apartment near campus. We joined the church in the fall of 1981. Our new-member party was combined with a going-away party for the minister that preceded Steve Crump.

I grew up in an Episcopal church in suburban New Orleans that my parents helped found. My older brother and I attended Sunday school, where there were the usual Bible stories, good lessons from both the old and new testaments, and an emphasis of “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” When I reached high school, we were segregated by gender. I can’t for the life of me understand why they did that. To counter this, I got involved with my church’s youth group, where there were girls as well as boys from my elementary school.

A lot of us joined “In His Name,” a folk-mass group with members from about ten Episcopal churches all over New Orleans. I was a singer and a beginner guitar player. In a way, I felt like a hypocrite. I didn’t believe most of what I was singing, but I was lost in the power of the music and the camaraderie of our performances. I was a singer and a beginner guitar player. In a way, I felt like a hypocrite. I didn’t believe most of what I was singing, but I was lost in the power of the music and the camaraderie of our performances.

We started attending the church regularly after our daughter Lily was born. Two years later, Colin was born and became a member of our family and of the church. I realized how much I had missed the extended family of a church. I was still amazed that there was a church that accepted my beliefs as jumbled up they were and still are. We had a place where we could raise kids with a well-rounded religious background free of superstition and fear.

Conversation 2: Lily Betancourt

What do I remember about my first day at the UU Fellowship in Baton Rouge? Although spirituality has always played a major role in my life, I never imagined I would join a church again. At 13, I broke up with the Catholic Church, which was one of the most important decisions I ever made in my life. I suddenly knew nothing, and that openness allowed for intuition and curiosity to guide me through some incredibly intense revelations about who I was and what I valued. Then one day, out of pure dumb luck, my husband and I stumbled across a documentary called Raw Faith, about a UU minster named Marilyn Sewell. This was our first exposure to Unitarian Universalism, and it piqued our interest enough to do some research.

Suddenly, after almost 20 years of not attending a single church service, I found myself willingly walking into one with my two impressionable young kids in tow. I wish I could tell you that I walked in, the clouds parted and I felt instantly at peace, but that’s not what happened. I was really, really scared. I was worried that the old feelings of shame and judgment would come back, or worse yet that my kids would be fed some crazy, self-serving propaganda (because why do they take them into a separate room?) Obviously something nefarious was going on!

However, the sermon Reverend Steve Crump gave that day was intelligent and profound. We met Dottie Kelly whose beautiful, calm energy made me feel instantly at peace. So we decided to implement the same philosophy we use when starting a new TV show: you never judge solely on the pilot. You gotta give it at least two episodes. We came back the following week, and shortly after that took the Roots class. You see, we were still waiting for the rug to be yanked out from under us and we thought “aha! This is where we discover their secret, evil plan to control the universe!” Instead, even through the lens of skepticism, we found that it actually WASN’T too good to be true. This was a community of people dedicated to respecting, loving and making space for everyone, in spite of their shortcomings and because of their differences.

Why did I sign a card and why is it my church home? This church stands firm in its commitment to justice and equality, not just in words but through actions. Its members are brave and openly share their differing beliefs, doubts, and insecurities. This congregation is not afraid to say “I don’t know.” That is due in part because we hold journey and exploration sacred; everyone is allowed and encouraged to curate their own experience. The Religious Education program encourages our kids to ask questions and find out who they are and what they believe instead of spoon-feeding them our own flawed ideas.

Nathan’s sermons leave me raw and cracked open; I find myself thinking about them for weeks. My experience. The Religious Education program encourages our kids to ask questions and find out who they are and what they believe instead of spoon-feeding them our own flawed ideas.

We have here is special. Coming here on Sundays reminds me to be grateful because I am very, very lucky. Thank you all for welcoming me and my family, for spreading love, tolerance, patience, and acceptance.

Conversation 3: Leslie T. Grover

What do I remember about my first time attending this church? I am the type of person who pays close attention to intuition – that feeling of energy that feels like an innate “yes” or “no,” in nearly all things. I look for a common energy in people, places, things and experiences. My first time attending this church, there was simply a feeling of “yes.” I remember how nice and welcoming the congregation was, but more than that, I remember feeling intellectually and spiritually at home during the services. While I am not exactly a social butterfly, I found it easy to talk, relax and engage after the service with one or two people.

I did not know it at the time, but that feeling was simply the energy of agape love—a brotherly love that transcends and serves regardless of circumstances.
What made me decide to sign a pledge card? I decided to sign a pledge card simply because my mind, heart, and spirit were all on one accord regarding the church. The love energy that I felt at my first time here was something I wanted to proliferate and give back to the church itself. As I sat in the Roots classes and learned more and more about Unitarianism, I wanted to support the church in any way that I could. I have always been a bit of an outsider. I don’t mind being one, and part of me takes pride in not seeing this world through typical eyes, but this church was a place I wanted to belong. To me, the pledge card represented a way to do that.

How did I know this was my church home? On a deeper spiritual level, I think I have always known this church was my church home. There were always clues that made me feel ownership in this church and the desire to be in covenant with this church. However, it is the past few weeks that have shown me that this church, without a doubt, is my home. Having a place to feel emotionally at ease and spiritually supported is something I have not experienced since childhood. When I went to church as a child, I felt protected. I knew that no matter what problem or issue I experienced, I could somehow turn to God or my parents, or just pray, and it would be okay. But then the protections of childhood gave way to adulthood: disappointments, abusive relationships, uncomfortable self-actualizations, death of childhood friends, illness, and other foibles in life that are not always easily understood. The rose-colored glasses had been shattered, and the view ahead was not always positive, easy, or predictable.

Like others, I still don’t always know the answers to hard questions. Sometimes I make the wrong decisions. I disappoint myself. I am sure I disappoint others, too. I question the universe. I question God. I question myself. Horrible things happen on a daily basis to people in this community. I work to make things better in my small way. I fail. I make mistakes. I fall short. I try again. There are times I am raw with hurt and overwhelmed with emotions. Until now, no other church I have attended as an adult has provided me with the agape love and support I felt in my hometown church as a kid—a small close knit church in which my father is a deacon and my mother the church musician.

This church is the adult version of my small church whose name I lift up—New Town Missionary Baptist Church. At this church I am part of the fabric, and that fabric covers me as I grow spiritually and become the theologian that Nathan sometimes talks about while proceeding with the kindness that Steve mentions so often. I now understand what it means to live in faith because this church is about more than the church itself; it is about building up others, ourselves, and this community.

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I knew this church was my home when I got to be Leslie, whomever she is, in all her iterations with all her heart. I knew this church was my home when I could shine out my heart and feel that love and acceptance shined back onto me from those sharing the church experience with me in a way that transcended race, gender, social standing, and even belief systems. For this type of love, I am grateful.

Oppertory: Bobby Thompson

In the wake of everything that has been happening abroad and right here at home. I find myself emotionally exhausted. It is another reason I am so grateful for this church. It is my oasis in the middle of the desert, my shelter from the storm.

A group from this church just finished the Dialogue on Race, a curriculum provided by DOA Louisiana, an organization we support. These dialogues are held all over the city and have been for many years. You can go on their website or their Facebook site for times and places for the next dialogue. The curriculum is not as important as the dialogue. Now a spoiler alert: Yvonne V. Delk has written an article in which she gives a strategy to eliminate racism. She says:

We must start from a historical perspective and not just our individual perspective. Know the legacy we are living.

The focus must be on systemic racism and not primarily on prejudice or bias. Racism is a systemic phenomenon; it does not require individual racist acts.

We must start from the perspective of truth-telling and stop the denial that racism exists. “To be white in America is to benefit from a system of power and privilege—whether or not one has ever uttered a racist thought or committed a racist act.

We must be color-conscious and not color blind. If you don’t see my color you don’t see me—my history, my culture, my pain, or the injustice of racism.

We must recognize that the work for change begins in those systems that we are part of, beginning with our churches.

And that’s exactly what we are doing here at this church. The Beloved Conversations’ are coming back next month. If you didn’t make it the last time, here is another chance. It shows us ways that we can be a more welcoming and open church community.

Together Baton Rouge, of which we are a member institution, is working on a plan of action to address the acute problem of excessive force by the police as well as the systemic problems of racial inequality here in Baton Rouge.

Because of work we do at this church, I ask that you give generously so we can continue to be a force for good in this community. Baton Rouge needs us now more than ever. Thank you.
Baton Rouge mourns the July 17 loss of three police officers in the aftermath of the shooting of Alton Sterling.

Violence is not unknown to our city or our nation. Our church community has responded to violence in the past, and we found ourselves responding to it again in July of 2016.

As ministers, we knew that many in our congregation, in our state, and our city were weary, angry, and afraid. Many black people had been asking for justice for a long time and that justice seemed as out of reach as ever. We knew that many in the city were scared after seeing militarized professionals on the streets of Baton Rouge. We knew that police officers had been working atrocious hours in atrocious heat. And so we met for worship, even on July 17 when we learned just after we sang the closing hymn of our 9:30 a.m. service that three police officers were gunned down after responding to a call about a suspicious person with an assault rifle.

We decided to continue with our 11:00 service that morning because we knew that being together is spiritually healthy. We decided to have worship because people need comfort. We decided to have workshop because this city, Baton Rouge, needs healing.

We know that these events of summer 2016 are not isolated instances. We know that this country has a long history of violence and strongly needs reconciliation. We know that many people want healing. And we know that the solution to our problems is not isolation.

We encouraged our congregation to stay connected, attend their Branches groups, and keep their hearts and minds open amidst tragedy. And so they did. Violence leads to more violence, but justice and compassion lead to healing.

—Steve Crump and Nathan Ryan
Revised from a July 17 Facebook post

FACEBOOK POST

Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge
July 17

I'm sorry to have missed everyone today. We actually pulled into the parking lot at church. But the speeding cop cars and helicopter scared the kids. I hope everyone is safe. Love to you all.
Black and Blue

Someday, someone is going to ask you about all this. Where were you in the summer of 2016? Will you remember . . . ? I still remember the 1967 Detroit Race Riots, the final straw for my father, a tool and die man in one of Detroit’s auto factories. As memory serves, his shop-closed, and we headed 250 miles north, settling in in an old farm house on 35 acres in the Village of Vanderbilt, population 500. Safe. Or so it must have seemed to my parents.

Fast forward 50 years and safety is an illusion.

If you are collecting personal stories to leave behind for friends and family, you will want to include an essay based on an historical situation. You may already have written your 9-11 story. Now another opportunity presents itself.

Maybe 50 years from now racial tensions will be a thing of the past. Maybe law enforcement officers will be deeply entrenched in and admired by the communities they serve. Maybe this will just be a bad memory, something for the history books. Will you have your story?

Will you remember where you were when you learned about the death of Alton Sterling? Will you remember the deaths of the three Baton Rouge police officers? Will you remember how you felt? How did it change you? Will it change you? For the good? For the bad?

We may lack the objectivity to write about this today, but that doesn’t mean we can’t pay attention. Let’s pay attention to the thoughts running through our minds and the words running across our screens.

For myself, I am reminded of a slogan I learned in Al Anon: Does it need to be said? Does it need to be said now? Does it need to be said by me? I’ve already posted something on FB only to delete it five minutes later.

Maybe it’s time to keep an old-fashioned scrapbook of newspaper articles, something that will jog our memories in the years to come, something that will lend credibility and immediacy to our writing. Because, believe me, somebody is going to ask us about this in the years to come. And our stories, after all, are all part of a larger story.

The Detroit Race Riots sent the city up in flames, literally. I remember because my father drove us through the city in the aftermath, and I saw blackened and boarded up buildings, perhaps the closest I’ll ever come to a war zone. Then-governor George Romney sent in thousands of National Guard troops. President John-son sent in paratroopers.

In my parents’ eyes, I am sure that fleeing the city seemed logical. In my 14-year-old eyes, our flight away from the city embarrassed me at some yet unexplored level I couldn’t have told you why. I just know that it didn’t seem right. It concerns me now that, almost a year ago, I made my own flight to Old Town, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, probably as un-diverse a place as you can find in America. Even Hancock County, Missis-sippi, is 90% white (according to the 2000 Census). I told myself I was coming for the water and to remain within driving distance of my youngest grandchild. Is that the whole story?

Before my flight, I had worked on a college access grant with low-income, high-minority students across Louisiana. I was the only white person on a staff of seven. I needed a break. Can I say that? Can I tell you that within five months another person was hired onto that staff? A black person. Now the entire staff is 90% black, from the agency director to the assistant director to the student interns. It hurts. Can I write this? Will it change you? For the good? For the bad?

I’m telling you this because I have black friends. I had black colleagues. I’ve had black lovers. I worked for years to empower black students in predominantly black schools. I work for equality. I tackled the dirty work of confronting stereotypes in my college-composition classes. I feel like I bend over backward, and yet I

Follow the July 17 shooting of law-enforcement officers, shrines appeared at Our Lady of the Lake Hospital where three wounded law-enforcement officers were treated. Photo by Maida Owens.
I heard the gays after Orlando. “We’re not safe anywhere.” They had known theoretically that they could be killed for being LGBTQ. But Matthew Shepard was a long time ago. In many places now they could hold hands in public, meet each other’s parents, get married. But, news flash—they weren’t really free. There was no safe haven. They were all potential targets, possible shooting victims.

And I heard the blacks everywhere after this city that city MY CITY this shooting that shooting shooting shooting shooting, young men dying, fathers dying, brothers dying, mothers dying, wives crying, girlfriends crying, children crying crying crying crying. The first time for them was so long ago, they can’t even remember. They’ve lived lives of constant fear. Humiliation. Pain. Anger. They’ve lived lives of slavery.

I’ve seen their stories on the news. I’ve seen them crying crying crying crying over and over and over, their hearts broken, their families broken, their lives broken.

The day I had the conversation with Larry I read an essay that said what we need to do now is to not drink the poison of hate. To not let anyone or anything cause us to spread our anger to another person or group of people.

I know Larry will talk about his anger with his friends and family. Today we were talking about black mold and he said jokingly, “I’m not going to talk about anything black.”

I wish I could say to him, “I know you’re angry. So many people are angry. So many people are hurt. So many people want to sow seeds of hate. But we have to sow seeds of love.” I wish I could tell him to use his anger and hurt to understand. I wish we could all water the seeds of love with our tears.

But I don’t think I can. It’s too fresh for him. He has to feel his anger. He has to release it. You can’t tell someone not to feel the way they feel. I don’t even know him that well. Maybe later.

Larry’s anger is new. Other people’s anger is old. They’ve felt it for so long that they think they have to keep anger and hurt to understand. I wish we could all water the seeds of love with our tears.

Some people’s seeds of hate are thriving in a field of hate, growing a harvest of violence. That to them is doing something more, taking action against helplessness.

So many seeds of hate—dropping, growing, spreading, multiplying, viral, tidal. I’ve always wanted to fix things with my words. My heart is on my sleeve and on my tongue. I want to take some damn seeds of love and spoon them down everyone’s throat with their vegetables, because they’re good for you. And I want you all to come sit in my blooming love garden and see all the beautiful colors.

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But . . . well, I guess my garden is actually kind of small for everyone. I really need some help with it.

Who all, then, will sow the seeds of love, and how?
July 24 - 30

Order of Service July 24

Congregational Hymns
- Gather the Spirit
- Precious Lord
- Wake Now My Senses

Readings
- A. Powell Davies: Is This Your Religion?
- Montrell Jackson: Facebook Post
- Robert Karnan: Inclusive Evangelism
- Glen Thomas Rideout: God is No Noun
- William Sinkford: Only Begun

Reflection: Unitarian Universalism 101
by Reverend Nathan Ryan

We had a UU 101 service three years ago. It’s supposed to be a refresher course on this church’s history for long term members and an orientation for visitors. I had planned to do that again this year.

But after the killing of Alton Sterling, the police response, and then the terrorism in Dallas and here last Sunday, it didn’t feel right to do the 2013 UU 101 version today. Instead, we will explore what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist in these turbulent times, and I will work with the new reality we have co-created this past month in Baton Rouge.

There is the history of Unitarian Universalism, and there is the practice. Our faith comes out of the white Congregationalist tradition in New England. These churches were covenantal churches, more focused on practice than belief. And that’s our focus today. People ask what we believe. Or they ask what the minister
believes. But asking what we believe shifts the focus away from how we practice our faith, and separates us from our accountability as a religious people. This question goes about Unitarian Universalism all wrong. It makes the faith belief centric, and it overemphasizes the power of the clergy.

Our beliefs are the way we make sense of our experiences. The job of this church is not to tell you your beliefs are wrong. The work of this church is to help you discern and refine your beliefs. And then, we get to figure out, together, the ways in which our beliefs succeed and fail to express the wholeness of our faith. Some of you have asked me to talk about God more. Others of you have told me I say God too much. I know what I believe today, but I don't know what I will believe tomorrow. I don't know what I'll believe if I win the lottery or get a bad diagnosis. And to promise you that I will be a theist or an atheist or a pantheist forever would mean I would abandon this living tradition and embrace a more fundamentalist worldview; I can’t promise that. But I can promise is that I will express my truth as it is revealed to me. And I promise to you that if life transforms me, as it is prone to do, that I will allow my beliefs to transform, too. The promise I make is that I will always be as authentic with you as I can.

And that is the promise this church asks each of you to make. Trust the world, trust yourself, and let this church be the testing ground for your own beliefs.

Ministers are taught not to preach from their wounds but to wait until they are healed. For the most part I agree with this wisdom. But I don’t know what to do with Baton Rouge. I have an open wound and have had it for weeks, if not years. I recently found myself crying during a vigil I was leading. This was before the militarized police response of last week, and that was before the killings last Sunday. I was that upset, and I’m in about the 8th circle of impact. I don’t have direct family members in law enforcement or who are black in America. My family didn’t grow up with a history of institutional abuse and neglect. So, if I’m that emotionally affected, I can only imagine how others with closer connections are feeling.

At a memorial service, Steve and I try to tell the whole story of the person who died. This is especially important if they died from suicide or addiction. We do this because avoidance robs the recently deceased of their humanity. It robs them of their struggle. If we avoid talking about the shadows of life, we communicate that there are certain behaviors that make us unworthy of love, that certain behaviors should never be mentioned. Avoiding their discussion tells other people who might suffer from addiction or depression that they shouldn’t talk about it, either. These diseases thrive under the cloak of secrecy. If we as a religious people are committed to making a healthier world, then we must talk about the shadows of life.

Today we will talk about the shadows. I don’t want us to avoid talking about that which is making us sick. At a vigil held this week held for the three officers murdered last Sunday, I noticed that while the officers’ names were mentioned, almost no context about their death was spoken.

Instead, I heard four or five different speakers try their absolute hardest to talk around what has happened in Baton Rouge. I’m sure they did this to try to be comforting. They sought not to poke wounds. Here’s the problem: That wound is already there. We can’t bandage a wound unless we say where it is.

The killing of Alton Sterling and the death of those three officers last week are both rotten branches on the same diseased tree. When you systemically abuse and neglect the black community for hundreds of years, obviously, it makes the black community less safe. But it also makes those asked to over-enforce unjust laws less safe.

The easy explanation is to say that one bad police officer shot Alton Sterling. The easy explanation is to say that you must support either Black Lives Matter or the police—one or the other—yet supporting one supports the other.

One bad cop didn’t order the police to line up in riot gear and point assault rifles at peaceful protesters. One bad cop didn’t bring in the media from all over the country to try and force the complicated story of race in America into one neat and tidy box of police versus black people.

It wasn’t one bad police officer who passed very strict, very punitive nonviolent drug offense laws. It wasn’t one bad police officer who passed laws that disproportionately impact the black community. It wasn’t one bad police officer who ran for office and was elected on a promise to be disproportionately tough on crime. No, we are all a part of this. And until we are willing to look our neighbors in the eyes and listen to them, until we are willing to act compassionately to those who are different from us, until we elect politicians that pledge to be compassionate and just, until we pass laws that are just, and until we start treating different communities with dignity and respect, we won’t find a solution to any of this.

This church is built on the belief that who you are at your core is holy, that there is nothing you can do to make yourself unworthy of the greatest love, and that we have a holy obligation to bring about justice in this world.

If we want a professional, just, and effective police force, then we must pay for it. We must pay officers more than $30,000 a year. We need to demand that they are not asked to overwork. We need to demand that the same officers who were taking photos with demonstrators and dancing to brass bands a couple of weeks ago aren’t asked to wear riot gear and march in military formations in the absence of a riot.

And we need to admit that the systemic abuse to the black community hurts the black community. That statement should stand alone. But for whatever reason, white America is not able to let it stand alone. So, systemic abuse to the black community hurts us all. And we need to be brave enough to face it and to say it.

This church is here because no other place in Baton Rouge (that I know of) fills your bowl with the UU 101 that I saw embodied in last Sunday’s service. I know that not everyone was here, so let me try and recap what we did last Sunday. Once a year the Worship Guild puts together a “Why I’m a UU” service. They recruit three to five members to speak about their experiences in the church.

Steve and I talked at length about where we expected the congregation would be last Sunday. We expected some of you to be sick of hearing about the violence/protests/racism while others were still hurting, and others wanted action. The most pronounced and consistent comment I heard last week was that you were sick of hearing police helicopters flying over your homes.

Right before the 9:30 service, some police cars sped past the church; I didn’t think much of it because Baton Rouge has had a heavy police presence all week. At 9:28 a church member showed me an initial, three sentence long report that a police officer was shot. We went ahead with the service as planned. It was already an emotional service considering what had happened in the previous weeks. During the service, helicopters flew overhead and a steady stream of police vehicles sped past the church. A few church members mentioned to me that they normally stare out the circle window as a reflection point during the service, but not this week because helicopters kept flying past the window. Following the 9:30 service, a dozen or so people rushed the chancel with phones in hand to let us know what was happening. We were told the church’s neighborhood was on lockdown. We heard a lot of crazy unsubstantiated reports. We decided not to cancel the second service, but assumed people wouldn’t come. Some of you came not knowing what was happening. Some decided to stay home or couldn’t get here because the roads were blocked. Others told me that you knew what was happening and came to church because that is where you wanted to be.

We huddled with the Worship Guild before the 11:15 service, with some knowledge of what happened, and we decided not to cancel church. Instead of changing the service, we contextualized it. We explained that we knew what was going on, that we knew that not all the reports were useful, and that we would try and give the congregation some sense of normalcy by delivering the service as planned.
I made it all the way through the first half of the Invocation without crying; that’s a success. Right? You see, I hadn’t paid a lot attention to the invocation. Well, I read it at the 11:15 service, and this is how it started: “We come from all the places of our separate lives to this hour; From love and grief, hope and worry, solitude and activity to seek renewal and find celebration.”

Our three preachers had Kleenex in hand as they told their stories. When one of our speakers started crying, two different people came up to the pulpit to deliver more Kleenex. Every few minutes we paused as more police rushed past the church. We held hands for the closing prayer and changed the closing hymn from “Love will Guide Us” to “There Is More Love Somewhere,” a hymn that has been used for hundreds of years by people who were afraid, angry, or uncertain to find hope.

Some of the most stoic church members cried. People held hands during hymns and a vocalist, after warning us that she may not be able to make it through the interlude, spoke the last two verses.

After the service, we still didn’t know entirely what was going on, and so we announced that anyone who needed to, could stay at this church if needed.

What I saw last Sunday was a group of people not concerned with their beliefs. They didn’t check to make sure they were sitting around like-minded people when they cried. They didn’t ask the person whose hand they held how they were voting in the next election.

I saw a congregation afraid and heartbroken. I saw people who have known police abuse, people who work blocks from where Alton Sterling was shot, church members who were police officers or related to police officers. I saw people looking to this church for hope, looking to this church for faith.

And I saw hope despite the helicopters and police cars, the physical reminders of the chaos in our city. Let us never forget that every week we have church members living in a less visible version of this type of chaos.

Let us never forget that there will be people we meet when we leave this sanctuary whose life is in turmoil. This is not new. This is part of the human condition. But if we are aware of it, if we let our hearts stay open to it, then we can do what this church was founded to do. We can love the hell out of this world.

For those who need some hope, here is where I see it: I see hope in the number of people who know Alton Sterling’s name. This is the first time that I know of that a black person was killed in Louisiana, and the nation paid attention.

I see hope every time we refuse to buy into simple divisions of black people versus police. I see hope in the numbers who have shown up in press conferences and demonstrations and vigils. I see hope in the tears I saw last Sunday in church.

We are at a pivot point in Baton Rouge’s history. We can pivot toward justice and compassion. We have the opportunity to make this state into the state we all deserve. Let’s make this happen. Let’s bring justice to a desert thirsty for it.

Amen.

LETTER TO THE BATON ROUGE METRO COUNCIL
by The Reverend Nathan Ryan
July 28

Dear Metro Council,

First of all, thank you for your service to our city in this very stressful time. I am a white minister who serves a predominantly white congregation (although this does not mean that we are entirely white). The church I serve is just a few blocks from the police station. Members worshiping July 17th saw police vehicles drive past the church throughout the entire service. Some members were scared, some members were unsettled, some were crying.

I remember in particular one black mother crying while holding her child very close to her while we sang
the opening hymn. We didn't know if the police were reacting to a real threat (it was only after the service we found out they were) or if it was another instance of what I had seen all the previous week—police wearing riot gear, using armored cars, and pointing assault rifles at peaceful protesters. This level of confusion and fear is a major problem.

I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt based on what I read about your decision not to discuss residency requirements for the police. I trust that you had a strong reason for not bringing this up.

I really and truly want to trust your intentions. I want to trust that you are working on a plan to address the perpetual abuse our city has heaped on North Baton Rouge and the black community—disinvestment, regressive taxes, removal of medical care, disproportionate and aggressive policing. I want to trust that you will do something to address the abuse the black community has felt at the hands of the police.

I want to trust that you will do this work.

This is not about choosing whether you support black people or police. In fact, that artificial dichotomy allows us to ignore the systemic problems that make both black people and police less safe.

To the white Metro Council members: I know this work might make you uncomfortable. I know that we white Louisianians have been taught a lot of things about race in our state that leads us to feel guilt and shame. And I know that one of the ways white Louisianians have tried to mitigate that pain is by ignoring the problems of race. Please, please, for the sake of our state, for the sake of our city, and for your own sense of well being, please do some work to understand racial dynamics in Baton Rouge.

If you haven’t, please take Dialogues on Race. Please read Between the World and Me, and The Half Has Never Been Told. Please do some of your own prayerful work that you need to do to represent the entire parish—not just your majority white districts. Please listen to your black colleagues and the black residents.

We have a choice. We can either go back to the status quo which, for me, as a white man, will feel pretty comfortable, but will be dangerous for the black community. Or we can do some real good and difficult work to make this city into something that can be a model for the country.

This is not pie-in-the-sky ideology. This is quite attainable. But Baton Rouge needs you to step up, to use your power to be more compassionate and more just.

Thank you for your service and thank you for taking the time to read this. Please help us make Baton Rouge into a city we all deserve.

July 31 - Aug 6

Order of Service July 31

Congregational Hymns
• Hail the Glorious Golden City
• There is a Love
• We'll Build a Land

Readings
• Jackie Clement: Faith and Belief
• Norman Naylor: Do Not Leave Your Cares at the Door
• Rebecca Parker: Through the Rubble
• Victoria Stafford: Did the Sun Come Up This Morning?

Sermon: Unitarian Universalism 201
The Reverend Nathan Ryan

We are all trying to craft a story of what happened in Baton Rouge this month. And not all the stories fit together. The police story is different from the protester’s story. The white cop’s story is different from the black cop’s story. The prisoner’s story is different from the professor’s story. The Catholic’s story is different from the Muslim’s story.

And over the next few months we are going to start shuffling these stories together and, in the process, see which story emerges at the top of the deck, what larger narrative will emerge. And because this is a natural process, let us at the very least be intentional and strategic about this process.

So, if you will, go with me through what has happened in this Church, Sunday by Sunday, through the month of July. For those of you, like me, who weren’t here for all five Sundays, don’t worry, I’ll catch you up. And for the tried and true that made it to all five Sundays, don’t worry; I’ll try to make this interesting.

July 3: We had a service about how the American story, for both good and bad, was intermixed with Unitarian Universalism. We mixed together the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” with “Since I lay my Burdens down.” We did this to show the discordant contrasts between white and black experiences in America.

On July 4, the next day, many of us celebrated America’s independence by watching fireworks. That night, technically early Tuesday morning, Alton Sterling was shot and killed.

There were constant vigils at the Triple H store where he died. Louisiana’s Governor turned over the investigations to Together Baton Rouge. Together Baton Rouge held a press conference and asked for the justice.

Together Baton Rouge is a coalition of over 40 religious congregations and community-based organizations in the Greater Baton Rouge area.
department to do a broad investigation. It was also this week that Philando Castille was killed during a routine police stop, and it was this same week that police officers were killed by a man in Dallas.

July 10: Reverend Darcy Roake (New Orleans) served as guest minister. It’s common for guest preachers to use one of their favorite sermons when they guest preach. That’s because preaching is a conversation, and guest preachers are not here week to week to have that conversation.

Darcy’s initial title was “Fear Itself: Religion, America and Us.” As the week unfolded, Darcy told me that she had to scrap the sermon she had planned. You see, we are always trying to predict where the congregation is and craft a service that meets its spiritual needs.

Reverend Roake worked on the service all day Saturday. She sent Steve updates and asked his help creating some of the media for it. She sent what was supposed to be the final copy to Steve to print Sunday morning, and she continued to work on her sermon during the drive to Baton Rouge.

There was a huge demonstration downtown Saturday evening, and many church members attended. I was in Texas as a chaplain for a youth camp so I saw everything from a distance. That was hard. I woke up Monday and saw video after video of police pointing assault rifles and using military formations on protesters.

That week many people called the church very angry at the Black Lives Matter slide on our sign. Most refused to leave their number, but I called back the few who did. Mostly the callers said hurtful and angry things, but underneath I heard a genuine concern.

The whole week I was in Texas I talked with the Worship Guild about their upcoming service. They had worked on this service for months, so it was hard to figure out if it should remain unchanged or be jettisoned. Also, we weren’t sure where the congregation was. We guessed that some were sick of talk and prayers and wanted a plan for action, while others wanted a return to normalcy. Still others didn’t want us to use this as an excuse to avoid mentioning the injustice plaguing our city. For the most part, we ran the service as planned. It was just before this service that the three officers were killed just a few miles away.

I didn’t get home until about 2:30 that Sunday afternoon. I remember that I was too hungry and too stressed to eat lunch. Instead, I wrote. I wrote as much as I could about what had happened that day, about what I saw. By the way, I give this advice to people who have lost a loved one or are in some sort of crisis. Writing helps us craft our story; it helps us make sense of what has just happened.

I now understand that what this church did for its members during the July 17th service—creating a space to grieve, to be afraid together—and to care about each other amid uncertainty—was the stuff of UU 101.

Maybe UU 201 is what it means to be a part of a human institution. It isn’t a place where you always get what you want. It’s a place where you start the hard work of building a great and glorious city.

I talked to some Unitarians in Oklahoma City a few years after the 1994 bombing. First Unitarian Church was close enough to the federal building to have some of its windows blown out. After the immediate aftermath came a second wave of trauma. Trauma and grief don’t just go away. They come and go in waves. The church responded to this second wave by handing out buttons. They had two kinds. One said, “Tell Me Your Story” and the other said “Listen to My Story.”

There is something powerful in the trifecta of creating stories, telling stories, and having those stories heard. That is what I’m asking us to do as a congregation. Figure out what your story is and tell it. Whenever you talk to someone combative, listen to their story. If people seem evasive or want to argue theology, try to figure out what their story is. That could be our spiritual practice—to listen to as many stories as possible.

So here is my story—my take on what happened this month. The black community has known systemic abuse for generations, and I think the shooting of Alton Sterling became a tangible manifestation of a larger abuse. It was hot and humid. Baton Rouge had told its black citizens over and over that they didn’t matter. North Baton Rouge, a black section of town, had seen its hospitals shut down and years of disinvestment. When black members of the school board asked to change the name of Lee High, they were voted down.

And here’s the other piece of the story: I am afraid that many in the white community are using the easy divisions of police versus black people to avoid looking at the deep wound of racism in this country. I’m worried that we will put up blue ribbons not to honor the officers but to help us avoid looking at the real pain inflicted on black people by America.

When I left church last Sunday, I saw signs on either end of Tara Boulevard that said, “We salute and support all law enforcement.” It didn’t feel right. My first thought was, “Well, what about the cop that shot Alton? What about the cops who use their power to harm others?” But I remembered that poem by Edwin Markham.

I remembered Steve telling us that love is not a pie. It’s not a zero-sum game. Love multiples. It’s made stronger the more we give.

And, yes, police should know they are loved and supported. Then I wondered what it would look like if the person whose job it is to edit those signs put up a sign every time a black person was killed that said, “We support all black and brown people.”

How would Tara react? Would they allow that sign to stand? I can guess. It’s an informed guess by the number of people who, in a very angry way, called this church to tell us we shouldn’t have a sign up saying that black people matter.

And the last part of the story is that I’m worried. We are at a pivot point in Baton Rouge. This is our chance to become more loving and more just. This is a chance to create a city based on compassion and kindness. This is a chance for us to do some real and pronounced reconciliation work.

Everyone in this city is suffering from trauma, whether it’s personal, systemic, or both. We can’t argue someone out of the trauma, but we can create spaces for people to heal and to tell their stories.

Let’s be intentional about how we tell this story. Let’s be aware that sometimes we don’t have all the energy we need, that we are a part of something larger. UU 201 is the realization that we are all in this together.

UU 201 isn’t nice and pretty. It’s not cleaned up and shiny. It is the real and sustained work that we must love.

The city was given every reason to explode but didn’t. That is part of the story. Then the police militarized. They wore riot gear and pointed weapons at protesters. The police acted as if there were riots, but there were no riots. The police were worked to the point of exhaustion with more than 3500 hours of overtime.

Then a mentally ill man from Kansas City came down. I still don’t know why I was relieved to discover he wasn’t from Louisiana. I’m not sure I like how it feeds into the us versus them mentality. But I felt relieved. And you should always feel your feelings. The trick is to be careful how you use your feelings to create actions and create stories.

It’s also worth mentioning that Micaiah Johnson and Gavin Long, Dallas- and Baton-Rouge shooters, were both veterans. It’s a part of the story because, presumably, both had access to and training in assault weapons. It makes me wonder if maybe we are asking too much of our soldiers. I am sure it illustrates a lack of adequate medical, psychological, financial, and spiritual support for veterans.

My story is that we as a city are still in shock, still suffering from disbelief. And I’m guessing that much of the black parts of this city have known perpetual trauma for many generations. So, it feels strange for me to complain about my discomfort when I know so many other people are so deeply impacted. It feels weird, but it’s true that I am genuinely upset.

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[They] drew a circle that shut me out— Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win— We drew a circle and took him in!—Edwin Markham
all people, especially those who act as if they don’t want or need our love. UU 201 says that we must get our hands and our arms dirty as we try and dig through the dirt and grime and muck that the world has laid at our feet. And we must find a way to fashion that mud into something beautiful, something functional, something worthy of our birth.

Let’s make it happen.

Amen.

Aug 7 - 13

Timeline: a flash flood emergency was issued for areas along the Amite and Comite rivers. Flooding began in earnest on August 12.

No one saw the flood coming. The weekend it rained for 56 straight hours was spent trying to find church members. We had planned our annual ingathering service, but had to postpone it late Saturday night when we realized how few church members could literally get to church on Sunday. Definitely not an ingathering.

That Sunday, on the same roads, through the same sanctuary windows, we didn’t see police cars. Instead we saw pickup trucks with boats hitched behind them.

Order of Service August 7: the Annual Gospel Service

Our Annual Gospel Service is hosted by the UCBR’s own Gospel Choir led by church member Marie Flowers, a music teacher in the Gifted and Talented program of the East Baton Rouge Public School System. She is often a featured soloist and is a member of HeartVoice Trio.

Congregational Hymns

• Heaven Help Us All
• I’ll Overcome Someday
• I Need You to Survive
• Lean on Me
• One of Us

Readings

• Langston Hughes: Border Line
• Langston Hughes: Heaven
• Langston Hughes: I Dream a World
• Madeleine L’Engle: First Coming
• Freya Manfred: Nothing in Common

Reflection: A Good News Sunday Morning

by The Reverend Steve J. Crump

In the reception hall at the close of yesterday’s memorial service, I watched someone look with astonishment at the long list of funerals held on Saturday in the Baton Rouge area—44 to my count. Hey, I say to myself, if your name wasn’t listed, it is a Good News Sunday Morning!

Some of us check the obits first thing in the morning just to make sure something did not occur of which we were not properly informed. When in the course of human events we concluded another fine Roots class

11 A small group for exploring the themes in your own spiritual journey, the nature of belonging to a church such as ours, and the history of this time-honored religious movement. Roots is our introduction to Unitarian Universalism and this church. It is taught by our ministers.
this week with participants eager to engage a community such as ours, it is a Good News Sunday Morning.

And when we figure out as UUs that we don’t have to be anti-Trinitarian to be non-Trinitarian, if we choose to be, then it’s a Good News Sunday Morning.

And when we become conscious of how the word “hate” has infiltrated our speech so indiscriminately, as in, “I hate that menu item, I hate that body art, I hate that car, I hate that political party or candidate, I hate this idea and hate that idea,” then I wonder how long before we slide down the “I hate people” slippery slope. When we so notice what we are thinking through the words we are saying, then that piece of consciousness makes it a Good News Sunday Morning.

And when young athletes from all over the planet gather in Rio and apply their adrenaline, their muscles, their training and skill, and celebrate the Samba—the look of it, that peaceful gathering, is inspirational in and of itself—then it’s a Good News Sunday Morning.

Today is a day we did not create. Good thing—because I’m pretty sure people would mess it up if it were their responsibility to work together and make the sun come up and the sun go down on account of not involving enough architects, physicists, and engineers. Because we had nothing to do with the creation of this day, I say it is a Good News Sunday Morning.

We come to the end of our Transformation Program theme today and launch a new theme next week, but transformation continues in our lives. I see idled Caterpillar earth movers out on the parking lot, the source of our impediments and petulance, but knowing that they will be moving again to give us a new foundation, I say it is a Good News Sunday Morning.

People recuperating with courage and resilience from heartbreak or bone breaks or shake ups or shakedowns, in so far as they are comforted by thoughts of better days ahead or simply comforted by persons nearby, it is a Good News Sunday Morning.

And on any Sunday when love universally applied and acknowledged exists in reality, which I believe it does, and others say amen or simply think and open themselves to possibilities, then I say it is a Good News Sunday Morning!

LETTER TO THE EDITOR - THE ADVOCATE

by The Reverend Steve Crump
August 13

Except for members of the chorus who predict the way things are trending, all the other characters in Greek tragedy are thoroughly oblivious to the trajectories and consequences of their individual and collective actions. The audience gets it, however. The question at the end of the tragedy, “How could this have happened?” is answered without equivocation by theater attendees: “How could this not have happened?” The analysis is common as dirt and comes with a piercing judgment: “How sad and pathetic that you did not see the consequences of actions by the lot of you. Surely this disaster is not of gods but of your own making.”

If there is undue excessive force, poor recruitment practices, or inadequate training associated with law enforcement in our nation, we have ourselves, in part, to blame. Those who are to serve and protect are on our payroll. Peer review is surely not enough. Citizens have not kept a watchful eye on policing. Everyone is accountable. Our multiple tragedies have captured our attention, I trust, for more than a news cycle. Our great days of mourning, the likes of which I’ve never witnessed before, occupied so much space in our psyches that I wonder if we nearly forgot why hideous events unfolded as they did in Dallas and Baton Rouge. The sea of blue, the motorcades, the balloons, the flags, along with the military vehicles and riot gear, have all but hidden the raw videos of the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Later, we were urged at local news conferences not to harbor thoughts of gun control. How could we not consider curtailing the easy access to assault weaponry as a remedy among a composite of remedies to end wanton carnage regularly witnessed in our nation? Sitting at these funerals ought to give us pause to consider what every industrialized nation on the planet regards as utterly obvious. Yet, too many, trapped in a perverse love affair, are afraid to speak the truth of America’s gun fetishism and gun worship.

For my part, appeals to “Unite. Come together. Let there be peace on earth,” ring hollow just now, even as I teach and preach non-violence, even as I love to sing, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” Let there be peace. Yes. But not without justice.

We tragedy-observers are actors also and, therefore, must take an active role in bringing credible and transparent law enforcement reform to this parish and region. The nation is watching. Act well our parts. Mourn our dead. But let us not equivocate on issues of justice, truth-telling, and reform because not one of us is exonerated.
Richard Webb
August 13, 2016

To all our family and friends, a heartfelt thank you for checking on us during Louisiana’s historic “500-year” flood event. We are fine and safe, but deeply saddened and praying for the thousands who have been displaced from their homes, so many losing everything and some their lives.

The work of our first responders and our local media, particularly WAFB Channel 9, has been exceptional and indicative of the spirit of service and humanity characteristic of the people of our community. We have lived in the Comite Hills West subdivision in Central, on a plain high above the Comite River, for 25 years, and our only access is four-lane Joor Road. While the Comite River often floods over Joor at the bottom, it never has flooded across at the top. All over Louisiana this time, serious flooding has taken place in dozens of areas in various communities that NEVER have flooded before. For Comite Hills West, the first subdivision at the top, the road was inundated by flowing water both north and south, so that no one could leave.

This was scheduled as our annual Ingathering Sunday, kicking off the new programmatic year. We had planned an upbeat presentation from all of the Religious Education classes and a reflection from a guest lecturer, Dr. Mark Hicks, who was in Baton Rouge leading a weekend-long program at the church. (Of the 40 registered, only 18 were able to make it to the workshop.) This is traditionally one of the most well attended services of the year.

The ministers spent most of Saturday calling church members believed at risk of flooding. Some were fine, but many evacuated. Some were trapped in their neighborhoods by rising waters. Others couldn’t get out of their attics. As day became night, the scope of this tragedy became clear.

Early evening, it was decided to postpone the ingathering service. The senior minister worked late into the night to craft a service for all those who were able to make it to church. It was decided to keep Dr. Hicks’s reflection, and the rest of the service would be mostly prayer, singing, and reflection.

An hour before the service, church member Jerry Gilbert came into the church in shorts and a t-shirt. He said that thousands of people were showing up at the Celtic Movie Studios and asked us to announce that anyone who wanted to help should come to the studio.

After the rains stopped, more than 50 families were flooded. Volunteers worked feverishly to contact every member and determine each family’s status. For the next month, volunteers staffed the church from sunup to sundown triaging volunteers, donations, and requests for help.

Order of Service August 14

Congregational Hymns
• Filled With Loving Kindness
• Winds Be Still
• In addition, the anthem was “Life Calls Us On,” and the offertory was “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

Readings
• Carmen B. de Gastold: Prayers from the Ark

Invocation
Steve J. Crump

Take the long view.
Know not exactly how but that we will get through.
Take the long view.
Know what you feel now.
Know, also, that outlooks and feelings change anew. They do.
Take the long view. Look around and know that we are not alone.
Give and receive. Help and be helped. Breathe in and out. What is this strange life about? Take the long view. Know not exactly how but that we will get through.

**Reflection: Our Opportunity**
by The Reverend Steve J. Crump

When the rains came, they seemed gentle enough, but they continued on and on in a counterclockwise pattern as I glanced at the radar. Here we go again, I thought. Images of the aftermath of tropical storms and hurricanes that have come through here, several with barely a mention by national media, crossed my mind. Through those storms there were opportunities, of course, to feel our all too fragile humanness and our real attachment to people, of course, and pets, and livestock, and other material things as well.

As in other storms, the first Amite River-rising in my life hit in the third month of my ministry when the carpenter of this pulpit and his wife, Henry and Kathryn Heller, needed a literal bail out once the waters went down. It was an opportunity to help someone in need. It didn't matter if he was an outspoken atheist or a quiet socialist, or maybe it mattered all the more to some that he was. I think we responded because we could once the waters went down, and we knew others were going, and the church-member workers made Henry's heart glad.

Today presents opportunities writ large: a signup sheet, should you have a spare bedroom, or you want to volunteer for clean-up or moral support. That's the main opportunity, I suppose. We have an opportunity to open a spare room, push a mop, haul out to the curb horribly damaged flooring, and we have do it for the love of people. Right?

The other thought on my mind is ancillary and related to the losses those in our region are experiencing. I think we ought to beware of anti-materialistic spirituality. It suggests that we should denigrate or deny the material, but we are material beings after all, and it does no good, is unhelpful, and offers no comfort, to suggest that the loss of things that have provided us shelter and comfort and connection are not important or should not be important. Losses of things are real, as real as people losses, both of which are connections to reality, to our lived lives.

Compassion is also on my mind. I don’t mean pitying or feeling sorry for others. I am talking about the kind of compassion that Karen Armstrong describes as “enduring something with another—feeling with someone.”

I brought a piece for folk who know loss, have known loss, or those who will know loss; that’s everybody, by the way. It is a short piece by the late Robert Walsh, UU minister who died two years ago. He called this reflection “Fault Line”:

> ... When the great plates slip and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen to lie in what you trusted most, look not to more solidity, to weighty slabs of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered beam to save the fractured order. Trust more the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you in the web of life that’s often torn but always healing. There’s your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth, your room, your precious life, they all proceed from love, the ground on which we walk together.

Let us take our losses and do whatever must be done next with compassion.

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FACEBOOK POST
Nathan Ryan
August 15
I have never seen such a stark contrast. Without exception, every person on Facebook from or in Louisiana is posting exclusively about the flooding—where they are, if they’re safe, which shelters need what, etc. Every post I’ve seen about anything else—the election, the Olympics, a cat that learned how to dance, or a squirrel using a camera—is from people not in Louisiana. I’m not mad about this. I completely understand. I have ignored the trauma and tragedies in other communities when I didn’t have the emotional bandwidth. This is not to say that other communities haven’t noticed. I’ve been inundated with text and emails offering help and prayers.

I am posting this because I want those outside of Louisiana to know what is going on. Much of Baton Rouge and many of the surrounding cities are completely flooded. People are trapped in their homes, in cars, on interstates. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands, are in make-shift shelters all over the city in churches, community centers, and movie studios. They are inundated with volunteers and donations. Many people lost their homes. Many don’t have flood insurance because where they built wasn’t in a flood zone.

Police and locals have been working non-stop to rescue people. These are the same police who feared for their lives after three officers were killed last month in a terrorist attack. These are the same police who were asked to overwork following the death of Alton Sterling. The church that hosted one of the Alton Sterling vigils and one of the police officer’s funerals is completely submerged.

On Saturday, through the sanctuary windows, I saw pick-up trucks pulling boats driving east toward flooded areas and military helicopters flying west, presumably with evacuees in them. From that exact same vantage point, just four weeks earlier, I saw SWAT vehicles and helicopters speeding toward the shootings. A number of church members commented to me that hearing the military helicopters reminded them of living in Baton Rouge—a central hub of evacuation—in the weeks and months after Hurricane Katrina.

I am tired. I am heart sick. I am exhausted. I am sick of crying and worrying. And I am not flooded. And I am not a police officer, nor are any in my immediate family. And I haven’t known systemic abuse like so many in this city have known. So, if I am this tired, I can’t imagine how tired and worried everyone else is.

I am writing this because I am used to Louisiana being ignored. Three years after Hurricane Katrina, Baton Rouge was hit with the worst hurricane in its history. As soon as it turned away from New Orleans, the media packed their things and went home. The only reason I know that a sinkhole forced hundreds to evacuate from a small town in Louisiana is because I moved back here. There was relatively no national media coverage. Most Americans didn’t know that the death of Victor White, a young New Iberia black man, who was found shot in the chest while handcuffed in a police car, was deemed a suicide by police and the coroner in 2014.

As heart wrenching as Alton Sterling’s death was, America actually noticed.

I know some people might think I shouldn’t muddle all of these things together. It might feel inappropriate to mix the systemic abuse and violence toward the black community and the complicated task of policing in this city have known. So, if I am this tired, I can’t imagine how tired and worried everyone else is.

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by Amy Dellinger
August 16
As I passed down the hall on Friday, August 12, and walked even with the window of the front door, I saw a narrow swath of water running down the drain side of the boulevard. Sunshine sparkling flowing water, draining. Yes!

Into the kitchen, I fed the animals, let them out, and fixed a cup of coffee. Not until I walked from the kitchen back to my room did I see through the front window from where the draining water was coming. This was not draining water—a river of it—rising steadily up the boulevard, consuming blacktop and oak tree-lined grass medians on its way to meet the rest of the water now pooling at the other end of the neighborhood to transform our road to an outstretched arm of the river system strong with current and devastation in its desire to flow.

Even surrounded by a home that I love, memories mostly happy, loneliness creeps up with the flood waters’ edge. Loneliness drags me down deep into waters strong with currents of sadness and loss.

I like to watch Jones Creek during all seasons, especially spring, when the lemon yellow blooms of wildflowers dance atop the lush green of foliage on the banks while a trickle of water meanders around and through the intricately-patterned ground that is the creek bed. The creek can be breathtakingly beautiful. The creek can be a land of adventure for growing, curious, critic-loving children. The creek often does its unglamorous job of ferrying rain waters, sediments, and pollutants from surrounding urban neighborhoods downstream to the Manchac River. I now know that this creek can also be breathtakingly dangerous and cruel without discrimination in its search for flow.

I knew the rains were coming. Just off the Florida panhandle, they started moving west along the coast. A low. We knew this, were told this, expected this. Lots of rain, heavy rain for extended periods of time. Flood warnings, not uncommon in Baton Rouge and the surrounding areas of Louisiana, blared on mobile devices and TV screens, interrupting the 2016 Rio Olympics coverage, but life went on. As usual, I had a meeting at 9:30 a.m. Friday morning in downtown Baton Rouge. Got up, got dressed, headed out.

I was surprised to hear from my clients that the Louisiana state government offices were closed. We, non-state workers, sat in an un-windowed conference room only able to hear the patter of rain on drain pipes, waiting to feel the drop and spread of water seeping through an already damaged ceiling. There were urgent noises, bi-finals and unnerves and flooding, so we finished our meeting and came out to a buzzing office: Everyone was going home. The rains were likely to flood streets. Acadian Thruway, with its dip under the railroad track, was already flooded as usual, and more rain was imminent.

When I drove into my neighborhood, everything was the same as always until I came to the bridge over Jones Creek, usually a tiny stream of water. Today the water was pretty high, but I had seen it that way before. Murky water moved fast under the bridge and filled the creek to a typical heavy rain stage. I was un-alarmed enough to stop and video a few seconds of this change before driving home.

Rain poured steadily, thunder rolled, my Maine Coon kitty, Sparkle Butt, holed up in my bathroom cabinet waiting for the scary noise to stop. My eyeless dog, Buddie, and our old sister, orange-tabby, Alycat, did what they usually do—sleep. I enjoyed the occasional day like this. We’d had two in a row, but that was okay. The Olympics were on. I had work I could do, and I had stopped for food earlier in the week. I was set.

By Saturday morning, August 13, there was a lull in the rain, so I walked down the boulevard lined with many houses nicer than mine and a school my children used to attend on the other side of the street. Upon crossing the street and walking past the brick landscaped lighted school sign, I could see the water was deeper than on Friday evening. A couple of other folks were out walking, too, and we all commented on how fast the Creek was flowing and how it had already flooded the school’s tennis court. Again not unusual if there’s a serious storm, a tropical storm, a hurricane.

The rain came again, hard, relentless, unheeding my pets’ and my own desires to get outside until Saturday...
I thought we were home free, unscathed, but it was not to be so. I was trying to get me up to feed them. The pets were tap, tap, tapping on the bamboo floor trying to get me up to feed them. The yard was wet but not sunny morning! My tomato plants looked like sticks trying to find seed under our pear tree outside our large sliding glass door. What a gorgeous view of the bridge. A block party of prognosticators, including myself, lined the bridge, measuring, providing historical background (“never seen it this high!”), spouting statements of hydrological facts not backed by any sort of real understanding of what this water meant, and finally, all deciding that this was close. The creek had definitely flooded the school tennis courts and the ball field with several feet of water and the new cross country trail at low points, but none of the buildings appeared to be threatened. I left more worried about the expense the school would face repairing these facilities than anything else. I knew the water was rising steadily thanks to some guy and his hourly trek to the bridge with his tape measure, and I worried about the school buildings and the bridge itself since closing that bridge left me only one route out of Woodland Ridge, and that route was currently under construction (and consequently, always congested with traffic). I was more than a little stir crazy, didn’t need to go anywhere, but had that itch to do something like maybe a movie date with a friend across town. However, more roads were flooding—just heard some of I-10 was closed—and I-12 was a mess. Guests I’ll just stay in and wait out the recession of the flooding waters.

I could tell Sunday was a glorious morning just as I opened my eyes. The birds were flitting about trying to find seed under our pear tree outside our large sliding glass door. What a gorgeous sunny morning! My tomato plants looked like they enjoyed the rains. The yard was wet but not mushy looking, starting to dry, and the patio was already only spotted with remaining puddles of rain. The pets were tap, tap, tapping on the bamboo floor trying to get me up to feed them. I thought we were home free, unscathed, but it was not to be so.
Aug 21 - 27

Timeline: The region continued its recovery. The church had its rescheduled Ingathering Service.

Order of Service August 21: Ingathering

Congregational Hymns

• I Know I Can
• Life Calls Us On
• We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table
• Where Do We Come From?

The Introit was “I Can See Clearly Now,” and the Offertory was “Make Them Hear You,” from the musical Ragtime:

Go out and tell the story.  How that justice was our battle
Let it echo far and wide.  And how justice was denied.
Make them hear you.  Make them hear you.
Make them hear you.  Make them hear you.

Invocation

Nathan Ryan

You are Welcome Here!
Whether you came here by car or pirot,
whether your house was flooded or dry,
whether you are exhausted or excited,
whether you come here heart sick or thankful,
whether you need help or want to help,
whether you are rich or poor,
whether you are gay, straight, male, female,
or somewhere in the middle
whether you’re an old soul or newly refreshed
whether you are feeling the trauma either from these floods, or from the shootings, or from memories of hurricanes past
whether you are grateful for all the volunteers or upset for them even being needed
whether you need a hug or just want to never see
mud or rain again
Regardless of who you are, how you’re doing, and

And say to those who blame us
For the way we chose to fight
That sometimes there are battles
Which are more than black or white.
Theme: The Church that Shows Up
by Reverend Nathan Ryan

This year's theme came out of Together Baton Rouge meetings. One of the organizers said that they loved Unitarians because whenever there is a meeting or an event, we are the church that shows up.

And especially after this summer, we need to be the church that shows up. We need to show up when there is injustice. We need to show up when there is police violence or the legislature starts acting up. We need to show up when someone's house floods, or when someone is hospitalized. We need to show up when police reform is talked about.

We need to be the church that shows up because our values, the values that say that there is nothing we can do that makes us unworthy of love, the values that say that no matter who we are, no matter our circumstances, we deserve kindness, compassion, and justice.

Just like many of you did this past week, we need you to show up. This past week we asked you to show up by offering food and shelter and childcare and witness. You showed up when we tried to call every single church member to check-in. And we need you to keep showing up.

There is another element of showing up. It will seem a little bit of a non-sequitur, but stick with me. Every time I go to an LSU football game, and I bring that up now, because I need every reminder that I can get that this summer is going to end and the fall is on the way, it doesn’t feel complete until I go home and watch the highlights on TV.

In other words, even though I experienced something, and you can’t get any more experience than literally being there, it doesn’t feel real until someone else notices it. That is what we’ve been seeing on social media this morning, people begging to be noticed.

He encouraged church members to continue to show up for one another and their community, expressing his worry that this flood would in some ways detract attention from existing community issues, like police violence and divisions of the community along racial lines.
Br 16
by Abel Thompson
August 24

It was all good just a week ago then the floods came and people can’t go where they need to go
School is shut down, work is slowed up
Folk drowning in their homes
Thank God those boats showed up

But at the same time
Mr. Mayor, where have you been?
We’ve got real problems
can’t be solved by LSU games

Matter of fact,
Yo, I can’t even front,
I retract my first statement
Things haven’t been great for months

First we mourn Alton Sterling
Then five cops get murdered
Folks gotta hear that news coming home from Sunday service

We hurtin,
But if all we’re doing is hurting
Then what’s the purpose?

Come together or fall apart
It ain’t been good for months
All respect due to those slain

Black Lives Matter
That don’t mean that no others do,
But little Timmy gets better treatment
Than my little brothers do.

His family don’t cry the same tears
That our mothers’ do
All respect to those slain
Say their names
Peace

Floodmommas
by Venessa Lewis
August 26

Every evening when I sit to catch up on what is going on in my friend’s lives and reflect on the day, I am reading the victories and laments of those of you that I have coined my #floodmommas. You are the women who are struggling daily, clawing your way back to some sense of normalcy. The ladies who are stronger than you knew, because you have been put to the ultimate test and you survived.

You waded through the rotten waters to pull your children in boats, hand them off to soldiers in trucks, waited in attics, and spent evenings on cots in shelters with those babies. You fought your tears because their eyes were on you and you cannot show fear, because then it would all unravel for their innocent souls. You fight them now until they are sound asleep, and then you rage and sob in the shower or alone on a back porch that is not your own.

You returned home with them and watched as your children picked through their flood soaked toys and the rooms they grew up in, which will never look the same. You work alongside your husband to tear apart your home, piece by piece, while friends and family frantically loaded your remaining belongings in boxes to be stored here, there, and everywhere until who knows when. Each day you remember some precious object and wonder its fate; is it boxed safely or was tossed in the heap on the curb? The site of your life’s treasures piled on your lawn is overwhelming, the stench is worse.

Every evening, you are exhausted, but sleep is distant because you are worried about the effect all of this is having on your children, your family, you. Will it make you more resilient or will it plant seeds of anger and fear? How will you ever get the money you need to rebuild the life you once had? Will your children fall behind in school? How will you rebuild and recover properly when you must also continue to work to afford to do so? What will happen when this crisis will slip so quickly from people’s minds and you are still picking up the pieces? Are you doing the right things to make your home safe for your family’s return? Will you be taken advantage of in the process?

This is a summer that will be etched on our psyches forever. The summer we were baptized in mud but found a stronger sense of ourselves, our strength, and discovered who and what matters. When others have moved on, we will be here. For our children, for each other, and for our futures. I love you ladies.
Aug 28 - Sept 3

Order of Service August 28

Congregational Hymns
• As We Sing of Hope and Joy
• Lord, I Want to Be More Loving
• Peace Like A River
• This Old World

Readings
• Braestrup, Kate: Here If You Need Me
• Alice Carpenter: Gathered

Reflection: Unconditional Kindness
by The Reverend Nathan Ryan

We had planned a two-part sermon series on technology, but, as we’ve done just about every Sunday this summer, we have a more timely topic. Now that it’s a couple of weeks since the flood, people are less in crisis and are starting to evaluate what they need to do. So what I think we need is the theme of today’s service: Unconditional Kindness.

Aside from some readings and a brief reflection, the bulk of this service will be individual experiences of some of the church members.

They don’t tell the full story of what happened. Nothing truly can. Please remember that the stress of this summer is new and still developing. I tried to find people who had a variety of angles on the flood experience. The three speakers are:

• Leslie Grover, a member of the Worship Guild, tells a story about being rescued from Central right after the flood.
• Jerry Gilbert, a Sunday School teacher, tells a story about converting his post-production movie/sound company, which works out of Celtic Studios, into a shelter right after the flood.
• Ed Allums, a Branches leader, helped with the response of Together Baton Rouge, an interfaith, interracial organization.

Unitarian Universalist Minister Kate Braestrup, a chaplain for the Maine Wildlife & Fisheries, in her first book, Here if You Need Me, says that you should look for God in the response, not the incident—an idea that has helped me get through this summer. In today’s service, pay particular attention to the response.
Flood Testimony
by Leslie Grover

This summer I watched the city come to a boil over the death of Alton Sterling. I watched the embers grow hotter and the city polarize more with the deaths of three police officers. There are a few things for which I have the words to tell this story, but there are a great many others for which I simply do not.

If I died right now, as the adage goes, I “wouldn’t take nothing for my journey.” I will not walk around the elephant in the room and the Comité River, the main character in my story. I want to say its name—Comité River. I cannot decide, however, if the Comité is the hero or the villain of my story because this saga is still dragging on.

The flooding of the Comité was so bad that my son, my friend, and I all ended up trapped in the attic waiting for help for hours while we watched the waters swirl around us. Once we all got safely into the boat, my sense of the world changed. I don’t really remember anything except the wind on my face as I whizzed by what used to be my nice, safe neighborhood. My insides felt stiffened. Faces became blurred. I thought I heard someone sobbing softly, and after awhile I realized it was me.

Soon the boat jerks and one of the police officers on the boat says “Ma’am you can stand in the water now. But we have to leave you here to go get more people.” And that was it. All of us disembarked from the boat. We were on our own in the middle of Lovett Road. We all walked a few steps, and we started to follow Lovett up to a main artery of the highway. My friend and my son were walking far ahead, but as I entered another stretch of water on the road that was up to my knees, I felt my legs start to shut down. They felt heavy, and I started to fall further behind.

Then the biggest F-3 million-50 truck pulls up beside us. The Confederate flag was prominently featured, and the captain seemed to be not at all concerned. I'm sure he was talking to dogs who were trotting alongside us. But he was talking to me. I took a running water on people as they drove into high waters, grabbing at dogs, cats, and even a small pig at one point. I imagined people searching for high ground and picking up stray animals. Some of the trucks were even splashing up like me. In fact I didn’t think the lady was even talking to me, as I saw several similar trucks moving right past.

We were on our own in the middle of Lovett Road. We all walked a few steps, and we started to follow Lovett up to a main artery of the highway. My friend and my son were walking far ahead, but as I entered another stretch of water on the road that was up to my knees, I felt my legs start to shut down. They felt heavy, and I started to fall further behind.

Then the biggest F-3 million-50 truck pulls up beside us. The Confederate flag was prominently featured, and a tobacco chewing, heart of Dixie loving woman and her son stick their necks out of the window.

“You OK? Need a ride? Hop in!” Her son abandons his seat and gets on the back of the truck. He was holding out his hand to my son who took his hand and hopped into the back of the truck. My friend, too, who had been so calm and so strong during everything climbed in, too.

I didn’t respond at first. In fact, a fervent “no” rose up in the back of my throat, but it did not come out for some reason. Full disclosure: the Confederate flag is not a symbol I associate with helping people who look like me. In fact I didn’t think the lady was even talking to me, as I saw several similar trucks moving right past people searching for high ground and picking up stray animals. Some of the trucks were even splashing up water on people as they drove into high waters, grabbing at dogs, cats, and even a small pig at one point. I thought she was talking to a dog who was trotting alongside us. But she was talking to me. I took a running jump into the high front seat and right into mud and empty aluminum cans on the floor of the truck. I could smell the fresh pelts across the seat draped right under the gun rack in the window.

“Where do you want to go?” she asked. It occurred to me that I had no idea where I was going or even what I was doing. I looked out the back window through the rack. My son and my friend were talking to her son.

“Thank you ma’am, please just take us as far away from this as you can.” She nodded. We ended up at a gas station a few miles up because the road was flooded.

“God bless you,” I told her, and I started to cry again. She smiled at me, and the young man helped me down out of the truck, while he smiled, too. He was wearing a confederate t-shirt with a deer head on it. We waved good-bye to them.

As they pull off, humor set in. I smirked. I said to myself, “Thank you God, but let’s be serious . . . You know I deserved a much more stylish way to die than this!”

And then in that moment I felt him say, “Yes Leslie, I know.” And so I am still here to tell the story.
everyone could get what they needed.
An area was set up for pets, and a mountain of dog- and cat-food started to grow along with wire pet carriers and leashes and collars.
PAs were borrowed from local musicians and set up to make announcements.
Musicians showed up to entertain in between announcements (talk about a captive audience!).
By the end of Sunday, three stages were housing just under 3,000 evacuees. By mid-day Monday, that number was up to 3,300, and the overflow was starting to be sent to the River Center. But the giving kept coming. Throughout the next two weeks, literally thousands came to volunteer, all with great attitude, just wanting to help.
Bouncy houses arrived and were inflated.
Snowball stands arrived.
Toys came by the boxload for the kids.
A free barbershop was set up with a rotating staff of volunteer beauticians.
Les Miles and the Tiger football team showed up to talk and sign autographs.
Phone charging stations showed up.
A small screening room showed with hundreds of movies. (Thanks, Sony!)
By Monday afternoon, the Red Cross came in to organize, and 350 National Guard and State Police took over the gates and security. Evacuees eventually found friends and relatives to stay with, and the crowds thinned. The last guest left Celtic on Thursday afternoon after finding a vet to take care of her Great Dane that had been hit by a car.
It’s quiet on set again, and it’s great that everyone has found someplace to go, at least temporarily, but I want to help.
I have no back problems which make it too difficult for me to perform an appreciable amount of physical work.
It’s time to start again, and it’s great that everyone has found somewhere to go, at least temporarily, but I really miss that outpouring of crazy chaotic kindness that overwhelmed Celtic for a few days, kindness that showed itself for no other reason than to try to do something, anything, to help those displaced by the great unnamed flood of 2016.

**Flood Testimony**
By Ed Allums
I have back problems which make it too difficult for me to perform an appreciable amount of physical work.

So when flooding occurred all around me and I was more fortunate than others in my neighborhood, I became extremely stressed trying to figure out some other way to help. That is until Together Baton Rouge created an online survey.

After seeing how big a disaster our cities and neighborhoods were dealing with, members of Together Baton Rouge created an online survey. The survey asked flood victims for their names, phone numbers, type and the extent of damages, types of physical and mental health needs they were facing, and, finally, would they be interested in getting a small gift card.

Each person’s survey results were put on a spreadsheet. One sheet included results for around six to ten individuals depending on how much information an individual may have supplied. My job was to take one of these summary pages along with a call summary sheet and then call each individual and discuss what he or she had put in the survey, making notes on any unresolved or pressing issues, and then giving advice and help where I could.

I went into this task not really knowing what to expect but thinking, “How hard can it be?” Well, as I soon realized, I was totally unprepared for the stories I began to hear. I was so overwhelmed when the first of these individuals told their stories of total frustration and hopelessness that my thoughts quickly changed to, “What can I do?” People were telling me stories about lack of food, clothing, transportation, health problems like diabetes and glaucoma, and age-related limitations. I wondered how I could magically make all this go away.

Eventually I was able to regain my composure and get back to work. It was especially helpful when some of us, myself included, were able, over time, to create a useful list of contact addresses and phone numbers. I felt I was helping flood victims if only in a small way.

So I have been making the long drive downtown to the Together Baton Rouge office every day for a couple of weeks now, and I couldn’t be happier, especially when almost every call ends with the recipient saying, “Thanks so much. It means the world that someone like you would take time to call and check on me.” Why, even my wife is doing her share by holding down the home front while I’m away. She still doesn’t cook but I guess that’s my fault!

After the police shooting in July, I called a mentor of mine who was a minister in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. I called her before we knew the flooding would be a part of this summer’s story. I was trying to understand what had happened in Baton Rouge this past July.

She said that our city is in trauma, that it is in shock. She was comparing what I was describing to the feelings she had after Katrina. She said that what was different about what our city had gone through—this is before the flooding—is that there was a desire after Katrina to do something physical, to go in and clean something. But for us, she said, there was nothing physical to do. All we could do was protest, demonstrate, and advocate for policy and reform.

Now with the flood, there is something physical for us to do, something tangible to unite us. With the shootings in July, there were layers of guilt and blame and worries of implication if the entire city of Baton Rouge took action. It meant admitting to the injustices alive in our city.

Maybe this flood will be a terrible distraction that keeps us from having a desperately needed conversation about race. Or maybe it will help us clarify what is important so that we can have these deep conversations beyond pretense, guilt, and shame. Maybe the response to this flood will be a model for how our city should react the next time there is a police shooting. Either way, the incredible desire to help is natural and probably cathartic.

This reminds me of how people often act right after someone dies. Your heart starts racing; your brain starts working overtime because it has figured out that something has happened to cause you pain. It’s looking for the hot stove that you touched, the source of pain, but there’s no hot stove.

You might have extra energy or a burning desire to do something. It’s not uncommon to see someone in grief react as if there is a crisis. They have physiological feelings of crisis. Well, this is a region in grief. And so we should act as if each person we meet might be going through something like that.

I was at a meeting of some local ministers last week. The New Orleans Unitarian Universalists wanted to
know what they could do to support us. They were probably eager as colleagues but also to pay back some of the support they received after Katrina. And, because they experienced Katrina, they knew something about flood relief (as do so many in this congregation).

As we were talking and reflecting on the response to these floods, I realized something. I asked the question: what would the response to a great unnamed flood look like if Katrina never happened?

I bet you that locals with boats would have been a little slower to respond. I bet you that it would have taken longer to get a government response. And I bet you we wouldn’t have known how to set up a relief fund, or to buy masks, or to show up at shelters as quickly as we did. I wouldn’t have known to tell church members to bring axes into their attics with them as they waited for rescue.

And if Katrina hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t have many in the congregation and this region retraumatized. Please remember that this flood is different from Hurricane Katrina, though it has a similar look and feel. The work of this church is not to give you all of the answers. It’s to help you find your answers. The work of this church is a visceral promise that no matter what you go through, you are not alone.

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This church has no belief requirement and no creedal test for a reason. Belief is how you make sense of your experience. For me to tell you your belief is wrong is to tell you your experience is wrong. No person has the right to do that. However, we can help you discern your belief and figure out how it meshes and clashes with other people’s beliefs and experiences. That is how we get to know the holy.

What I’m asking you to do as a congregation is discern your beliefs. Do something to help you process this summer. Write. Just sit down for an hour with a sheet of paper and write whatever comes to your mind. Just like after a death, you might need to re-create the story of what just happened.

If writing isn’t your thing, try talking to people about it. Pay attention if you haven’t told your story yet. If you haven’t, tell it to someone you trust. Pay attention to what you’re going through.

All three of these tragedies—Alton’s death, the police shootings and the flooding—are unrelated and yet entirely related. I believe part of the reason for the velocity of the response was a need that had been building all summer; we needed to do something and to feel the opposite of helpless. Just imagine what a city would look like if we could respond to injustice with the same veracity as we did this flood.

So as you go through this whole process, I hope you won’t look for God in the incident or the accident, but in the response. I hope that you will look for faith and hope in how people responded.

This is the work of this church, and that leads us to the theme. If you are flooded or affected and need to do some work to clean up, do it. If you are dry but want to help, do it. If you are physically or spiritually unable to help, then find some other way. And if you think that this city deserves a justice building all summer; we needed to do something and to feel the opposite of helpless. Just imagine what a city would look like if we could respond to injustice with the same veracity as we did this flood.

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This is the work of this church, and that leads us to the theme. If you are flooded or affected and need to do some work to clean up, do it. If you are dry but want to help, do it. If you are physically or spiritually unable to help, then find some other way. And if you think that this city deserves a justice distribution of policing, say it. If you think we need to have some real discussions with elected officials, call them up.

But regardless what you do, please remain unconditionally kind. We are part of the response. We are part of the way others will make meaning out of this. We are part of the God that is in the response.

So please remember that this is a region suffering and in trauma. Even if you don’t see it, even if you don’t see people’s things sitting in piles outside their house, they might well be suffering.

So here is what I’m asking each of you to do: As you go out into the world, be unconditionally kind. Be considerate and compassionate to each person you see. Remember that they are tired and worried, and, I bet, so are you.

And please remember that you have the power to bring goodness and light into this shadowy world.
Whenever someone tells me or Steve that someone died, we ask them to tell us the story of the death. This is intentional.

For whatever reason, our society tells us to avoid thinking about death and more specifically to avoid talking about it. Maybe people are afraid that asking about the moment of death will be too upsetting. Maybe they are afraid to hear the answer. But talking about the death is a part of the grieving process. It helps those still alive create a story. People want to know what happened, what was done well, what wasn’t, was the person in pain, was someone at fault.

July was a very difficult month for our city and our state. We are all trying to create a story regarding what happened. This is not only a part of our grieving process, it also helps us plot a course of action to prevent this type of pain from happening again. I’m still creating the story for myself. I need my story to be honest. I need my story to have hope. I need my story to not overly shame or demonize black people or the police or my state. I don’t want easy answers. Instead, I want a story that helps us to build a more just Louisiana.

We are at a pivot point in Louisiana. I fear that we are using the shootings of the police officers to silence injustices to the black community. I fear that we are allowing ourselves to be divided into simplistic divisions of cop versus black. I worry that the white community will use this as an excuse to avoid looking at major injustices in our state. Instead, I hope that these tragedies can be used to reform the police force, and rework legislation. I hope that we can pivot to what we all want—a more just, equitable and compassionate state.

We are all creating a story of what happened with the deaths of Alton Sterling, Montrell Jackson, Brad Garafola, and Matthew Gerald. I hope that we can be intentional as we create these stories. I hope that we are honest with ourselves and our state. I hope that we can pivot Baton Rouge towards more love, kindness and justice.

Jazz Worship Service September 4

Congregational Hymns
- Amazing Grace
- Happy Days are Here Again/Get Happy
- The Water is Wide

Readings
- Smiley Anders: The Great South Louisiana Flood in Haiku (Recitative)
- William Henry Davies: The Rain
- Gary Johnson: Good Workers

Opening Words
by The Reverend Steve Crump

It’s Jazz Sunday, and I’d be happy to dance and sing and not cry anymore. We’ve already had 6.9 trillion gallons of rain dumped on southern Louisiana in about four days. So, I guess, what’s a few more tears going to do to our human situation? They are tears of our humanness, compassion, grief, sentimentality, even joy for the delightful moments that have also come our way.

We’ll work extra hard this morning to make our jazz joyful even if we cannot turn a happy-switch on. Look on the wall. We captured an image and the spirit of Mariene de Castro, famous pop singer of Brazil, who sang at the closing ceremonies with water pouring on her head and shoulders during the Olympics in Rio—while many of us were mucking and gutting. Blessed be the music-makers and bless us all, everyone—the meaning-makers, who still know we have the power to make meaning of our situation.

Let the jazz worship roll.
Rain

by Bobby Thompson
September 5

Rain as crystal spheres fall rhythmically from the sky
Life’s true blood returning to earth from on high
Rupturing on impact releasing its magic potion
The perfect solvent dissolving destiny into motion

Rain as dewdrops that show-up mysteriously over night
An aqua system’s infrastructure that remains out of sight
Strange little creatures have ways to capture it when in drought
Ingeniously they scurry to store it before the sun comes out

Rain as water for the fields of the just and the unjust alike
Ingeniously they scurry to store it before the sun comes out

How do heavy, dark, clouds float a lake of this sweet elixir?
Equally dispensing it’s two to one hydrogen, oxygen mixture.

Rain as the angry storm rages against the levees made of earth
Can’t hold back the evils of the years, our hypocrisy and dirt
We live not for justice but for what the market forces demand
Could this be punishment for what we have done to the land?

Rain as fog with droplets hung in clouds that fly too low
Our path cloaked in wispy intrigue wherever we go
Light refracted and reflected mixing shape with shadow
To make unknown all the things we think we know

Rain as tears washing away our sorrow
Rainbow arched sky signals another tomorrow
But with water blurred vision facing the now
We search hindsight for clues to show us how

The rain has ended and the sun comes out again
The world seems cleaner and the birds begin to sing
Obvious as it may seem only one thing we need to know
The sun is always out, it’s the clouds that come and go

Sept 11 & beyond

The reading for the service was “The Forgiveness that Comes Hardest” by A. Powell Davies, and the Litany was “Name the Summer of 2016.

It was September 11, a day memorable in its own right.
The summer was winding down although when the summer would exactly end had become a bit of a congregational joke. Would it ever end?

According to a Chinese Proverb, the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names. Naming things seems to be a human need. We thought that naming the summer of 2016 might help bring us closure, so we passed out scraps of paper during the service and asked the congregation to exercise their power and name the summer. What we ended up with was a poem, if you will, compiled in real time on September 11.

Name that Summer of 2016: A Congregational Compilation

Sucky Summer
Flood of Losses, grief, and compassion
Flood of Tragedy, Reconciliation, and compassion
Cumuppence
Summer from Hell
Summer Nightmare
End of LA
Flood LA
#LAfloodTerror
Deluge and Despair
Losses and Lessons
Deluge of Troubles
Enough is Enough
Half-Mast Summer
Sunny Summer

This was the summer that the heart leapt up and stood up for what matters most of all – Love in Action
Summer of Expectancy
2016: The Summer of Great Community Challenges
The Fall Dawn
The Summer of Suffering
The Summer that tore us apart and Brought us Together
Poem
by Nikol Andersen
September 18

Cruel things have happened,
Cruel things are happening
From the killings to the flood, absolving all our petty sins.

Take my love away, no, not today,
Was the word made flesh after Alton's death
You're not one of them, not one of who?
If you're not human like me? Then we are who?

I remember talking to my girl Leslie that day,
While thinking pieces of her life are now floating away
Praying God, please protect my sister-friend and her son
But knowing even through this, the battle you've won

Yeah it was cruel, not cool
So tell me what it's the rule,
When your faith takes a backseat to your humanity

It's hard to find the rhythm and the beat to your life
When it's gutted in the streets
So you're filled with strife

We're seeking God when we're His hands and his feet
Waiting on the miracles,
We ourselves complete

You feel me?
I ain't trying to dis what's choking your bliss
Just know that I have got your back, and you will get through this
And if you got my back, then we will get through this

SEPTEMBER 2016 NEWSLETTER
CRUMP EXPRESSWAY
a Column from The Reverend Steve J. Crump

Four Faulty Aphorisms Often Heard in a Time of Crisis

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.
No. Suffering does not necessarily make people stronger. One, two, or three body blows have an accumulative effect on our bodies and psyches as well. Each one of us has a breaking point. Inching toward a breaking point does not suggest strength.

God doesn't give us more than we can handle.
No. This statement is faulty at several levels. Does God dish out stuff to afflict people? If so, is such a God worthy of respect, praise, or worship? That God is not, in my opinion, worthy of belief. If The Flood of 2016 teaches anything, it is that rain falls on the just and the unjust, the poor and the not-so-poor. And we, who trustingly believe in, for the most part, flood maps and governmental planning bodies, are all vulnerable...
to the vicissitudes of life. Someone from Ponchatoula won the $1.1 million dollar lottery during the great storm last month. Talk about a vicissitude! Can you and I name persons for whom ill fortune seems to have fallen incessantly? Of course we can. Stuff happens—floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and illnesses—as consequence of events well beyond our control. To suggest God dishes it out, sullies God's reputation and deprives us as free agents in the same breadth. A good theology needs to tell the truth about the way life is—sometimes absurd, sometimes deliciously delightful—while pointing to the nature of our finite existence.

We must not live by bread alone.

OK, but let’s not live by that verse alone because we must not live by spirit alone. We are material beings, after all. We are not ether. We are material. The loss of food, shelter, photos, stuffed animals, an old car we cooed to keep running and other keepsakes are connections to a lived life, no less real than the connections to people in our lives. When folk say to themselves or to others, “It’s only stuff,” think again. The material is what we are. We are not made of ether. We are not mere spirits.

What happens to us is up to us.

No, not exactly. Each individual has freedom, but that freedom is limited, or as theologians would say, we are contingent beings. Can you name a thing that is not interrelated, connected, contingent upon something else? Each thing has some degree of freedom. Everything is interconnected. Quantum physicists, do you agree? William Ernest Henley wrote, “I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.” If only that were completely so. Perhaps Henley’s experience was his realization of personal freedom. But we do not have freedom in an absolute or infinite sense. When something bad happens, we may ask, “Why did this happen?” But as Rabbi Harold Kushner in When Bad Things Happen to Good People says, this question does not move us forward. Instead, he suggests a better question, “Now that this has happened, what am I going to do about it?” It is up to us to ask that question and to the best of our ability, often with help and encouragement from others, answer the better question with a plan: “Now that this has happened, what are we going to do about it?”

ASSOCIATE MINISTER’S COLUMN
by the Reverend Nathan Ryan

I’ve been promising people that our terrible summer will be over soon. I promised that after Alton Sterling was shot. Then I promised it after Brad Garafola, Matthew Gerald, and Montrell Jackson were killed along with Gavin Long. And now I’ve promised it after one of the most devastating floods in Louisiana.

Statistically, it has to end at some point. And we need to be reminded that no matter what the trauma—be it a flood, addiction, illness, or death—we might not get over it, we will get through it.

Recently I’ve wondered if I should stop making the prediction. I’m not sure how helpful it is. A part of being alive means we will experience the negative. Loving other people means being heartbroken when they die, or being disappointed and angry when they let us down.

The real miracle we see in life is the persistence of love despite the promise of tragedy and death. Whenever I see people reaching out, sheltering evacuees, crying at a memorial service, or in any way yearning for a more just and compassionate world, I see the miracle at work.

BR residents unite in the wake of tragedy, but there is still work to be done

by Chelsea Rainwater
October 11, 2016

The shooting of Alton Sterling on July 5, 2016, garnered national attention and brought unrest to the Baton Rouge community. The preexisting divide between the #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter residents was amplified. Racial inequity runs deep in Baton Rouge, perpetuated by generations of attitudes and policy. Race issues are so embedded in our culture that I know people who were born and raised in the city and don’t even notice.

Our community leaders had responded immediately to the Sterling incident, and to me, it seemed like more than just talk. I saw them speaking out and working together to begin to take action to address the underlying structural racial disparities. But before we could see it through, our community was shaken yet again by an unforeseeable blow — a storm we didn’t even take seriously enough to name. (It certainly felt that way.)

The storm’s lack of name correlates with the level of destructive power I expected from it. If you’ve grown up in south Louisiana, it’s common knowledge that hurricanes flood, but without a name, this was just your average rainstorm. None of us could have anticipated the damage that ensued.

In spite of the physical destruction No-Name delivered, the storm brought out the best in people. I watched the news and was moved by the dedication, helpfulness and compassion that manifested among members of the community — members that, a month before, wouldn’t have been able to have a conversation without getting heated.

But as the storm swelled and news illuminated the scope of its impact, community tensions quelled. I can’t explain why people bond during traumatic experiences. Perhaps because we were all in emotional overload, we knew we couldn’t handle any more. I like to think that the awareness of what it’s like to be in “survival mode” — an existence without screens and electricity — reminded us of what’s actually important: a sense of family, community and unity.

Our issues, of course, have not been rectified. It is my hope that as we continue our return to the real world and move further and further away from the events of those fateful days, we remember. We must remember how we felt in those crucial moments. We must hold onto the connection we felt with one another after the storm, the sense of urgency we felt after Sterling. The only way we are going to bring about even the smallest shift toward positive change is if we have the willingness to work together to overcome the racial and socioeconomic lines our ancestors have drawn. We are all in this together, and we must face it together, with a spirit of collaboration and understanding.
FLOOD TESTIMONY
Christina Normand
December 2016

We didn’t flood until Sunday afternoon. We live in Broadmoor. We didn’t think we would flood at all. My sister’s house flooded Friday, and we were telling people they could come stay with us. Our house had never flooded before.

About 4:00 Sunday morning, we were awakened by our neighbor pounding on our door. Her husband is a first responder, working near Millerville, and he just had called her, saying, “Pack up and get yourself and L (their daughter) out. Water is headed your way.”

We have a houseful of beasties. We couldn’t just pack up and go. And we were still thinking we wouldn’t see water.

When water started slowly creeping up the street, we thought it wouldn’t reach the house, but we put sandbags around the doors just for CYA purposes. When it started coming in the house, we thought we would just have sloppy floors. It kept coming in and kept rising. We moved precious items close to the floor to higher locations. I set up litter boxes for the cats on top of tables so that they could stay in high spots, as they were beginning to freak. We moved the rabbit’s house to a table top as well. The dogs were on the couch. My dog has anxiety attacks when the weather is bad, and I normally tranquilize him until it passes. I couldn’t do that this time, because I was afraid that if he fell off the couch in a drugged state, he would drown.

I called 911. I explained that we had pets that needed to be rescued with us. I was told that Homeland Security was coordinating rescues for people with pets, and that they would call me back. I never got that call.

I called the Celtic Media Center, which was serving as a shelter for people with pets, told them our situation, and was told, “That’s a lot of animals, but if you can get here with them, we will figure something out.”

Meanwhile, everyone was keeping in contact through social media when we could. Our phone and internet service was intermittent at best.

Logan England, who now lives in Rhode Island, saw everything via Facebook, and called me, asking if he needed to get in his van and drive down here. I told him that would serve no purpose. It’s too long a drive, and by the time he could get here, the danger would be passed. What we needed was a boat.

Not long after, he called back. He had found contact information for some folks in the loosely organized Cajun navy, and there was a boat on its way to us, so I should start kenneling cats.

We didn’t have enough cat carriers for every one to have their own. We never had to move all the cats in one trip before. So we put the rabbit in an airline kennel, and started stuffing cats into airline kennels two at a time, and when we ran out of airline kennels, we started throwing the rest into the large dog crate.

One of the cats, a very skittish Siamese, freaked at going into the kennel, raked my arm with her claws, fled, and dived through nasty water to get under my daughter’s bed and up inside the box spring.

By this time, there were two guys in a bateau with a trolling motor under my carport. Johnny had the dogs leashed, and he and one of the guys in the boat took the dogs, the rabbit, and the crates to the truck waiting up the street out of the water.

I couldn’t leave Eponine to drown.

The other guy helped me move stuff off the bed and lifted the mattress and box spring so that I could retrieve her. She was curled up as small as she could make herself in the corner of the box spring frame. I put her, wet and almost catatonic, in the crate.

We loaded the crate full of cats into the boat, then onto the truck.

Johnny and I, both soaking wet and my arm bleeding, plus all the beasties, in varying degrees of dampness, rode in the back of a pickup to the Celtic Media Center, which, by now, was filled past capacity. People were sitting under easy-ups in the parking lot with their pets. They couldn’t take us. They suggested the River Center, so we went there. The River Center did not accept pets at all.

Meanwhile, a friend of my daughter’s had called. I missed the call because I couldn’t hear the phone ring in the back of a moving pickup. I called her back, and she said that if we were in a dry spot, she could come get us and the menagerie, and bring us to her house.

We offloaded in front of the River Center, and waited for her. We made quite a sight, sitting there surrounded by kennels, leashed dogs, and cat litter buckets full of animal fodder. One guy walked up to us with a shopping bag full of cat food and gave it to us. He said he had bought it to donate to the shelter for people with pets, not knowing that the River Center was a no-pets shelter.

Paige arrived with a truck, and transported all of us to her house – one of the few in Zachary that didn’t flood. She lives with her mom, three cats, and grandfather, and Paw-Paw didn’t want extra animals in the house. We stayed there until we were able to move back into our house in December. She and her boyfriend had already gone and picked up his parents (who live not far from us and flooded before we did), along with their two dogs and two cats, and they were staying in her mom’s greenhouse.

She also has a studio (a converted storage shed) behind the house from which she and her partner run their custom printing business. She and Avery moved all of their equipment to Avery’s house so that we and the beasties could use the studio. Avery’s mom gave us a sofa bed to put in there to replace the pallet on the floor we were sleeping on, and told us we could keep it if we moved back home. So it’s now our sofa.

Several people provided us with clothing and shoes, as well as offering furniture once we had a pace to put it. Friends fostered a few of the lower-maintenance critters to reduce the crowding in the studio.

When the water had receded, friends and family showed up to help remove all the wet, ruined items from the house, and to help pack up what little was salvageable and move it into a storage unit. A few who couldn’t come help with the grunt work offered to hold onto items that needed climate control, such as Franke’s baby picture albums (which were in a plastic bin that floated and was bone dry inside), my grandmother’s Bible and some of the electronics that had been in high enough spots to avoid damage.

Once we got back home, a friend in New Orleans (who had been through similar circumstances after Katrina) gave us a bed for Franke and a dresser for us. One of Johnny’s cousins had their grandmother’s old iron bed in storage, and gave us that, along with a couple of other pieces of furniture that had been in the family for a while. Johnny’s other cousin had their grandmother’s dining table in storage, and it’s now in our dining room.

A friend of Johnny’s gave us nightstands for both bedrooms. We still have some little repairs to finish, but at least we are now back home.


On Showing Up

By Dottie Kelly, Connections Director

Our Unitarian Church members in Baton Rouge are accustomed to looking after each other. We learned after Hurricane Gustav in 2008, during which we lost part of our sanctuary roof, that we must first check on the safety of everyone. Our first line of action was started by the Branches small group ministry network of 24 groups and 48 leaders. This network made contact with all members and reported to the Branches coordinator the results.

The office manager was marooned at home by the rising floodwaters. As connections director, thankful that I was safe and dry, I made the church board room the headquarters for relief efforts. Thus began 12-hour days of many weeks, then 40-hour weeks for months, of coordinating members’ needs with volunteers who tried to fill those needs.

The first Sunday we offered signup sheets for volunteers to meet two kinds of needs; one for those who could physically go to the flooded sites and another for those who could do the behind the scenes work. Both categories were very much needed. Monday a dozen folks who could come to the church and do telephone canvassing began reaching out to discover who was affected by the floodwater. Immediately a folder of community resources was assembled to answer those questions of where to get aid from FEMA or Red Cross or other agencies and where to offer help in the way of donations or time to those agencies. Our large “coffee room” kitchen area became a repository for donated supplies and tools. It stayed this way for several months. Friends and relatives of members were buying things online and shipping them to us. The generosity was overwhelming. At the end, we passed on the leftover items to Together Baton Rouge, an organization involved in assisting homeowners and landlords in restoration of properties.

A directory of those in need was gathered on a spreadsheet that was constantly updated as new information was gathered by the phone workers. By the next Saturday, teams of active volunteers were going to six houses to assist in removing flooded goods and walls and insulation and sheetrock. Then the phone calls from our Unitarian brethren around the country began.

With each call, we were asked how many people were affected and my response—the number of homes—would rise, and we kept finding new ways to explain that, “Yes, this was like Katrina in that it is horribly destructive, but No, it is not like Katrina in that only 1/3 of our area is under water so that the other 2/3 can still provide services and assistance.” But if you are among the affected 1/3, you are in deep trouble.

We received sincere, generous offers of help. For example, a total of 32 spare bedrooms with baths were offered; however, knowledge of the families and where they lived was essential because although we assumed the good intent of all the help offered from out of state, we still had to maintain our vigilance regarding the safety of our church members, especially with regard to children in the home. The traffic congestion had become so bad that we had to consider commute time from where a volunteer would be staying to a job site. Parking for RVs was discussed, whether meals would be offered was discussed. As it turned out, only three homes sheltered displaced persons and another three homes supported volunteers from afar allowing them to help in the flooded homes. All the offers were wonderful resources had they been necessary. How can we thank people enough?

Many of our members did not work through this Flood Relief Office because they wanted to help their friends or relatives first and foremost. More volunteers wanted to run errands and make phone calls than those who could physically work on removing wet sheetrock and insulation. But fortunately, those who could, did. That is, I would learn from a homeowner of 8 people helping at their house when only 3 had been sent through our listings. The others were friends, co-workers, relatives, and unaffected neighbors who just showed up ready to work.

The wonderful part of this entire space of time was that nearly everyone was doing something to help somewhere. Our members were also working long hours at the Together Baton Rouge offices, Red Cross shelters and office, and FEMA offices. Many were taking relatives and neighbors into their homes. The latter...
Dear members of the UCBR community,

A SPECIAL THANK YOU

We are five volunteers from Massachusetts who spent the last week in Baton Rouge, volunteering to gut and rebuild homes through St. Bernard Project and Together Baton Rouge. The primary house we worked on is owned by an older couple, currently searching for a very specific RV with more than one other member. We were glad to support them in getting one step closer to home through our efforts. Through giving us a place to lay our heads (lending us air mattresses to sleep in your beautiful sanctuary,) sharing your kitchen and arranging for showers at the YMCA, our volunteering was made possible. But you went above and beyond, with Rev. Nathan giving us an extensive tour and sharing the historic and cultural context of the city, Charlie introducing us to the Atchafalaya Basin through his amazing photographs others treating us to Louisiana cuisine, home cooked and on the town. And many others did not even blink an eye when they saw five weary strangers hanging around their church building. Your abundant hospitality was such a gift. We northerners are not known for our hospitality but rest assured that if any of you are Boston bound, a red carpet awaits. (We can hop in the car and go out for chowdah and have a wicked good time!) Thank you for embodying the values of our congregation which were on our “distressed” list. These people were all given financial help from the Flood Relief Fund that was established early.

• Over 100 volunteers did everything from telephone surveys, hunting places to buy supplies, verifying places to send victims for more help than we could give, picking up soiled laundry from flooded families and returning clean clothes, transporting out-of-towners to and from job sites (flooded homes being gutted), packing and moving belongings to rentals and/or storage, hosting people from other states in their homes, cooking meals for our visitors.

• Ten homes became significantly more self-sufficient very quickly through our efforts. People slept on new air mattresses and had tools and supplies to help themselves, thanks to your donations.

Here are some of my heroes:

• The Jacksonville, Florida church group. We coordinated our first set of visitors on Aug. 26, 27, and 28. These Jacksonville folk drove nine hours to reach us. They slept on sofas in the church youth room, worked a long hard Saturday and half day Sunday before driving back. On our part, we provided companionship, entertainment, and food while they completely prepared one home for mould remediation and replacement walls and floors. They are Wonderful people never to be forgotten.

• A retiree from the Channing UU Church in Newport, Rhode Island. She phoned in early August and asked if she could come down and clean flooded houses. She is retired and has worked with Red Cross in other natural disasters. Spirit of giving, she is unable to do heavy manual labor, but she proclaimed herself a cleaning machine. One of our members offered to host her including transportation. They were a great team. How many people are that selfless?

• A young man from Long Beach, California. Matt telephoned “out of the blue” from the New Orleans airport saying he had a duffle bag prepared one home for mould remediation and replacement walls and floors. They are Wonderful people never to be forgotten.

Here are some statistics:

• By the end of the project, 54 people (members, employees, adult children of members, close Friends of the Church) were on our “distressed” list. These people were all given financial help from the Flood Relief Fund that was established early.

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Our community is still in a state of recovery. People are still living with relatives or in rented quarters. Many said they will not return to their homes without help. Many are selling their homes as they just can’t cope with restoration or do not have the requisite finances. They have lost irreplaceable possessions. But when I offer a solicitous inquiry at church on Sunday mornings, nearly everyone, regardless of their circumstance, offers a cheerful answer. How can I not love these wonderful fellow Unitarians? We are closer for what we have all been through together.

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The Winchester, Massachusetts UU church group. We greatly admired the efficiency as well as the generosity of a group from Winchester whose UU church had sent helpers on 49 trips to New Orleans in the 3 years following hurricane Katrina. Our members let us borrow air mattresses so that these folks could sleep in our sanctuary the week they were here. Can you imagine, their minister wrote to us a letter of thanks for the opportunity to demonstrate their values in a meaningful way? We who owe them such a debt of gratitude.

• The nephew of one of our members already on his way to New Orleans for a family event, who offered to give an extra day to help. He went to the home of one of our affected members and wholeheartedly gave an entire day of dirty, physically strenuous labor to a total stranger.

• The Leesville, Louisiana couple who stayed overnight with friends in St. Francisville, Louisiana, put in a long, hard day of physical activity on Saturday and then worshipped with us on Sunday before heading back to Leesville. They said, “We would not have been able to sleep for worrying about you guys if we had not helped.” I just melt thinking about such genuine loving people.

• The Baltimore, Maryland couple with backgrounds in landscape architecture and urban planning. They had been at a professional meeting in New Orleans and read about our plight here in New Orleans. It was October, and most of the urgent, immediate work on homes was complete. However, one of our church families lost not only their home near Bayou Manchac but its habitat due to the two-week inundation of floodwater that killed nearly every bush, shrub, and piece of grass. “Yes, we can help them,” the Maryland couple said. They were able to find lodging an hour away and made the daily commute. Days later when they came by the church to see us and say goodbye, they told me how much they enjoyed the week, even the commute. They left a little of themselves in Baton Rouge near Bayou Manchac and in our hearts.

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FACEBOOK POST

Thank you SO MUCH, Dottie and the rest of the crew at UCBR!!!! We couldn’t have come and helped without you! I cannot believe how much you did to welcome our family into your own!!! We ate like royalty the entire time we were here—thanks to Salvatore and Dave/ Suzanne for hosting us and spoiling us! #uj4#ucbr #batonrouge #1100yeastorm

Dottie Kelly, UCBR connections director, with Eric Ledyard, Unitarian Universalist Church, Jacksonville, FL
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