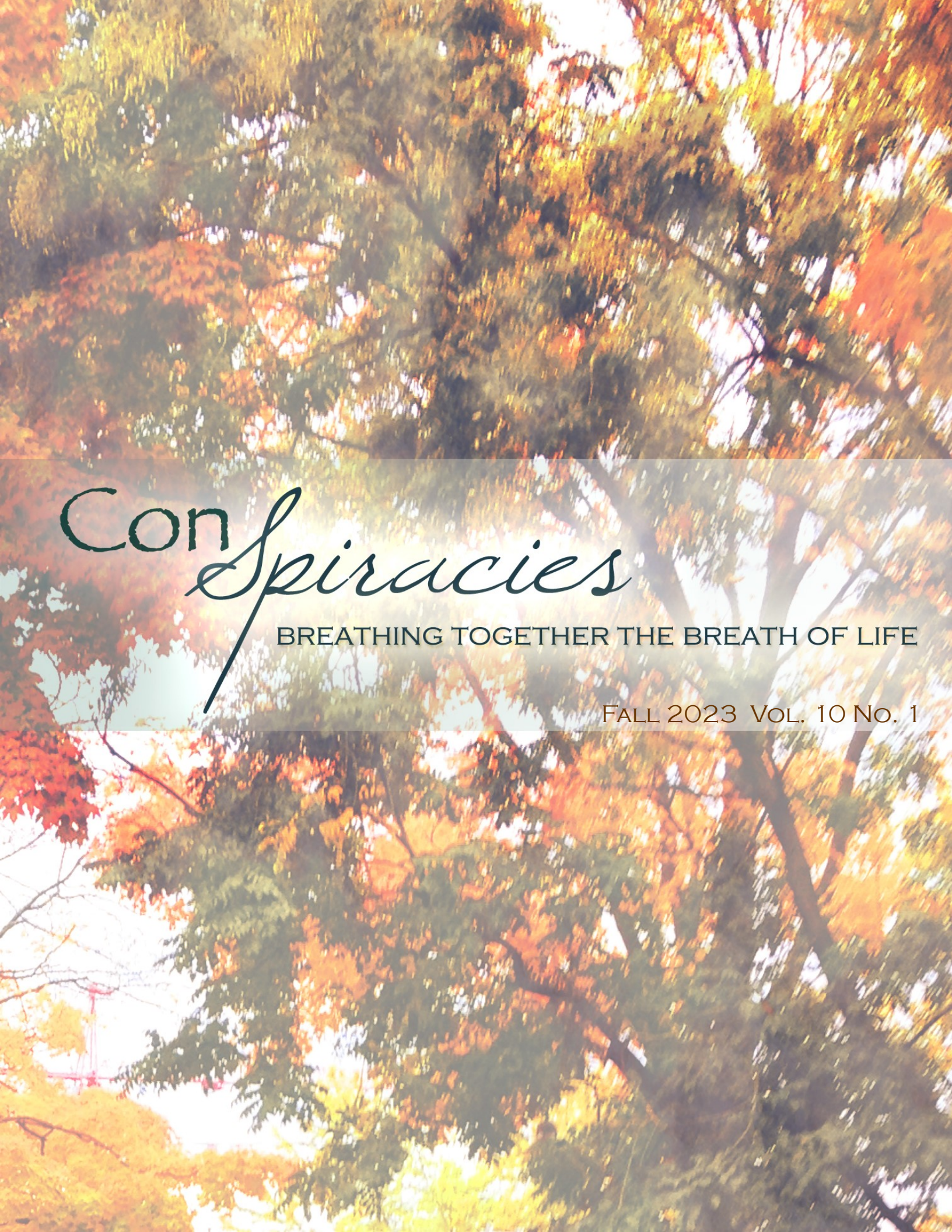

ConSpiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

Fall 2023 Vol. 10 No. 1

ConSpiracies

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Prayers for peace

At the outbreak of the war between Israel and Hamas, the HDS community was invited to light candles in our Multifaith Space and to inscribe prayers and longings in a binder kept there.
This is just one of the prayers left in that sacred space.

May there be beauty instead of ashes, dancing instead of mourning.
May every wounded soul be healed, every tear wiped away.
May the land experience restoration.
May justice prevail and may the people know gladness that will no longer be truncated by war.
May the reign of love and peace and justice endure in all hearts, now and forever.

Annica

Monica Sanford

Assistant Dean for Multireligious Ministry, Office of ministry studies

Monica Sanford offered this brief meditation in the October 31, 2023 issue of "Ministry Minute," the weekly online newsletter of the HDS Office of Ministry Studies.

Photo: Monica Sanford

As the weather shifts from the warm colors of early autumn into the cold gloom of forthcoming winter, I find myself looking at the trees and thinking 'anicca.' And as I read one terrible headlines after another, talk to one anxious and fearful student after another, I find myself hoping, wishing, and devotedly praying 'anicca!' 'Anicca' (ah-ne-cha) is the Pali word for 'impermanence' or 'change' and one of the three Buddhist "hallmarks of existence." Annica is not just the moment of or ability to change, but the constant state of all things as changing, never actually solid or permanent though they often seem that way. In Buddhism, change is recognized as a cause of suffering, especially when we lose those we dearly love, when the things we hope never change inevitably do. Wars break out, loved ones leave us, and warm autumns give way to miserable winters. Yet change is also very good news. Change enables peace to return, children to be born, and spring flowers to replace bare branches. This can never make up for the heartache we have felt, nor compensate for loss, of course. Whether we look at the world and say 'anicca' (change) like a curse or like a blessing (or both in the same day) depends very much on the circumstances and on our own minds/hearts. Buddhism tells me I won't always affect the circumstances (though I am ethically obligated to try), therefore I am responsible to continuously cultivate my mind/heart. Change makes spiritual growth possible, whether we understand that as liberation, redemption, transcendence, or actualization. We are thus obligated to use change to heal ourselves and heal the world. I can't tell you to look on any particular change as good or bad. I can only say "Look: change!" while trying to tenderly hold the paradox of suffering and hope that it brings for all of us.

Radical imagination

Shir Lovett-Graff
MDiv III

Photo: Shir Lovett-Graff

Shir Lovett-Graff offered this meditation at Memorial Church's Morning Prayers on March 23, 2023.

Poet Adrienne Rich writes: "But nothing less than the most radical imagination will carry us beyond this place, beyond the mere struggle for survival, to that lucid recognition of our possibilities which will keep us impatient, and unresigned to mere survival."

I spent last summer living in Jerusalem, in dire need of radical imagination. The political and moral crises surrounding me served to parallel my internal crises around my gender and queer journey.

For years, I found myself called towards a rabbinical path, and dreamed of building Jewish communities grounded in values of justice, compassion, and liberation for all. But faced with the on-the-ground reality of state violence, settler colonialism, fermented trauma, and religious nationalism, I found myself asking: how could G!d have allowed this to happen? What was I being called to do in response?

The crisis of faith matched a growing discontent with my gender expression and being perceived as a cis woman by partners, family, and the world around me. I reached a breaking point. Walking around the old city of Jerusalem, surrounded by gendered expressions of religious devotion and religious expressions of gender, I realized I would need to medically and socially transition to live as my truest self.

One early morning, I walked to the Western Wall, the holiest site for the Jewish people, and stood for a while on the women's side. Surrounded by women and girls lost in prayer, their heads pressed against the ancient stone, I found myself starting to cry. I realized this would likely be the last time I could ever stand on the women's side of the Western Wall and be true to myself before G!d, surrounded by a political reality that was undoubtedly corrupting the many spiritual hearts of this holy land.

I was in a profound wilderness, a spiritual crises, and a deep depression. In other words, I had what Rabbi Benay Lappe calls a crash. A crash is the pivotal moment when you realize your life is not going to turn out the way you planned.

I wish I could say I had a moment of revelation, looking over Jerusalem baked in the golden morning light and feeling a clear call towards my future. But like most journeys through the wilderness, this call lay muffled and distant. Instead, what emerged over time, with the support of friends and family, and therapy and self-reflection, was that I needed to invest in radical imagination.

As a child, I spent hours entertaining myself with stories about worlds that did not exist. My daily life was grounded in play, creation, and dreaming beyond the norms of reality. When we realize our lives will not turn out the way we planned, we are called to reach back toward our child-selves and re-access the imagination that flowed freely within us in our youth. Like children, we need to see the world as a space of endless possibility.

But as adults, we are not often given permission to engage and play with radical imagination. So, what do we need in order to imagine?

First, we need community.
We need people to trust and explore ideas with. We need people who are like us and who can serve as models for who we can become.

Second, we need time and space.
We need time to rest and we need Sabbath. We need art we don't have to be good at and respite from productivity culture.

Finally, we need grief. We need spaces to hold the names we no longer carry. We need rituals to honor the dreams of our parents that we will not be living out.

As queer and trans people, political radicals, abolitionists, and anti-Zionists, imagination is our calling. As people who exist in the hyphen, the slash, the parenthetical and the in-between, imagination is, and has always been, our home.

The fear of the Lord is *tahara*

Francesca Rubinson
MDiv III

Photo: Francesca Rubinson

As a Jewish student in a class on Christian preaching, I am getting used to navigating the lectionary. Each week, I read through the texts that will be interrogated and explained in Protestant churches across the world: a selection from the Hebrew Bible, then a psalm, then the readings from the New Testament—the epistle and the gospel.

I thought I knew what my sermon would discuss. I was going to challenge myself to preach from the New Testament. I wanted to offer my take on Paul's letter to the Philippians, bringing in some insight as a fellow "Hebrew born of Hebrews." But then something came up in my life that called me to another part of the lectionary, and I threw my first sermon out the window. I consulted with divinity school friends who preached regularly and have learned that this often happens.

Psalm 19 verse 10 reads, "The fear of the Lord is clean, abiding forever." In Hebrew, yirat Hashem tehora, omedat la-ad. This past weekend, I received a text asking me if I was available to perform tahara, traditional Jewish burial rites, for a woman who had passed away. The Hebrew term for these burial rituals, tahara, is the same word that appears in line 10 of Psalm 19. The vocalization is slightly different—tehora, tahara—but the meaning of the word is the same: clean, pure, or ritually ready.

I decided to join the local Jewish burial society about this time last year, right after completing a unit of CPE in hospital chaplaincy. In my role as hospital chaplain, I engaged in death and dying work for the first time. I sat with people very close to death. I comforted families before and after the passing of loved ones and prayed over their bodies. With my CPE classmates, I made my way through the bowels of the hospital to the morgue, learning how to set up visitation rooms for families and how to check bodies in and out of that painfully white room.

After my summer of CPE, I decided I didn't want to work as a hospital chaplain full-time. I had grown as a chaplain and as a person, but I wasn't sure I could handle the level of emotional intensity that long-term death and dying work entails. Still, the moments spent with families and patients at the time of transition had been incredibly meaningful. I wanted to continue learning about the rituals that govern the liminal space between life and death in my own Jewish tradition. So, when I heard that the Boston Chevra Kadisha—Jewish burial society, or to translate literally from the Hebrew, group of "holy friends"—was looking to train more members, I jumped at the chance. I wanted to give back to my community in a way that hospital chaplaincy had prepared me to do.

I was trained in the tahara ritual around this time last year, in October of 2022, at Jewish funeral home in Newton, Massachusetts. Actually, I remember the training fell on October 31, Halloween, because there was something deeply spooky about spending hours in a funeral home on a day the veil between the living and the dead is said to be thin. Tahara is fairly straightforward. It really is about cleaning, purification. A tahara team consists of four or five people of the same sex as the person who has passed away. We refer to the deceased as the met or meitah, meaning "the dead one."

The fear of the Lord is *tahara*

Francesca rubinson
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The tahara team undresses the meitah, washes them with three buckets of water, making sure the water touches all parts of their body. They gently dry the meitah, dress them in new white clothes, wrap them in a sheet, and place them in a coffin with accompanying blessings and prayers. During the training last October, we practiced this order of undressing, washing, and dressing again with a CPR dummy. We practiced transferring the dummy from the large metal table to the coffin over and over. We went over the liturgy used during the tahara process. We had opportunities to ask questions about the more intricate details of the ritual and the origins of these customs. It took about three hours on a beautiful fall day, and then I was deemed trained.

My name was placed on a roster of chevra kadisha members. I was told I would receive a text when someone who requested tahara passed away and would be asked to respond quickly if I was available to perform the ritual. If not, that was totally fine; the burial society leaders would move down the list until they constructed a team of five people. Since last October, I have received a tahara text twice. Once I was out of town. Once I had inflexible plans. This past Sunday I was asked to perform tahara and had no obligations or excuses.

I arrived at the funeral home in Newton on Sunday night and told myself I was ready. I told myself I would be with experienced team members. I told myself I would remember my training, even though it had been almost a year ago. I told myself I had worked as a hospital chaplain and been in rooms with dead bodies before. But part of me knew that I had never touched one.

Upstairs in the beautifully appointed parlor of the funeral home, I met the other members of the tahara team. I was the youngest by far. One woman seemed to be in her forties, and I guessed the others were in their sixties. The head of the tahara team had been performing this ritual for ten years. We said a brief blessing upstairs, then moved to a nondescript white door, set unobtrusively in the wall of the funeral home. We opened it and descended narrow wooden steps into a very cold basement. I remember that I shivered and wished I was wearing something warmer and more comforting than a thin t-shirt. We opened another heavy door into the space with the big metal table and a drain in the floor, where the funeral home laid out the meitah for tahara. When we first entered, I saw the form of the meitah covered by a white sheet, stretched tight so I could see the contours of her skull, her shoulders, her hips, her feet. I thought of ghosts and mummies and decay and every horror movie I had ever seen. I was afraid. Yirat Hashem tehora, omedat la-ad. The fear of the Lord is clean. And yet, it didn't endure forever. The tahara team members moved efficiently around the room, preparing the buckets and washcloths and towels, the coffin filled with straw. The tahara team leader gently removed the sheet covering the meitah. I saw that she was still a person. She was a grandmother in a nightgown.

The meitah had been one hundred and one years old. She was tiny and wizened but appeared strangely healthy, with few scars and no medical devices on her body, which I had been warned to expect. My fear became something else, more like the other meanings of the Hebrew root y-r-a. Not only fear but more like awe, a fearful, tender reverence.
There are codes of behavior to follow during tahara. Speak as little as possible, except for the set prayers and quiet instructions. Do not pass anything over the body of the meitah. Instead, walk around her to hand over the scissors or a washcloth. The modesty and dignity of the meitah are paramount. Keep her covered with the sheet unless you are washing her directly. Never leave the meitah alone once the ritual begins. Someone should always be standing close to her, touching her. You are allowed to sing. We removed the meitah's nightgown and poured the three ritual buckets of

The fear of the Lord is *tahara*

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water continuously over her body, like a stream or a current of the sea. We used washcloths to gently wash all parts of her body. To do so we needed to carefully roll the meitah to one side and then the other. Though the meitah was mercifully light, this was a visceral thing to do. To take her cold and immobile in my arms, braced against my chest so others could wash her back, her nape, the underside of her thighs.
One of the other women began to hum a niggun, a wordless melody, and we all joined in. It felt like washing a baby. We supported her head and neck, moved her limbs because she couldn't move them herself. We were incredibly careful with the meitah entrusted to us.

We dried her and dressed her in new garments—white pants and two layers of tunics. We read scripture over her, passages from the Songs of Songs that praised the beauty of the body, likening the meitah to an everlasting spring, overflowing with water. The white garments are held together with long strings that are tied in a specific way, so that the loops form the Hebrew letter shin. This calls in God by the name of El Shaddai, sometimes translated as The Breasted One. I liked the thought that we were returning the meitah to the great mother, to the source of life and the source of death.

It was easy to pick up the meitah. I could have held her alone. But three of us did so as the tahara leader brought over the coffin filled with soft straw. We placed her into it. Before we closed the coffin, we performed the final part of the ritual. We placed fragments of stone from Jerusalem on the meitah's eyes, sprinkled earth from the holy land into the coffin, and covered her again with a white sheet. And then we closed the lid.

At the end of the tahara, we repeated a prayer that we also recited at the beginning of the ritual. We asked forgiveness of the meitah for any error we might have made, for any moment of disrespect or discomfort that we might have caused. We asked her to remember that our intentions were good, wishing only to honor and purify her.

Psalm 19 verse 12 reads, "Who can tell how often he offends? Cleanse me from my secret faults."

I needed that prayer. There was a moment in washing the meitah when I tried to place her hand to rest on her hip, but it slid off her body and hit the metal table with a horrible thunk that sounded like death, so harsh I gasped aloud. The fear of the Lord is pure. It shot through me. But the prayer for forgiveness wrapped that moment up and put it away, as clean as the meitah in her coffin, ready for her journey on.

After the tahara I went home. I didn't eat before heading to the funeral home. I was afraid of what I would see and smell and touch. When I came home, I cooked dinner. I called my mom and told her about my experience. I sat with my housemates and laughed with them as we ate ice cream and watched The Golden Bachelor. I went to bed and slept dreamlessly. People don't always talk about performing tahara, because it is such a strange and intimate thing, especially within mainstream American culture, where death is held at arm's length. Tahara is also considered an important mitzvah, a good deed that not many perform, so chevra kadisha members don't want to brag about the work they do. But I felt called to share this story today because the word tehora leapt out at me from the psalm after my experience. My first tahara reminded me how necessary and meaningful it can be to move through fear and find yourself on the other side. To offer care where there can be no possibility of reciprocity.

Brother roger's sky

Nicole newell
MDiv II

Photo: Nicole Newell

Nicole Newell offered this meditation at Memorial Church's Morning Prayers on September 11, 2023.

A reading from the journals of Brother Roger, founder of the Community of Taizé: "May 15, 1969 All through the day, wherever I am and whoever I may be talking to, I find ways of watching what is happening in the sky. The sight of creativity constantly in action. So many shades of gold set off by brilliant greys—joyfulness wells up inside me; it is not so hard to bear the burden of contradictions."

This reading from Brother Roger's journal is one of many such entries he makes about the marvelous, renewing quality of simply looking up. I came to Brother Roger's writings and journals two years ago when I visited the monastic community of Taizé with other Harvard students. We were among the 100,000 young people that now make pilgrimage to Taizé each year. People come for a week at a time, living simply, attending prayers, and working a couple of hours each day to keep the community running smoothly.

But the community started small, with just one person—Brother Roger. Brother Roger was born in 1915 in Switzerland. He nearly died from tuberculosis as a teenager and later studied theology. In 1940, when Brother Roger was twenty-five years old, he rode his bicycle into France, impelled to start a community of prayer. He founded this community in the near-abandoned village of Taizé, just a few miles away from the Nazi-occupied region of France. In the beginning, Brother Roger prayed alone, three times a day, and provided shelter for Jewish refugees. After the war ended, other Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, joined him and took vows to the monastic life together. The community of Taizé grew around a vision of reconciliation in the Christian church across religious divides that had fueled centuries of horrible violence in Europe.

Throughout the ups and downs of life in community, in the church, and through war time and peace time, the sky was a constant reminder to Brother Roger that God is active in the world. Vast and beyond our reach, the sky suggests mysteries beyond our knowing and opens us to contemplation. Brother Roger saw the sky as a sight of creativity, a source of joy, and a reminder of beauty at work in a difficult world. And a difficult world it is.

We remember today the events of September 11, 2001, when four planes were crashed on the East Coast—one at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, one in rural Pennsylvania, and two into the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan. Some of us were not born yet. Some of us, like me, watched these events unfold on a screen; others, out a window or from the street, or witnessed the loss later from a hospital room or memorial service. We may live close to the fabric of this loss even now; or we may find ourselves more distant. Let us remember these events and their aftermath this morning with a moment of silence.

The sky on 9/11 was a beautiful blue imprinted with smoke and collapse. I wonder how Brother Roger's words about finding ways of watching what is happening in the sky, written in 1969, can hold that sky too, in a vision of beauty, reconciliation, or care. Perhaps they cannot; or perhaps both visions must be held alongside each other. Brother Roger would find the sky lifting him from tribulation or trial or grief—whether personal or international—to a deep, abiding, and inexplicable joy in the mysteries of life and the mysteries of faith. The sky with its brilliant greys, not unlike this morning's, somehow helped Brother Roger bear the burden of contradictions, to hold joys and sorrows together. For me, too, looking up can often have the effect of renewing my mind or moving me to consolation and contemplation and joy even as I stay with sorrow or loss. The sky is a constant backdrop to life. All is held there. What do you see when you look up? What does the sky return you to within yourself?

What is the kingdom of God like?

Stephanie Paulsell
Susan Shallcross Swartz Professor of the Practice of Christian Studies

Stephanie Paulsell preached this homily at the HDS Tuesday Morning Ecumenical Eucharist on October 31, 2023.

I haven't counted them up myself, but apparently Jesus asks more than 300 questions in the gospels. Who do people say that I am? How can Satan drive out Satan? Why are you bothering this woman? Who touched my clothes? Why does this generation ask for a sign? All kinds of questions.

In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus is not only asking questions, he asks the same question twice and answers it differently both times. "What is the kingdom of God like?" he asks. "What shall I compare it to?" Jesus answers his own question with a parable: the Kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows into a tree so large that birds make nests in its branches.

He then asks the same question again: "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?" This time the Kingdom of God is like the yeast that a woman mixes into her flour to leaven it.

Jesus' multiple answers suggest that his answers are not the only ones this question might evoke. By offering more than one answer, he invites us to imagine our own parables. What else do we see around us that might evoke the hiddenness of God's Kingdom in our midst, its secret growth? What else can we think of that starts our small and then grows and expands until it is large enough to be lived in or nourishing enough to sustain our lives?

In our culture, believing is often lifted up as what it means to be religious. Religion is a set of beliefs that we either do or do not accept, beliefs that demand certain choices about politics or science or sex. Rarely is religion portrayed as imaginative, creative work. But Jesus doesn't ask What is the Kingdom of God? He asks What is the Kingdom of God like? He invites us to cultivate, as theologian David Tracy puts it, an analogical imagination. He invites us to think with things we can see and touch about things we can only imagine.

Imagination is at the heart of the ethical choices to which Jesus calls us. During the last brutal months of World War I, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that the willingness to kill must be a failure of the imagination—an inability to imagine another person's life and what it might become—to imagine what's furled up inside of them, as she put it. The imaginative work at the heart of the life of faith challenges us to cultivate our capacity to imagine lives other than our own. Because if we can't imagine them, how will we care about them?

Photo: Stephanie Paulsell

What is the Kingdom of God like? To what shall we compare it? With this open, inviting question, Jesus opens a space for more and more and more answers. The Kingdom of God is like a drop of indigo in white paint, a pinch of saffron in a pot of rice. It is like a healing dose of medicine in a suffering body, a fragment of hope in the midst of fear. A banner of possibility furled up inside of everyone, every single person. The Kingdom of God is pervasive and transformative, and once it has been added, it can't be separated out.

Paul writes of hidden things too, in the reading from Romans. Here, the Kingdom of God is hidden in creation itself, creation which is groaning in pain, trying to give birth to it, trying to bring forth the glory of it in the midst of what Paul calls "the sufferings of this present time." "The creation waits with eager longing," Paul writes, "for the revealing of the children of God." But here's the secret. The children of God are not some people

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and not others. The children of God are everyone. Us. And them. Even now, the fragile seeds of God's kingdom are being carried across a chasm of violence. Who knows in whose hearts are growing the solutions to the conflicts by which our world is convulsed? No one knows. And so we cannot afford to lose a single person.

A hospital chaplain's prayer for her community in a time of war

Alison Jablonsky
MDiv '17
Director of spiritual care, tufts medical center, boston, MA

Photo: Alison Jablonsky

Ali Jablonsky sent this message to all employees of Tufts Medical Center in November 2023.

I don't often give context to prayers, blessings, or intentions, but for this, it is important. The war in the Middle East is devastating and for many of my colleagues, this devastation is harrowingly personal. As I bear witness to the pain of my Jewish colleagues, my Muslim colleagues, my Palestinian colleagues, my Israeli colleagues, and my colleagues who hold many other connections to the Middle East, I know there is a profound complexity of suffering. As the Spiritual Care Director for our hospital, my responsibility is to all staff and my compassion and love are for all of you. In our conversations on the units, in the halls, on the phone, and in my office, I see your pain, I hear your fear, I feel your anger, your terror, your despair, your disappointment. Our conversations stay with me and I know that there are many of you that I don't know, there are losses and pains that haven't been shared. I want to do everything—anything—that will help ease your pain and I know that the needs are not universal and what might comfort one could upset another. I am, above all else, a chaplain. My job is to bear witness to your pain, to love you as you hurt, to support you, to help where I can. Often, my help starts with a prayer, especially when I don't know what to do. Prayer can go by many names and can sound differently; to me, prayer is the act of lifting up cares and asking for help. In that spirit, I would like to start with a prayer, knowing that we cannot be sustained by prayer alone. For those of you who don't know me, it is important to name that I do not have cultural or religious ties to the Middle East, though many people I love do. I write this prayer from the perspective of a queer, Unitarian Universalist, white female chaplain in response to the hurt I am hearing and the devastation I am seeing. I know there are no words that could ever be right for everyone. I'd like to start with my best attempt at what is in my heart. Where my words fail, I hope my love and care for you are felt.

As we care for patients in crises,
Let us extend the depth of compassion, patience, and dedication of our external care
inward as we tend to ourselves and each other in this crisis of war in the Middle East.
May our collegiality be a resounding call of responsibility for each other's well-being.
May we settle for no less than kindness to and investment in each other and what we carry.
May we settle for no less than seeing each other and caring about each other.

May love reach every person in agony who has lost people, place, or safety,
especially our colleagues who are trying to work as they grieve.
May outrage expose every expression of cruelty and harm near and far,
especially the physical and emotional brutalities that wound our colleagues as they endeavor to protect their bodies and minds.
May action create change that upholds dignity for all people,
especially for our colleagues who experience their dignity being stripped away.

Give us the courage to speak our truths, our pains, our questions, our fears, our hopes.
Give us the compassion to hear their truths, their questions, their pains, their fears, their hopes.
Give us the capacity to move beyond binary thinking to take in all that exists
beyond the falsities of sides and certainties.
Give us the strength to use engagement to break the paralysis of the cancel culture
so that we can achieve beloved community.

Hindu prayers for peace

Swami Chidekananda
HDS Resident Fellow

Amid global and local violence and tension, the Vedas, the most ancient of Hindu scriptures, provide prayers for attaining inner peace and equanimity. Below are three such Vedantic prayers. The first two can be chanted when waking up in the morning, and the final prayer can be chanted before falling asleep. These peace prayers help us to protect our subconscious mind from disturbing influences. They also help to infuse our minds with a holy thought pattern that vibrates mangala (auspicious energy) to ourselves and others throughout the day and into the night, spreading peace from ourselves to others and, ultimately, to the whole world.

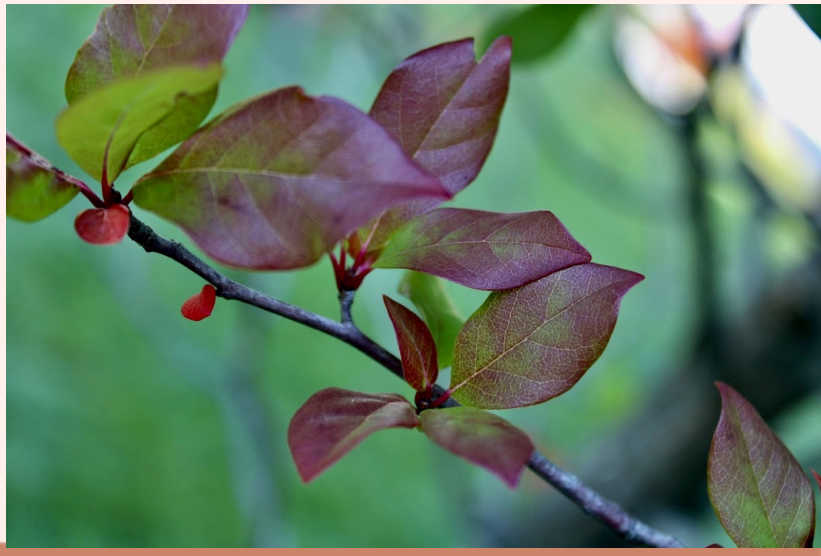
Photo: Swami Chidekananda

May the Infinite Reality protect us.
May it nourish us.
May it guide us.
May it give us strength and right understanding.
May Love and Harmony be with us all.
Om peace, peace, peace."

-from Yajur Veda Taitiriya Upanisad 2.2.2

May peace radiate in the whole sky as well as in the vast ethereal space everywhere.
May peace reign all over this earth, in water, herbs and trees.
May peace flow over the whole universe.
May peace emanate from the Supreme Being.
And may there be peace and peace alone.
Om Peace, Peace, Peace unto us all.

-from Atharva Veda, Chapter 19



Lead us from the unreal to the Real
Lead us from Darkness unto Light
Lead us from Death to Immortality
Light us through and through and guide us ever more with Thy Loving Presence.
Om Peace, Peace, Peace

-from Brihadaranyaka Upanisad 1.3.28

Who is this community for?

Caleigh Grogan
MDiv II

Photo: Caleigh Grogan

Caleigh Grogan preached this homily at the HDS Noon Service hosted by HUUMS (the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Students) on September 13, 2023.

When I was here in the Williams Chapel for the HUUMS Noon Service last fall, I was overwhelmed by the prospect of finding my place here. Coming to HDS completely turned my world upside down. I took me away from everything that was comfortable and familiar about my day to day existence and forced me to leave the web of relationships that kept me grounded and feeling secure in who I am.

And now, a year later, I've begun to reestablish some of that familiarity and comfortability that I crave, but I've also come to a somewhat jarring realization: there isn't "a place" for me in this community, and I will only cause myself further stress and isolation if I keep looking for it.

The Unitarian Universalist tradition that I was raised in puts a high value on our sense of community. I know this is not unique for any spiritual tradition; but in the absence of any creed or specific belief about our universe to tie us together, it always seemed like it was our sense of community, our commitment to one another, that was sacred. I experienced that the most acutely during worship together on Sunday mornings. I was raised in this culture that taught me the most important part of community was how we are together.

Of course, the pandemic threw a bit of a wrench into that; but my congregation like so many, still found a way to connect with one another and be in community in virtual spaces, we still centered our community around showing up—be that on zoom or six feet apart and from behind our facemasks.

But what happens when we can't be together anymore? When we leave to go to school? When we graduate? When, by fate or by fortune we must move on and find new places to call home?

Over the summer I got an unexpected answer to those questions. Thanks to a string of good luck, I found myself in a small pub in County Kerry, Ireland on the fourth of July. And I am not exaggerating when I say that I have never in my life felt more patriotic.

John B. Keen's Pub was hosting "America Night" which I assumed, maybe naively, would be a little tongue in cheek, ragging on Americans, playing on stereotypes about America… But, boy, was I wrong.

Instead of being light and fun, the tone was serious, almost reverent as they told stories about relatives who had moved to America to find work and send money back to their family in Ireland, about ancestors who went to America to escape persecution or hunger and were not heard from for decades, if ever again. A local musician sang the song "Immigrant Eyes" (popularized by Willie Nelson), detailing a grandchild's awakening to the heartache his grandfather endured as an Irish immigrant in America. And then, to my surprise, he sang a song by Tom Paxton honoring the first responders who died on September 11, 2001. They introduced the song by telling us that Ireland was the only country to declare a national day of mourning after 9/11. And this was not the only time 9/11 was brought up during my visit, leaving me with the impression that the events of that day live just as presently and vividly in the collective consciousness of Ireland as they do here in America. I was told there's such a connection to that day because so many NY City firefighters and police officers came from Irish immigrant families.

Who is this community for?

Caleigh Grogan
MDiv II

All those people who left Ireland and came to America, they didn't come and "find their place." They elbowed their way in and said, "My community needs me to be here." They may have had to leave that community physically, but spiritually, that Irish community expanded to encompass foreign shores, and it deepened to make room for the generations of Irish Americans to come.

So that is how I am entering this year at HDS, not looking to find my place, but bringing my community into this one. Though I may not be able to hug and talk with and be in fellowship with the people who shaped me, whom I continue to hold close in my heart, while I'm a part of this community, so are they

So when I say "There is no place for me here," I don't mean it pessimistically. I mean, how could there be a place for me in this community which does not know me? I mean, I have not yet finished building my place here.

And I don't mean to say that that is an easy or fair task. It's much harder for some than for others. In years past, everyone may have felt like there was a ready-made place for them because there absolutely was. This was an institution for White, American, Protestant, men. But over and over again, people have elbowed their way in and said, "My community needs me here," and they have changed the shape and the scope of this institution.

As we journey through this year as an HDS community, there may not always feel like there's a place for you, but please do not forget that this community is for you. We all have the opportunity to honor those who taught and shaped us by having a hand in shaping this community. We can, with our particular wisdoms and experiences, strive toward that longed for community, where we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats, where we can come into our power.

It is not always easy work; it is not free of conflict, frustration, and hurt. But it is important work, and we are blessed by the innumerable communities that have swirled and crashed together in just the right way to bring you here to HDS.

Do I actually want freedom?

Jack brookes
MDiv II

Despite all the accounts read, practices done, vows taken—and even those brief moments when freedom's possibility suggested an actuality—I don't think I truly want to end my suffering. If one were to take some kind of Buddhist appraisal of my daily life, the ending of suffering is not one I'm positioned to realize. I still sow seeds, however tiny, that will undoubtedly produce a harvest of confusion. It is therefore hard to say that my life is dead set on realizing the Buddhist goal par excellence. The practices done or ceremonies attended are outweighed, just in minutes, by those activities which build the home for mistaken views of the self's fundamental separation. The question inevitably gets raised: What about that goal of the Buddha, that one that was articulated with such urgent clarity? My daily goings-on then get thrown into the following binary: Is how you are living contributing to the realization of your freedom, or not?

This experience then occasions its own set of concerns, foremost of which is not knowing where one's former longing has gone. When one's flame, that one that only seems to burn for a kind of freedom, is turned down and seems to rest at a kind of simmer—where does one turn for gas? Or, perhaps more precisely: How do you relearn to want your own freedom?

I face this question in some form every day, especially as a graduate student in his second year. At one point in my life, I was an extremist who took himself to be fighting a holy war for his own freedom. There was a pained single-mindedness that had very little belief in the promises of a "traditional" life. Calculations aimed at securing generic versions of contentment became, if not simply delusory, an occasion for the tragicomic. Life did not understand nor respect plans. It became obvious, in the words of one of my teacher's teachers, that we do not have the time even to conceptualize how impermanent our life actually is. By the time we start to invoke our formula for a better life, the "poor" one we were attempting to contort into a "better" one has vanished. Life becomes a series of corollaries to a now outdated formula. At one point during my first few months, I underwent a breakup that had me living as if in an acid solution, lost an uncle who was my first spiritual teacher, and my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. As one verse puts our situation, "like a fish floundering in a puddle, what pleasure is there here?"

This rhetoric might appear as unfairly privileging just one aspect of our life and ignoring the abundance of joy that is also available, especially to those of us so privileged. This might be true, but the reality for our human situation is that joy does not seem to make us desperate for freedom. This is not to say suffering has a privileged proximity to reality, just that it reminds us of something that joy often seems to have us forget. For someone who has been touched by just a fraction of the difficulty that comes from that imperceptible, swift punch of impermanence, I can see that it is enough to drive anyone to become a fanatic. One becomes determined to never be surprised. In some sense, these types of Buddhists are intensely struggling but also desperately needy—the life of temporary gratification feels "not enough." One longs for a security that is more robust than the joy that seems to take the place of an earlier sorrow.

It is no accident that some of the most committed practitioners I've ever met were at one point struggling with addiction. Such people have bottomed out on the routine of pleasure, its ending, and its subsequent reboot. Some of them were immensely successful in the ways we all hope to realize: financially secure, humble folks with seemingly spotless reputations, perfect family systems, unfailing and dazzling genius, or someone with a frustratingly powerful charm. But at some point, nothing was new for them anymore. As the routine of success and failure lost its own flame, what came up was not boredom but a form of fear. The Buddha's term for this is samvega, or the spiritual urgency that comes from disillusionment with the human preference for routine. Its etymology suggests something intense coming at you at high velocity. Those who experience this high-velocity urgency become terrified that their life could just be this rehearsal of reigniting our own limited agenda. The options for wellbeing on life's table assume a monotone in the face of a vision of another possibility.

But what to do when the colors on the slot-machine of our agenda regain their own allure? When that fear is assuaged, not by any sort of resolution or knowledge of our inner strength, but because we might have just forgotten the lesson of life's fragility? It is just so very easy to mistake sources of temporary gratification for sustainable happiness—not because of some moral failing but because of a doubt—and hence a corresponding rigidity in belief—about what is possible in this life.

Do I actually want freedom?

Jack brookes
MDiv II

Perhaps most worrisome is the uniquely American skepticism, originating in what it believes is secular rationalism, about the possibility of liberation in the forms offered by spiritual practice. Our culture has positioned itself to produce citizens who believe that the release from suffering is fundamentally impossible. Advanced consumer culture has promised an immense satisfaction that has left us bereft at its ultimate impotence and has impacted what sort of desires we believe are worth having. This attitude becomes intensified for coastal achievement culture for which the possibilities of professional success are only able to keep a unique type of loneliness at bay. If this product, this partner, or this career couldn't deliver us to stable wellbeing, then we start to think we have good reason to believe that nothing else will. The Buddha's encouragement, or any spiritual offering aimed at liberation, starts to sound like an advertisement, or a species of ideology.

If we lack the desire for any sort of freedom from lives predicated on instability, then we might do well to recall that our lack of inspiration is not a mistake. There is actually wisdom in our disbelief, since so many of us have been without any, let alone substantial, spiritual nourishment—which in this case would mean the guidance to reliable and liberating ways of being. "New Atheism", secular mindfulness, or technological vanguardism are the products of a profound spiritual disappointment. We often either deny the fruits of spiritual praxis outright or look for one to deliver us out of this world entirely. Both cases possess a hopelessness that lacks guidance for, or belief in, any form of wellbeing possible in this life.

Perhaps learning to want freedom does not just consist in recalling one's disappointment or pain but reorienting ourselves to the nature of desire. What do we want, and why? This is not a moralism to impose spiritual practice but a way to understand that desire is fundamental to our situation. Desire is not an option but a given that comes on a spectrum. One end of that spectrum might be renunciant minimalism and the other might be resignation or disbelief, but both possess their own share of desire.

Learning to want our highest wellbeing is therefore not an exotic act of spiritual fortitude or asceticism, but learning to see that all our actions are premised to some degree on such a wish. Eating, working, relating, washing the dishes, or even passionately arguing for the futility of spiritual practice are their own expressions of such a wish for ourselves and others. Renunciation may be a speedier modality for these wishes to become clarified, but it is not the only one; we see this longing for wellbeing most clearly with parents and their children, through acts of service, or the offering of art. Our desire must therefore be revered and harnessed as expressions, however vague, of a longing not limited to its object. How might our lives be lived if we understand them as infused with a desire that is not limited to its objects and its satisfaction—or in other words, our finitude? How might we then include those mundane, or even painful, moments as expressions of a longing for, and hence an intuition of, the wellbeing that is our birthright? What, then, becomes the expression of our ultimate wish?

The Office of the Chaplain and Religious and Spiritual Life
Division of Student Services
Harvard Divinity School, 45 Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138 USA
617-496-7540; www.hds.harvard.edu/spiritual
Editors: Kerry A. Maloney, Rose O'Shea, and Micah Rensunberg