



UU Sangha

Volume: XIV, Number 2

Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship Fall 2013

Short Leash: A Memoir of Dog Walking and Deliverance, by Janice Gary (Michigan State University Press, 2013)

A Review by Florence Caplow

How many of us have had animals in our lives who have been teachers and bodhisattvas to us? I know that several animals in my life have touched me to the core with their sincerity, kindness, and unconditional love. As Buddhists, we recognize that all beings have Buddha nature: not just us, but animals too.

Short Leash is a memoir by a member of the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis, a UU-affiliated Buddhist sitting group. The au-

thor is struggling with pervasive fear, trauma, and self-doubt, but she has two great allies in her search for healing: her big black dog, Barney, and her mindfulness practice. Her dog is as wounded as she is, and dangerously aggressive toward other dogs. As the book opens, she is beginning to walk Barney in a local park, almost paralyzed by fear of every person and dog who comes near them.

The book unfolds over the next five years, and most of the book takes place in the park, as gradually, painfully, bravely, she expands her awareness and her willingness to walk, to allow Barney to lead her, to be opened by the trees and light and Barney's slow explorations. And mindfulness practice allows her to stay with her fear, even at its most intense. As her beloved dog ages, she is forced to face the mirror of impermanence, the willingness to feel and live fully, knowing that life is unpredictable and uncontrollable and at the same time fiercely pervaded by love and by the astonishing beauties of the world.

Near the end of the book, she writes, "Walking with Barney on this last leg of his path has brought a gift beyond all gifts—a heightened appreciation for life and a deepened ability to appreciate it." The author brings us this gift too.

Zenshin Florence Caplow is a Soto Zen priest, a seminarian at Starr King, and the co-editor of *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women* (Wisdom Publications, 2013).

Read an excerpt beginning on page 5.



Notes from the Editor

Greetings.

BUDDHIST SERMON PRIZE!

We are pleased to announce a contest for the best Buddhist Sermon. The winner will receive a prize of \$500 and an opportunity to present the sermon at the UUBF biennial convocation in 2015, and honorable mentions will be published on the UUBF website.

Besides bringing more attention to the place and possibilities of Buddhism within Unitarian Universalism, we hope to encourage young ministers and new ministers. We don't want a lot of rules but here they are:

This contest is for sermons delivered in 2013 or 2014 to UU congregations and associations on the theme of Buddhism within Unitarian Universalism by anyone who is not a UU minister in final fellowship at the time the sermon is given. Submissions should be emailed to the editor by January 31, 2015. Your editor will be one of the judges. Rolling submissions will be appreciated. Questions? Just ask.

One word of advice: If you meet the Buddha on the road, gassho in greeting, continue on the way, and find another hook for your sermon.



The Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis, my home sangha, has begun offering a service to our members, congregation, and community.

The international Death Café movement, headquartered in London and run by a Vajrayana Buddhist practitioner, has approved our Death Café as meeting its goals of being “safe, nurturing, accessible, and nonideological” as well as “increasing awareness of death to help people make the most of their finite lives.” Cake is an essential part of these informal gatherings and conversations. (Visit <http://deathcafe.com/>) You can do this too.

Gassho,
Robert Ertman,
Editor



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Living Buddha, Living Jesus

**A Sermon Delivered Christmas Day,
2011, at the Unitarian Universalist
Church of Annapolis**

by Anastassia Zinke

When I first heard that I would be leading service today, I did not know what to do... This “stuckness” came from two implicit learnings that I have gleaned over the years. The first came as a child attending UU Sunday school. I didn’t know what we were doing there at church. During the classes, I would play dra-dle, learn the Hebrew alphabet, enact stories from the Torah, learn about Siddhartha’s life, meditate, and otherwise explore world religions. But I never learned about the life of Jesus.

When I would attend church upstairs in the sanctuary, sit in the pews, I would look at the white unadorned walls with the sunlight streaming in clear, and at the large, large central pulpit where our minister preached in loose black robes in front of an alcove that held a woven wire artwork, in which I could faintly make out a cross. Yet there too we never talked about Jesus. We didn’t talk about Jesus in the coffee hour either. I felt as a child like Jesus was the big white elephant in a place that otherwise to my observation could only be described as a church.

As an adult, this sense of unease grew. I learned in high school, in seminary, to respect Christianity and Jesus as a teacher. I learned about how Unitarianism and Universalism emerged out of Christianity, and I could still see as I did as a child how close our modern Unitarian Universalism is to Christianity. But I also learned that Jesus can be a taboo subject in our congregations. That of all the great prophets and teachers – despite our heritage – he is

the one to be avoided.

So how to celebrate Christmas authentically? More important, to me and to other souls being raised here, welcomed here, seeking refuge here, how can we do the personal and collective work of what is essentially de-stigmatizing Jesus? Considering that Christianity is a primary root to the tree that has become Unitarian Universalism, are we going to abandon our tree house just because we don’t like the seeds they sprouted from? Do we think that there is more love somewhere else besides here?

These are questions that can’t be answered in one sermon, but ones that I hope that you will reflect on.

Today, I will share one method that you may want to use if you decide to engage these questions further. Study Buddhism. Study Buddhism, and Christianity. Study Christianity and Judaism. Study Judaism and Hinduism. Study all of these or one of these next to Unitarian Universalism. In essence, as Paul Knitter writes, be “religious inter-religiously.”

Buddhist monk, author, and leader Thich Nhat Hanh and Catholic theologian, teacher, and former-priest Paul Knitter are both “religious inter-religiously,” AND interestingly in different ways. Thich Nhat Hanh is a deep embracer and Paul Knitter a deep questioner of Buddhism and Christianity.

Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the similarities. He notes, for instance, that both the historical figure of the Buddha and the historical figure of Jesus witnessed suffering within their society and developed a path out of suffering that was appealing to their respective followers. Both men took spiritual, solitary retreats for contemplation and renewal. Hanh writes: “When we look into and touch deeply the life and teachings of Jesus, we can penetrate the reality of God. Love, understanding, courage and acceptance are expressions of the life of Jesus.” Hanh’s methods help us see important characteristics of Jesus as a social leader and spiritual practitioner that we might otherwise have missed. Characteristics that we find important in our religious leaders today. The

historical Buddha and Jesus were men, whose lives reveal deeply meaningful, sacred ways of living and connecting to a higher reality. These men were wise, yes, but not so different from ourselves that they cannot stand as role models.

Hahn goes further, helping us re-examine our conceptualization of an eternal, EVER-abiding Jesus. Hanh speaks of the “Living Buddha,” who in Mahayana When I would attend church upstairs in the sanctuary, sit in the pews, I would look at the white unadorned walls with the sunlight streaming in clear, and at the large, large central pulpit where our minister preached in loose black robes in front of an alcove that held a woven wire artwork, in which I could faintly make out a cross. Yet there too we never talked about Jesus. We didn’t talk about Jesus in the coffee hour either. I felt as a child like Jesus was the big white elephant in a place that otherwise to my observation could only be described as a church.

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and the living Jesus are concepts or spiritual rivers that continue to flow, that reveal, that speak to, and inform our existence in ways that are not bounded by history, by geography, or by centuries.

Unitarian Universalists understandably balk at the idea of a bodily-reincarnated Christ who will walk amongst us, and whose goodness and death on the cross were meant to serve as a sacrifice to appease an angry God. But I find it much harder, much harder all together to resist the notion that Christians are meant to speak their faith by living out love, understanding, and tolerance as a means to say, “Jesus is real to me, in my life, now.”

Hahn encourages such 180s in religious perspective. He quotes the 2nd precept of the Order of Interbeing: “Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others’ viewpoints.” Be open and non-attached to your views. Perhaps learn new ways to be religious or inter-religious.

That doesn’t mean that such self-reflection is easy, especially when one’s religious education (or as we sometimes like to say, indoctrination) has been narrow, repetitive, and thorough. But it may be necessary. In fact, self-questioning is where Paul Knitter begins. He writes: “More and more I found myself- a Catholic Christian all my life, a theologian by profession – having to ask myself, what I really do, or can, believe.” Essentially, this wonderful, kind man – Knitter was my academic advisor in seminary – was having a spiritual, or theological, crisis, but one he resolved in his tellingly titled book, *Without Buddha, I Couldn’t Be a Christian*, by diving into Buddhism. He learned several important things about the Buddha and Buddhist teachings that reformed his thinking on Christianity. He learned that:

- Buddha was a searcher who gained enlightenment;
- That in Theravadan Buddhism, the Buddha is a teacher who “shows” and “embodies what all of us can achieve”

in our own lives;

- That in Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is more than human, a presence that “steps into human lives and provides assistance for the difficult job of achieving enlightenment.”
- That the Maitreya Buddha is a future Buddha, who will come to save humanity when we face future dangers.

With 84,000 Buddhas one could go on until next Christmas! But Knitter pulled out two even more important teachings:

- First, Tibetan Buddhists remind us that all these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas “in their external reality, are reflections of, and a means to, identify realities within our very selves.” Each Buddha reflects a reality within us that we can then, by reflecting on that specific Buddha, identify. In the Buddha, we see ourselves.
- Second, Buddha is such a powerful savior because he is such a good teacher.

Now what is interesting about Knitter’s work for us is that he then took these learnings back and used them to re-examine his own faith. To do one of those 180s I was talking about earlier. Here are some of the things he realized about Jesus as a result.

He writes: “Jesus’ divinity was *not* something that ‘came down’ and landed *in* him; rather [it] was something he *became*. And what he became was something within him that he realized, ... became aware of, ... responded to. Jesus *grew into divinity*. He ‘woke up’ to it, much like Gautama [Buddha] woke up.” For Knitter, Jesus’ saving quality is that he became enlightened. He became someone who effectively taught his path to enlightenment to others.

This is a Christology – a way of thinking about Jesus – that is much more in line with traditional UU ways of thinking or conceptualizing Jesus. It is a view that holds that Jesus is a person who grew over a period of time into a spiritual awakening that transformed his life. It is a spiritual awakening that he found best to explore with others in community. He was a spiritually engaged person and teacher. If only

this was something that we could talk about more in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. If not this Christology, then a Christology that is relevant and meaningful to our lives.

Consider it. Consider starting an inter-religious conversation within yourself. In what ways can you embrace another faith? What questions about your faith are arising in you? What beliefs about Christianity or Buddhism need airing out? What new language or thinking may be transformative? Consider those elements of religion that seem universal and the elements that seem particular to a certain faith. Compare and contrast. Where are you on your journey? Where will you draw from?

Consider faith as something dynamic, vital, changing. A system of beliefs that you can live out, that clarifies and opens doorways that led to you to living your faith more comfortably and fully. Consider which messenger – which Buddha, which Jesus, which Mohammed, which prophet – has the greatest transformational pull over your life.

May whatever questions you ask or answers you arrive at bring you to a place where you are fully alive; a tree blooming in the winter time. Be faithful. Be alive. Every day.

Amen.



Anastassia Zinke is the settled minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Indianapolis. In 2011-12 she was the intern minister, then summer minister, at the UU Church of Annapolis, where your Editor is a member.



haiku:

new memorial garden
no one forgotten yet

— Robert Ertman

(first published in bottle rockets, August, 2008)

An Excerpt from *Short Leash: A Memoir of Dog Walking and Deliverance*

by Janice Gary

In the middle of April, I wake around midnight with heaviness in my chest – emotional, fear-based heaviness – an old friend or rather, an old enemy from long ago. I can feel anticipation gathering, the stirrings of the sleep panic returning. I lie in bed for awhile, trying to breathe, to relax, wrestling with the demons gathering in the gloom above. My thoughts fly around from corner to corner, from the fear of not finishing the thesis, to being a failure as a writer, to getting old and needing Botox shots, to not having money to get Botox shots. So much to do. (*Did you remember to put the empty water bottles on the porch? Renew the library book?*) I won't be able to sleep, the old voice says, and the creeping toxicity of anxiety begins to seep through my skull when another voice says no – get up, do something different. I pull on some clothes and wander downstairs where the backyard beckons to me through the square panes of the French door.



Through the window, the lawn glows, bathed in the luminous light of a full moon and I'm pulled to it like a tide. Suddenly, Barney is beside me, probably having woken not so much to the sound of my leaving the room as the sense of my absence. We both stand before the window looking out into the night. "Want to go out?" I ask. His tail wags slowly. I open the door we walk out into the coolness. There's a feeling of enchantment, of things unknown, a world hidden yet plainly there.

Barney steps onto the grass, sniffing around for possums and other night creatures. But I'm held in place by the moon, transfixed by the glowing whiteness before me, the transformation of my yard from a suburban garden to a vivid, living dream. I sit on the cold, wooden boards of the deck and watch the branches of the river birch, festooned with delicate fringes of new leaves, throw dancing patterns on the grass. The stars are out, too, bright and glittering against the clear sky. Barney comes over and sits beside me, leaning his warm body against mine and I'm reminded of the line from a Joni Mitchell song – *Constant as the northern star, constantly in the darkness, where's that at?*

There's something to be said for constancy. And how could Mitchell forget that light is so much brighter when it's set against field of darkness? A few days before, I had been to a lecture by the Chinese-American author Maxine Hong Kingston where she spoke about the fire that destroyed her home and how difficult it had been to have heart in the face of such loss. To find answers, she turned inward – meditating, being still so she could hear herself think. Finally, she understood what she had to do, what we all need to do when facing devastation. "In a time of destruction," she said, "Create something. And this, too: "Write things down, so you don't have to keep it in your body."

I wrote it down, especially what she said about Kwan Yin, the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion. Kwan Yin exists, she said, to remind us to have compassion for ourselves, for this difficult task of being human.

Recalling those words, I take in the quiet spring night and look up at the moon beaming down on me, pretending it is Kwan Yin. Closing my eyes, I let myself be filled with the light of compassion for the girl who lived in fear, the young woman who tried to forget, the woman pinned under a ceiling of panic in the middle of the night. I want to breathe in the moon, the light, the beauty of the moment.

At first, I can feel the fragile tendrils of life-affirming energy entering my body. But then something in me holds back, blocks the light as if it's fighting it. I breathe in, trying to take in the light, then attempt to breathe out whatever is reluctant to open to this luminous energy. There's a battle taking place entirely inside me as I breathe in, breathe out, entering a meditative state where I observe myself in detached fascination, as if watching from above. I relax enough to follow my breath into my body, placing consciousness in the knot of tension below my sternum. When I breathe in, there is fear. And when I breathe out, there is sadness – a very old, very resigned sadness for this inability to fill with breath.

As I continue breathing, emotions play like musical notes in my body – the treble of struggle, the bass of sadness, the high, blistering soprano of frustration. I take in another breath, realizing that I am literally afraid to breathe.

My eyes fly open and fill with moon. I sit stunned for a long moment in the light of Kwan Yin's compassionate gaze. Finally, I'm able to acknowledge what I must have known on some level all along: I'm not just afraid of breathing. I'm afraid of being alive.



Janice Gary is the recipient of the Christine White Award for Memoir/Personal Essay and the Ames Award for Essay and is a fellow of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. A writing teacher and memoir coach, Gary leads writing workshops throughout the U.S., including Writing the Memoir You've Been Dreaming About at the C.G. Jung Institute of New York City. For information: www.janicegary.com

2013 Holiday Letter

The Keepsake

Many years ago I remember seeing exhilaration flash across my daughter's face as she explored the coastline of the great Pacific Ocean for the first time. Her brilliant eyes dance in step with the sunlight shimmering across the surf. And as she stood gazing out at that living blue body of water, I felt that she could actually sense the endless potential of what lay before her. I wish I could have bottled that moment—tucked it away in some special keepsake box—because I never want her to forget that feeling—the way it fates for many of us over time.

Life has a way of draining us, like the bleaching of photographs after years of withering exposure. The details that bring vitality to our portraits slowly recede and eventually all that remains is a silhouette of who we once were.

But what if there was a way that we could pull out that keepsake box and uncork a bottle of youthful exhilaration? What if we could drink it desperately down, like an antidote to shrinking lives? In this Intoxicated state of exuberance the world no longer works to constrain our curiosity; instead, we take a deep fresh breath and immediately experience clarity. Suddenly our focus turns to the task of updating our old, faded memories with passionate new color, markers of matured character and hints of classy charm.

Just as our favorite snapshots become dated with time, the nature of existence is that all things change. But while we cannot control our surroundings, we can manage our reactions to the things which come our way. And, if you ask me—the best approach is to always gaze across the world as if it holds endless potential.

Season's Greetings

—Christopher

Christopher is a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship and a prisoner in California.

Revitalized Sangha

The Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society, CVUUS, recently announced the revitalization of the CVUUS Sangha. The CVUUS Sangha, as part of the UU Buddhist Fellowship, will provide a vehicle to strengthen and deepen members practice and service through weekly peer-led meditation sessions combined with Dharma Talks and discussion. In addition to the weekly meditation sessions, plans call for offering one day mediation sessions with a teacher a few times a year as well as the opportunity to attend meditation retreats at area meditation centers. CVUUS is in Midd the Champlain Valley College community

The Sangha will meet each Sunday from 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm, starting with the first Sunday in January, 2014. All are welcome here!



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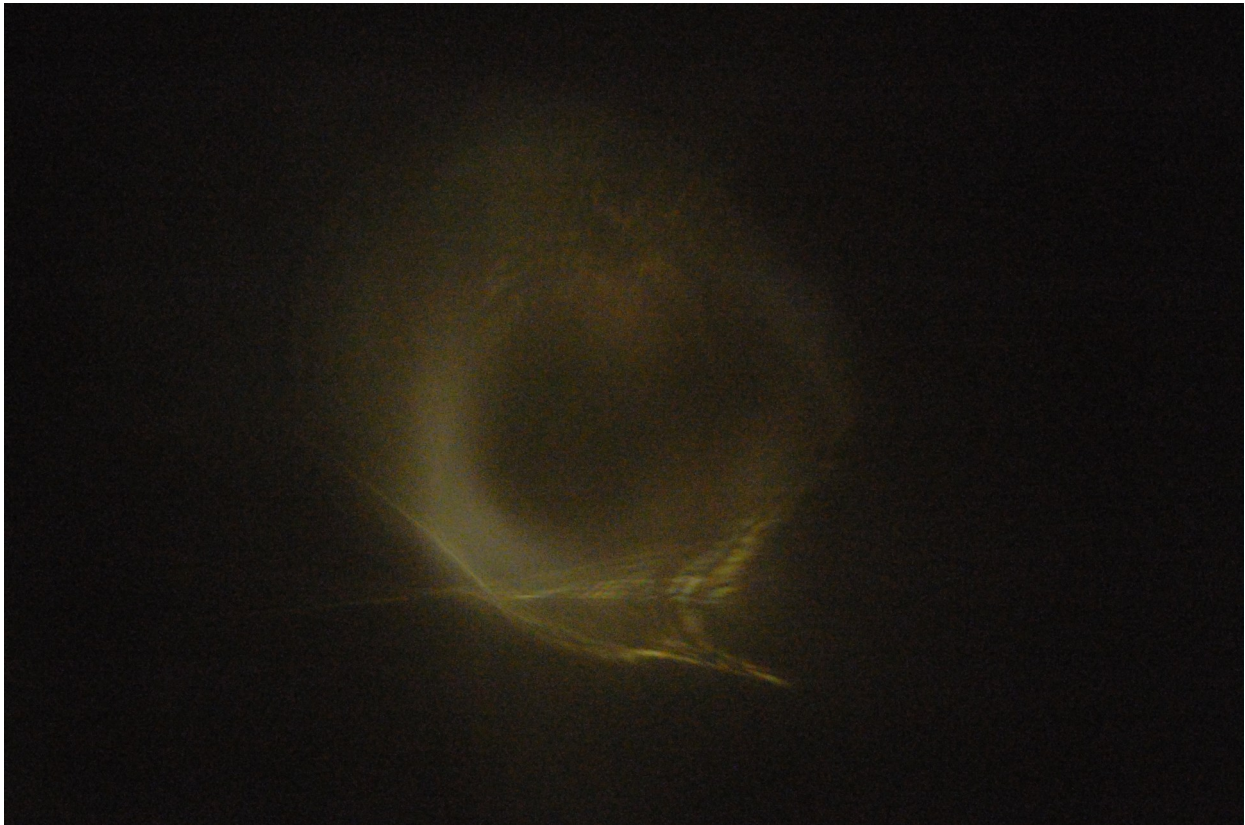


haiku:

all black zendo—
my official Buddhist cushion
rejected

— Robert Ertman

(first published in bottle rockets, August, 2008)



Enso

Artifact made in a digital pinhole camera, by Robert Ertman

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UU Sangha Fall 2013

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