Care of the Soul

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“How is it with your soul?”

This question would begin our conversation each Thursday night when we gathered at the university chaplain’s home on campus. We were a small group, all of us in the religion department, involved in campus ministry, and deeply committed to the work found in religious life—caring for the soul. Our group was called “Pastries and Perfection,” a half-hearted nod to John Wesley’s work on Christian Perfection and mostly about baked goods and tea.

Our question, “how is it with your soul?” is also how Wesley opened every small group gathering he led. It is a question that asks more than just how is your day, or how do you feel, or what do you think, or even how are you. It is a question that should jar you in a world of well-intended but mostly superficial interactions. It’s also a question that should be carefully asked and when you are open to holding sacred the space before you.

Asking about the well-being of one’s soul is to ask about what Thomas Moore identifies as “a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance.” It’s to inquire about the essence of what Pema Chodron calls “that which is indestructible in us.” In both asking and answering this question, we are invoking the countercultural idea that who we are is more than what we do, what we know, what we possess, and how we feel. The question isn’t asking if we are happy or if we have what we want. The question is asking us if we are tending to our essence. It’s asking if we are living out of the place where we are most authentically us. And if our answer is no, are we willing to spend our days detached from that which is indestructible within us?

A few weeks into the pandemic, I found myself wanting to return to those Thursday nights in college, gathered around a shared table of nourishment, asking and answering the jarring question, “how is it with your soul?” I did not want questions about how I was coping, or how to do something in Zoom, or had I mastered a new skill yet. I wanted a question that would break me open in the midst of the world’s tipping point. An unsettling question. A question centered on alignment and authenticity. The great gift of community is that you can find people who can ask you this very question, and who will walk with you as you answer it. And my answer has offered an unexpected chance to remember and to be renewed amid the chaos.

There is an eternal landscape, a geography of the soul; we search for its outlines all our lives.

—Josephine Hart
One of my favorite courses in seminary was simply called, Care for the Soul. Three days a week, we gathered in a cramped basement classroom to discuss the pieces of our lives that either fed or injured our souls. It was completely different from studying holy scriptures, turning them inside out to look for hidden meanings, or discussing theories of pastoral care and the latest research on how to care for another with careful boundaries and open hearts. Three times a week, we gathered to engage in the work of our souls.

I have a vivid memory of our professor standing in the front of the room and explaining that this could be one of the most important courses of our time there because soul work is hard work, and we must do it if we are to be fully alive. It requires compassion and empathy, for ourselves first, and living from a place of hospitality and welcome, being ready to greet whatever arose from within and whatever was brought to us from another. We prayed, we meditated, we journaled, we discussed what it was in our own ministries that would counter the alienation and brokenness of our lives, our communities, and our world. We learned that we must first belong to ourselves, care for our own souls, before we could create communities of deep belonging for others.

This is the work of a congregation, and this is the work of a minister. Ministers are called to enter into your lives while you are doing this deep work. Reminding you that you are loved, you are enough, you are precious, you matter, and you are not alone. We ask you to examine your life, share your gifts, connect and commit to the holy work of showing up for one another, again and again, turning wounds into wisdom, to be a part of building the world of our imaginings.

This month, we say goodbye to another minister, this time Rev. Roger Bertschausen. As Roger pointed out in a recent sermon, ministers come and ministers go. We travel with you for varying lengths of time, whether one year or twenty, and we hold your stories, your dreams, your hopes, and your fears while we journey with you in community.

Roger arrived less than one year ago and has traveled with us in an almost completely virtual environment. Most of you have only ever seen him on a screen, and yet he has become a part of the fabric of our community. Through sermons that have inspired and challenged us, small group gatherings, coffee hours, board and staff meetings, and work with our search team, Roger has left his mark here among us. He has nurtured us in community, helped us find our way in an extraordinary year with compassion and curiosity, greeting whatever arose, and caring for our souls as we did the hard work of discerning our future.

Ministers come and ministers go. Each one leaves a mark on our community and lives here with us in our histories and our hearts. Parker Palmer writes, “Here’s the deal. The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed—to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is...” Thank you, Roger, for seeing us, for journeying with us, for loving us with compassion and hope, exactly as we are, and calling us forth to all that we can become together.

In gratitude and in love,
Kelly
CELEBRATING REV. KELLY

When asked about her personal strengths for co-ministry, Rev. Kelly Crocker responded, “If I had to come up with a vision of who I am in the world, it’s a giant table, and there’s always room to pull up another chair, and there’s enough for everybody who wants to be there. I have a deep belief in the expansiveness of life, and it’s really grounded in the expansiveness of love.” For those of us attending the coffee session during Candidating Week, it was a moment of recognition—one where we knew this to be true of both Rev. Kelly and her ministry among us. Her ministry, in her own words and beautiful illustration, is one of belonging.

John O’Donohue, the beloved Irish priest, poet, and philosopher, wrote extensively on belonging in his book, *Eternal Echoes*. He writes, “The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature. Cut off from others, we atrophy and turn in on ourselves... belonging suggests warmth, understanding, and embrace. No one was created for isolation.” O’Donohue identifies that our post-modern culture isolates us from ourselves and each other, and we have lost “the art of fostering community.” Belonging is essential for human flourishing, but we struggle to cultivate it in meaningful ways. Perhaps this is why Rev. Kelly’s ministry has touched all of us who have found our way to First Unitarian Society.

As we celebrated her 20th year at FUS and her new ministry as Co-Senior Minister last month, many of you shared stories of how her ministry of belonging has been felt in your life and in the larger experience of our community. From officiating your weddings to dedicating your children and grandchildren. From celebrating rites of passage to leading services to participating in retreats. From sitting with you as you received devastating news—the loss of loved ones, the loss of health, the loss of relationships, and all the difficulties that accompany the human experience. Through political unrest, through a long interim period, and through a pandemic, Rev. Kelly has been with each of us and all of us throughout the seasons of our lives. In each season, she reminded us of the necessary and beautiful gift of belonging, the need for community, and shared in the joys and challenges of our lives.

In reflecting on her statement for this article, I thought of the poet and philosopher David Whyte’s words, “To feel as if you belong is one of the great triumphs of human existence—and especially to sustain a life of belonging and to invite others into that [belonging].” What a gift this faith community receives through her invitation to sit at the table. As we celebrate her new role as Co-Senior Minister, a note of gratitude: Rev. Kelly, thank you for the gift of sharing in this common life, for inviting all to sit at the table and for telling us “you belong here.” Your leadership and continued ministry sustain and uplift us as we foster community, deepen our faith, and learn how best to walk in this world.

Rev. Kelly during her 20th anniversary celebration. The Atrium Entrance was lovingly decorated with yarn squares and God’s eyes from over 45 contributors. Thanks to all who participated in the celebration!
Reflecting on the Interim Time

After the May 2 vote on calling Rev. Kelly Asprooth-Jackson as Co-Senior Minister, there was a loud cheer of excitement as you welcomed him into the virtual room to share the news. It was both a significant and celebratory moment in the life of the congregation. It also marked the almost end of a three-year interim period.

As we begin to close this transitional chapter and enter into a new chapter of co-ministry, we wanted to take a moment to recognize and thank those who helped get us here.

The Ministerial Search Committee. Over the course of the third year, the Ministerial Search Committee worked countless hours as your elected representatives. They began with a deep dive into the search process with the UUA, solicited your feedback through a comprehensive survey, and held numerous cottage meetings in the fall. With your feedback, they created our congregational profile, sifted through applications, conducted preliminary interviews, and facilitated three pre-candidating weeks. They were tasked with the responsibility of selecting the best candidate to present to us at Candidating Week and then planned and led all the events. This volunteer task was enormous in its scope, hours, and responsibilities. We are indebted with gratitude to Dorit Bergen, Emily Cusic Putnam, Sandy Eskrich, Chuck Evenson, Jeanne Sears, Emily Smith, and Joy Stieglitz Gottschalk. Thank you!

The Board of Trustees. Throughout the interim period, your elected board members have strived to bring your voice, your hopes, and your vision to every decision. Tasked with hiring two interim ministers, they also listened to your feedback and thoughtfully considered the congregation’s hopes for the future in choosing the co-ministry model. All of these efforts occurred while continuing to maintain our regular business and leading us through a pandemic. We are deeply grateful for their continued leadership.

The Interim Ministry Transition Team. In February 2019, a board-appointed team worked closely with Rev. Doug Wadkins to provide a listening ear to the congregation about concerns, hopes, and dreams for the future. This team met with almost every FUS group individually and tabled during coffee hours. They also compiled a report after meeting with local partners in the community to hear their feedback on what FUS means to the larger Madison community. Thanks to Lorna Aaronson, Emily Cusic Putnam, Amy Kell, Alan Knox, Lori Neumann, Dawn Regenbogen, Carol Roan, and Ed Zapala.

The Ministerial Model Task Force. The behind-the-scenes work of this task force was instrumental in laying the foundation in choosing our new ministry model. Appointed by the board, this team held extensive interviews with large UU congregations across the country, with differing ministry models, and produced a 49-page report for the board. Thanks to Jake Blaszyk, John McGevna, Melinda Gustafson Gervasi, and March Schweitzer for their work on this report.

The ministers. The work of Revs. Doug Wadkins and Roger Bertschausen were instrumental in helping us through the transition process, asking us to envision our future, even if we disagreed on the details. Their guidance, leadership, and pastoral support have been invaluable. Equally as instrumental and invaluable has been the work of Rev. Kelly Crocker throughout this process. Her steadfast support, care, and guidance not only carried us through the transition but will also carry us into the future.

The staff. While not playing a leading role in the transition process, our gratitude goes to the staff for helping maintain the life of our community and for providing support to our lay-led committees throughout the interim period.

The congregation of FUS. The interim period would not have been possible without each of you. Though there were challenging times during the transition, we are grateful to all who engaged in the process. Thank you for volunteering your time, providing feedback and input, participating in town halls and cottage meetings, attending Candidating Week events, and voting to call Rev. Kelly Asprooth-Jackson on May 2. Your patience and persistence throughout the transition period made it possible for us to take the next step in our future. Thank you.
A STEWARDSHIP CAMPAIGN IN TRANSITION
by Cheryll Mellenthin, Project Coordinator

As a community striving for purpose, our shared values have provided an anchor to moor us during these months of being apart. While we have missed the weekly gatherings—the squeeze of a hand, the shared smiles of joyful news, the bowed heads acknowledging personal challenges—living our values has held us close. We have weathered together an uncertain time and reached deep to emerge as a community full of possibilities for the future. This is how we care for ourselves and one another.

We are also entering a season of unparalleled transition: A new co-ministry model with Team Kelly—a wonderful reality for FUS, a healing season with the prospect of being together again soon, and the power of our voices shaping the politics for the future. The transition also lends permission to break out of old constructs so together we can use our shared values to build a more resilient future and with increased transparency. I embrace transitional disruption as a positive force for doing good while honoring our strengths. This month is the transition from one fiscal year to the next. What if we used the power of reimagining through disruption to build a more perfect future with a fully-funded operating budget as we enter the new fiscal year? Our budget truly would be the moral and restorative document for the future we build together.

A fully-funded budget at the start of each fiscal year is a new construct. Put in practice, it would mean less staff time spent seeking funds and more time doing the work we hold to be the center of our mission. The social events we plan would put community engagement first and fundraising opportunities second, truly meaning all are welcome. Honoring equitable staff compensation would be possible. Most importantly, your financial gifts are a powerful tool in aligning our shared values with the work we can do. Your generosity also enables those in our FUS community without financial means to fully participate in the mission we share.

Many of you have started us on that path of a fully-funded fiscal year by increasing your year-over-year pledge, becoming Sustaining Stewards for future years, and encouraging others to give through sharing your stories. Still, in the spirit of financial transparency, the reality is that we are far from our budget goal for the new fiscal year. We ask all who can, to make your pledge in this month of transition. Let us start our new fiscal year full of promise, celebrating what we have accomplished this past year, and looking forward to a future with the financial means to fully care for one another.
REOPENING FUS: JUNE UPDATE
by the Staff Leadership Team

We wanted to offer a brief follow-up to our column last month about when and how FUS will reopen for in-person events.

We are continuing to refine the metrics we’re using to make reopening decisions. We also have a staff team working on the complicated details of reopening various aspects of FUS life. The commitments we outlined in our May column, including centering the most vulnerable among us and providing good in-person and virtual options, continue to guide us.

We anticipate beginning to phase in some smaller-scale in-person activities over the summer. The earliest we anticipate holding in-person worship services will be September. There are many complicated details to work through, and timing reopening with the launch of our new ministry team and the traditional beginning of a new program year at FUS feels synchronous. We anticipate doing some dress rehearsals and trial runs for worship with very small numbers of people later in August, so we have an opportunity to work out problems ahead of a large-scale reopening.

This is, of course, all contingent on continued improvement in the key metrics we’re using. Watch the Red Floors for updates. Thank you for your continued patience and support.

—Rev. Roger Bertschausen (rogerb@fusmadison.org)
—Rev. Kelly Crocker (kellyc@fusmadison.org)
—Monica Nolan (monican@fusmadison.org)

THANKS & BEST WISHES, FLORENCE!

In June, we say goodbye to our Office Manager, Florence Jessup. While we are sad to say goodbye, we are excited for her new job as Director of Administration for a UU congregation in New York! Florence joined us in October 2017 and jumped right in at the start of several significant staff transitions. Many of you interacted with her by phone, email, or when you stopped by the office during the week. Her pragmatic approaches to managing our complex calendar, database, and payment processes have been invaluable. We'll miss her steady and calm presence when we return to the office, and we wish her all the best in her next adventure.
Wheel of Life
Congratulations to our Coming of Age Youth: Evan Carlson, Lila Chanas, Quinn Conroy, Raphael Espinoza-Forlenza, Finn Hill-Gorman, Portia Grade, Rave Luecht, Molly McArdle, Finn O’Higgins, Anna Pedretti, Finn Peters, Mary Sandwich-Schroeder, Maya Stegner, Ophelia Swallen, and Sam Taylor-Feldman. We offer them our deepest thanks for their commitment throughout this year and the thoughtful and inspiring belief statements they delivered during the Coming of Age service.

We send our love to Carolyn Sanders and Ann Fleming as they grieve the death of Carolyn’s mother, Barbara Sanders. Barbara passed away on May 18 following a short illness. We are grateful she graced this planet for 89 years and she will be deeply missed.

Financial Forum
Our annual and virtual Financial Forum will take place on Sunday, June 6, at 11 am. An email was sent to the congregation on Sunday, May 30, with more information, including a video and budget documents. You can access that email by clicking here.

Parish Meeting Announcement
Our virtual Spring Parish Meeting is scheduled for Sunday, June 13, at 11:30 am to vote on the budget and the relational covenant, as well as two new Board of Trustee members. A link to Zoom is available on our website. To participate by phone, call 1-312-626-6799 and follow the prompts. The Meeting ID is 849 8114 2267 and the Passcode is 363979.

Office Closed June 14-18
Our offices will be closed during the week of June 14-18 as staff will be taking time to develop a reopening plan for the new program year in the fall. Staff will be available for urgent needs that arise during the week.

UUA General Assembly June 23-27
The 2021 General Assembly is another all-virtual event. The Ware Lecture will feature Stacey Abrams and Desmond Meade. All are welcome to attend, and registration is required. General Assembly is the annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists, where we conduct business of the Association, explore the theological underpinnings of our faith, and lean fully into our mission and principles. Visit www.uua.org/ga to learn more. Contact Janet Swanson at janets@fusmadison.org for scholarship information.

First Friday Film on June 4 @ 5:30 pm
Join the FUS MOSES Ministry Team (Criminal Justice Reform), PBS Wisconsin, and other community partners for the June First Friday Film. Coded Bias (90 min) is a documentary film directed by Shalini Kantayya and premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. It follows researchers and advocates, principally MIT computer scientist and founder of the Algorithmic Justice League Joy Buolamwini, as they explore how algorithms encode and propagate bias. It touched on other ethical issues in Big Tech, including surveillance via facial recognition, and the perils of computer-based judgment in human evaluation. Others featured in the documentary include: “Weapons of Math Destruction” author Cathy O’Neill and members of “Big Brother Watch,” including Silkie Carlo. After the film, we will host a brief community discussion via Zoom at 7 pm on Friday, June 4. Register by Thursday, June 3, at noon at https://forms.gle/mmK2bsCjorK9TUJ4A to receive links to both the film and the after-film discussion. These links will be emailed to you on June 3 around 1 pm. Please note: Given that this film is 90 minutes long, you will need to start watching it by 5:30 pm on Friday, June 4, if you want to finish in time for our after-film discussion starting at 7 pm.
A Month of Services
Sunday @ 10 am at www.fusmadison.org

Sunday, June 6 - “Mending and Saving the Soul”
with Rev. Roger Bertschausen

This sermon will kick off the exploration of our worship theme for June: Care of the Soul. We'll consider these questions: What is the soul? How do we mend it? How do we save it? These past fifteen months have been an extraordinary challenge to so many of us. Mending and saving our souls feel like particular challenges at the moment. Music to care for the soul for piano, harp, and voice.

Sunday, June 13 - “Blessing of the Animals”
with Rev. Kelly J. Crocker

Our lives are enriched in many ways by the presence of beloved animals. They remind us of the sacredness that flows between and within all things on this planet. This annual service of blessing and remembrance acknowledges our profound interconnection and reminds us that it is by this deep interconnection that we are blessed and are a blessing to each other. Please send photos of your animal companions to Rev. Kelly by June 10 to be included in our slideshow. You can send photos of pets that have passed on to include in our time of memory. Join us after service for our virtual coffee hour with your pets so we can share in the blessing of these companions together. Music by Khachaturian and Saint-Saëns, plus The Carpenters’ “Bless the Beasts and the Children.”

Sunday, June 20
with Rev. Alicia Forde

Rev. Alicia Forde is the Director of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s International Office. Alicia was born and spent her formative years in Trinidad and Tobago. She identifies as an African descent queer, cisgender female with deep roots in Tobago. She considers herself bicultural and is grateful that her formative years enabled her to cultivate a global perspective. That global perspective and commitment to mutual relationship informs her work at the UUA. Rev. Roger worked closely with Rev. Alicia when he was with the UU Partner Church Council and continues to collaborate with her on deconstructing the legacy of imperialism and colonialism in our American UU faith.

Sunday, June 27 - “Hubris and Gratitude”
with Rev. Roger Bertschausen

Some thoughts about FUS, Unitarian Universalism, and the future of both as Rev. Roger prepares to depart FUS at the end of July. This will be parting words that Roger hopes contain some wisdom—not a parting shot! Solos for organ and piano to soothe the soul by Vaughan Williams and others.
love after love

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

-Derek Walcott