



February 2019 Monthly Theme  
**COMPASSION**  
*the practice of Crossing Borders*

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*The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: [wbuuc.org/themes](http://wbuuc.org/themes) or sign up for a circle at [wbuuc.org/classes](http://wbuuc.org/classes).*

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### **QUESTIONS**

What is the relationship between being compassionate, and being courageous?

In your deep heart, and in your privacy, do you feel compassionate or dispassionate about others?

What is one way to bring new encounters with different kinds of people into your life?

How does one develop a deeper capacity for using compassion to help and not be overwhelmed by “compassion fatigue?”

“Antevasin” is the Sanskrit word for “one who lives at the border.” What does it mean to “live at the border?”

### **QUOTATIONS**

“Our job on earth isn't to criticize, reject, or judge. Our purpose is to offer a helping hand, compassion, and mercy. We are to do unto others as we hope they would do unto us.” — Dana Arcuri, *Harvest of Hope: Living Victoriously Through Adversity, A 50-Day Devotional*

True compassion flows fast, as if we were wounded ourselves, yet without diminishing our strength. —Japanese saying

Compassion and tolerance are not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. – Dalai Lama.

America was indebted to immigration for her settlement and prosperity. That part of America which had encouraged them most had advanced most rapidly in population, agriculture and the arts – James Madison

Before ICE, we had Immigration and Naturalization Services, but it wasn't until about 1999 that we chose to criminalize immigration at all. And then, once ICE was established, we really kind of militarized that enforcement to a degree that was previously unseen in the United States – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

“A good writer should be able to communicate to the reader, 'I know your life. I know what you have truly experienced. It's not right or wrong. It's survival. It's making mistakes, and trying to redeem yourself. It's imperfections, and trying to make yourself better. It's outrages, and crimes, and insults, which often are not righted, which you have to fix yourself, in your own mind, in your own heart, so that you are not poisoned'.” – Sergio Troncoso, *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*

“It takes so little, so infinitely little, for someone to find themselves on the other side of the border, where everything - love, convictions, faith, history - no longer has meaning. The whole mystery of human life resides on the fact that it is spent in the immediate proximity of, and even in direct contact with, that border, that it is separated from it not by kilometers but by barely a millimeter.” – Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

“Security is a double-edged sword: While a fence sure protects the fenced; it also imprisons the protected.” – Mokokoma Mokhonoana

Let borders become sunlight so we traverse this Earth as one nation and drive the darkness out. —Kamand Kojouri, Iranian author and poet

We can learn the art of fierce compassion - redefining strength, deconstructing isolation and renewing a sense of community, practicing letting go of rigid us-vs.-them thinking - while cultivating power and clarity in response to difficult situations. —Sharon Salzberg

The world is not changing if you don't shoulder the burden of responsibility. —Ai Weiwei, artist/activist

## **POETRY**

They want us to be afraid.  
They want us to be afraid of leaving our homes.  
They want us to barricade our doors  
and hide our children.  
Their aim is to make us fear life itself!  
They want us to hate.  
They want us to hate the other.  
They want us to practice aggression  
and perfect antagonism.

Their aim is to divide us all!  
They want us to be inhuman.  
They want us to throw out our kindness.  
They want us to bury our love  
and burn our hope.

Their aim is to take all our light!  
They think their bricked walls  
will separate us.  
They think their damned bombs  
will defeat us.  
They are so ignorant they don't understand  
that my soul and your soul are old friends.  
They are so ignorant they don't understand  
that when they cut you I bleed.  
They are so ignorant they don't understand  
that we will never be afraid,  
we will never hate  
and we will never be silent  
for life is ours!  
— Kamand Kojouri

## READINGS & EXCERPTS

### Tell Me How It Ends - Valeria Luiselli

...the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken. And perhaps the only way to grant any justice--were that even possible--is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us. Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don't dare even look.

### CROSSING BORDERS: A.E. Stallings bears witness to Europe's refugee crisis By Cynthia Haven, from Poetry Foundation

The poet A.E. Stallings has been a student of the classics since her Oxford days, but Homer and Hesiod didn't prepare her for the hands-on experience of volunteering with refugees during the disaster that has engulfed Europe. Stallings, who was born in Decatur, Georgia, and has made Athens her home since 1999, found herself passing out shoes, serving food, and managing children during the largest refugee crisis since World War II.

For a while, the borders in Greece were still permeable, and people were moving through, often to Germany or other European countries on buses. Stallings remembers when her friends began distributing baby carriers to refugees who were walking to the border with young children.

Within a year, families were camping in Athens's Victoria Square, a landmark in the center of the city. By October 2015, about 400 refugees were camped out in tents, mostly Afghanis, Stallings said. "It was a shocking thing—hundreds of families living rough in a central European square." Soon Syrian and Afghan refugees fleeing war and famine were joined by Iranian Christians fleeing persecution, Iraqis, Somalians, and Yazidis. "'Syrian refugee crisis' is a misnomer. It's a general crisis," she said.

With her friends, a loose community of expatriates and local artists, Stallings was pushing herself to assist the refugees twice or three times a week. "Everyone was giving everything," she said. She found herself writing—often short poems or epigrams. "I could write them as things were going on, while I was still processing," she said. For example, in "Nothing to declare":

As if in a sea of red tape  
The faulty life-jackets tossed:  
There is no custom house, no guards,  
At the border these have crossed.

Then in March 2016, "suddenly, the borders slammed shut," Stallings recalled. "Within two weeks Piraeus was a tent city of 5,000 people."

Stallings wrote in an epigram with a title almost as long as the poem itself: "From an autopsy report of an unknown drowning victim, Ikaria":  
Female. Nine years old. Found wearing a blouse,  
And a pair of sweatpants patched with Minnie Mouse.

Epigrams were often the form she chose to express the horror and humanity of what was happening around her. “I wanted them to be sharp,” she explains. “Something that had distance, irony. The reality was too overwhelming for a sonnet. These are real people. The situation is bad enough that you don’t have to poetify,” she said, stressing the last word with a little self-mockery.

On land, the adults were bored and anxious, and the children more so. “The worst part is being in limbo and waiting. The uncertainty is really unbearable for people,” said Stallings. “This is their life. Instead of finishing their law degrees, they’re wearing ill-fitting shoes.” She remembered, in particular, a Syrian graduate student who felt his youth was being frittered away. From “The City”:  
“I want to go to another land. I want to cross the border,”  
The young man out of Syria said. “I’m tired of being stuck.  
Sure, Greece is nice enough if you can get a job: good luck.”

Stallings and her friends brought supplies—crayons, Play-Doh, markers, bubbles, and pipe cleaners—to keep the restless kids busy as they waited day after day to learn their fate. “We’re the artists, we’re the painters, we’re the poets. We can do this,” she said. “I’m a mother; I can yell at kids in four languages.”

But the children began drawing massacres they had witnessed and drownings at sea—the sea, in particular, haunted them. “Every single displaced person has arrived in a dinghy,” Stallings said. “Every single person has risked drowning.” When the refugees first wash ashore, they are unsure whether they have arrived in Greece at last. The pilot is often steering a dinghy for the first time, and many of the passengers had never seen the sea before. The volunteers arranged outings for them to meet the sea on more friendly terms.

She was initially hesitant to write about what she’d witnessed. Poets must find a way to write from their own perspective, she said, and they must be honest about themselves and their motivations. She concludes her own poem, “Empathy” (first published in *Literary Matters*), with ruthless self-awareness:

Empathy isn’t generous,  
It’s selfish. It’s not being nice  
To say I would pay any price  
Not to be those who’d die to be us.

## **MEDITATION**

Affirmation: I am spacious yet full of loving-kindness, full of compassion, yet serene. I live like the strings of a fine instrument—not too taut but not too loose. —From 1001 Meditations

## **LifeAfterHate.org**

It all starts with Compassion. Founded by former violent extremists, we are committed to compassion, education and countering hate and discrimination. We are committed to inspiring all people to a place of compassion and forgiveness - for themselves and each other. “There’s no academic way of making someone compassionate,” he said. “It happens through experience.” - Tony McAleer - cofounder LifeAfterHate