

The Magic of Stones
by Janice Marie Johnson

“There will always be magic stones,” author Sue Bender asserts, “if we just look around and see them. The wonder is that these stones are all around us. Why put a limit on believing? If you believe, you begin to look. And you begin to see what has been there all the time.”

The Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee believes. We believe in our work. We believe in our mission. And we are committed to honoring our charge: “To monitor and assess the work of the Association toward becoming a genuinely anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural institution.” It is a rightfully bold charge, friends. Our commitment to staying true to it is fierce, too.

The Journey can be Lonely... Thankless... Confusing... Daunting...

The Journey can also be Inspirational... Gratifying... Hopeful... Joyful...

We see these stones. We believe that, when collected and used carefully, they can help us to dismantle notions and systems of oppression, of divisiveness, of inequity, of injustice.

We believe in the magic of these stones. We do believe that they help us design and build systems that move us towards becoming anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multicultural. And we are committed to embodying that belief. This is our work.

What is foundational to these stones? There is that wish we share beneath the stones. The core. The elements. The stuff of life and love. The goals, the hopes and dreams that we share for our work on the Journey. There are dreams to be articulated for growing our collective souls. There are concrete plans to be made -- each with the all-important element of flexibility. There is the synergy among us, synergy for us to celebrate.

I am reminded of the universal children’s tale, Stone Soup. In the story, individual hunger and fear turned into imaginative teamwork that created a nourishing “win-win” for everyone. When I observe us; Unitarian Universalist individuals, congregations, districts, regions and so forth growing into our best selves—mistakes and all—the message of Stone Soup reminds me that an inspired, creative, and pro-active commitment to justice is critical to deepening our understanding of what it means to live our faith by embodying the work, our work. We are the chefs... May we take these magic stones and create a rich, tasty, and healthful offering that feeds our souls for generations to come.

Steppingstones on the Journey **by Michael Sallwasser**

My first tentative steps toward undoing oppression, racism in particular, was not until high school. Our all-white, Catholic, high-school-aged youth group invited a group of inner city grade school kids, all African American, to spend the day with us at our church camp. My upbringing in highly-segregated Saint Louis meant this was the first time in my life I had genuine interactions with **any** people of color. It was a blast.

The day offered many small, yet important, stepping stones on the path to justice. The person-to-person interactions eroded the negative, racialized beliefs that were in the segregated air I breathed. I understood that there were profound inequities that must be confronted. I also recognized that my privilege obligated me to do the confronting.

The summer I graduated from college, I worked as a camp counselor for two weeks. This, too, was sponsored by the Catholic Church to help those less fortunate. This time, however, the disadvantaged were young adults with intellectual disabilities. Their disadvantage had less to do with their disability than with the underfunded state-run institution that warehoused them. Their week at camp was supposed to be a respite, but was instead, a continuation for some of the same indifference and disregard. It was painful to witness some of my fellow counselor's blatant disrespect for the inherent worth and dignity of those placed in their care. It was even more dismaying that some of them thought they were somehow being good Catholics.

These stepping stones had ragged edges that cut and tore. I had to acknowledge that people who were otherwise

friendly and fun to be with could be so disdainful of another's humanity. It was particularly disturbing that devoted Catholics, believers in the one true and apostolic church, could simultaneously believe that these disabled young men were children of a lesser god.

A few years later, a three dozen feminist activist met at the Long Beach YWCA. I can no longer recall the crisis in need of a response that prompted everyone to gather, but everyone expressed their distress as we went around the circle, everyone speaking in turn. I had been working on women's rights for several years with some of the women in the room— and it was nearly all women, most of whom did *not* know me. When it was my turn to speak, I expressed my impatience in a manner consistent with my maturity at the time. I don't remember my exact words, but I believe "chit-chat" was one of them.

I slid off that stepping stone and fell pretty hard. My friends did not abandon me, but they didn't try and defend what was indefensible, nor did I. I would like to say I learned a lesson I never forgot, but the truth be told, some of the stepping stones between then and now have been surprisingly slippery.

The path of justice that I have followed has included many, many more stepping stones, sometimes fun to follow, others painful to walk upon and then there were those landed me on my backside when I was careless.

It is only in hindsight that I have been able to see how they interlock. To paraphrase Tracey Robinson-Harris, a colleague in this work, "The paths fit together because I am on them." Paths of many twists and turns, countless stepping stones cobbled together to create a single whole that has brought me to where I stand today. And for that, I am grateful.

Seeking the Brilliance Within
by Dr. Julio Noboa

Reflecting on what an authentic “journey towards wholeness” would mean, my first thought is that wholeness is both internal and external to us. We seek personal wholeness within our souls, and also outside of ourselves in the communities to which we belong and with whom we identify the most. And we identify with others in so many different ways and belong to various groups each reflecting a strand of our identity based on such obvious dimensions as race and gender or more subtle ones like faith and belief.

Yet, for all of those significant identities that constitute each of us, there is a personal essence that defines who we are, a singular soul that is hidden deep within beyond the layers of identity that protect it. When we make initial contact with each other, we only see the outside of that soul at first. But only through sustained communication and authentic relationships can we begin to penetrate the layers of social identity to view and enjoy the singular soul within.

That singular soul is like a geode, a rough stone that seems quite ordinary on the outside with no distinguishing features. But when opened the inside of that stone reveals a brilliance of color and light, like a forest of amethyst crystals hidden in an ordinary rock. Our true selves, our souls are hidden deep within us, and only when we open up to each other can we view the full range of colors and appreciate who we really are. That realization is part of our personal journey of self-

discovery, one that is informed and sustained by engaging with others also on their path.

Through this engagement we build a “beloved” community of individuals who know themselves, appreciate each other, and can help move our faith and our world towards the realization of our shared principles and ideals. Thus the wholeness that we seek in our journey begins with self-knowledge, extends to our community and from there to the larger society and the world. May we continue engaging authentically with each other and never cease our journey!

Russell
by Rev. Jose Ballester

Russell was an amateur geologist, paleontologist and professional teacher. He took his young charges on an overnight field trip. Sitting around the campfire he brought out a bag and took out five rocks. Holding-up a round grapefruit-sized rock. "This rock," he began explaining, "looks ordinary on the outside. But inside there is hidden beauty."

At that he opened the two halves of the rock to reveal all the purple crystals inside. He then picked-up another rock of equal size and opened it to reveal a fossil inside. "This is the fossil of a trilobite," Russell explained. "It was a sea creature that lived millions of years ago. All that remains is this impression of him. Minerals seeped into the mud that held his body and this is all that remains."

Next he picked-up something that looked like a small wooden branch, "This branch is another fossil that looks like wood, but it really is a rock. And as we know wood burns, but not rocks." At that Russell threw the rock that looked like a branch into the fire; it did nothing. Next he took out a flat, palm-sized rock and said, "Now watch closely." He threw the flat rock into the fire and it soon began burning. "That rock is called oil shale and has been used for fuel for hundreds of years."

He then began our lesson in earnest. "People can be as complex as these rocks. Too often all you see is a dull rough exterior but never suspect there is beauty inside as a crystal or a fossil. Sometimes they look like something else and behave in unexpected ways. And here is the true

lesson from the rocks." At this he picked-up a round, black stone from a water-filled container.

"I found this stone earlier today in the stream. As you can see the water has rounded the rock and the minerals have turned it black." He then hit the stone with a hammer and it broke in two. "As you can see the outside is still wet and the water has made it round and dark; but the inside is still dry and grey. A human heart, like a stone can be shaped by outside forces but its inside remains unchanged. Over time this stone will be further reduced, perhaps becoming a grain of sand that will find its way into an oyster and become a pearl. You never know what a human heart will become over time, so never lose hope in its potential."

Tumbling **by Rev. Wendy von Zirpolo**

When I hold this stone, a metaphor arrives: that each of us, like a stone, is tumbling down a river—sometimes soothed by gentle rains, sometimes pushed under mud, sometimes grabbed and skipped along the top, at others stepped upon, cracked open, chipped, and others still washed clean and placed gently in a new spot. When applied to the journey that brings me here today, these experiences come to mind as formative to the shaping of my stone:

- My upbringing in Unitarian Universalism welcomed me into waters rich in history, mentors and prophetic voice all letting me know ours was a faith set upon a trajectory toward justice for all.
- My involvement as a young girl volunteering with Special Olympics and in a home for those with mental illness & disabilities. It was there I was challenged by adults to **live** a level of acceptance not required of me in any other setting.
- A friend of mine who led the effort to bring home all the special needs children of Haverhill rather than see them placed out of district. She taught me what it meant to claim ‘who’ we were as a community.
- My years on the UUA Accessibilities Committee where I learned first how little I truly understood of life as a person living with disabilities, secondly how explicitly our theology calls us to achieve wholeness

through inclusivity and finally how much of the work belongs to allies of those in marginalized identity groups.

- The Forth Worth GA and the days, weeks and months that followed. It was then my stone was cracked wide open once again as I came face to face with the reality of how deeply oppression, particularly racism, is embedded in the UU community I cherish.

There are many more experiences and people that have touched my soul. I am so very grateful, for those people and experiences that have added shine and perhaps even more so, for those who have been willing to help crack it open. The stream is long. How wonderful that we’re in it together.

Between a Rock & a Hard Place
by Catie HyungJu Chi

In one of those Facebook 25-question lists, there is this question to answer: “Have you ever hurt anyone?” People usually write wistfully of feelings, of chances not chosen, some minor hurts of the heart. My answer is different.

Once and long ago, I picked up five smooth stones like David and threw them at my fourth-grade neighbor Scottie. Like Goliath before him, Scottie went down like rock. Sank like a stone. As a first-grader, the ensuing fracas amazed me. My Norwegian Bestamor, more embarrassed than angry, shooed me into the house where I was instructed to think about what I had done. Wasn’t it just like that illustration in my Children’s Bible? My Sunday school teacher told us David was a hero for standing up to this Philistine bully. Scottie bullied everyone. Wasn’t I the hero? Maybe in the Older Testament, but not on my block, not that summer.

“Sticks and stones,” children still say, “can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That summer, my block would learn words can hurt as much as stones. Someone would call me a word of power, the one we call the N-word, fearing that power still. I didn’t know what it meant, except that it was something not good, not a thing I even was. When driving in certain areas, my pinkish whitish mother would panic, reminding us to roll up the windows and to lock the doors. Just the fear in her voice hurt, without the words. To be that afraid of darker people and a mother of darker people, at the very same time was a painful thing.

In the Newer Testament, the teacher Jesus comes upon a woman about to be stoned for adultery. It is a test of Jesus by the orthodoxy of his day. Before responding, Jesus sits for a moment and writes in the dirt, something tantalizingly not recorded. The recorded words are “Let the first among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” As now, no one was without sin. I picture rocks falling from hands, eyes not meeting those of a neighbor, a slinking away in silent agreement of never mentioning that day.

The words have changed since my childhood. So has my intention. I don’t throw actual stones anymore, though I have hurled words like “racist” hoping to make change happen that way. In hope that we all come to realize that wholeness means healing both the throwing of the stones and the marks the stones have left.

The Cornerstone by Helen Boxwill

Stones are everywhere, on the beach, on city streets, on mountains and form fences around farms. Stones connect us to the earth. They form the foundation of our buildings, keeping us safe and giving us a home. Without stones earth would be an amorphous mass. They are beautiful and essential building blocks of the earth and all our dwellings. Their strength is both within each stone and on the outside holding us up.

Stones to me are like this UU faith. Our faith is what holds us up in moments of need and moments of joy. Our faith is what we build on to do this very difficult work of transforming our world. This faith is the foundation of what we do and what we dream of. As Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley so eloquently taught us, “It is only through our faith that we can do this work, this Soul Work.”

I could spend my energy doing work for justice through political or social groups. But what grounds me is my faith. If we can build a faith community that is open and embracing to others, if we can not merely welcome the stranger, but incorporate them into the structure of our congregations, the home we are building will be both long lasting and worthy. I keep thinking of Bob Marley’s lyrics, “The stone that the builder refused will always be the head cornerstone.”

Some of you may know that I am building a library in Ethiopia. As a symbol of commitment, the mayor of the town placed a cornerstone in the spot where our building would be built. It looks like nothing in the picture. Just a

15-pound stone sitting in a field of grass. But like our faith, this stone carries much meaning and hope. Like our faith, it is the beginning. As the stones are brought together, then the building can stay strong. As we people of faith stand together, we can create a lasting Beloved Community.



Arthur Tackman and Bob Gross are present with us in spirit and in the work we do, but they were not able to attend this General Assembly. We include their voices here.

Stonehenge: An Enduring Monument by Arthur Tackman

Stonehenge, built in southern England between 3,000 - 2,000 BCE, was an engineering marvel in its day and time. Stonehenge was constructed of stone probably because it would serve as a temple to honor ancient gods for generations. Indeed, it has endured, although now in ruins, for more than 4,000 years. It is a testament to the solid, lasting and monumental qualities of stone, lasting for the ages.

I selected Stonehenge for my theme because it was an engineering marvel, testing the skills and energies of many people to build such a monument which has endured for so long. Our faith community needs to build a cultural framework which ensures that no one person or no group of people feel marginalized or oppressed. Like Stonehenge, we must build a framework which is solid and will endure for generations.

It is one of the basic tenets of our faith that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We need to reach out to those among us who see themselves as marginalized or oppressed and find ways to fully integrate people who seem different into our faith community.

For the past two years, I have worked on forming an affinity group, Equal Access, to promote equality and access for Unitarian Universalists with disabilities. Our group is now on the brink of becoming an organization which can play an important role for individuals who feel marginalized and we look toward the future with the hope that we can make a significant contribution within our faith community.

The formation of Equal Access promises a hope for equality within our community for those of us living with disabilities. As we work toward developing efficient structures and operations, we must think of Stonehenge: we need to think of developing an enduring and permanent program that will be with us for the ages.

Gems are stones transformed
by Bob Gross

The work of releasing our personal and community culture from automatic suspicion and debasement of others - based on the color of our skin, who we love, our ethnic heritage, or perceived limitations of our physical and mental abilities—is monumental and unprecedented.

The work of release is already many generations old, and will certainly take more decades than any of us in this room will live to witness.

Hereafter the great bulk of this work of transformation *must* be shouldered by those of us who benefit most from the way things are—educated, Euro-American, straight, temporarily-able males—whether or not we fully understand it, and regardless of whether we want our culture and society to be this way.

We must work especially with other dominant-culture UUs in every single one of our one thousand congregations—that's the most difficult of all. Many of them are our friends. That work will be ongoing. Being open to calling and *fully supporting* ministers without regard to artificial categories will be one indication of our evolution.

We must work constructively in our immediate communities to educate, identify and support dominant-culture allies...and support transformation efforts like the ones just beginning by Charlottesville, Virginia's City Council and by associates of the University of Virginia.

The most challenging thing I've learned along the journey thus far is that transformation is slow, glacial—but that our personal and small group actions can occasionally result in modest changes for the better. I know that a number of you have been associated with such changes around the country. Thank you for all your efforts. I hope you'll muster the energy to keep on doing, teaching, planting, leading, persuading, and organizing.