

LGBTQ Stories of Overcoming
Rejection and Religion to Find Truth

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Generous donations from friends like you allow us to make Unity literature available to those most in need of spiritual encouragement. You may give at *unity.org/donatenow*.

You are about to read a series of personal stories that are honest, powerful, and spiritual. They describe the lived experiences of people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning.

It may or may not surprise you to learn that many of them were bullied and even beaten, ridiculed, shamed, and—perhaps most hurtful of all—told they were unacceptable to God.

However, these are stories of healing—even triumph. They have endings that are not simply happy but full of gratitude and love. Each is a story of inner transformation as these writers came to know, understand, and love who they truly are and to see themselves within the whole, one with God.

We hope this booklet offers spiritual support to anyone who has traveled this path or who is still struggling to feel accepted or worthy. One of the writers, Rev. Mark Anthony Lord, wrote that after a long, painful life journey he now believes, "I am so flippin' worthy it's ridiculous!" So are you.

Your Friends in Unity

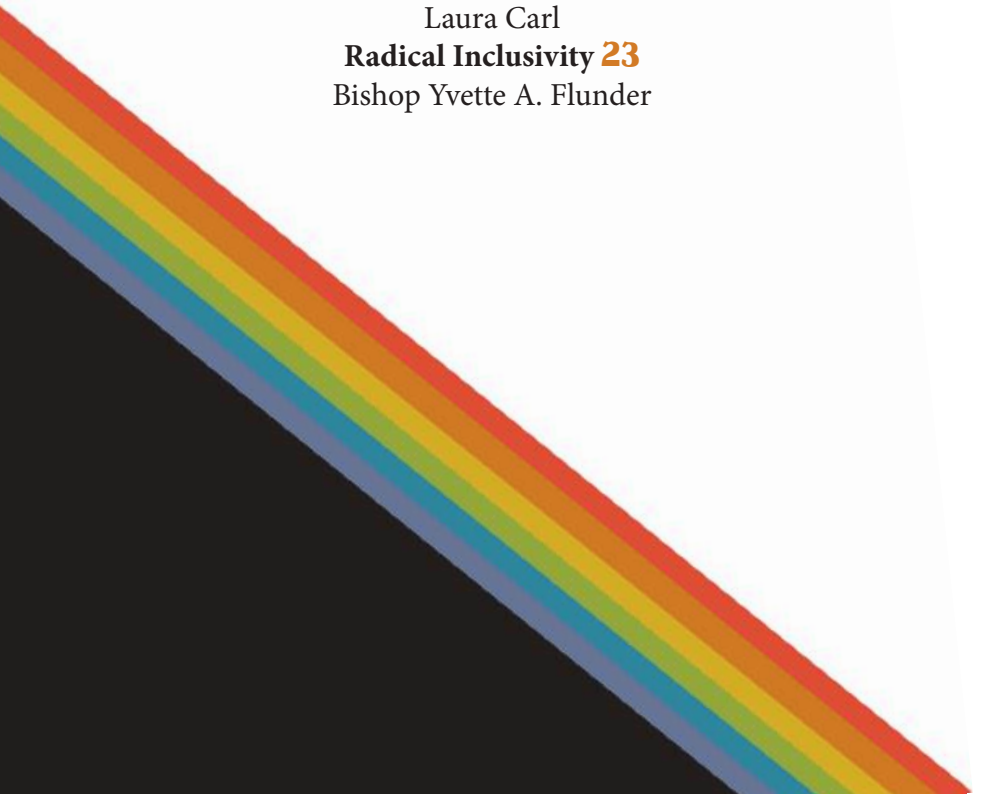
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BURIED SPIRITUALITY

Rev. Ken Daigle



I learned at a very young age that it was not safe to be myself. When I was 11 years old, *Time* magazine had a front cover with the title, "The Homosexual in America." I saw the magazine when it came into our house and asked my mother, "Who are those men?" She told me they were very sick and disgusting people. I felt the knot tighten in my stomach as I flipped through the pages and looked at the story. I knew I was one of them, and I had to go into hiding.

Hiding, however, was never easy for me. I was ridiculed throughout grammar school by other boys and by the nuns for my effeminate behavior. I was then tormented and beaten at home by my father, who was determined to, as he put it, "make a man" out of me. High school was a little easier because I found other people like me and disappeared into the drama club, where I could be honored and celebrated.

I was outed by my mom after high school, who listened to a phone conversation I was having with a boyfriend. Thrown out of my family's home and sent on a search for answers, I found myself sitting with our family priest, who counseled me to give my sexual desires for men over to God and to marry a woman and have a family. I walked out of his office and knew I could not live that lie. I walked away from the Catholic Church and my spiritual life.

After a decade of living as a proud, gay man in New York City, I was diagnosed as HIV-positive. There was no cure at the time, no treatment, and seemingly no hope. A dear friend of mine, who was suffering from Kaposi's sarcoma from HIV, showed me a book someone had given him. It was called *You Can Heal Your Life* (Hay House, 2017) by Louise Hay. As I devoured her book, learning about affirmations

and denials and listening to tapes and meditations from Louise, my spiritual curiosity and my spiritual nature were reignited.

IT WAS NOT SAFE TO BE MYSELF.

From friends, I heard about a woman who was giving lectures on a book by Helen Schucman called *A Course in Miracles* (Createspace Independent Publishing, 2016). I certainly needed a miracle, so I found myself studying with Marianne Williamson, listening to her cassette tapes and joining her HIV support group. People in that group told me I should check out a place called Unity.

When I arrived at my first Unity service, I saw something I had never encountered before in a spiritual community. There were people of all races, ages, and sexual orientations. There was talk of spiritual healing, of God's love, and a message of hope and positivity. Eric Butterworth was the minister, and he forever changed my life when I read his book *Discover the Power Within You* (HarperOne, 2010).

I went on to a wonderful life and career in the Broadway theater, but my spiritual journey was far from finished. While I had found the healing I needed at that moment, I still had not done the deep, inner work to release my internalized homophobia and self-loathing. It is so easy to see today how I started numbing those dark feelings and how I needed more and more anesthesia—so much so that I found myself in

rehab and once again desperate for answers. Luckily for me, a 12-step program led me to a practical, spiritual practice and back to Unity, where I set about my spiritual work of recovery.

My mom recently sent me a box of my old report cards. As I looked through the years, one pattern jumped off the pages: straight "As" in religion. I was raised Catholic and went to Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. The story I had always told myself and everyone else about those grades was that I questioned the nuns and priests who taught me because I couldn't believe what they were saying. Looking back, it was clear I have always had an intense spiritual curiosity.

It took my HIV diagnosis to resurrect my spiritual seeking and study. It took my drug addiction to help me shed decades of internalized homophobia and self-loathing. Today I am grateful for those dark nights of the soul. They uncovered what I had left for dead and buried—my spiritual self.

Today, more than 32 years since my HIV diagnosis and 17 years since my last drink or drug, I live a life beyond my wildest dreams, married to a man I love with three beautiful children. I live a life in which prayer, meditation, and spiritual curiosity are the cornerstones of my practice, and a life in which I get to help people find their true nature—their spiritual selves.

Rev. Ken Daigle (he, him) is the senior minister at Unity San Francisco, California, and chairs the Board of Directors at Unity World Headquarters.

BECOMING ALL OF ME

Rev. Michael Gott



I grew up in a very loving family in rural Oklahoma. My family wasn't perfect by any measure, but I never doubted that my parents would protect and provide for me and do anything they could to make sure I had all I needed. I was generally happy and well-adjusted. I felt loved and accepted.

Most of the time.

There were signals that something wasn't right. Throughout my childhood, I was given silent and not-so-silent messages about who I was expected to be—as a boy, as a white person, as a Christian. Early on I began to see that I didn't meet these expectations in many ways.

When I was 3 years old, I was given a cast-off baby doll by my teenage babysitters, two sisters who lived down the street. I loved that doll. Her eyes were supposed to close to mimic sleep when she was on her back, but one eye always stayed open. About half of her nubby hair was pulled out of her scalp. It didn't matter. Julie and Anita had given her to me, and I loved her.

When I brought her to Sunday school one morning, it became very clear that I had violated some tribal law. My dad was not okay with his son carrying a doll in public. It was taken away. I cried a lot but then got over it—or so I thought.

Years later in a spiritual exercise during a retreat, the memory of the doll surfaced, still containing all the grief and confusion I had felt at 3. I hadn't thought of it for years, but there it was. Part of the exercise was to name the belief that was formed

in my consciousness at the time of this event. It was instantly apparent. These are the words I wrote:

"If I show up as who I truly am, the people I love are harmed."

THOSE EARLY MESSAGES HAD STAYED WITH ME AND SHAPED ME.

The moment I wrote it down, I recognized that this belief had been silently controlling me for decades, that at a deep and unconscious level I had been *editing* myself so the people I cared about would not feel uncomfortable.

I had come out as a gay man years before at age 19, and by the time of this exercise, I had already done significant internal work. I thought I was living authentically, but it was immediately clear to me that those early messages had stayed with me and shaped me. So many times, I stopped myself from saying what I really felt or expressing what I really wanted because I knew my partner or my friends or my family members wouldn't like it. In that moment of clarity, I was able to take a stand for authenticity, no matter the cost. I was being asked to live my authentic life on a whole new level.

This choice changed some dynamics in my close relationships. Some people supported me and confessed they had seen through my people-pleasing for years. They were grateful for

my becoming more honest with them. But some friendships ended. They weren't built on truth but on the false self I had projected.

In these past years, I have experienced a new freedom and a sense of personal power I didn't even know was possible. I also discovered that this greater power was rooted in vulnerability. My willingness to bring all of me to my relationships—even when it's scary to do so—has led to deeper connections and truer intimacy than I have ever known.

This is true even in my family. Before he passed away, my father and I grew close. Being fully who I am gave him the opportunity to question his own beliefs and assumptions. He became my greatest champion.

Today I cherish the sweet little boy who was drawn to nurture a baby doll instead of playing with toy guns. I welcome his softness as a part of who I am at my core. I am also incredibly grateful to be a part of a spiritual community that recognizes my uniqueness as a gift from God. This path to authenticity has been so healing for me. I believe it is universal. We are all here to discover who we are and become part of the collective so that we may all be healed, and we may all be, finally and truly, one.

Rev. Michael Gott (he, him) is the senior minister at Unity of Houston, Texas, and a well-known New Thought singer/songwriter.



A PORTION OF GOD

Rev. Mark Fuss



I am a gay man, a Unity minister, and "a portion of God made manifest."

This snippet of a quote from H. Emilie Cady has given me joy and strength for many years now. The idea that I was part of anything divine was foreign to me for much of my life. Growing up gay in the Deep South and coming of age in the 1970s, I was immersed in the traditional Christian theology of sin-fall-redemption.

The time I spent studying at a fundamentalist Christian college was a gut-wrenching exercise in self-loathing, shame, and guilt. My inevitable crisis of faith was like a tsunami of anger, darkness, and shame. If God could not love me as I was created, then for me there was no God.

Closeted until my 20s, I came out with abandon, dismissing religion from my life and rarely looking back. My career and clubs (dancing, drinking, and drugs) took center stage in my life. I found all of my self-worth in a job well done and quickly self-medicated anything approaching a painful feeling. This roller coaster seemed to work well for two decades, until it didn't.

The bottom of the barrel found me homeless in New York City, strung out and lost, at the end of my long ride. Early one morning while sitting on a park bench, the thought entered my mind: *There must be more than this.* I knew I had to get a grip and make some changes if I wanted to live.

I moved to Florida, Mom providing the bus ticket. The next two years were a struggle—getting work after years of being



unemployable, drying myself out, beginning to put myself back together.

It was 2001 when I first visited a Unity church. I was stunned and overwhelmed by the love, acceptance, and joy I found there. It was palpable in the energy, the people, and the minister's message: God is Good. Your essence is of God. Therefore, you are inherently good. Not fallen, sinful, broken, but spiraling upward, an expression of God made manifest.

I began to study New Thought teachings and theology. I joyfully joined the choir, became a prayer chaplain, and soon was serving on the board of this spiritual community. I eventually became an ordained Unity minister.

I share as widely as possible the same message I heard that first Sunday: one presence, one power, God the Good, and *you* are a portion of God made manifest. It is a message many of my brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community desperately long to hear.



Speaking from experience, I can say it takes time and effort to hear it, to begin to believe it, and then to embody it and put it into practice. It is a process of becoming real, which means coming to believe you are worthy of all the universe has to offer. It takes a lot of loving, a lot of living, and a lot of learning for most of us to reach this place.

YOUR ESSENCE IS OF GOD. THEREFORE, YOU ARE INHERENTLY GOOD.

That is my wish for each of you—a lot of loving, living, and learning on the way to becoming real.

Rev. Mark Fuss (he, him) is the vice president of Outreach and Engagement at Unity World Headquarters in Unity Village, Missouri.

FINDING SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Rev. DeeAnn Weir Morency



I was 11 when I first realized I was different from my friends.

First, I loved God. My family were active members of a conservative/orthodox Jewish center that was like a second home to me. I went to Hebrew school and attended weekly services. I loved learning and studying the Torah. The prayers, the history—I particularly loved the history. I would place myself in the stories of the Torah. I was Abraham, Joseph, Moses—all the prophets who had powerful and transformative relationships with God. I was drawn to spiritual leadership and dreamed of becoming a rabbi.

Second, I was discovering my sexuality. While my girlfriends were enamored with boys, I found myself enamored with them. I dreamed of kissing girls.

It was also the year I learned two very painful lessons that took decades to unlearn: Girls cannot be rabbis, and girls must never admit they wish to kiss other girls.

I left Judaism and hid my sexual identity. I eventually found the strength and self-awareness to come out and claim my sexuality, and maybe not surprisingly, began to reclaim my relationship with God at the same time. Some inner knowing kept me searching for a spiritual tradition that would support my love of prayer, my desire for community, my passion for ritual, my commitment to transformation, and would not simply accept but welcome me as a lesbian.

I still remember walking into my first New Thought service. Relief and shock ran through me as I realized I wasn't merely tolerated as a lesbian—I was truly welcomed and

embraced. I looked at the leadership and saw lesbian, gay, and transgender ministers. I found a spiritual framework that took the gender out of God, took the suffering out of God, and took the judgment out of God. Most important, it was a spiritual framework that saw me as intrinsically whole and wonderfully unique. It was one of the most healing moments of my life.

Religion and religious dogma have done so much damage to members of the LGBTQ community. However, there is a way to love God and to also love whomever you wish. You don't have to choose one over the other.

It has been a deep journey of healing for me to stand in my spiritual authority as a minister, as a lesbian, and as a woman. I have released the painful beliefs my 11-year-old self had accepted without knowing any better—that I was a mistake, I was an abomination, I was less than, and I was intrinsically wrong somehow, a great big God mistake.

My life is now one of peace and well-being. I love my life, my wife, my desires, and my spiritual calling. I am so deeply grateful to share this message of hope with others.

Rev. DeeAnn Weir Morency (she, her) is the associate minister at Unity San Francisco, California.

CAN ANY RELIGION APPLY TO ME?

Laura Carl



The name of the religious denomination I was born into is of little importance. I have heard stories of others from different faiths who went through similar experiences, just as I have heard beautiful stories of love and connection associated with the religion in which I was raised.

Regardless, I was brought up in a religiously oppressive household. The dogmas that polluted my heart were sex is a mortal sin unless you are in a heterosexual marriage, boys will be boys until they're men and then they are infallible, and you will go to hell unless you observe a particular religion. These dogmas were so intertwined with my family that it was difficult to know where religion ended and family began.

I AM NOT EVIL. I AM NOT LESS THAN. I AM AN EXPRESSION OF GOD.

Our self-worth was measured by the severity of our "sins." One of my older brothers was nearly disowned when he came out as gay, while another family member (who molested me as a young child) was celebrated by my parents for staying in the church. My "sins" placed me somewhere in the middle. Since there is no direct Bible passage saying "a woman shall not lie with a woman," coming out as a lesbian in the 2000s was not as bad for me as it was for my poor brother who came out in the 1980s. However, that definitely didn't do me any favors in getting a pass to heaven. The real upset occurred when I told my mother that I was no longer a member of the church.

It is isolating to grow up constantly feeling less than, or even evil, because you know you're *different* from your peers and family members. I felt disconnected from everyone and everything, including God. I remember the day I mentally and emotionally left my former church. I began questioning the concept of original sin and decided I did not want to be part of a religion that could believe an infant was less than perfect. Throughout college, I teetered on a fine line between agnosticism and atheism, and I tried to avoid anything that remotely smelled like religion.

It wasn't until I met Monique that I began to question my own faith. Monique was one of my crushes of the month. She was a pharmacy student while I was a mere undergrad; she was smart, pretty, and a devout Christian. She invited me to attend a church service with her and, in an attempt to impress her, I agreed. It backfired.

"How could you take me *there*?" I shouted after the service.

"What was so bad about it?" she argued.

She had a point. What was so bad about it? There was no mention of sin or hell. The people were friendly and accommodating. I realized the problem wasn't them—it was the hatred I felt because of the hurt I had not dealt with. I decided to go back the following week. To take the emotion out of it, I took notes and concentrated on the messages. What did I agree with? What did I disagree with? Did any of it apply to me?

Monique and I eventually stopped seeing each other. I stopped going to her church, but I continued my studies, applying the questions to every religion. What did I agree with? What did I disagree with? Did any of it apply to me? Were there any overarching themes that rang true with multiple religions?

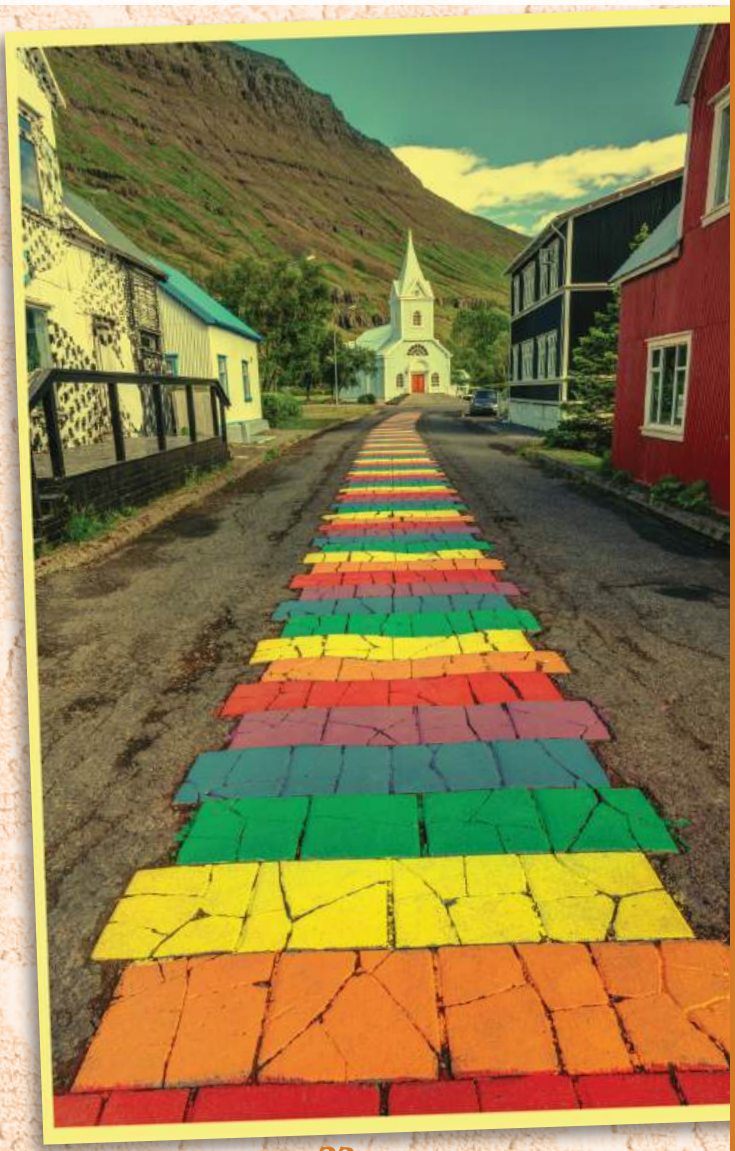
It didn't take long before I began to feel a connection—a genuine and deep connection—to something greater than myself. Sometimes I referred to that connection as God; other times, calling it the Universe felt better. Regardless of its name, I began to believe it was in everything, including me.

The name of my current spiritual denomination is of little importance, for it is too eclectic and personal to truly label, but its teachings are of love and authenticity. And that *does* apply to me. I am not evil. I am not less than. I am an expression of God. And so are you.

Laura Carl (she, her) leads the design team at Unity World Headquarters and designed this booklet.

RADICAL INCLUSIVITY

Bishop Yvette A. Flunder



Bishop Yvette A. Flunder founded City of Refuge UCC, a service-focused, inner-city church in San Francisco, California, and leads The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, a global coalition of churches devoted to genuine openness. Both organizations describe themselves as "radically inclusive." Bishop Flunder elaborated on inclusivity and told her story—how an African-American woman who loves other women came to be a religious leader—in this interview excerpted from Unity Online Radio.

We coined the phrase *radical inclusivity* because we had heard a lot about multifaith, multidenominational, and multiracial settings that are called inclusive. Sometimes I think inclusivity is limited to what the dominant presence—the dominant culture, the dominant religion, the dominant race—is comfortable with. Our premise is that we must radicalize inclusivity.

A better way to say it is that we have to go all the way to what we believe is the farthest margin and make sure our inclusivity is inclusive of those who are on the farthest margin. Because if you go to the farthest margin, you'll catch everybody either going out or coming back. That's the intention.

My departure from the Pentecostal Church was not because I didn't feel like I was really a part of it. I was deep in it and, as we say, "highborn" because I was the child of bishops and preachers and leaders who were on the front lines. But my departure was threefold.

First, I sensed myself being called to ministry in a setting that didn't believe that could happen for women. Men had to

be the preachers and leaders, and women were the support system. I believed in myself in terms of being a supporter, but I also felt I had the skills to lead and preach. I knew it early on, and it became evident.

They didn't know exactly what to do with me. They kept trying to think of something to call me. They called me a *messenger*. Some of them called me a *missionary*. But they couldn't call me a *preacher*.

The second thing that was problematic for me was that we did so little justice work. We were preparing to go to heaven most of the time. Going to heaven was based upon whether or not we had any sin in our lives, so it was a perpetual effort to live free from sin.

I REFUSED TO LIE.

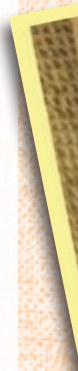
The third departure was when I sensed myself to be a same-gender-loving woman. We are not healthy around sex, most of us who are involved in religion. We're not able to have open conversations about human sexuality, so everything is closeted.

There's something very titillating about closets. Even in the making of Jesus after his death, those who canonized the text took any expression he might have had around pleasure and passion away from him altogether. They suggest that he was very human, very man, and very God simultaneously.

But what "very man" do you know who does not have some realities of human sexuality in his life?

That was the way we were taught from the very beginning—there was something problematic about human sexuality. It was a necessary evil but an evil nonetheless. So it pushed us all into the closet.

That departure became a real problem for me because I was of the opinion that there's no way in the world God would have made me like I am—"fearfully," as King James says, "and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). There's no way in the world God would have made me who I am and then require me to lie about it and hide it in order to do the work of God on earth. So I said either I'm going to tell the truth and stay, or I'm going to tell the truth and leave—but I am going to tell the truth.



That closed the door on my being able to go back to the church of my youth. I wasn't alone. There were a lot like me and there still are a lot of folks like me in the church. I was different primarily because I refused to lie about it in action or word. I would not lie about it, and that became the beginning.

The hour-long recording with Bishop Flunder (she, her) is at* unityonlineradio.org/voices-unity *on June 11, 2019.

THE ESSENCE OF LOVE: CHOSEN FAMILY

Jen Dickey



I would love to say my coming out experience was filled with ease and grace. It seemed to start out that way with friends in 2006, the majority of whom were not the slightest bit surprised by my long-kept but apparently not well-hidden secret.

The faith tradition I grew up in condemned same-sex relationships, and when that denomination split, I found myself isolated from the rest of my family. It was hard enough to share my truth with my immediate family, and it was considerably harder when they realized this wasn't a phase. I was met with passionate disapproval and months of silence, which threw me into deep grief. I didn't understand how the family who, until now, supported me in every possible way could suddenly be filled with such disappointment and disgust. Eventually I concluded that showing any sign of support for me would go against their faith in God and their view of the inerrant word of the Bible. They believed it could jeopardize their salvation.

As I sought comfort from those in the LGBTQ community, their enthusiastic suggestion that I might create a family of choice was an upsetting invitation. I wasn't interested in a family of choice. I wanted *my* family and their support. I knew they loved me, and I also knew I didn't want to live an inauthentic life.

In time I found a spiritual community that was like a salve to my heart, and I began the process of what I call the "debridement of my soul." It didn't happen until I was ready and willing to be loved by others, and then the miraculous formation of my family of choice began.

Each chosen family member offers a gift by their presence and unconditional love. They believe in me, cheering on the inner and outer transformations taking place in my life. They reach out to ask how they can support me. They call me on my BS (belief system) and know my love language is food, which I never turn down. They are willing to sit beside me and hold me as I cry, because sometimes I just want to be held and reassured that everything is all right.

We already have the power within to create the life of our dreams, to transform our lives one thought at a time. When we speak the desires of our heart, the Universe responds. When you say, "Show me love … joy … hope … peace," it will be revealed. You will be amazed at the barriers and blockades that crumble in the face of love. There's always someone longing to become part of your tribe, to celebrate your value, and to walk through life with you, no matter the duration.

The television character Gloria Pritchett on *Modern Family* said it best: "Family is family, whether it's the one you start out with, the one you end up with, or the family you gain along the way."

I still have the love of my family of origin in addition to the love and support of my family of choice. Add to that the budding of my own self-love and the infinite love of God. If there's anything I know for certain, it is that I am loved.

Jen Dickey (she, her) is a digital media specialist for Unity of Houston, Texas.



FINDING A SAFE HAVEN

Rev. Sharon Ketchum

My mother was devoted to her church, and her church gratefully accepted her gifts of time and talent—until her husband left her. As a woman who was about to be divorced, she was asked to stay away from the church. She could type the bulletin from home, but it would be better if she no longer attended. Lesson heard. Lesson learned. You can imagine the rules I superimposed on my own life.



Fast-forward a few decades. My life had been full of experiences. Some I shared with others, some I kept private, but all of them contributed to my growth. I became a single mother, then a married woman and a corporate manager. Life was unfolding more or less according to script, although there were footnotes. I discovered transcendental meditation, I read Ram Dass's *Be Here Now* (HarperOne, 2010), I learned affirmative prayer, and I found a Unity community. It was a great spiritual awakening—a growing understanding of the meaning of oneness, of an intimate relationship with Spirit, and unconditional acceptance. This awakening led me to become a minister.

As a church leader with two kids and married to a man, I knew there were expectations for my husband's role in the community and a lot of curiosity about him. There was also mental illness that I believed was a threat to my life.

On March 8, International Women's Day in 2012, I walked out with the clothes on my back after 23 years of marriage. I had a lot to deal with personally—where to live, getting my essential belongings and papers—but I also had to find a way

to share the news with my congregation. I remembered what happened to my mother when her husband left her, and I had done "worse." I left my husband.

Two Sundays into my new experience, I told the congregation and held my breath. There were a few murmurs, but that was it. I was still Rev. Sharon. Married or divorced, I was still their minister.

I FOUND I MADE BETTER CHOICES IN WOMEN PARTNERS THAN MEN.

Changes didn't stop there. When I started dating, I found I made better choices in women partners than men. I began a serious relationship with a woman who was relatively well-known in our town and brought her as my date to church events. While it didn't feel appropriate to announce it from the pulpit, it was obvious to our congregation that I was now in a same-sex relationship. There was curiosity and surprise, but the congregation I had served for 13 years continued to accept me, straight or gay, married or single. I was embraced for who I was.

Three years later, I received a very clear message that my work with this congregation was complete. It was difficult to say goodbye, especially to people who had supported me unconditionally through so many life changes. I moved to a new city, new home, and new life.

Engaged to be married to a wonderful woman, I meditated and read while I looked for a new spiritual community. One day, I noticed an advertisement for a minister at the local Unity church. It read like a tailor-made request for someone with my particular skills. I felt compelled to apply, but then came the interview process. To share or not to share? How do I come out to these strangers who did not know me? Were all Unity communities affirming or was my previous congregation an exception?

In our first face-to-face meeting, I shared that I was planning to marry a woman. No one blinked an eye. It turned out that their previous senior minister was gay. I stepped into the role of their leader, and the entire congregation celebrated my marriage with my wife.

That was three years ago. The fact that I have a wife is just a fact, as simple as the fact that my name is Sharon, I'm five feet tall, and I have two kids. Unity has been a safe haven for me through the growth times, through major life changes, and through failures and successes. My commitment now is to minister in such a way that anyone stepping into my church will find the same safety and acceptance I experienced.

Rev. Sharon Ketchum (she, her) is the minister at Unity Spiritual Center of Lansing, Michigan.

THE TESTS AND BLESSINGS OF PARENTHOOD

Rev. Juan del Hierro



I know this can sound trite and as cheesy as the macaroni and cheese I make once a week for my 7-year-old son, Lucas, but being a parent has been one of the biggest blessings of my life.

Growing up, I always thought I would get married and have children. Even as I struggled in the closet, I knew one of the reasons I would eventually come out and make peace with living as my true self was because it would create the space to have my own family. However, when it finally happened, it was so much more of a healing experience than I ever expected.



Being part of the beautiful LGBTQ rainbow prepared me to be the best parent I can be. It gave me a strong sense of the importance of living my life in an authentic way. It gave me a deep sensitivity to ensuring that Lucas grows up knowing he is whole and perfect, just as he was created.

By claiming my truth, I am giving him an even stronger foundation to claim his. I try to teach him, to the best of my abilities, that he doesn't have to conform to societal norms. He can be exactly who he is meant to be. The beauty is that as I teach him I am also reminding myself. Being conscious of nurturing self-love within Lucas continues to bring *me* to a more expanded practice of self-acceptance.

Any parent will tell you that self-love and self-acceptance are deeply needed in us. I make mistakes. I sometimes realize I'm even trying to get Lucas to conform, to do what is expected. Lots of people comment on how children will test you. Oh, they do! The biggest test is this: Do you believe the things you say you believe?

Part of my spiritual practice is understanding and affirming that we are all expressions of good and are to be celebrated for our individuality. Well, some mornings can be tough. I wake up Lucas, get him ready for school, make breakfast for him, make his lunch, and even have the audacity to think we should get to school on time. When Lucas's personality or interests on a particular morning make this challenging, I forget. Then I remember and realize the beauty of parenthood is not only to celebrate how much we have healed and become empowered, but to show us the places where healing still needs to take place.

BEING PART OF THE BEAUTIFUL LGBTQ RAINBOW PREPARED ME TO BE THE BEST PARENT I CAN BE.

Just above the kitchen counter, I have a note to myself especially for mornings. It reads in big letters: "Love. Serve. Remember."



I practice showing up in love and as love. I practice being of service to Lucas and serving his highest good. I try very hard to remember his truth and remind him of it also.

For me, parenthood can be summed up in a quote from Myrtle Fillmore, cofounder of Unity and the mother of three boys. She wrote, "Our purpose has been to help you discover the finest qualities within yourself."

In doing this for Lucas, I have discovered the finest qualities within me also. Together with my amazing son and wonderful husband, we walk this path of self-discovery and love.

Rev. Juan del Hierro (he, him), associate minister at Unity on the Bay in Miami, Florida, and his husband Tom Gantt were instrumental in the legal efforts that brought marriage equality to Florida in 2015.

SACRED SPACE, SAFE SPACE

Rev. Jacquie Fernández



I held my breath as I walked through the door. Something was very different and somehow, without understanding why, I knew my life was changed forever.

More than a decade ago now, I walked into a Unity center for the first time—through a door held open by a transwoman

who served as greeter that day. Though time has passed since that fateful day, I recall the temperature outside, the position of the sun shining through the swaying branches of nearby trees, the scent of her perfume as she hugged me, and the warmth in her voice as she welcomed me into her spiritual community. And I remember the moment I lost my breath, trembling inside as my feet carried me forward, stunned by the notion that a church would allow a transwoman to serve as a greeter—the first point of contact for all who would attend the service. Could this be a safe, sacred space for me and my family?

Keep in mind that at that time (2009), only six states had legalized same-sex marriage. Conversely, other states were in a frenzy to amend their constitutions to prohibit same-sex marriage. It was extremely rare at that time for openly gay individuals or couples to be approved as foster or adoptive parents. It would be six years before the Supreme Court ruled in favor of James Obergefell, who sought to be named as surviving spouse on his husband's death certificate, which legalized same-sex marriage nationally. It was a very different time in some ways, yet we still have a long way to go to create spiritual safety for the LGBTQIA+ community.

I held my breath entering Unity that day because I was afraid of rejection and perhaps more afraid that I would be fooled into believing I could find acceptance in any church. My experience of spiritual community up until that point used scripture to justify hatred and rejection, convincing me that as a queer woman I had no place in God's kingdom. I had internalized the belief that I was an abomination to God, yet I could not reconcile that belief with my personal experience

IN UNITY, I FOUND LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE THROUGH A THEOLOGY OF ONENESS—THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE PRESENCE AND ONE POWER ACTIVE IN THE UNIVERSE, AND THAT PRESENCE IS IN EACH OF US WITHOUT EXCEPTION.

of God. Even through prayer, meditation, and reflection on scripture, I simply did not dare to let myself fully believe the divine love I already felt: *The God of my understanding loved me.* It made no sense, so I stopped praying. I stopped studying scripture, something I had loved to do since childhood.

Then came Unity.

In Unity, I found love and acceptance through a theology of oneness—that there is only one presence and one power active in the universe, and that presence is in each of us without exception. I found a path to ministry and leadership as an openly queer person, and six years after my first encounter with Unity, I became an ordained Unity minister. In that first Unity center, as in many that I have visited over the years,

there were many same-sex couples and individuals, many members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and those who are questioning their gender or sexual orientation. In an effort to amplify and create structure around the way a spiritual community is organized as a sacred and safe space, I gathered a group of leaders together and established Folx with Faith.

While we have made great progress in the realm of rights and equality, there are still many communities in which it is not safe to be openly LGBTQIA+. Like me, many LGBTQIA+ folks have been told they are damned, which wounds the heart and soul. Folx with Faith is dedicated to providing safe space for the LGBTQIA+ community to explore spirituality.

Finding liberation in spiritual exploration is healing in and of itself. Finding a supportive and loving community in that exploration is transformational. The Unity teaching that we all have a spark of the Divine within us is pure medicine to anyone who has been pushed out of sacred spaces. It is in this principle that we discover the opportunity *to be the presence of divine love on earth.* Spiritual principle transcends laws set by state and country and reaches right into the soul, revealing a path to spiritual liberation. If we all have a spark of the Divine, we are living expressions of God—each and every one of us.

***Rev. Jacquie Fernández (they, she) is senior minister at Unity Church of Overland Park, Kansas, and the founder of Folx with Faith* (folxwithfaith.org).**

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

Catzian Maris



As I caught sight of myself in the mirror, the reflection didn't look like me. I was gazing into a mirror at the spiritual center I attended, where we would talk about spirituality and learn various practices to connect with Spirit. Sometimes it was through meditation or tarot cards, but each night offered a new, eclectic avenue to venture down the path of spiritual discovery.

On this particular night, we were doing mirror work. The lights were dim as I sat in front of a mirror. We lit candles, their orange light dancing across the glass. I looked into my eyes not knowing what to expect, but after a minute, I watched my face change shape. It was me, but it wasn't. It was me with a thinner face, a sharper jaw, unmistakably masculine in a way that my pudgy cheeks belied.

I looked to the leader wide-eyed and asked, "Who is that?" She didn't give me an answer but gently encouraged me to continue to look. "You already know who it is," she replied.

I did continue to look at myself, even after that night. In fact, I had been looking at myself long before. I had known I was transgender for about three years. The process of finding myself had started when I was at my lowest, a depressed 16-year-old searching for answers. In my search, I discovered it was possible to be nonbinary, and with that recognition, I knew who I was. In one of the most uncertain and hopeless times in my life, I felt sure.

Growing up, I always struggled with doubting my beliefs, both in myself and in whatever "God" was. I grew up Catholic, and after a while, none of it seemed to make sense.

When I had rejected God entirely, I was able to reach out for things that truly resonated with me. Without having emptied my hands like this, the universe could not have handed me the pivotal tools I needed on my journey. Letting go of what did not align with my truth gave me the freedom to trudge forward on my path toward what was real. Of course, I spent years grappling with baggage, sometimes getting lost along the way, but it was because of my curious wandering that I was always able to find my way back to Spirit.

I WONDERED ABOUT THE THINGS I COULD CHANGE AND WHETHER MY BODY WOULD EVER FEEL LIKE HOME.

The way to my true self was a rocky road to navigate. Just as I had rejected what was not right for me spiritually, I had to do the same with my gender. The process was just as turbulent. I struggled to figure out which parts of me to let go. There were so many nights when I looked in mirrors, pulling at the skin of someone I didn't feel like, picking apart the parts of me I didn't recognize. I wondered about the things I could change and whether my body would ever feel like home.

Even with the proof of my pain and the joy in my hope, I doubted my feelings. I wondered if I made up my own grief, if

being transgender was all in my head. Constantly, I would turn within to search for some sort of meaning. I would tear at myself, frenzied and afraid I would never reach that knowing.

That night in the spiritual center was the first time I truly looked in the mirror and saw myself reflected back. Suddenly, I knew the truth I had been uncovering about myself was real. I could see it tangibly, even for only a moment. I became empowered to meet that person. The doubt that drove me to find my true self had bloomed into a beautiful assuredness. Asking myself who I was in the face of all my preconceived notions allowed me the space to uncover more of me, always ending up back at the truth every time.

In a lot of ways, my transition and my spiritual journey have been one and the same. For me to find joy and comfort in the universe, I had to first recognize it in myself. Taking the physical steps to affirm what I knew to be true was transformative, both materially and spiritually. My whole life, I struggled to understand the truth of the universe, questioning the world around me, but it was only through becoming myself that I was able to understand what it means to be at all.

Catzian Maris (they, them) is a sign language interpreter in the Detroit, Michigan, area.

I'M AN ORIGINAL CREATION

Rev. Dr. Temple Hayes



United, we stand. Divided, we are merely a distraction.

When this idea first came to me a few years ago, I related it to organizations, communities, societies, or families that might stand together. As time went on, I realized this statement was most significant when applied to my life experience as a gay person.

United, I stand. Divided, I am merely a distraction.

I was divided as a teenager when I realized I was drawn more to women than men. I had feelings for a woman a little older than me, yet the church said I was going to hell. When I was not yet 14, my grandmother actually mourned that she would not see me in heaven.

My parents went to a mental health clinic to report my homosexuality. I was terrified that people in white uniforms were going to take me away. It was so clear I didn't belong anywhere. I was a misfit.

I found Unity spiritual teachings when I was 19. For the first time, I heard that God loves everyone. How was this possible when all my life I had heard about a God I wanted to love yet, based on what I was told, a God who wasn't for me?

In time my minister noticed that I was volunteering for everything and attending every activity, so one night she invited me to dinner. We were discussing food choices, and I interjected, "I want you to know I am gay." She continued to talk about food. I said, "Did you not hear me?" She said, "Yes, but in Unity being gay does not matter. God loves and

accepts everyone." In that moment, I felt as if I belonged. I took probably the fullest breath of life I had taken since I was born. I felt undivided, united.

The longer I have lived, the more I have realized that as long as we have an unresolved need to belong, we will always be weakening our strengths, possibilities, and self-esteem. Our emotions are often so deep, the pain so great, that even as mature adults the feelings underneath are making subtle decisions for us. Needing to belong was my shadow. It called my name until I was more than 50 years old.

Then one day I had the greatest epiphany of my life. I suddenly realized and believed I am an original and unrepeatable creation of God. This means I will *never* belong. Yippee! The angels sang, and I was resurrected. I claimed my space from misfit to mystic. I laughed for an hour, and I have been in joy ever since. My entire life made sense, and for the first time ever, I was undivided and absolutely clear.

In his book *The Thought Exchange* (Library Tales Publishing, 2011), David Friedman teaches that our frequent thoughts of fear or discomfort are only sensations; they are *not you*. I started practicing this awareness. One day on an airplane, a woman seated beside me started conversing and asked, "What does your husband do?" The familiar sensation took over my whole body, but I stayed with the feeling and said to her, "I don't have a husband, I have a wife." No one died when I said it. Most important, I didn't die a little by changing the subject

or shutting down my heart. I embraced the sensation of freedom.

I AM AN ORIGINAL AND UNREPEATABLE CREATION OF GOD.

I've heard that each time we share our story, the power and pain of the story divides by the number of people we share it with. This experience on the plane gave me courage to move forward, so I shared my story with the new members class at my church. No one died, and no one quit the church. People actually applauded.

The next Sunday morning, I told the whole church community, and they gave me three standing ovations while I was talking. Two weeks later, the Lifetime television channel called. I was interviewed on a morning show called *The Balancing Act* about how I had recovered my self-esteem, which I believe is born in each of us. I was free from the closet for my lifetime.

My life is dedicated to teachings that unite and heal the divide within.

Rev. Dr. Temple Hayes (she, her) is the spiritual leader at First Unity Spiritual Campus in St. Petersburg, Florida.

THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS

Ellis Delaney



It feels as if I have lived my whole life searching for wholeness, for belonging, for my way back to connection with something greater. I have felt as if I'm just treading water while waiting for a better, holier version of myself to arrive.

When I was a kid, I learned I couldn't look to the grown-ups in my life for the protection or steadfast guidance I needed, so I read the Bible and lived inside country music.

I grew up in a small town in Texas. Even moving there at 5 years old meant being an outsider and not really from there. It was hard to fit in anyway as the boyish girl I was. In a small town without many relatives or connections outside of school, kids either joined 4-H or Future Farmers of America, or made friends with the air, the trees, and whatever wildlife happened by. Thank goodness our house was next to a pine forest! I desperately wanted to be free of the loneliness and fear I felt, so I would daydream, play outside, and pray to God.

In middle school, I leaned into my Catholic faith by making sure all my classmates knew they needed to ask Jesus to come into their hearts to be saved. That didn't make me popular, but I was already outside every social circle anyway. I felt outside of my own skin, too, as I hovered somewhere close by but distant enough that I was hard to know and hard to be friends with.

Early in high school, I realized I was more attracted to girls than boys. That pretty much meant I couldn't be Catholic anymore—not even Jesus could save me. Expressing the love and attraction I felt as holy and beautiful was an unforgivable sin. How could this be? My uncle said I was being tested and that if I abstained from expressing my sexuality, I would pass the test and get into heaven.

This made me pretty mad at God. What kind of God would give me love but tell me I couldn't love who I loved?

So I turned to songwriting to help me make sense of my life and find hope that I was not alone. I poured my heart into song lyrics:

Angel, come down and be with me.
Right this moment I am in need.
I've gotta find some sense of security.
Please, angel, come sit close to me.

Music and songwriting became my way to pray, to feel connected to myself and something greater at the same time.

I met my wife after college, and we have been together 21 years. I am also a parent to a wonderful 10-year-old. I have become the parent I'd been waiting for.

With the help of community, my family, dharma, relational recovery, and the gift of music and songwriting, I am learning what it means to love myself and others. And while a holier version of myself has not arrived, I have found something better. I have learned that I am worthy just because I am alive, that I am imperfect and still lovable at the same time. I am leaning into the truth—even when I can't see it—that we each have inherent worth.

Self-esteem is not something you are given; it's something you do. It is a worthiness practice. I am learning that worth is not something we have or don't have, but rather something we do for ourselves and others. We are all worthy.



Ellis Delaney (she, her; they, them) is a singer/songwriter based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

WORTHY—I AM

Rev. Mark Anthony Lord



To say I think I'm worthy today is an understatement. I don't just think it—I believe it. Most important, I feel it. That definitely wasn't always the case.

I grew up in a blue-collar, Catholic suburb of Detroit. In hindsight, I don't think anyone felt truly worthy as there was a pervasive feeling of guilt and fear of God. For me, heaped on top of that pile of shared unworthiness was the secret of being gay. That exponentially multiplied my sense of not being good enough—a "sinner."

My childhood was very, very painful. I could write the word *very* a thousand times because that's honestly how scary and excruciating it was. When it came to "sins," it seemed I had been given the most unacceptable of them all, the kind that God deemed disgusting. As early as age 7, I was plagued with the fear that one day I was going to die and burn in hell forever. This daily trauma caused deep psychic and spiritual wounds in me.

I also was not the kind of gay kid who was able to hide my sexual orientation because my gender was fluid. (I didn't even know that was a possibility until about 10 years ago.) That's the part that made me naturally gravitate to playing with girls on the playground instead of boys. It made me more susceptible to hateful words thrown at me like *sissy*, *faggot*, and *disgusting*, combined with the constant threat of being beaten up.

Not a great beginning, huh? It does get a lot better, but not just yet.

I started coming out in college and found acceptance, which was amazing. I was also very blessed to have a family who loved me "no matter who you are." But feeling so unworthy didn't just go away because I had come out to my friends and family.

As I found my freedom by hanging out at gay bars and developing friendships with other gay men and women, I also started becoming addicted to drugs, sex, people, and anything I could find to give me some momentary relief from the constant self-rejection.

I hit bottom at the ripe old age of 24. I discovered 12-step programs through a dear friend, and I knew I needed them. One Friday night I was walking home from a meeting. I knew many of my friends were out drinking and dancing and doing what they did every weekend. I stood on a busy street corner in Chicago and couldn't move. One part of me craved to join my friends, and another part knew if I did I'd go down the slippery slope of addiction again.

Suddenly, an unexpected prayer rose up out of me: "God, I can't get myself home. I can't take care of myself. Please help me." Then Jesus came strongly into my mind—I had not thought of him for years—and I heard within me, *Take my hand. I love you. Take my hand.*

This might sound crazy, but I reached out my hand as if there were really someone there. I didn't feel anything, but at the same time I knew something loving was helping me. I held out my hand and walked home.

Once safe in my living room, I sat on the couch and closed my eyes. Tears started to fall as the revelation of my undeniable, unearned, never-ending worth began to awaken in my heart.

The next years weren't easy, but I started attending Unity in Chicago, and my relationship with God and Jesus was healed. In turn, throughout time, I healed my relationship with myself and ultimately others.

I used the spiritual tools I learned, especially denials and affirmations. Every day, I denied any power to the feelings of fear and unworthiness that were triggered at unexpected times. I affirmed over and over how loved and perfect I am. I took classes, went to services every Sunday, and kept immersing myself in a community that reflected to me how fabulous I really am. I knew in my soul that God, the energy of perfect love, adored me. But it took time to believe it and for my body to become free from the memories of abuse. One day at a time, I grew to love myself more and more and more.

Today, I am a minister. It is my greatest joy to help others know their worth and how deeply and dearly loved they are. It's my job to assist people in becoming free from the fear of an external, punishing, score-keeping God. I am married to a beautiful man. We have been together for 24 years. My life is wonderful.

This is what I know without a doubt: I am worthy. I am so flippin' worthy it's ridiculous! And so are you. I promise.

Rev. Mark Anthony Lord (he, him, her) is the senior minister at Unity of Naples, Florida.

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