

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2018

SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

Depth through reflection

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"I study history... because I am interested in the future." Lyrics by Si Kahn; quote by labor activist historian Peter Rachleff. This image drives home the importance of history in social change activism. mixed media art by Ricardo Levins Morales

**"Creating a wide variety of opportunities to
listen . . . and learn . . ."**

—FROM THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE'S
"CALL TO ACTION," ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES,
FEBRUARY 2017



The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte is to inspire children, youth and adults to discover and articulate deeper spiritual meaning evidenced in lives of integrity, compassion and stewardship of the earth.

La mision de la iglesia Unitaria Universalista de Charlotte es inspirar a los niños, jóvenes y adultos para que descubran y articulan un significado espiritual profundo, evidente en una vida de integridad, compasión y en el manejo de los recursos de la tierra

ON TAKING TIME TO LEARN AND THE PERIL OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

by Jay Leach



I recently heard an NPR news story about the lax oversight of the medical implant industry. They used a man named Dennis Fegan to exemplify a disturbing trend.

Dennis Fegan was prone to seizures and had a “vagus nerve stimulator” implanted in his neck as a way to regulate his seizures.

One morning, he stumbled out of his bedroom only to fall face first onto the floor. Leaning against the wall, in a short time he passed out again.

Fegan was rushed to the hospital where a doctor noticed that his heart was stopping at exactly three-minute intervals. After several missteps, the doctor realized that “he wasn’t passing out from seizures. He was passing out from lack of oxygen to the brain.”

Finally, a neurologist concluded that the device implanted in his neck was calibrated to activate at exactly three-minute intervals. It was the implanted device that was triggering his debilitating, life-threatening reaction.

What was supposed to give Dennis Fegan a life free from the most serious impact of his seizures, was instead rendering him completely helpless and putting his life at even greater risk.

Such are the perils of unintended consequences—a negative outcome can result despite positive intentions.

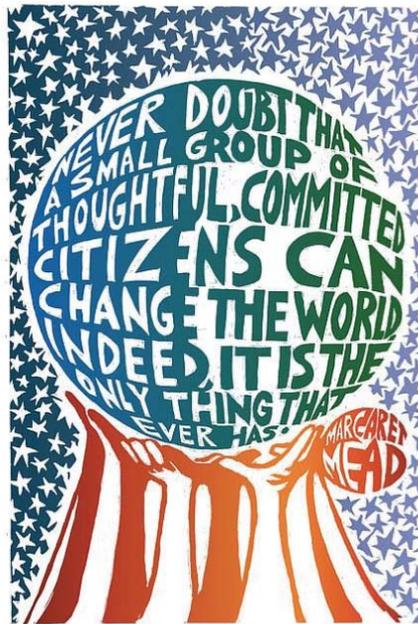
Where the work of transformation is concerned, we could find ourselves doing things that seem like the right things to do, that offer a sense of being involved, of taking action, of making a difference. But, they could actually turn out to be problematic, even counter-productive. What may appear to be a step forward, can turn out to be two steps back.

This awareness motivated a core component of our Board’s Call to Action. They asked us to set aside our impulse to engage, to take immediate action, to be involved, and, for a time, to do the hard work of listening and learning, examining our lives, our assumptions, our biases.

Several months into that effort, this issue of *Soundings* offers an interim report. Here you’ll find reflections from four of our core group members who are engaging deeply in the work of learning. Each of these personal reflections attests to the value of developing fluency and of deepening our understanding on issues of environmental and racial justice.

You’ll find updates from our two professional staff people most directly involved in helping us create and offer our focused programming for children, youth and adults. These too point up the importance of this season of exploration.

A pair of our youth share how the focus of the senior high service last fall was redirected by their choice to take the time to reflect on their experiences.



Never Doubt (quote by Margaret Mead), illustration by Ricardo Levins Morales

Aware that all of our learning should ultimately lead to involvement, to finding partners with whom we might work, our Racial Justice Core Group keeps circling back to three primary questions that we hope can help guide us. At each point in our learning, we’re asking ourselves

1. What does this say about what needs to be transformed?
2. What might transformation look like, sound like, feel like, act like?
3. What—within us, among us, and in our larger culture—is working against transformation and why?

Join us by reading about and reflecting on our work in this year. Join us by engaging in your own ways of listening and learning. Join us in probing ever more deeply into the potential meaning behind our commitment to transformation.

In time, our hope is that we will act with greater integrity and with greater impact because we’ve taken the time to understand before acting.

BECOMING BETTER LISTENERS

by Martha Kniseley



In the October issue of *Soundings*, I addressed “Moving Toward Transformation” by describing the programming that the Adult Religious Education and Spiritual Development Team (ARESD) was offering so our members could become

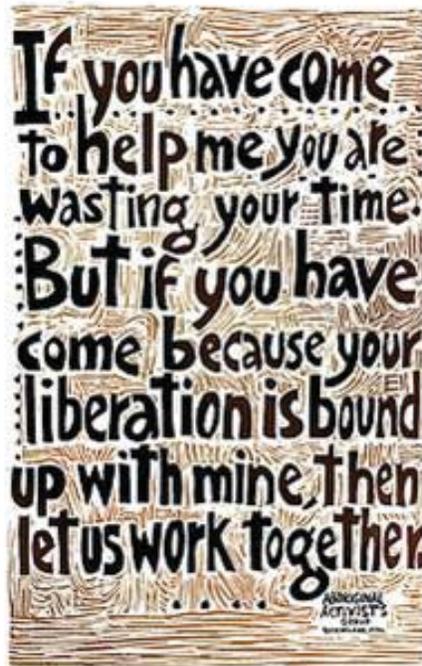
more fluent around issues of Environmental and Racial Justice. As we enter our fifth month, I’ve been asking our members involved in congregation-wide film series discussions and study groups about their learning experiences.

The beginning of this journey was not an easy one. It has required a great deal of patience for all of us as our tendency is to be *action* driven. We had to buckle down and decide what it is that we needed to learn before we *act*. We recall that when we started focusing on our Call to Action and were confronted with harsh terms like “white supremacy,” many of us well-meaning folk heard ourselves proclaiming, “That’s not me! I’ve been working for social justice all my life.” Through our new experiences, we’re becoming better listeners. Now our response might be “I don’t understand. Tell me more.”

We’ve learned from women telling us their stories of incarceration and re-entry into a society that doesn’t support their drive to lead meaningful lives. We’ve learned from women who paint a different picture of our legal system as they tell their personal stories of losing sons at the hands of the police. As we look at our society through a different lens, we are beginning to question the messages we get from the media, politicians,

people in positions of power. We are applying our new understanding in our daily lives as we learn about environmental policies that affect the health and well-being of our communities.

One member reflected, “My eyes were opened as I watched the African American history series *Many Rivers to Cross*. It helped me have a better understanding of the importance of African American grandmothers raising children. Such a long history of rape, bearing children of their “masters”, others raising their children and the incredible fracturing of families. It has enhanced my ability to see the struggles many of my African American patients and co-workers have endured, and the importance of listening to their stories and withholding judgement of others.” She is not alone. Another member admits that she knows that her “property, freedom, privilege, is [hers] at the expense of those of color.”



If You Have Come,
mixed media art by Ricardo Levins Morales

As we examine our local Environmental and Racial Justice concerns, we wonder how we can address the effects of historical and deep systemic injustice. We now recognize that charity is not an acceptable path and understand why building partnerships must be our goal.

Every year my brother sends me a calendar illustrated with his beautiful photography and a quote for each month based on an annual theme. I have always found the readings thoughtful, but this year I was struck by the particular relevance of his theme of “justice.” For August he included this quote from William Wilberforce: “You may choose to look the other way but you can never again say you did

not know.” The ARESD Team will continue to bring you more opportunities for learning in the coming months; it is my hope that few of us will be able to say we did not know.

ADDRESSING ISSUES THAT IMPACT JUSTICE

by Kathleen Carpenter



On any Sunday morning, you can walk the halls of our education wing and hear children: murmuring in a class discussion, emoting in role plays, squealing and laughing as they engage in active games. Or perhaps you hear adult voices: telling stories or guiding discussions.

This is how kids learn and in the case of this year's focus, how they are learning about racial and environmental justice.

What happens in our nine classes each week differs dramatically based on age, but it is all designed to address the issues that impact justice: truth, love, respect, kindness, marginalization, power, and fairness. We are asking our children to identify their own experiences and perspectives and to look beyond them to seek out, care about, and respect those of others.

I asked our volunteer teachers, all of whom are aware of the congregational Call to Action, to share their thoughts about how the children are receiving these lessons. Here are their responses:

Kindergarten–1st Grade

- The most common thing I observe is empathy. The children like to share times when they have included or befriended someone who was left out. I am proud of . . . how truthful they are.
- I've really enjoyed how the theme has deepened the wondering questions for the children. I've had meaningful conversations during our group time on issues such as fairness, history of oppression and racism that I don't remember having growing up. While we've approached some of these themes in books, stories, and experiences in our home, it is so refreshing to talk about them openly with our church's community of young people.

Elementary School

- Our kids are learning how to see beyond themselves by appreciating the goodness in others. Case in point, the "Gems of Goodness" portion of each lesson allows them to share about their own good deeds but additionally those of friends, family, etc. They are responding wonderfully to this weekly activity—truly noticing the kindnesses happening around them.
- The children have been very receptive, even during the content-heavy sessions. We've talked about how marginalized populations don't necessarily have to be those of color or even those in this country. Big picture ideas.

Middle School

- We've had some great discussions regarding inequities in our community and the world at large. Our discussions were almost exclusively from the perspective of the privileged trying to see, understand and fight for the common good with not much perspective from the marginalized groups because there are so few in our congregation or represented in close relationships in their lives.
- In one class this fall, the youth held a secret ballot about how to handle a scenario with countless babies floating down a river, apparently unharmed. Given only two choices, rescue versus factfinding, almost everyone voted for rescue. We discussed how factfinding is not inherently heartless. Sometimes we want to make sure we're doing the right thing so badly that we forget to do the urgent thing. Sometimes we wear ourselves out doing the urgent thing and forget to do the research.
- I think that it is meaningful for the youth to know that what they are exploring is the same as, or similar to, what the adult congregation is focused on. I believe this creates a sense of connection to the church and it certainly gives teachers the ability to provide a broader context for why we are focusing on given topics.

FACING IT

by Tricia Bernard



This last year has been surreal. I teeter between wanting to dismiss it all as absurd and feeling genuinely afraid. For the first time in my life, I am questioning the validity of the core principles I have always believed governed my (American) world.

But I try not to despair. Favorite poets and writers give me hope.

In his 1892 essay “Democratic Vistas,” Walt Whitman articulates a stark truth: “America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself, not without.” Whitman goes on to tell us that figuring out what is wrong within our country and ourselves is our patriotic duty. My takeaway is that I can’t blame an “enemy” for what’s going on here. I own this problem as much as anyone.

Seventy years later, in 1962, James Baldwin entreats us to take responsibility for seeing and then reordering reality when he writes, “not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

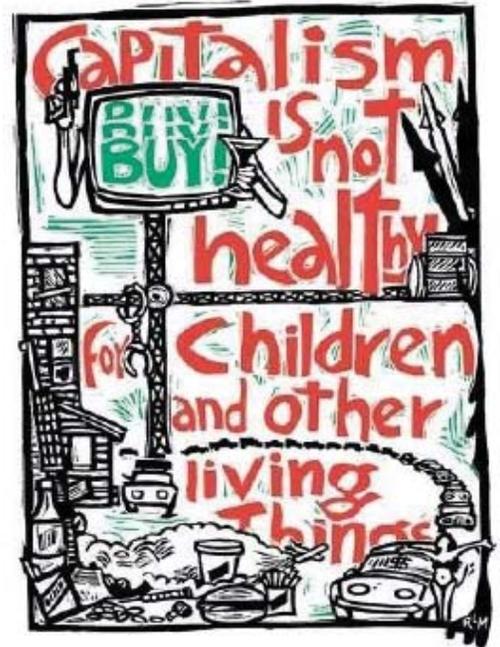
It is this desire to face what is wrong that led me to join the Environmental Justice Core Group. From the beginning I was drawn to the group’s mission, which is to explore and understand—rather than fix—the ways our community (congregation, municipality, state, nation) is a part of a very imperfect eco-system. While the call to “do” and “fix” that I hear both in my heart and at the UUCC is strong, the work of this group is preparatory to those efforts. I am enjoying this work, concentrating on listening, learning and reflecting, without the pressure of taking action.

I have had the opportunity to explore in depth the challenges our city will face as our climate continues to change. I have been shown proof of the injustices suffered by low-income (disproportionately African American and Latino) communities as a result of factory-farming practices, Duke Energy policies, and poor urban design. I have also had my eyes opened to the absurd bio-mass wood-pellet industry developing in our state, which was a complete surprise to me.

These issues are uncomfortable enough, but nothing is as uncomfortable as the notion set out in one of our core readings, *This Changes Everything—Capitalism vs. The Climate*, by Naomi Klein, that the ultimate solution to our climate challenge is not going to be based in our current economic system. I am having a hard time wrapping my head around this. Capitalism underpins all that I understand about my country and my place in it, and I am looking with new eyes now at a system that has sustained my family for generations. I am intrigued and open to Klein’s argument that the magnitude of the climate challenge offers us an unprecedented opportunity to redesign our entire society and remediate a whole host of injustices while we are at it.

Her argument echoes Wendell Berry’s in his essay “Solving for Pattern,” suggesting that individual “solutions” disconnected from the whole often create a chain of unforeseen future problems. Instead of treating problems in isolation, both Klein and Berry advocate for designing for an entire system.

I am coming to understand that the remedy for our imperfect and self-destructive eco-system will likely require a *total* societal transformation. Though it seems daunting and perhaps unlikely, I am inclined to feel hopeful. As Emily Dickinson imagines it, Hope is “the thing with feathers that perches in the soul / and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.” The tune I hear is telling me to take a new look at all I have held sacred and face what I find there.



Capitalism,
mixed media art by Ricardo Levins Morales

EXPANDING MY CONSCIOUSNESS

by Thomas Eljah, III



Born in New York City, my first experience “out in nature” was walking the forests of New Hampshire and Maine during college. My first camping experience was in Western North Carolina borrowing my carpentry teacher’s tent and sleeping bag. Best sleep ever!

While taking a Master Gardener class I learned how the “life force energy” is present in plants and trees as it is within me, so as I save plants, I save myself.

These experiences helped transform my consciousness. I joined the Sierra Club, sent funds to Greenpeace—I consider myself an environmentalist. My spirituality recognizes that Divine energy flows through everything: people, animals, planet—even profits.

Our Environmental Justice Core Group experience is at an approximate midpoint. Here are a few of my reflections so far.

While I may have become an environmentalist, I was not an environmental justice advocate, so this core group exercise is expanding my consciousness.

Learning how the abuse of our “common home” is connected to the abuse of indigenous people, folks of color, and communities with low incomes is frightening. The Core Group has explored numerous local examples.

In fact, the environmental justice movement is said to have sprung from a Warren County, NC, protest by a community of color.

For me, the so-called urban and rural divide is fake news! When I visit farmers’ markets and talk to the vendors who sell their goods to city customers who want

fresh and locally-grown produce, I am witnessing a symbiotic relationship. Both regions need each other to prosper.

We see the abuse of our common home in both communities, urban and rural. The consistent theme is that African-American and low-income communities both urban and rural are disproportionately affected by the actions of corporations which create waste dumps and air pollution, which abuse our land through deforestation and extraction, and which pollute our creeks and rivers with hog farm lagoon waste and chemical spills.

The EJ Core Group is reading *This Changes Everything—Capitalism vs. The Climate*, by Naomi Klein. Reading this book makes me want to pull the blankets up and not get outta bed! Here’s my conscious bias:

First, I am not a big fan of multinational corporations. These entities often lie to us, poison us, exploit and destroy our common home and get big governmental breaks. Regular folks get zip! I try to support small and regional business when possible.

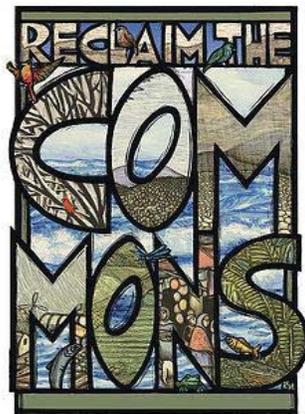
So far, however, capitalism is the lifeblood of America. Our retirements and pensions, and lifestyles are based on it. There’s a place for profits, as well as for non-profits that serve and help people.

So, I am wary of Klein’s thesis that we have to replace capitalism. I guess my preferred title, and thesis, would be *This Changes Everything—Capitalism and The Climate*. Capitalism itself is not destructive—it’s the consciousness of capitalists that needs to improve!

I can even point to hopeful signs that capitalism is evolving: Japan’s government pension fund (\$1.3 trillion), insurer Swiss Re (\$130 billion), NYC pension funds (\$189 billion) and others have all announced they’re divesting from fossil fuel companies.

In addition, as reported recently in Investment News, “Women and millennials are responsible for the doubling of ESG [socially responsible] assets to \$8.1 trillion worldwide since 2014—and you can expect that trend to continue.”

I’m an optimist. Don’t let the current Federal talk get you down. Stay focused and connected locally. Stay active (inside and outside institutions), and stay vocal. Help is on the way, I maintain, in the form of capitalism guided by more enlightened minds.



Reclaim the Commons, mixed media art by Ricardo Levins Morales

LISTENING AND LEARNING

by Ron Spake



When the Racial Justice Core Group was introduced in our June 2017 Congregational Conversation, my immediate reaction was that I had a lot to offer. Coming out of the first meeting, I realized I was wrong.

I grew up in a place with some racial inequity. When business moved me to Charlotte in 1991, I was shocked at the racial divisiveness I witnessed on a daily basis in the workplace. Today, I find myself engaged in trying to understand those issues and experiences.

The Racial Justice Core Group has highlighted my need to listen and learn in a different way especially at Time Out Youth where I volunteer with, among others, transgender people of color. I also volunteer as a docent at the Museum of the New South where I speak about social justice issues and about discrimination. I realize from the core group the necessity to become involved in uncomfortable situations rather than relying on my past experiences to gain a better understanding of racial inequalities and white supremacy.

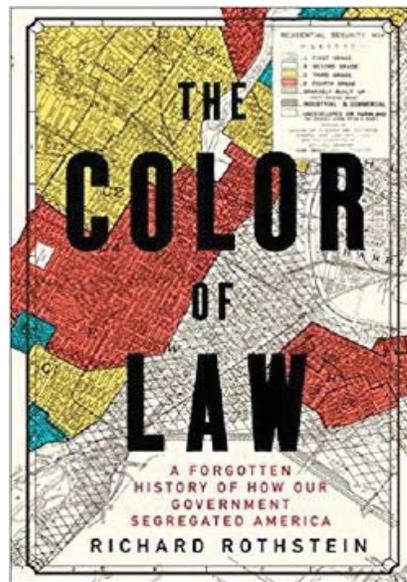
Coming out of the first session I realized how little I knew about the topic and I felt a bit overwhelmed. Immediately I realized that the topic would challenge me to think differently as well as engage

differently. My life experiences thus far were limited in comparison to what lies ahead. I realized that I and we as a congregation had work to do.

My first discovery was that in order to succeed in this endeavor I must reeducate myself. There was plenty of reading to do, a need to rethink my role in the community, as well as to learn how, when and where I could broaden my perspective of racial injustice.

In each session it is difficult to determine what I need to do next. From the readings to the interactions within the group, I have found there are many things in school that were intentionally omitted or skewed in order to keep white supremacy in place. In this study, I have discovered my need to dig deeper, listen more intensely and engage more with others both inside and outside the group.

Recently we studied some historical documents written by our founding fathers and it surprised me to learn that the wording encourages hate and injustice while promoting white supremacy. With the arrival of the first Europeans at a place already inhabited by people of color, white supremacy was instituted; as I have learned, that hasn't really changed. Amendments and words in other documents have been redefined to either enhance or maintain white supremacy.



The Color of Law, by Richard Rothstein

This core group has also enhanced my library. The readings and the assignments have not only changed the type of books I read but the intensity and open mindedness with which I read. For our book assignment, I have chosen to read *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein. This is a study of how we as a society have been intentionally segregated by our government. In this and other readings, I have learned that as a white man I have been granted privileges, many of which I did not recognize and which have been denied to others.

I appreciate our congregation's support of this core group. Hopefully, we will diligently and purposefully seek ways to live harmoniously with each other so that one day all people will be treated equally.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

by Janet Zick



In July 2017, I participated in a two-session class at church on the gift of discomfort. I had just retired the year before and was open and willing to explore new possibilities for this new chapter of my life. I felt the congregation's Call to Action for "spiritual, societal, and environmental transformation," but wasn't

sure about just how to get involved. Was it time to step outside of my comfort zone? If our current political climate was not enough incentive to step up, what would be?

When the invitation came to join the UUCG Racial Justice Core Group, I welcomed the opportunity to participate. I was one of 24 participants who would be engaged in the examination of racial justice for the next 10 months. This was a chance for study and deep reflection in a supportive environment under the able leadership of Joan Davis, Jay Leach and Melissa Vullo.

Each class is a revelation. The language of racial justice is entirely new to me and the concepts are difficult to assimilate. Race, racial categories, and white supremacy/privilege are some of the core definitions we are tackling. We have supplemental readings that advance our understanding of racial justice issues and a hefty book list to allow each of us a deeper dive into relevant topics. Respectful group discussion where we have a chance to listen and learn from each other is an integral part of each session. The discussion topics are difficult as well as uncomfortable. Some of our basic understandings and long-held beliefs are being challenged; the process can be draining. Our group is deeply committed to this study and provides a safe space to share sometimes painful and personal reflections.

Additionally, each one of us has been matched with a partner for the duration of the class so that off site, shared conversation can further enhance our understanding during this journey of discovery.



© 2018 UUCG & Jokerspool Photography
 UUCG members marching in the 2018 Martin Luther King Jr. parade, photograph by Chris Clark

The class has substance and relevancy. It is with a heightened awareness that I am able to more clearly see how white privilege permeates every aspect of my life.

I live in the neighborhood we chose because there were no barriers for us to purchase. The neighborhood is in a better school district than most in the city because we have the economic clout to demand it. How many employment opportunities were opened to my family because we are white? What about that brush with the law that could have gone very wrong in an instant? Didn't happen and community service took care of it.

The knowledge I have gleaned from the class also informs how I listen to and understand the issues of the day (e.g. Harvard affirmative action case, education, affordable housing, voter access, redistricting, debtor's prison, school to prison pipeline, economic opportunity and resource distribution). I find that I have a keener interest in digging deeper for what might be the possible motivation for proposed legislation.

It's so important to me that I redirect my energies toward something that can ultimately make a difference within me, my congregation and the community-at-large. I spend far less time wallowing in despair over the state of the union and more time working to expand my awareness so I can better be able to be an agent of change. This is an intensive period of learning that builds upon itself. It pains me to think of how much I don't know and thrills me that I'm doing something about it.

That's part of the transformation.

NEW EXPERIENCES

by Grace Friedheim and Emily Robinson



Throughout our high school years at the UUCC, we've been exposed to a variety of new experiences and challenges. This year has been no exception.

As our high school worship service began to take shape last fall, a planning session took an unexpected turn. As our

discussions over service topics and content matured, our plan to focus on environmental justice began to morph into something else. When the group discussed our other option, racial justice, one of our peers shared a personal story. While out to dinner with her grandparents, her grandma began to describe an African American boy in a class she once taught, using words like colored and other terms this peer found highly offensive. She was very uncomfortable with what she regarded as a blatant display of racism from an adult she valued and thought highly of.

As the group listened, others began to think of connections to events in their own lives. More and more stories were shared and our service topic came into view: a connection between comfort zones and racial inequalities. As leaders in such a reflective and sincere group, we were inspired by their stories and began to get excited to share our own personal experiences and reflections with the larger congregation.

In addition to our thought-provoking and constructive senior high worship service towards the beginning of our CYRE year, many of our individual class topics this fall were intriguing and helped us to expand our personal

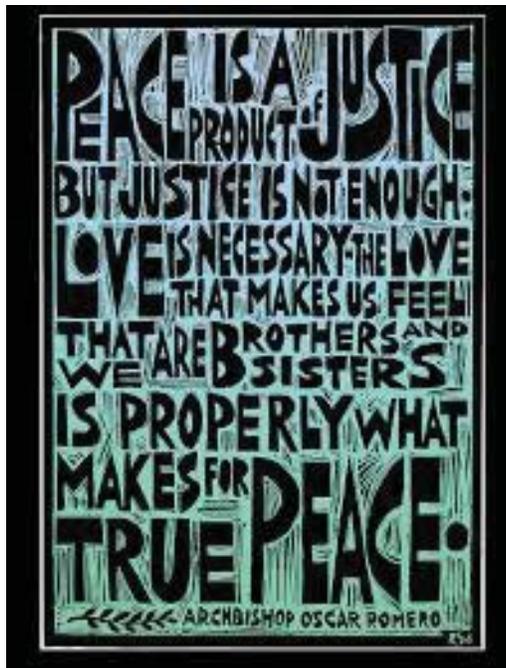
perspectives. During one specific class, we watched a video of an experiment where instead of dividing people by race, the instructor divided the youth by eye color. She separated the blue-eyed people from the brown-eyed ones and then instructed the brown-eyed people to treat the blue-eyed ones as if they were lesser. She asked the blue-eyed people to do impossible tasks and beat them down to make them feel worthless. What really stuck out were the reactions of some of the participants. One blue-eyed girl was so upset by how she was treated, that she stormed out of the room. While watching the video, we realized the parallel between the eye color experiment and the harsh reality that a lot of students of color go through.

Another intriguing layer of the experiment was that the blue-eyed/ brown-eyed division wasn't obviously targeting race but did flip the typical privilege divisions. For us, watching the video was incredibly eye-opening to see this instructor curse at, berate and treat the blue-eyed people so rudely and unfairly. It really clicked

during the interview of some brown-eyed people of color after the experiment. They shared that similar experiences had happened to them in real life. The nonchalant manner in which they shared these connections made the outbursts and anger of the blue-eyed people seem childish and ignorant. They weren't making the connection between the way they were treated during the brief experiment and the way many people of color are treated in daily life.

As leaders in the high school class, this year's congregation-wide focus has helped us grow stronger. Eye-opening experiences like the ones described are incredibly beneficial in allowing us to

connect with our classmates, congregation and the greater community as we all work on the call to justice.



Peace is a Product of Justice,
mixed media art by Ricardo Levins Morales

THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS:



Tricia Bernard

Tricia is a New Jersey native who has landed in Charlotte following 20 years in Madrid, Spain. She has been a member of the UCC for 5 years. Tricia's interests include art and design, languages and literature, and the environment.



Grace Friedheim and Emily Robinson

Both Emily Robinson and Grace Friedheim attend East Meck High School where Grace is a senior and Emily is a junior. They have been attending the UCC nearly their whole lives and are currently serving as the co-chairs of the youth leadership team, the SQUAD. Grace enjoys spending time with her family, hiking, and watching movies. Emily loves science, the outdoors and all animals but especially horses. Both Grace and Emily are passionate about the environment and are leaders in their school's environmental club.

Chris Clark

A UCC member since 1999, Chris Clark says he tries to take photographs of things other people might not notice. He writes software for a living.



Thomas Elijah, III

Thomas is a self-described spiritual humanitarian who wants to be of service, develop real relationships, and effect improvement in the community. Personal Mission: To practice good health, wonderment and cooperative prosperity.

Ricardo Levins Morales

Earlier this year we discovered Ricardo's artwork online and contacted him about using it to promote the social justice work we're pursuing here at the UCC. You'll see his engravings and mixed media pieces reproduced throughout this issue of *Soundings*. Ricardo was born in the coffee growing mountains of western Puerto Rico and moved to the US in 1967. His art has grown up inseparably entwined with his activism and sense of community. For Ricardo, art is "a collection of medicinal herbs and nutrients that can help individuals, communities and societies overcome the cultural toxins that keep them from making needed changes." He lives in Minneapolis, MN, where he works out of a storefront studio. Visit www.rlmartstudio.com for more information about Ricardo and his art.



THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS:

Ron Spake

Ron joined the UCC in 2014 and found this to be a wonderful life changing place to be engaged both spiritually and socially. Ron lives in Charlotte with his partner Randall Hartsell. He is retired from Bank of America as a commercial loan trainer and tech writer. Volunteering as a docent at the Museum of the New South and at Time Out Youth keeps him busy.



Janet Zick

Janet is a long time UU who recently retired after 21 years of employment with the Cato Corporation. Retirement is a joy with time spent caring for her granddaughter, Alexandra, ushering for the Blumenthal, and engaging in a deeper involvement of social justice issues.



SOUNDINGS

CHURCH OFFICE HOURS:

MONDAY-FRIDAY, 9 AM - 5 PM

PHONE 704-366-8623 | FAX 704-366-8812

EMAIL: UCC@UCCCHARLOTTE.ORG

WEBSITE: WWW.UCCCHARLOTTE.ORG

UCC PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Unitarian Universalist
Church of Charlotte



Kathleen Carpenter, Director of Religious Education for Children & Youth
704-366-8623, ext. 6034
kathleen@uuccharlotte.org
Children and Youth Religious Education (CYRE), Denominational Connections, Young Adult Group (YAG)

Donna Fisher, Children's Choir Director
donnfish@bellsouth.net
Children's Choir

Kelly Greene, Membership Coordinator
704-366-8623, ext. 6039
kelly@uuccharlotte.org
Membership Team, New Members, Stewardship, Visitors, Volunteer Coordination

John Herrick, Director of Music
704-366-8623, ext. 6037
john@uuccharlotte.org
Music, Stewardship, Worship

Alesia Hutto, Office Administrator
704-366-8623, ext. 6030
alesia@uuccharlotte.org
Administrative Support, Communications

Martha Kniseley, Adult Programming Coordinator
704-366-8623, ext. 6036
martha@uuccharlotte.org
Adult Religious Education and Spiritual Development (ARESD), Community Building, Congregational Care, Environmental Transformation

Jay Leach, Senior Minister
704-366-8623, ext. 6032
jay@uuccharlotte.org
Chief of Staff, Coordinating Team, Social Justice, Worship

Belinda Parry, Administrative Assistant
704-366-8623, ext. 6033
belinda@uuccharlotte.org
Part-time Administrative Support, CYRE Support

Doug Swaim, Director of Administration
704-366-8623, ext. 6031
doug@uuccharlotte.org
Building & Grounds, Communications, Coordinating Team, Environmental Transformation, Finance, Memorial Endowment Trust, Open Door School, Security