

**Rethinking “The Orphan”:
Towards a Unitarian Universalist Imperative for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Grievers
Experiencing Living Family Loss**

a thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Theological Studies

By
Krista Faith Westervelt
Vanderbilt Divinity School

April 23, 2024

Dr. Yara González-Justiniano - First Reader

Victor S. Judge - Second Reader

Dedication

To my beautiful trans and non-binary siblings, to my queer friends, neighbors, and loves:

May you be held in the tenderness of community, today and always.

You are not alone. You are loved.

Acknowledgements

As I type this, I can hear the Oscars night orchestra lifting their instruments in anticipation of playing me off the stage. Before that time comes, I want to extend my gratitude to those who contributed to my intellectual and spiritual formation and to this work.

To my readers, Dr. González-Justiniano and Dean Judge, not only for your valuable feedback and pedagogical generosity, but also for the ways in which you each uniquely inspire me to lean more fully into my gifts and my calling. Thank you; thank you; thank you!

To my greatest teachers, my children—Joshua Stone, Moriya Renee, and Kiernan Alexander—with gratitude for your patience along the journey of your mother going back to school and staying there *forever*. To my brother, Bryce, for encouraging me to persevere, even if it meant two years of missed phone calls. To my late mother, Mary—though things were complicated, I know you would have been proud of my work. I love you and miss you. To my father, Rudy, from whom I inherited the drive to keep figuring it out. To the queer and trans folks in my family—by marriage and by blood—I see you and I love you. To Terp Vairin and Erik Chaplinsky, for myriad reasons I will most assuredly text you later.

To the Rev. Thom Belote, Marion Hirsch, and the congregation of the Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist for affirming my ministerial and theological journey. To my “Postcards from a Seminarian” bidders—Susan Blanchard, Mary George, Mary

Beth Powell, Bill Rote, Joan and Doug Shier—to whom I still owe a couple of postcards and a massive debt of gratitude for their support.

To Keegan Osinski and Michael Sekuras for their invaluable guidance through the thesis writing process. To Dr. Laine Walters Young, Mediatrix Kisiyenya Draper, and my beloved VDS cohort for countless hours of support, encouragement, and inspiration.

To the Rev. Diane Dowgiert and the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville for leaning into welcoming me and those I feel called to serve.

To all who have walked through the door of the Nashville LGBTQIA+ grief support group since November 2023 for trusting me and for trusting each other. Your vulnerability humbles me every day.

And to those whose names are not written here, but who nevertheless made an immeasurable difference along my journey to this day—you are remembered and loved, even if there is not enough space in this thesis to show it.

Introduction

The early glimmers of this project first announced themselves in February 2021 as I experienced the COVID-19 Memorial via livestream from the National Cathedral. The simple, yet haunting service marked 500,000 US deaths from COVID-19, giving sound and space to a profound communal grief, too large and loud to be spoken or grasped—a grief that we, as a nation, had not otherwise been allowed to grieve. I found myself inescapably moved by this event and I took to my journal to process the thoughts that arose:

Where am I called to [in caring for the grieving]?¹
 Those places of margin (margins) / The places of disconnect (disconnection) / The end
 The grieving / The loss (through death) / The loss through disconnection (disownment)

¹ I knew at the time that I was planning to apply to divinity school in the coming year and “call” was front of mind. Grief and grief-related support have been a part of my life since 2011, but for a differently marginalized and stigmatized population.

And what would that look like... to hold sacred space for all endings/disconnections—
 ...to love into [the] fullness of being and hope and pain and grief[?]
 What does this look like?²

As I journaled through the day, the idea begin to crystallize a bit more:

What if—

Isaiah 1:17 AMP - “Learn to do good. Seek justice. Rebuke the ruthless, Defend the fatherless. Plead for the [rights of the] widow [in court].”

EHV - “Relieve the oppressed. Seek justice for the fatherless...”

What if the “fatherless” or the “orphaned” [one] here isn’t necessarily the one who has been literally orphaned, but one who has been orphaned by

- family rejection

- social rejection

(due to marginalized identity or other reason[s] for being cast aside)?³

I sat with these questions a bit longer and scrawled “*Rethinking the ‘orphan’*” in large letters at the bottom of my journal page.⁴ A few days later, I elaborated on this thought,

I feel like when people are rejected by their families for whatever reason (often related to gender / sexuality, but there certainly can be other things) it can likely feel very much like grieving a sudden death—(even if it was one that wasn’t outside the realm of possibility...) And such psychic deaths (for lack of an immediately better term)⁵ are likely to have a lot of the same aspects / pain / adjustment (I would imagine) — because any potential for a dual-sided rather than a one-sided [relationship] is lost—there is not a way to dialogue—to talk with that person/those people any more—a connection is severed—Along with that is the loss of being able to wrestle with hurts together.⁶

I explored these early ruminations further on a masked (pre-COVID vaccine, social distancing-era) outdoor walk in early March 2021 with my Unitarian Universalist (UU) church’s Director of Religious Education, Marion Hirsch. “*What might it look like,*” I asked, “*to create spaces that serve these types of living loss?*” Marion encouraged me to explore the idea, to test it

² Krista Westervelt, “Entry for February 22, 2021” in *Unpublished Personal Journal, 2013-2021*, 100-102; Original punctuation and formatting left intact.

³ Isa. 1:17AMP; Isa. 1:17 EHV in Westervelt, “Entry for February 22, 2021,” 103.

⁴ Westervelt, “Entry for February 22, 2021,” 103.

⁵ Since “psychic death” has a different prescribed meaning than offered in my journal entry, I now use “living loss” to describe this type of loss. The term “ambiguous loss” would be an appropriate alternative, as well. In my work with grieving people, I prefer to use “living loss” to describe the loss, especially in public-facing materials, as it is often more easily understood and requires less explanation than the term “ambiguous loss.” For more on ambiguous loss, see the work of Pauline Boss, from whom the term originated: <https://www.ambiguousloss.com/about/>

⁶ Krista Westervelt, “Entry for February 23, 2021” in *Unpublished Personal Journal, 2013-2021*, 106-107.

out and see what came of it. Practical considerations got in the way of creating spaces of support for living losses while I was still in North Carolina, but the question never left me.

Since matriculating at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Fall 2022, I have explored elements of my curiosity in some form or fashion through various course-related projects:

- Designing a guide for an artistic ritual-based grief work experience for the living loss of mother/daughter relationships, inspired by a brief study of Thecla in Dr. David Michelson’s Global Christianities I course;
- A final project dedicated to laying the groundwork for grief support for later-in-life, newly-out queer women for Dr. González-Justiniano’s Pastoral Theology and Care course;
- And a field education placement as Student Minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville, offering group and one-on-one grief support to LGBTQIA+ church and community members navigating both living and death-related losses.

While each of these projects comes at my “rethinking the orphan” questions at an angle, none tackles them directly. In this thesis, I tackle these questions head-on, digging in and refining them both theologically and practically, within the lens of my Unitarian Universalist (UU) faith tradition.⁷

In light of the living loss of family experienced by members of the LGBTQIA+ community, how might mandates to care for the orphan (either explicitly or implicitly communicated through religious, moral, and ethical frameworks) be explored and applied more expansively in order to inform a more theologically- and morally-grounded Unitarian

⁷ Given my UU context, any authority I have in speaking from a theological framework must be informed by that tradition and speak towards that tradition. That said, my hope is that my findings from within the UU tradition could speak to those who identify with and practice the Christian faith (along with other faiths and belief systems explored in this thesis), that they might also expand their ministering in a way that affirms, uplifts, and supports the LGBTQIA+ community in a more healing and holistic way.

Universalist imperative for offering grief-related care to those experiencing such losses? Why is such care needed? What does Unitarian Universalism currently bring to the table in this regard and how might the denomination and its congregations shift to provide grief care for LGBTQIA+ people bereaved through the living loss of their family?

On the path to uncovering answers to these questions, this thesis will begin with an exploration of the living loss of family experienced by those within the LGBTQIA+ community, ranging from emotional disconnection to literal abandonment and disownment. From there, I will discuss how such losses contribute to disenfranchised grief, which—if not acknowledged and attended to—can lead to negative outcomes for the bereaved. From there I will plot the current landscape of Unitarian Universalism’s care of LGBTQIA+ individuals and expose current gaps in both grief care and care in general. After shedding light on those concerns, I will offer a survey of sources held by Unitarian Universalism as inspirational for thought and action. This exploration will serve to demonstrate a commonality and throughline of care for the orphan within sources applicable to UU praxis. The survey will include sources commonly offered from UU pulpits, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Wicca, along with UU principles, themselves. Because UU conceptions of “truth” are often built off of common throughlines of justice found in multiple traditions, rather than by considering any one religious tradition to be uniquely authoritative, these common narratives are compelling for UU discourse on the topic.

After this survey of care for the orphan within various theological and philosophical contexts, I will briefly connect those conceptions to those in the LGBTQIA+ community experiencing living orphanhood to establish a Unitarian Universalist imperative for the care of the subsequent grief from such loss. The paper will close by locating this call to action within the

UU congregational and denominational setting by offering practical suggestions for future praxis.

Living Loss of Family within the LGBTQIA+ community

As with other marginalized communities,⁸ there are certain losses that are common to the LGBTQIA+ experience, though not necessarily universal. One such loss—the loss of relationships—may occur during the process of coming out to friends, family, loved ones, and others with whom the individual is connected (including their religious communities). Though this thesis will focus on family rejection, rejection within and by religious community is often woven into the tapestry of such loss.

Such experiences of rejection may vary in severity—perceived and otherwise—but all can have a profound effect on emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. Carastathis et al. note that such experiences can range from “withdrawal of emotional warmth, affection, concern, love, nurturance, and support,” to physical and emotional abuse.⁹ One account of coming out to family describes the nuances of such rejection:

When I came out to my parents at the age of 20...
 my mother asked, “Why are you doing this to me?!”
 I found a support group listing tucked in the pages of an issue of *Creative Loafing*, and
 joined a handful of young adults I’d never met in the basement of a church I’d never
 attended to discuss our families’ reactions to our coming out.
 Turns out, I had it easy.
 Easier than everyone else, anyway.
 My mother hadn’t kicked me out; she was merely incredulous.¹⁰

⁸ Of which many LGBTQIA+ people are a part, given intersectional identities beyond sexuality and gender.

⁹ Geoffrey S. Carastathis et al., “Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian: Portrayals, Perceptions, and Resilience,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 3 (2017): 290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1179035>.

¹⁰ kfw, “out-living,” *Undusted Corners* (blog), March 17, 2023, <https://undustedcorners.com/2023/03/17/out-living/>.

A recent *Tennessean* article profiled Christian children's book author Matthew Paul Turner, who experienced both embrace and backlash after coming out as gay.¹¹ Among those who rejected him were some of his closest family members:

[I]n the past three years, [he] has faced hate, online and in person... [and Turner] has lost the close relationships he once had with his mom and his siblings. [He] hasn't spoken to his father for nearly four years.¹²

Turner experienced this disconnection in spite of initial signs of support from family members.¹³ Unfortunately, family retreating from one's life after one comes out as queer or gender non-conforming is not uncommon.¹⁴

Surprisingly, families who show support to the LGBTQIA+ community in public may not be necessarily supportive at home. A study by Carastathis et al., found that a number of LGBTQIA+ respondents who experienced familial rejection noted that their "parents... were friends with gay or lesbian people," leading the participants to "assume... their coming out would be accepted," creating cognitive dissonance when the acceptance never came.¹⁵ One young gay man shared about his own experience of the shock of rejection:

[Your parents] see you different [after you come out]. Like they are your parents, they know you. It's being like 18 or 19 years, and then you say that you are gay and then it's suddenly like, I don't want anything to do with you.¹⁶

Those experiencing "blatant rejection" by their families rather than more subtle withdrawal, particularly those who had been reliant on them for housing, were often subjected to

¹¹ Brad Schmitt, "Best-selling Christian author's intense path to his public coming out: 'A man at peace,'" *The Tennessean*, March 12, 2024, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/life/family/2024/03/12/christian-author-matthew-turner-you-will-always-belong-c-coming-out/72583244007/?>.

¹² Schmitt, "Best-selling Christian author's intense path."

¹³ Schmitt.

¹⁴ Carastathis et al., "Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian," 296.

¹⁵ Carastathis et al., "Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian," 298.

¹⁶ A study participant named "Sammy" in Carastathis et al, 298.

“verbal [and] physical abuse, disownment, hostility, condemnation, and punishment,” with disownment leading to the loss of shelter.¹⁷

Though all identities represented within the LGBTQIA+ community may experience homelessness or housing insecurity after coming out, Klein notes that “[transgender] youth face higher rates of homelessness and institutionalization as a result of being thrown out of their parents’ homes.”¹⁸ Tanis quotes one trans man who shared,

During my coming out to my father, he became very angry. He then kicked me out of his apartment and I was homeless. That fight with my dad catalyzed my move to complete financial independence from my family of origin, and was also my first taste of rejection by those I love. I was eighteen. I had to geographically relocate in order to discover my own self.¹⁹

Transgender adults also experience housing insecurity due to family rejection. According to the results of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey,

More than one in ten (11%) adult respondents who grew up in the same household with family, guardians, or foster parents said that a family member was violent towards them because they were transgender and 8% were kicked out of the house because they were transgender.²⁰

These experiences of disownment, no matter the severity, create a tension between the relief of embracing one’s full self and the grief of being rejected and abandoned by family.²¹ In spite of the risks of rejection, given the weight of being closeted, “coming out” is often “necessary for mental well-being.”²² As one young person shared in a study,

¹⁷ Carastathis et al., “Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian,” 295.

¹⁸ Rebecca Klein as cited in Justin Tanis, “A Search for Our Selves,” in *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2003), 35.

¹⁹ Tanis, “A Search for Our Selves,” 35.

²⁰ S.E. James, J.L. Herman, L.E. and R. Heng-Lehtinen, *Early Insights: A Report of the 2022 U.S.*

Transgender Survey (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2024), 20, https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/2022%20USTS%20Early%20Insights%20Report_FINAL.pdf

²¹ Encouragingly, research cited in Roe suggests that “most *out* adolescents feel as if disclosing their sexuality was a positive experience, perhaps because they are selective to whom they disclosed.” Stuart Roe, “‘Family Support Would Have Been Like Amazing’: LGBTQ Youth Experiences With Parental and Family Support,” *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 25, no. 1 (2017): 56, doi:10.1177/1066480716679651

²² Roe, “‘Family Support Would Have Been Like Amazing,’” 57.

“Yeah, I had to [come out], it was like really, really, really, really messing me up just hiding it every single day or putting effort into hiding it...” [W]hen asked if he thought coming out was a good or bad decision, he replied, “good, I never felt better about it, even with people going against it, it felt much better just to be myself.”²³

Relief from coming out does not negate the pain of any loss that may come with it, even if friends or other non-family members are supportive. One young person in Roe’s study experienced this disconnect:

[A]lthough he is grateful for the support of friends, he would like a lot more family support because, “But they’re [friends] not like [family], they won’t always be there; so where family, family will always be there, so I think, like a stronger foundation of family support would’ve been like amazing.”²⁴

Experiences like his drive home the reality that, while beneficial and critical, non-family support does not negate the emotional loss of family support. While having “supportive parent and family relationships” can be emotionally and psychologically protective in the face of crisis, parent and family rejection is a significant loss of such protection.²⁵ The consequences of this living loss go beyond the material consequences of being disowned, and can “significantly [affect] the health [and well-being] of LGBTI people.”²⁶ Experiencing hostility or rejection after coming out, can lead to “feelings of doubt, confusion, low [self]worth, alienation, [and] self-hatred,” which can be deleterious to mental health.²⁷

Though such experiences have been taking place for years, and disownment and rejection by family can happen to queer and gender non-conforming individuals at any age, the recent passage and implementation of state and local laws that require schools to “out” LGBTQIA+ young people to their parents (parents whose level of support—or lack thereof— may range from indifferent to actively abusive) contribute to the living loss of family for LGBTQIA+ youth and

²³ Roe, 57.

²⁴ Roe, 58.

²⁵ Roe, 58-59.

²⁶ Carastathis et al., “Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian,” 290.

²⁷ Carastathis et al., 299.

increase the need for support.²⁸ As Meris notes, such laws “endanger children who are secretly conflicted about their sexuality, because they realize they might not have the support of their nuclear family as they grapple with their self doubts, self-discovery, and isolation.”²⁹ This problem is far-reaching and is unlikely to diminish in severity over the coming years, especially as backlash against the queer and trans community ramps up.

Living Loss and Disenfranchised Grief

Along with the tangible repercussions of family rejection noted above, grief is an intangible consequence of the living loss of family after coming out. Turner and Stauffer note that “non-death *losses specifically related to discrimination, marginalization, and oppression*” are a form “of disenfranchised grief”—or grief that “is socially invalidated and unacknowledged”—that carries additional challenges.³⁰

According to Turner and Stauffer, the quality and level of connection experienced within one’s “support systems” can have an effect on how successfully one is able to navigate grief³¹ Combine “histories embedded with trauma and marginalization,” with “the interplay of intersectionality,” each of which are common to the LGBTQIA+ experience, and the griever may struggle with “resilience” in the face of their loss, which can have negative consequences for their mental health.³² The tenuous living conditions experienced by those who were disowned or kicked out by family may also contribute to “disenfranchised [grief] spaces” thereby

²⁸ Doneley Meris, “Complicated grief and challenges in LGBTQIA+ communities,” in *Disenfranchised Grief: Examining Social, Cultural, and Relational Impacts*, eds. Renee Blocker Turner and Sarah D. Stauffer, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), 128; As of this writing, the Tennessee General Assembly is speeding various pieces of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation through, including a bill that forces teachers to out students to parents and one on the governor’s desk now that would allow vocally and stridently unaffirming foster/adoptive parents to foster/adopt LGBTQIA+ children. The state is actively oppressing the orphan while creating new ones.

²⁹ Douthat as cited in Meris, “Complicated grief and challenges,” 128.

³⁰ Doka as cited in Renee Blocker Turner and Sarah D. Stauffer, “Disenfranchised Grief: The complicated interweave of death and non-death losses,” in *Disenfranchised Grief: Examining Social, Cultural, and Relational Impacts*, eds. Renee Blocker Turner and Sarah D. Stauffer, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), 3,6. Italics preserved from original.

³¹ Turner and Stauffer, “Disenfranchised Grief,” 3.

³² Turner and Stauffer, “Disenfranchised Grief,” 15.

“heighten[ing] emotional vulnerability and increas[ing] isolation.”³³ Without safe and stable spaces for processing grief, the griever experiences suffering heaped upon suffering.

Making accessing support for and acknowledgment of such grief even more challenging, individuals’ disenfranchised grief from the living loss of family may be mistaken for “clinical depression,” especially if their healthcare provider is not aware of their loss, leading to inappropriate or ineffective care.³⁴ While it may seem surprising that a griever would not bring up the loss of family to their clinician, Turner and Stauffer note that feelings of “shame” can contribute to “self-disenfranchisement” from one’s grief.³⁵ Additionally, the griever may not be “out” to their clinician or provider and may be less likely to broach the topic after experiencing rejection by those closest to them.

Compounding these concerns, many LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing such loss self-diagnose their feelings of grief and despair as “depression,” suggesting that a misdiagnosis is not always the result of practitioner misinterpretation.³⁶ For example, one participant in Carastathis et al.’s study described symptoms as depression, which could arguably be grief-related:

“I was depressed,” the participant shared, “[My parents] will never accept who I am, I knew because they told me that.”³⁷

The use of the phrase “will never” suggests grief, not only for the respondent’s current experience of rejection, but also for the loss of future familial acceptance. Such grief is experienced as an ongoing loss.

³³ Meris, 129.

³⁴ Turner and Stauffer, 8; Sabia-Tanis notes that “even healthy grief is [sometimes] mistaken for a kind of illness or a sign of depression that must be immediately remedied,” adding that “grief is not something to fix... [but] a response to love and loss.” See: Justin Sabia-Tanis, “Grieving Together: LGBT Bereavement Support Groups,” in *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists on Health*, ed. Adrian Shanker, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020), 194.

³⁵ Turner and Stauffer, 11. Queer and trans experiences within the healthcare system have been historically fraught. Unfortunately, an exploration of those challenges is beyond the scope of this thesis.

³⁶ Carastathis et al., 300.

³⁷ A participant named “Richard” in Carastathis et al., 300.

Misdiagnosis and misunderstandings of one's emotions following the loss of family can further disenfranchise the griever from their grief. Meris outlines the complications of unaddressed disenfranchised grief for members of the LGBTQIA+ community, including grief related to being rejected or abandoned by family.³⁸ For instance, gay men are noted to be particularly “vulnerabl[e] to depression” and to experience “suicidality” at a level “three times higher than the general adult population.”³⁹ As Jones and Adams hauntingly express in “Undoing the Alphabet: A Queer Fugue on Grief and Forgiveness,” this suicidality after familial rejection creates a ripple effect of loss in the queer community:

Diabetes or suicide, postcoming out—
 (possible) causes of death.
 To think about suicide
 as your response to a
 hateful, homophobic response
 makes me angry, confused;
 I thought most everyone knew that you liked men;
 I guess I should have asked.⁴⁰

Lesbians are noted to “have higher percentages of alcohol, [tobacco], and drug use/abuse than straight-identified women,” with rates for such use/abuse being “strongly influenced by... factors” including grief and historical experiences of “compassion fatigue.”⁴¹

Within the trans community, trans women may experience higher levels of “addictions and self-destructive behaviors,” in addition to the potential of experiencing further trauma if they feel pressure to turn to “sex work [as] the only viable way to financially survive,” particularly after facing employment challenges elsewhere “after their families reject” them.⁴² This increases

³⁸ Doneley Meris, “Complicated grief and challenges in LGBTQIA+ communities,” in *Disenfranchised Grief: Examining Social, Cultural, and Relational Impacts*, eds. Renee Blocker Turner and Sarah D. Stauffer, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), 120-127.

³⁹ Meris, “Complicated grief and challenges,” 122.

⁴⁰ Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, “Undoing the Alphabet: A Queer Fugue on Grief and Forgiveness,” *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 103-105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613512260>.

⁴¹ Meris, 124.

⁴² Meris, 123.

their already-high risk for becoming a victim “of violence.”⁴³ Trans men are noted to “delay their grief process in a search for meaning from their traumatic experiences,” which complicates the timeline of care and support.⁴⁴

Meris pairs bisexual and intersex people together when looking at complications of disenfranchised grief, particularly for their common experience of a “disconnect as to whom they may access to gain support.”⁴⁵ Without a clear cut answer for intersex people about “their placement in the social milieu,” as well as persistent stigma “within gay culture” for bisexual individuals, grievers might “self-isolat[e]” out of “reluctance to seek mental health and grief counseling services.”⁴⁶

Age also factors into these complications. For instance, young people who have come out to their family are at greater risk “of physical and verbal abuse” than the general population.⁴⁷ Add “family rejection” to the mix and there is an “associated [risk of] higher rates of... substance abuse, and unprotected sex” along with increased “rates of suicide” and “suicide attempt[s].”⁴⁸ These trends hold for gay and lesbian adults who experienced family rejection, as well.⁴⁹ Grieving physically and emotionally abusive family relationships can be especially fraught, especially if, as mentioned previously, the griever does not have access to a safe place to process their grief.

⁴³ Meris, 123. The experiences of some trans women in this regard suggest an urgent need for vocational support and work toward creating safer workplaces for trans women. These experiences also raise questions around improving the safety and well-being of sex workers, trans or not. Both topics are beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁴⁴ Meris, 123.

⁴⁵ Meris, 123-124.

⁴⁶ Meris, 124.

⁴⁷ Stuart Roe, “‘Family Support Would Have Been Like Amazing’: LGBTQ Youth Experiences With Parental and Family Support,” *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 25, no. 1 (2017): 55-56, doi:10.1177/1066480716679651.

⁴⁸ Roe, “‘Family Support Would Have Been Like Amazing,’” 56.

⁴⁹ Carastathis et al., 291.

Hauntingly, in an attempt to manage the “intense distress” of being disowned by family, some LGBTQIA+ individuals turn to “self-harm,” which one participant in the Carastathis et al. study claims helps them to “[feel] something and [to be] able to cry and just sort of cry it out.”⁵⁰ Maladaptive as it may be, this attempt to access and release emotions suggests suppressed and disenfranchised grief, among other emotional and mental health concerns.

While these generalized trends are not a given for each grieving member of the LGBTQIA+ community,⁵¹ their relative severity points to a need for effective, compassionate, and affirming support for the disenfranchised grief of those who have experienced the rejection of living orphanhood. Given the overwhelming backlash and the recent reversal of the progress made by the LGBTQIA+ community over the past several decades, the creation and discovery of healthy and safe connections within the community is becoming more challenging, especially when it comes to navigating losses.⁵² The need for support is great and the stakes are high and growing higher. As these trends reflect, grief care can be a matter of life and death.

Missed Opportunities Within the UU Context

“‘Everyone is welcome’ is drastically different from ‘we built this with you in mind.’

People don't want to go where they are merely tolerated,

they want to go where they are included.”

- Terence Lester, Ph.D.⁵³

⁵⁰ Carastathis et al., 300.

⁵¹ These categories also erase the overlap that does exist between these identities/populations, particularly around the intersection of gender and sexuality. For instance, one might not only be a trans woman, but also a lesbian. The inclusion of these categories is not meant to erase the beautiful complexities of LGBTQIA+ identity and experience, only to highlight the need for grief care within the community.

⁵² Meris, 127.

⁵³ Terence Lester, Twitter (X) Post, April 1, 2022, 7:06 AM, <https://twitter.com/imTerenceLester/status/1509864821369548805>.

Of the 1063 Unitarian Universalist congregations in the United States and its territories, 805 (or 75.7%) are Welcoming Congregations.⁵⁴ The Unitarian Universalist Association’s Welcoming Congregation Program is an opt-in “program for congregations that want to take intentional steps to be more welcoming and inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.”⁵⁵ There are a number of steps involved in achieving the Welcoming Congregation designation, including making commitments related to inclusivity, outreach and advocacy.⁵⁶ While appropriately aspirational, none of these commitments directly address emotional or grief care,⁵⁷ though they do not preclude it.

Because of a need for congregations within the denomination to truly walk their talk in the welcome of LGBTQIA+ individuals, rather than merely slap a “Welcoming Congregation” sign on their front door or their website’s home page, the “Five Practices of Welcome Renewal” were created.⁵⁸ These practices, which are to be undertaken annually in order for congregations to maintain their Welcoming Congregation designation, include engaging more actively with LGBTQIA+ welcoming worship and religious education, as well as donating to LGBTQIA+ causes.⁵⁹ Again, none of these practices are specific to grief support for the LGBTQIA+ community. Further, affirming these practices and commitments does not necessarily mean that congregations are consistently abiding by them, especially given that nearly a quarter of Unitarian Universalist congregations are not Welcoming Congregations.

⁵⁴ “Congregation Search Results,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 4, 2024, https://www.uua.org/find/results?browse_location%5B%5D=2523&lgbtq_welcoming=1&items_per_page=10&honoring_congregation=All.

⁵⁵ “Welcoming and Inclusive Congregations: Affirming LGBTQ Individuals and Families,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming>.

⁵⁶ “Guidelines and Action Steps for Welcoming Congregations,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/program/guidelines>

⁵⁷ Beyond offering memorial services.

⁵⁸ “Five Practices of Welcome Renewal,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/program/five-practices-welcome-renewal>.

⁵⁹ “Five Practices of Welcome Renewal;” TGQNB = Transgender, Gender Queer, and Non-binary.

What happens when congregations fall short of the denomination’s advertised welcome? Justin Tanis addresses the gap between tolerance and true inclusion in his chapter on “Creating a Genuine Welcome for Trans People in Communities of Faith.”⁶⁰ He urges faith communities to move from advertising to actually “embracing” the LGBTQIA+ community.⁶¹ Otherwise, congregations that claim a welcoming status without a truly-inclusive follow-through appear to be engaged in a bait and switch, at best.⁶²

While there are a handful of online options for the LGBTQIA+ UU community to participate in and connect with at the denominational level that demonstrate truly inclusive intentionality—including UPLIFT’s monthly “Trans/Nonbinary+ Gatherings & Pastoral Care Space,” and their regular LGBTQIA+ blog and newsletter—a monthly online care space is likely insufficient for most grievers’ needs.⁶³ Putting the onus of care onto a monthly online ministry creates massive inequities in delivery of pastoral care. Local, congregational-level support is needed to fill in those gaps. Unfortunately, evidence shows that Unitarian Universalist congregations have significant work to do in the “embracing” and support arena.⁶⁴ This need for improvement is highlighted on the UUA’s “Five Practices of Welcome Renewal” page, acknowledging that,

Transgender Unitarian Universalists (UUs) are still struggling to find community in UU congregations. Bisexual UUs suffer from invisibility while asexual, intersex, and polyamorous communities are wrestling with a progressive faith that does not privilege their truth. These and the many more social ills that plague our LGBTQ+ and TGQNB⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Justin Tanis, “Creating a Genuine Welcome for Trans People in Communities of Faith,” in *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2003), 120.

⁶¹ Tanis, “Creating a Genuine Welcome,” 120.

⁶² Tanis, “Creating a Genuine Welcome,” 120.

⁶³ “UPLIFT Programs Trans/Nonbinary+ Gatherings & Pastoral Care Space,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/transnb>.

⁶⁴ “UPLIFT Programs Trans/Nonbinary+ Gatherings & Pastoral Care Space,” UUA.org; According the Rev. Michael J. Crumpler LGBTQ and Multicultural Programs Director for the UUA, “UPLIFT is a platform for the UUA to highlight LGBTQ+ issues and concerns by featuring related programming, reflections, and content circulated in our quarterly email newsletter.” See: <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/blog>

⁶⁵ Trans, gender queer, and nonbinary

communities are calling us into a deeper commitment to insure that our Unitarian Universalist congregations are living into the Welcome that we boldly proclaim.⁶⁶

Examples of this need to live “into a deeper commitment” are spotlighted in a 2018 survey of transgender Unitarian Universalists (including non-binary individuals), which found that “42% [of] trans UUs regularly experience trans-related marginalization in UU spaces.”⁶⁷ Additionally, “Trans UUs of color experience greater levels of trans-related marginalization... than [their] white” counterparts.⁶⁸

Such results mirror concerns lesbian, gay, and bisexual UUs shared decades prior in a survey by “the [UUA’s] Common Vision Planning Committee, the group that called for the creation of the Welcoming Congregation Program.”⁶⁹ This survey showed that “LGB” UUs experienced a gap between the talk of the denomination and the walk of their congregations.⁷⁰

The “T” UUs now experience the same disconnect:

[A]lthough transgender people have been affirmed by denominational statements and resolutions, and the movement as a whole has a stated commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive faith... the lived experiences of trans people in our congregations tell a very different story... Only 44% of trans UUs feel spiritually connected and nourished... and only 15% feel strongly spiritually connected. Of trans UUs who have a UU minister, only about half (55%) feel comfortable seeking pastoral care from them, and of trans UUs who have a congregation, a majority (60%) feel responsible for educating the leaders and/or membership on trans identity or concerns.⁷¹

⁶⁶ “Five Practices of Welcome Renewal,” UUA.org.

⁶⁷ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, *Experience of Trans Unitarian Universalists: Report on the 2018 Survey of Trans UUs*, (Transgender Religious professional Unitarian Universalists Together, 2019), 8, https://truust.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/trans-uu-experience-survey-report_final_revised.pdf; The report’s authors note on page one that the “report uses the word ‘trans’ expansively to refer to all people whose gender identities (or lack thereof) do not align, according to mainstream expectations, with the sex they were assigned at birth.”

⁶⁸ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, *Experience of Trans Unitarian Universalists*, 8.

⁶⁹ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, 6.

⁷⁰ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, 6.

⁷¹ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, 9.

Unsurprisingly, negative experiences within their congregations lead a number of trans UUs to leave them. Of the “survey respondents who left a UU congregation” for reasons “other than moving away from the area,” these were the most common reasons:

- trans-related marginalization [including othering and tokenization, as well as misgendering]
- other identity-related oppression such as racism, classism, ableism, or ageism
- hypocrisy
- unfulfilling worship/spiritual experiences
- abuse or bullying⁷²

More detailed responses from survey participants offer insights into the gaps between talk and action. In terms of spiritual and emotional needs, one respondent shared that they left because,

The worship and community left me feeling empty and felt like going through the motions. [It was] unrelated to my gender journey and experience.⁷³

Another stated that they left because of a “lack of spiritual substance, [and a lack of] emotional healing, and feeling ignored as a young adult.”⁷⁴

Each of these responses is deeply concerning and antithetical to the spirit of community, as well as to UU principles, purposes, and values, which will be discussed further in this thesis. That trans community members are seeking spiritual and emotional care and not finding it within our UU congregations is tragic, especially in light of rejection and harm experienced outside of the walls of the church. To be orphaned at home is painful enough without also being orphaned from the church, especially in a denomination that aims to affirm LGBTQIA+ people.

It is clear that Unitarian Universalism needs to improve on its inclusion of all LGBTQIA+ people within its congregations in order to create safer spaces for supporting disenfranchised grief and promoting emotional healing. How can we lay the theological and moral grounding to champion this work?

⁷² TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, 6.

⁷³ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, 9.

⁷⁴ TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Multicultural Ministries, 9.

UU Moral and Ethical Sources for Rethinking “The Orphan”

In exploring a potential theological grounding for “caring for the orphan” within a Unitarian Universalist context, applying sources of wisdom and moral truths accepted within that context is crucial. Unitarian Universalists are not a monolith and the tradition’s sources reflect that truth of their plurality.⁷⁵ According to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA),

[T]hese are the six sources our congregations affirm and promote:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;⁷⁶
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;⁷⁷
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.⁷⁸

The UUA’s proposed Article II revision replaces these “sources” with “inspirations” in Section C.2.3, noting that:

Direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder are primary sources of Unitarian Universalist inspiration. These experiences open our hearts, renew our spirits, and transform our lives. We draw upon, and are inspired by, sacred, secular, and scientific

⁷⁵ As Eric Eldritch notes in his blog post titled “Coming Out Day 2023: Coming Out Spiritually,” one’s individual “spiritual orientation” helps explain the whys one uses to move from thought to action. He names three orientations found in pluralistic spaces that I hope to acknowledge (and hopefully motivate) within this piece: 1) “Poly-Spiritualists [who] find spiritual meaning and inspiration in many sources, symbols and practices,” 2) “Mono-Spiritualists [who] find spiritual meaning and inspiration in a single set of spiritual practices,” and 3) “A-Spiritualists [who] find personal meaning and inspiration in a simple principle like ‘Be Kind.’” See: Eric Eldritch, “Coming Out Day 2023: Coming Out Spiritually,” *Uplift* (blog), UUA.org, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/blog/coming-out-spiritually>.

⁷⁶ While this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is curious that the UUA lists two Abrahamic religions together here, but leaves out the third: Islam. This is, perhaps, reflective of the common homogenization of Jewish and Christian traditions into the concept of “Judeo-Christian,” though that is problematic in ways that, again, are beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss.

⁷⁷ Arguably, when a congregation fails to do justice by the LGBTQIA+ people in their midst, they are making an idol of gender conformity and heterosexuality; an idolatry I would suggest that this particular set of sources warns against.

⁷⁸ “Sources of Our Living Tradition,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>.

understandings that help us make meaning and live into our values. These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times.⁷⁹

Though “direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder” are challenging to definitively catalogue, the “affirmed in all cultures” aspect of this source suggests that a consistent throughline found among multiple traditions can be particularly instructive.⁸⁰ Within the scope of this paper, I will pull from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Wicca (as an example of an Earth-centered tradition),⁸¹ as well as Unitarian Universalist principles to demonstrate a cultural throughline and generate a grounding framework for caring for the grief of living orphanhood within the LGBTQIA+ community. While texts embraced within Christianity and Judaism have some overlap, New Testament sources will be compiled under Christian sources and Hebrew Bible sources will be compiled under Jewish sources, though this is an imperfect distinction.

Given the caveats of explicating the tenets of non-hegemonic faiths,⁸² especially if one is not a practitioner or scholar of those faiths,⁸³ the UU Article II Study Commission’s reminder to “respect the histories, contexts, and cultures in which these sources were created and are currently practiced” will be followed as closely as possible within the confines of a short thesis.⁸⁴ Space limitations preclude providing comprehensive background on each faith’s or tradition’s understanding of the orphan. The goal of sharing these texts is not to offer an exhaustive treatise

⁷⁹ Article II Study Commission, “Final Proposed Revision to Article II,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, October 2023, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/final-proposed-revision-article-ii>.

⁸⁰ “Sources of Our Living Tradition,” UUA.org.

⁸¹ Arguably, there are elements of Earth-centrism in some of the other major religions in this list, if one scratches the surface, though that is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸² At least non-hegemonic in the US context. A number of these faiths would be considered hegemonic in other parts of the world.

⁸³ Much of the theological coursework offered within Vanderbilt Divinity School centers Christian and Jewish contexts and perspectives. Any scholarly background in other faiths came from my undergraduate coursework, including survey-level studies in Buddhism and Hinduism. As such, it is important to acknowledge my own growth edges in obtaining a truly multi-faith fluency.

⁸⁴ Article II Study Commission, “Final Proposed Revision to Article II.”

on the topic, but to engage with these texts' potential to inform a broader theological understanding and praxis.

Additionally, because Unitarian Universalist sources are meant to inspire praxis rather than merely serve as thought experiments, this paper will take the lead from Goshen-Gottstein (as cited in Kepnes) and offer examples of religious praxis where available, rather than strictly focusing on religious texts, especially given that not all faith traditions center sacred texts.⁸⁵ Of course, since none of these traditions is a monolith, a comprehensive survey of religious praxis across each one is beyond the scope of this thesis. The hope is to paint as broadly accurate a picture as possible, to inspire further work.⁸⁶

Christian

Christianity offers a fairly consistent, scripturally-based ethic and scope for the care of the orphan. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is James 1:27:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.⁸⁷

Looking at the Greek words underlying the translation of this passage helps elucidate the scope of its application. In this verse, the word translated as religion is “the Greek word *thrēskia*.⁸⁸ Aung notes that “*thrēskia*” encompasses the concept of worship as an expression of both “inner spirituality and outward character.”⁸⁹ Thus, religion in this context “is the practice of

⁸⁵ Steven Kepnes, “Reflections on the Religious Other from Modern Jewish Philosophy,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 40, no. 1 (2020): 67-83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-020-09326-2>.

⁸⁶ One thing this thesis will not attempt is a theological conversation around the validity and sacredness of LGBTQIA+ identity and existence. I am operating from a context that LGBTQIA+ worthiness is a given and not something to be argued or earned.

⁸⁷ James 1:27 NRSVUE.

⁸⁸ James Ha Tun Aung, “Ministering to the Marginalized in a Pluralistic Society: An Act of Pure Religion in James 1:27.” *Journal of Asian Mission* 18, no. 1 (2017): 60. <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=A TLAI GFE171218002976&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁸⁹ Aung, “Ministering to the Marginalized in a Pluralistic Society,” 60-61.

the act of spirituality” that transcends mere belief.⁹⁰ It follows, then, that caring for the orphaned could be considered praxis *as* worship.

Further, the word translated as “distress” in the NRSVUE translation of James 1:27 shown above is “*thlipsis*,” which Aung notes has multiple meaning that each help clarify what aspects of an orphan’s distress the church should be concerned with alleviating.⁹¹ Whatever the meaning one selects within the array of meanings denoted by the term, *thlipsis* transcends the merely material and includes experiences of “social injustice” and emotional turmoil.⁹² Cowser elaborates on this notion, explaining that the pairing of “Widows and orphans’ as a designation was both literal and symbolic... a way of signaling who the most vulnerable, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed persons were in society.”⁹³ She goes on to point out that “In the Greco-Roman world... [o]rphans were a second vulnerable class of persons because they were socially marginalized, politically powerless, and economically endangered.”⁹⁴ Thus, care for the marginalized and powerless within such contexts includes not just providing material “security” to the orphan, but also social “justice.”⁹⁵

Given these distinctions, it follows that focusing solely on material needs to the exclusion of supporting the emotional well-being of the orphaned signals a failure to fully fulfill the mandate to support the orphan in distress.

De Beer and Jordaan expand on this by encouraging readers to set aside “the generally accepted interpretation... that this verse is simply an exhortation to heed the poor in general and

⁹⁰ Aung, 60-61.

⁹¹ Aung, 64.

⁹² Aung, 64.

⁹³ Angela Rosita Cowser, “Between Text and Sermon: James 1:17-27,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 74, no. 4 (2020): 375, doi:10.1177/0020964320936389.

⁹⁴ Cowser, “Between Text and Sermon,” 376.

⁹⁵ Aung, 62.

tend to their needs.”⁹⁶ “Reading against the grain” in this way pushes us to consider other needs of the orphan and the widow beyond the merely economic.⁹⁷ The authors assert that,

The receivers of Jas 1:27 are urged to fulfil[l] God’s role as God Father practically by taking care of orphans and widows in their suffering... Since the receivers are created in the image of God... they are motivated to represent God by acting as protectors and fathers of fatherless households. [Such practices] would be a manifestation of God Father’s love and support. Thus, in the context of Jas 1:27, the reference to Ὀρφανοὶ Καὶ Χῆραι⁹⁸ is more than a rhetorical ploy; it appeals to the community to exhibit care for fatherless families.⁹⁹

The love and support of a parental-type figure transcend the mere material and even the bounds of one’s immediate household. Such parental love and support is part of being in community. De Beer and Jordaan suggest that the exhortation in James reflects the early church’s failure of community as demonstrated by their “apathy to [the] distress” of the fatherless.¹⁰⁰ The church may have been falling short of the aspirations of the faith—as we see in congregational praxis in the here-and-now— and needed a reminder to do right by “the orphaned.”

Jewish

Judaism also contains within its practice and theology a call to care for the orphan in a way that transcends meeting material needs. Claassens points to multiple Psalms to emphasize “Divine Adoption” of those who are orphaned under various circumstances, including abandonment by their parents.¹⁰¹ Among the Psalms Claassens cites is Psalm 27, which includes this verse, “Though my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will take me in.”¹⁰² Here, even the child orphaned by living parents is worthy of care and protection. She also cites Psalm 68:

⁹⁶ Sanrie M. de Beer and Pierre J. Jordaan, “Heeding the Voices of Ὀρφανοὶ Καὶ Χῆραι (Fatherless Households) in James 1:27: Utilising the Greimassian Semiotic Square,” *Neotestamentica* 55, no. 1 (2021): 24, 26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/neo.2021.0014>.

⁹⁷ de Beer and Jordaan, “Heeding the Voices of Ὀρφανοὶ Καὶ Χῆραι,” 24, 26.

⁹⁸ Or “fatherless households”

⁹⁹ de Beer and Jordaan, “Heeding the Voices of Ὀρφανοὶ Καὶ Χῆραι,” 32.

¹⁰⁰ de Beer and Jordaan, 33-34.

¹⁰¹ Claassens, L. Juliana. “‘Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child:’ Considering the Metaphor of Divine Adoption in the Context of Trauma.” *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2023): 66-74. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010066>.

¹⁰² Psalm 27:10 JPS, Claassens, “‘Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child,’” 67.

Sing to God, chant hymns to His name;
 extol Him who rides the clouds;
 the LORD is His name.
 Exult in His presence—
 the father of orphans, the champion of widows,
 God, in His holy habitation.
 God restores the lonely to their homes,
 sets free the imprisoned, safe and sound...¹⁰³

In expanding on the metaphors found within these texts, Claassens reflects on God's role as "Father to the fatherless (and Mother to the motherless)" and the ways that carrying out that role acknowledge a more expansive understanding of God's presence and power beyond the strictly authoritative.¹⁰⁴ In the role of parent to one who is without parents, God demonstrates "the power to care and nurture the most vulnerable members of the community."¹⁰⁵ Arguably, such nurturing extends beyond the material.

Other scriptures define humanity's own role in such care (and the consequences of not providing it), particularly within Mosaic law. For instance, in Deuteronomy 27, it is written,

"Cursed be the one who subverts the rights of the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.—And all the people shall say, Amen."¹⁰⁶

Psalm 82, while not Mosaic, echoes the admonishment (and even cursing) of those who treat the orphaned unjustly:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
 in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
 "How long will you judge unjustly
 and show partiality to the wicked? Selah
 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
 maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
 Rescue the weak and the needy;
 deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

They have neither knowledge nor understanding;

¹⁰³ Psalm 68:5-7 JPS, Claassens, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Claassens, 72.

¹⁰⁵ Claassens, 72.

¹⁰⁶ Deuteronomy 27:19 JPS.

they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I say, “You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals
and fall like any prince.”

Rise up, O God, judge the earth,
for all the nations belong to you!¹⁰⁷

In these verses, as commentator Mark S. Smith notes,

God indicts [and ultimately demotes] the other gods for failing to maintain traditional standards of justice (commonly involving care for the poor and needy as well as the orphan and the widow).¹⁰⁸

Note the important distinction the commentator makes between “the poor and needy” and “the orphan and the widow,” suggesting that a call to care for the orphan is not meant to be an exclusively financial undertaking.¹⁰⁹

Additionally, Smith shares that extending justice to the widow and the orphan (as well as the others mentioned in Psalm 82) was expected of human kings and not just the gods (or God).¹¹⁰ As such, this Psalm impresses upon the hearer (and singer) that such care must be provided here on Earth through human hands and human means. To fail to provide such justice and care to those who are orphaned is to shake “the foundations of the earth,” thereby threatening our collective stability.¹¹¹

Daniel McClellan posits that employing “the poor, the needy, and the orphan” within a scriptural context could be seen as somewhat allegorical, with the “type” of “the orphan”

¹⁰⁷ Psalm 82:1-8 NRSVUE.

¹⁰⁸ Mark S. Smith, “Canaanite Backgrounds to Psalms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown, (New York: Oxford University Press: 2014), 48.

¹⁰⁹ Smith, “Canaanite Backgrounds to Psalms,” 48.

¹¹⁰ Smith, 48.

¹¹¹ Psalm 82:5 NRSVUE. Though conceptions of divine wrath are antithetical to what most UUs believe, this idea of the stability of the world being shaken by injustice connects well with UU conceptions of interdependence and interconnectedness.

ultimately “represent[ing] idealized victims associated with conventional conceptions of social justice and cosmic order.”¹¹² Still, considering each of the listed groups to be idealized figures does not preclude a mandate to care and seek justice for those who are orphaned, whether by death or abandonment. In fact, this use of typing can be seen as an encouragement to *expand* the scope of our care rather than diminish it.

Speaking to the scope of care, Aung notes that within “Jewish Diaspora communities, the synagogue was collectively responsible for” the care of widows and orphans.¹¹³ In this sense, the work of caring for the orphan is both individual and communal. He lists multiple passages to support what he describes as humanity’s responsibility to be a living reflection of God’s compassion for the orphan.¹¹⁴ Given the repetition of the calls to care for the orphan within the Hebrew Bible, its importance cannot be overstated.

Judaism’s historical praxis reflects this importance. Among an array of examples of such praxis is Josephus’s report on the “Essenes [who] provided care for orphaned children and trained them up in their sect,”¹¹⁵ and a Greek epitaph describing a Jewish woman¹¹⁶ who “care[d] for orphans,”

¹¹² Daniel McClellan, “The Gods-Complaint: Psalm 82 as a Psalm of Complaint,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 4 (2018), 844, doi:10.1353/jbl.2018.0045.

¹¹³ James Ha Tun Aung, “Ministering to the Marginalized in a Pluralistic Society: An Act of Pure Religion in James 1:27,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 18, no. 1 (2017), 58, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIgFE171218002976&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

¹¹⁴ Aung, “Ministering to the Marginalized in a Pluralistic Society,” 58. The other passages Aung lists are: Exod 22:20-21; 23:9; Lev 19:9-10; 19:33; 23:22; Deut 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 16:9-15; 24:17-18; 26:15; Amos 2:6-8; 3:2; Hos 12:8-9; Mi 3:1-4; Zeph 1:9; Zech 7:8-10; and Ps 68:5.

¹¹⁵ Blumell, Lincoln H., “A New Jewish Epitaph Commemorating Care for Orphans,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 47 (2016): 310–29, doi:10.1163/15700631-12340459.

¹¹⁶ On pages 316-317 of Blumell, “A New Jewish Epitaph,” Blumell notes that the term “Ama” here was commonly used “in a Christian context,” and discusses the possible implications of that context later in his piece (pages 319-320). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss those implications. In the context of applying sources of religious thought and praxis to an overall Unitarian Universalist theology and praxis, I would argue that this distinction is less important than it might otherwise be, especially as it reflects a potential pluralism rather than dismissing one. For a deeper dive into the topic, visit Blumell’s piece.

In peace and blessing Ama Helene, a Jew, who loves the orphans, [died]. For about 60 years her path was one of mercy and blessing; on it she prospered... In peace and blessing.¹¹⁷

Blumell asserts that the use of the term “love” in this epitaph, “possibly suggests that Helene was... carrying out a purely voluntary act of charity,” an acknowledgement that encourages the reader to aspire to such love.¹¹⁸

In his article on the Greek epitaph explored above, Blumell also offers a footnote explaining that the use of “love” as it relates to “an orphan” also appears “in Plato, Leg. 928 A,” which translates to “‘A man [i.e., guardian] should love the child whom fate has made an orphan as if he were his own child.’”¹¹⁹ Along with the example set by the Essenes and Ama Helene, Plato’s conception (as taken up within a Jewish context) suggests a care for the orphan that transcends mere obligation and mere economic provision by extending that service into care for emotional well-being¹²⁰

Muslim

Similarly to Judaism, Islam holds its adherents to a high standard when it comes to care for those who are orphaned. That “orphans and their problems” figure prominently in the Qu’ran is perhaps unsurprising, as its scriptures reveal that Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم,¹²¹ himself, was “an orphan and a child of a needy family,” ultimately cared for by Allah.¹²²

By the morning sunlight,
and the night when it falls still!
Your Lord ‘O Prophet’ has not abandoned you, nor has He become hateful of you.
And the next life is certainly far better for you than this one.
And surely your Lord will give so much to you that you will be pleased.

¹¹⁷ Blumell, “A New Jewish Epitaph,” 314.

¹¹⁸ Blumell, 324.

¹¹⁹ Blumell, 324.

¹²⁰ Blumell, 324.

¹²¹ صلى الله عليه وسلم added out of respect for the name of the Prophet. See: “Respecting Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم : How to Easily Use the “صلى الله عليه وسلم” Symbol Consistently,” <https://projectmaruf.com/blog-2/respecting-prophet-muhammad>

¹²² Nasr Abu-Zayd, “The ‘others’ in the Qur’an: A hermeneutical approach,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 3-4 (2010), 289, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453709358530>.

Did He not find you as an orphan then sheltered you?
 Did He not find you unguided then guided you?
 And did He not find you needy then satisfied your needs?
 So do not oppress the orphan,
 nor repulse the beggar.
 And proclaim the blessings of your Lord.¹²³

Here we see that the Lord's care for the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in his orphanhood as a model for the Prophet ﷺ to exemplify in his own ministry, not unlike the examples cited from the Hebrew Bible.¹²⁴

This model carries through to other portions of Islam's holy scriptures. For instance, the Qur'an offers the reader the following commands: "Do not worship except Allah; and to parents do good and to relatives, orphans and the needy."¹²⁵ Doing good, here, goes beyond mere economic support, especially as seen in another translation:

And remember when We took a covenant from the children of Israel stating, "Worship none but Allah; be kind to parents, relatives, orphans and the needy; speak kindly to people."¹²⁶

Kindness to the orphan is an expansive command, and the reflection on the covenant demands a restoration to previous religious piety, which includes care for the orphan—not dissimilarly to the imperative of James 1:27 or the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

Surah An-Nisa also includes within it multiple calls for justice for the orphan, including an imperative in 4:9 for guardians to look out for the well-being of the orphan in their care as they would their own biological children.¹²⁷ Likewise, in 4:36 we see a repetition of the call to a restoration of piety toward the orphan and others, as was seen in 2:83:

¹²³ Qur'an 93:1-11 *The Clear Quran*.

¹²⁴ Bonner, 402-403.

¹²⁵ Qur'an 2:83, translator unknown, as cited in Aung, "Ministering to the Marginalized," 55.

¹²⁶ Qur'an 2:83 *The Clear Quran*.

¹²⁷ Qur'an 4:9 *The Clear Quran*. Notably the language in this verse is in the subjunctive "as they would *if*."

Worship Allah alone and associate none with Him. And be kind to parents, relatives, orphans, the poor, near and distant neighbours, close friends, needy travellers, [etc.]¹²⁸

This repetition across surahs in the Qur'an emphasizes the importance of this care mandate.¹²⁹

Such care falls within the expectation to act from a place of “*taqwā*” (or “piety”) and to be a “*mutaqqī*” (or person with integrity).¹³⁰ Such action, as illuminated in the Qur'an transcends rote performance of religious devotion.¹³¹ Adeel points to one particular passage to demonstrate this transcendent care:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves.¹³²

This throughline of care for the orphan caught the attention of a variety of notable people over the years, including “early American abolitionist and women’s rights activist Lydia Martin Child.”¹³³ In the third volume of her 1855 book series *The Progress of Religious Ideas, Through Successive Ages*, Child lauds the Prophet ﷺ for “chang[ing unjust] laws, and inculcat[ing] justice and kindness toward widows and orphans.”¹³⁴ Again, the care demonstrated in Child’s description transcends the purely monetary and embodies something considerably more holistic.

¹²⁸ Qur'an 4:36 *The Clear Quran*; Michael Bonner, “Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2005), 400, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1162/0022195052564270>.

¹²⁹ Johanne Louise Christiansen, “God Loves not the Wrongdoers (*zālimūn*): Formulaic Repetition as a Rhetorical Strategy in the Qur'an,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 22, no. 1 (2020): 93, 114-115, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2020.0413>; Bonner, “Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an,” 401.

¹³⁰ M. Ashraf Adeel, “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions, and a Virtue Ethics of the Qur'an,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 32, no.3 (2015): 14-16, 20, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v32i3.268>.

¹³¹ Adeel, “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions,” 14-16, 20.

¹³² Excerpt of Qur'an 2:177, translator unknown, as cited in Adeel, “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions,” 20.

¹³³ Juan Cole, “The Qur'an and the Modern Self: A Heterotopia: The Qur'an,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 558, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2018.0030>.

¹³⁴ Cole, “The Qur'an and the Modern Self,” 558; L. Maria Child, *The Progress of Religious Ideas, Through Successive Ages, Vol. III*, (New York: C.S. Francis & Co, 1855), 376.

In fact, Loue posits that in a Muslim context, “almsgiving... signifies more than only providing something to the poor.”¹³⁵ Nanji expands on Loue’s assertion:

The Qur’an emphasizes the ethic of giving and articulates, through a variety of terms such as *zakat*, a very textured and multivalent concept of charitable giving. While inclusive of the notion of acts directed to the needs of the poor, the Qur’anic concept extends the significance of charitable giving to encompass the ideals of compassion, sharing, strengthening, and social justice. Such an ethic aims to be socially corrective and beneficial and to reflect the moral and spiritual value connected with the qualitative uses that are attached to wealth, property, resources, and voluntary effort for the welfare of individuals, communities, and society as a whole.¹³⁶

This ethos provides the foundation for compassionate, non-material care for those who have been orphaned under any context.

Buddhist

While Buddhist writings do not directly address orphanhood, Buddhist ethics offer a solid jumping off point for engaging with the concept of care of the orphan. Since examining all of each of the schools of Buddhism is beyond the scope of this thesis, this section will primarily focus on the virtues and ethics found within Mahayana Buddhism.

In exploring such virtues, Loue illuminates the connection between compassion and altruism within Buddhism, noting that its “four central moral virtues of love (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*) suggest the basis of altruism,” or what she describes as “action” that transcends mere “concern.”¹³⁷ Such altruism, within a Buddhist conception, harnesses a desire that others “be liberated from... sufferings,” into “right conduct.”¹³⁸ A 1950s translation of Mahayana Buddhist texts—which outline the bodhisattva

¹³⁵ Sana Loue, “Religious and Spiritual Traditions of Altruism, Community Service, and Activism,” in *Handbook of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice and Research* (New York, NY: Springer, 2017), 288, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-7039-1>.

¹³⁶ Azim Nanji, “Zakat: Faith and Giving in Muslim Contexts,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 319.

¹³⁷ Loue, “Religious and Spiritual Traditions,” 281-285.

¹³⁸ Loue, 283-284.

path, which puts “alleviating sufferings of others” ahead of selfish motivations for enlightenment— instructs its readers to:

Cause no affliction to human beings
 [And] Let your thoughts always be of compassion...
 Then you will be reborn in Akshobyha’s Pure Land.¹³⁹

In this sense, thoughts join with action to embody compassion.

Though the texts do not explicitly mention the orphaned, in a translation of Kamalaśīla’s *Bhāvanākrama* (or “Stages of Meditation”), we can still see mandates of care and compassion that complement those of the three Abrahamic faiths already discussed.¹⁴⁰ For example:

[O]ne understands that the entire world is licked by the blazing flames of suffering; and one meditates upon compassion for all beings, for one knows that they abhor their pain as one does one’s own...
 Then one meditates upon those to whom one is neutral: one considers that in the beginningless world there is no being who has not been one’s kinsman a hundred times, and one awakens compassion for them as for those one loves...
 And thus gradually one meditates upon all beings in ten directions: one awakens one’s compassion for all beings equally, that they are as dear as one’s own suffering children, that they are one’s own family, and one wishes to lead them out of pain. Then is one’s compassion made perfect, and it is called great compassion.¹⁴¹

We have kinship with one another and are called upon to care for one another as kin. It is not a stretch to extend this call to ease suffering to our spiritual kin who have lost their literal kin.

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva* (or “Introduction to the Path to Awakening”)

expresses similar commitments:

May I be a protector of the unprotected, a guide for travelers on the way, a boat, a bridge,
 a means of crossing for those who seek the other shore.
 For all creatures, may I be a light for those who need a light, a bed for those who need a
 bed...
 Just as the Buddhas of the past grasped the mind set on enlightenment and went on to
 follow the bodhisattva training,

¹³⁹ R. Robinson’s 1954 translation of *Chinese Buddhist Verse* as cited in Loue, 284; John S. Strong, “The Dharma: Some Mahāyāna Perspectives,” in *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Inspirations* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2008), 173-174.

¹⁴⁰ Kamalaśīla’s *Bhāvanākrama* as cited in Strong, “The Dharma,” 174-175.

¹⁴¹ Kamalaśīla’s *Bhāvanākrama* as cited in Strong, “The Dharma,” 175.

so too will I give rise to the mind set on enlightenment for the well-being of the world, and so will I train in the stages of the bodhisattva discipline.¹⁴²

Such commitments are also seen in this bodhisattva vow:

After crossing over the stream of samsara, may I help others across; being freed, may I free others; being comforted, may I comfort others; gone to nirvana, may I lead others there.¹⁴³

Our spiritual service is to be a source of freedom, care, and comfort to others. These sentiments echo God's call to Muhammad ﷺ to pay forward what was given him as an orphan.

Hindu

Hinduism offers a similar call to ease suffering that could be extended to caring for the orphan as that found in Mahayana Buddhism. In Eagle et al.'s study, a caregiver cited "sacred texts as" inspiration for their work in caring for others:

*Epic stories I have read [have] influenced me to choose this type of work and also the mindset to do service. What I had read in Bhagavad Gita where Lord Srikrishna quoted that, "I exist in everything in the universe. If you serve them it means you served me. If you help the needy it means you served me." There is a saying in it, "Service to humankind is service to the God." I believe in that. Treat every human being equal; that will create wisdom.*¹⁴⁴

This echoes the third chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, (*Karma Yoga* or "The Way of Action"),¹⁴⁵ where Krishna explains to Arjuna¹⁴⁶ how to escape the cycle of karma:¹⁴⁷

Every selfless act, Arjuna, is born from Brahman, the eternal infinite Godhead. Brahman is present in every act of service. All life turns on this law, O Arjuna. Those who would

¹⁴² *Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra* as cited in Strong, 178.

¹⁴³ Dayal's translation of a bodhisattva vow as cited in Strong, 179.

¹⁴⁴ Eagle et al. 1677; italics preserved from original.

¹⁴⁵ Easwaran Eknath, "Selfless Service," in *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Eknath Easwaran. (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 99-101.

¹⁴⁶ Krishna is an avatar of the deity Vishnu. In the Gita, Krishna is guiding the human Prince Arjuna as he is facing "go[ing] into battle against [his own] family" on behalf of "his older brother's claim to the ancient throne of the Kurus," as described in Easwaran Eknath, "The War Within," in *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Eknath Easwaran. (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 71. That the story deals with a battle around family connection/disconnection seems particularly apt in the context of this thesis, though the aim of my work is to avoid bloodshed, entirely.

¹⁴⁷ Eknath, "Selfless Service," 100-101.

violate it... ignoring the needs of others, have wasted their life... Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world, by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life.¹⁴⁸

To serve others' needs is the purpose of life. Caring for the orphan could be seen as "serving the welfare of the world" and the people in it.

Wiccan

Just as with other religious traditions and belief systems, attempting to distill Wicca into a single, tidy set of beliefs would be audacious and inappropriate. As Harwood notes about the "spiritual movements" of which Wicca is a part, attempting to create one definitive summary of its commonly held tenets and practices "inevitably excludes some accepted variations."¹⁴⁹ With that in mind, Harwood "identifies seven interrelated core aspects of Wiccan morality" that have some universality and, while not speaking specifically to the care of the orphan, seem to encourage it:

1. Interconnectedness
2. Personal responsibility
3. Love and the desire to help
4. The will
5. Harm [and our relationship to it]
6. Reciprocity
7. Wiccan exemplar of virtue¹⁵⁰

Of those, the most salient—both to "Wiccan morality" in general and the context of this thesis, more specifically—is our interconnectedness.¹⁵¹ This concept drives moral action and an understanding of the sacred.¹⁵² As Dianne Sylvan shares,

[If] you are of the mindset that everything on Earth is part of the Goddess and God, and that all things are connected, you won't be the sort of person who will need the Law of

¹⁴⁸ *The Bhagavad Gita* 3:15, 19-20, translated by Eknath Easwaran; Loue, 287.

¹⁴⁹ Brandon J. Harwood, "Beyond Poetry and Magick: The Core Elements of Wiccan Morality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22, no. 3, (2007), 376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900701637528>.

¹⁵⁰ Harwood, "Beyond Poetry and Magick," 377.

¹⁵¹ Harwood, 377.

¹⁵² Harwood, 377.

Three¹⁵³ to tell you how to behave. You will see the world as sacred and all beings as sacred and will try to treat them as such.¹⁵⁴

Within this interconnectedness, actions have consequences. As Harwood notes this “interconnectedness includes a concept of mutual help and harm.”¹⁵⁵ He cites Starhawk who suggests that because of this interconnectedness we are “mutually responsible” to one another.¹⁵⁶ Starhawk continues, “An act that harms anyone harms us all.”¹⁵⁷ This unbreakable connection should be considered, as Sylvan notes, so that we avoid causing harm, inasmuch as we are able.¹⁵⁸

Love is tightly woven into this interconnectedness, particularly as it relates to moral action.¹⁵⁹ Harwood turns to Starhawk again as he engages this concept, asserting that “‘love for life in all its forms is the basic ethic’ in Wicca.”¹⁶⁰ Sylvan affirms this, stating that,

The goal... is to strive to look at the world from a place of love and to act accordingly... We all have this love within us [even if] it’s buried beneath [inner conflict]... attachments, and pain. Cultivating love for all creatures... is a lifelong quest. All of the other graces are facets of love or ways to help us find it in ourselves and others.¹⁶¹

While there is not a specifically “Wiccan” mandate to care for the orphan, arguably the concepts of interconnectedness and love as moral lodestones can easily get us to that destination. It also follows that such interconnectedness and love transcend the merely material. As Sylvan notes, “Compassion flows naturally from love into *service*.”¹⁶²

UU Principles, Purposes, and Values

¹⁵³ Also referred to as the “Three-fold Law.” This is the concept that “Whatever you send out returns to you multiplied by three,” as noted in Harwood, 383.

¹⁵⁴ Dianne Sylvan, *The Circle Within: Creating a Wiccan Spiritual Tradition*, (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2004), 47.

¹⁵⁵ Harwood, 377.

¹⁵⁶ Starhawk as cited in Harwood, 377.

¹⁵⁷ Starhawk as cited in Harwood, 377-378.

¹⁵⁸ Sylvan, *The Circle Within*, 47-48.

¹⁵⁹ Harwood, 380.

¹⁶⁰ Starhawk as cited in Harwood, 380.

¹⁶¹ Sylvan, 51.

¹⁶² Sylvan, 51. Italics retained from the original.

Though Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal and dynamic (or “living”) tradition, it does have a set of principles that serve as something of a collective moral compass¹⁶³ Those principles comprise these seven values:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.¹⁶⁴

With the proposed revision to Article II, those principles would shift to a set of purposes and values.¹⁶⁵ While the purposes relate to the role of the Association, itself, the values are meant to be shared across congregational, denominational, and community life and include: interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation (including “growing spiritually and ethically”), generosity, and equity.¹⁶⁶

While UU principles, purposes, and values do not speak to caring for the orphan directly—much like within Buddhism, Hinduism, and Wicca, as noted above—the principles of justice and compassion, interdependence, and inherent worth and dignity (among others), inspire an embrace of caring for those who find themselves without family. While the “carrot and stick” model of “do good or earn wrath” is antithetical to the UU values and principles, a throughline of “do right by one another, because our lives are interconnected and our actions and inactions have consequences in the here-and-now” is a solid starting point for an ethic of care for those who have been orphaned from (or by) their families, including LGBTQIA+ grievers.

¹⁶³ “The Seven Principles,” UUA.org, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

¹⁶⁴ “The Seven Principles,” UUA.org.

¹⁶⁵ Article II Study Commission, “Final Proposed Revision to Article II,”

¹⁶⁶ Article II Study Commission.

Connections Between Care for the Orphan and Care for LGBTQIA+ Living Loss

How do these religious and moral calls for compassionate care for the orphan extend into care for LGBTQIA+ individuals orphaned by living family loss? In her piece “Revisit to the Life of Elijah and the Widow: Empowering Grace Amidst Vulnerability,” Laila L. Vijayan acknowledges the social construction of “vulnerability.”¹⁶⁷ Such a social construction allows for an expansive definition of those for whom we are called to care.

Vijayan goes on to list a number of priorities and communities for churches to focus their liberatory efforts on, including the LGBTQIA+ community and “Widows, Children, Migrants, Refugees, [etc.].”¹⁶⁸ Though she does not specifically address the orphan within this context, it is worth exploring the overlap of vulnerabilities between these groups, particularly since orphans are so commonly addressed in concert with the widow in religious contexts.

In her commentary on the book of Deuteronomy, Guest also addresses expanding our definitions of the vulnerable and marginalized to include queer and gender non-conforming individuals, noting that,

One might not be comfortable associating LGBT/Q-identified people with the marginalized [including “the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan”], since this reinforces the binary between normative society and its margins, firmly assigning LGBT/Q-identified people outside the norm, nevertheless these references... struck a chord with early lesbian and gay theologies where the scriptural tradition of bondage in Egypt and living as a marginalized member of society was often associated with the experiences of the closet and of living as a gay or lesbian-identified person in a heterosexist world.¹⁶⁹

She quotes Dr. Rembert S. Truluck to strengthen this assertion, stating that “Homosexuals can also appreciate the many references in the Bible about legal protection from abuse and injustice

¹⁶⁷ Laila L. Vijayan, “Revisit to the Life of Elijah and the Widow: Empowering Grace Amidst Vulnerability,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 54, no. 2 (December 2022): 42, <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI4230512000036&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁶⁸ Vijayan, “Revisit to the Life of Elijah and the Widow,” 50-51.

¹⁶⁹ Deryn Guest, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 127-128.

against widows, orphans and aliens,” and offering the example of Deuteronomy 27:19: “Cursed is the one who distorts the justice due an... orphan.”¹⁷⁰

Guest first notes that the Deuteronomistic “focus upon God’s concern for the vulnerable... calls for compassionate treatment of LGBT/Q-identified people,” though in another breath she pushes back on the connection.¹⁷¹ She does so by asserting that,

There is... a problem with latching on to biblical texts regarding the marginalized, for these texts do not sufficiently problematize the boundary between the privileged and the margins. Accordingly, they do not promise deliverance from the margins, rather they deliver laws that perpetuate it, while injecting sufficient compassion to make life there more acceptable for the privileged and more bearable for the marginalized. If LGBT/Q-identified people want to break free of their stigmatized status, this identification with God’s vulnerable ones needs to be reconsidered.¹⁷²

I would push back on Guest’s pushback. The scriptural call towards compassion towards the vulnerable does not necessarily reinforce the binary, as it does not claim that there is something *inherent* to queerness, transness, etc. that renders one vulnerable, just as being orphaned by the literal death of one’s parents is not something *inherent* to childhood. In fact, this vulnerability and marginalization is something *done to* or *experienced by* queer and trans people.

Certainly, providing care (including grief-related care) to the marginalized—no matter the theological or moral imperative that leads one to do so—does not demarginalize or interrupt loss. Still, that it does not liberate in and of itself does not invalidate the need to provide that care for LGBTQIA+ people orphaned by living loss in the meantime. Even if full liberation is achieved, grief for the past loss will not immediately disappear.

Though a full rendering of Minjung Theology is beyond the scope of this paper, its approach could be particularly instructive in this instance, especially for its understanding that

¹⁷⁰ Guest, “Deuteronomy,” 128.

¹⁷¹ Truluck in Guest, 128. Truluck appears to have used the NASB translation of Deut. 27:19. Guest notes that Truluck compiled the now-defunct “Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse” website. Religious harm is another source of grief for the LGBTQIA+ community; one which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹⁷² Guest, 128.

the designation of *Minjung* (i.e. oppressed/marginalized people or “ordinary people deprived of belonging”) is not a “permanent” one, but one that is “relational and fluid.”¹⁷³ The label signifies that liberation is needed.¹⁷⁴ The goal is to “keep... people in connection with [one another] so that we can participate in the expansion of belonging.”¹⁷⁵ When the people are no longer marginalized the label need no longer apply.¹⁷⁶

Similarly, as Thomas Bohache notes in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, “In a queer context... our future well-being (both physical and spiritual) depends on how we treat others in the here and now.”¹⁷⁷ Such treatment includes care for harm experienced in the midst of ongoing oppression. This care cannot wait until liberation has already taken place or until the day comes when parents no longer disown their children, especially given the profound psychological, emotional, and physical effects of such abandonment on those experiencing it.

Without naming her or her assertions, Bohache’s chapter on Matthew also pushes back on Guest’s argument that leaning into Biblical texts’ views of the marginalized could be harmful in the long run, by asserting that “if tomorrow, all of the marginalized were suddenly ‘free,’ they would still have generations of bondage behind them, informing their context.”¹⁷⁸ As such, emotional and grief care will be relevant for some time.

Justin Tanis sees a connection between faith and providing care for and relief from “the psychological, spiritual, and physical harm” experienced by those in the queer and trans community.¹⁷⁹ In fact, he “believe[s] Christians have a mandate to” offer this care and

¹⁷³ Seulbin Lee, “Readings from and as the 99%,” DIV 6600 - New Testament, class lecture, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN, March 22, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Lee, “Readings from and as the 99%.”

¹⁷⁵ Lee.

¹⁷⁶ Lee.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Bohache, “Matthew,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 507.

¹⁷⁸ Bohache, “Matthew,” 507; Guest, 128.

¹⁷⁹ Tanis, “A Search for Our Selves,” 33.

protection.¹⁸⁰ My brief survey of religious traditions, texts, and praxis above related to care for the orphan suggests that this mandate transcends both the Christian context and any limitations as to who is considered an “orphan.”

Integration

In light of this brief survey of theological and moral mandates, how can we integrate these understandings into a coherent and practical UU foundation of grief care for LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing living loss? We start in community.

As Sabia-Tanis notes,

LGBT people may face loss without the same levels of compassion, sympathy, and support as our heterosexual, non-transgender peers, and yet we share the same human needs for comfort and healing.¹⁸¹

Community is emotionally and psychologically protective for LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially community that offers “safe and supportive others” and space for “emotional processing.”¹⁸² Such communal emotional processing includes acknowledging and holding space for the grief of LGBTQIA+ individuals who have been orphaned through the living loss of family. As Harvey Peskin offers,

[G]oing through the painful experiences of loss, grief, and mourning without a community to support or acknowledge the loss can add to the emotional pain and distort what might otherwise be an adaptive process.¹⁸³

Peskin also shares that,

Permission to grieve belongs to a relational process of recognizing loss through the real or virtual company of others and is more essential to the process of mourning than we often let ourselves know. Even without public display, grief is dialogic, representing a

¹⁸⁰ Tanis, “A Search for Our Selves,” 33.

¹⁸¹ Sabia-Tanis, “Grieving Together,” 200.

¹⁸² Carastathis et al., 292.

¹⁸³ Harvey Peskin, “Who Has the Right to Mourn?: Relational Deference and the Ranking of Grief,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 29, no. 4 (2019): 478, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2019.1632655>.

simultaneous need to listen and be listened to—to give comfort and be comforted—about the meaning of the loss.¹⁸⁴

Creating a space that makes room for the “dialogic” experience of grief requires trust. Such trust is not granted automatically. Because of the all-too-common relationship between religion and rejection, UU congregations should be mindful of the barriers to trust within a religious space.

As Roe notes,

LGBTQ youth... believed they are not welcome in their places of worship. Each participant [in Roe’s study] mentioned the negative impact that they believe religion has played in their coming out process... Most participants viewed religion as something that their parents or others have used against them to condemn their sexual orientation.¹⁸⁵

As one young person shared with Roe,

I don’t go to church anymore because, I don’t think, I don’t think I’d be accepted at the church I used to go, so I don’t [long pause], I don’t know.¹⁸⁶

It is crucial to acknowledge that Unitarian Universalism being non-creedal does not automatically make its congregations safer for or more accepting of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Given the harms done by churches toward the LGBTQIA+ community, it is critical that UU congregations reckon with their own histories of harm toward the community, especially in light of reports such as the one undertaken on behalf of trans UUs, as shared above. Marginalization and harm can occur even without the insistence that the teachings of a particular holy book or faith require it. Just as non-UU traditions must acknowledge and address the harms done in the name of their respective faiths, so must Unitarian Universalism. It is through acknowledging and addressing such harms that trust can be built or restored and true growth and welcome can take place. Congregational work to become a more welcoming and safe space for LGBTQIA+

¹⁸⁴ Peskin, “Who Has the Right to Mourn?” 479.

¹⁸⁵ Roe, “Family Support,” 57.

¹⁸⁶ Roe, 58.

individuals goes a long way towards providing the safety required to hold space for supporting rejection/disownment-related grief.

While striving to create the psychological safety and true welcome required to cultivate such a space, congregations should take care not to engage in such welcoming in a self-serving way that comes across as disingenuous—which I would argue is also unsafe. Tanis notes that congregations should remember that in working with LGBTQIA+ people, “You will be dealing with a community that is, at best, somewhat suspicious of your motives and fearful of condemnation.”¹⁸⁷ As such, working to build trust is essential. When cultivating such trust, congregations should be mindful of not offering supportive programming as a way to grow membership numbers or fill pews/chairs. Such motivations are transparently disingenuous and trust-damaging.

While Roe notes that “religiosity has been found to be a protective factor against health risk behaviors,”¹⁸⁸ the goal of supporting LGBTQIA+ people who are experiencing grief from the living loss of family disconnection is not to inspire religiosity or to impose spiritual practices onto them. Though Unitarian Universalism is not known as a proselytizing tradition, care should still be taken not to impose our own tradition onto those seeking compassionate welcome. Support for LGBTQIA+ community members should arise from living into our principles and from understanding that our liberation and well-being is connected to that of those in the LGBTQIA+ community, even if they never participate in anything else our congregations have to offer.

Praxis

¹⁸⁷ Tanis, “Creating a Genuine Welcome,” 128.

¹⁸⁸ Roe, 59.

While developing a comprehensive plan to address UU congregational shortcomings as they relate to the LGBTQIA+ community in general is beyond the scope of this thesis, its scope could inform recommendations for providing grief care for the community. Support for the grief of those orphaned due to their identities can range from pastoral care to group-based support to offering “meaningful rituals to mark changes,” as well as hosting “vigils or memorial events” to support communal grief.¹⁸⁹

Ideally, the Unitarian Universalist Association would build emotional and grief support into their Welcoming Congregations model, and offer continuing education for ministers in providing safe, dignity-maintaining and affirming pastoral care to their LGBTQIA+ congregants and community members, in order to correct past mistakes and mitigate future harms.¹⁹⁰ In the meantime, centering LGBTQIA+ leadership and guidance in this area is invaluable. LGBTQIA+ led (and LGBTQIA+ exclusive) peer grief support groups are a good start in addressing and holding space for the living loss of family, among other disenfranchised losses. Participation in “[LGBTQ] community groups” has been shown to be psychologically and emotionally protective, such that holding space for and being in fellowship with other LGBTQIA+ folks can serve as a balm for grief and distress.¹⁹¹ Sabia-Tanis notes that,

[S]everal other LGBT people who had experienced a significant loss [had shared] that they never considered attending a general grief support [that was not specific to the LGBT community]. They were concerned that they would be refused service by the provider because of their sexual orientation or gender identity or that they would encounter prejudice (anti-LGBT or racism) within the group. These perceived barriers,

¹⁸⁹ Tanis, “Creating a Genuine Welcome,” 122, 126. Some resources that may be helpful in this regard include Elaine J. Ramshaw’s chapter on “Making (Ritual) Sense of Our Own Lives,” in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, edited by Sheryl A. Kujawa, Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno; Chris Glaser’s 1998 book *Coming out as Sacrament* from Westminster John Knox Press; and Francis Weller’s 2015 book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*, published by North Atlantic Books.

¹⁹⁰ More expansive opportunities for grief support and education, in general, would be a helpful addition within many UU congregations, though that work is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁹¹ Roe, 60.

based on their own previous experiences of anti-LGBT and racist attitudes by both society and health care providers were too much to overcome in the midst of grieving.¹⁹²

Such experiences underscore the importance of offering LGBTQIA+ exclusive groups.

Additionally, UU congregations should consider opening such support groups to the broader community rather than focusing on just church members (or building church membership), especially if the congregation lacks LGBTQIA+ membership within its numbers. Given a dearth of LGBTQIA+ specific supports in the broader community, having a group that embraces the queer/trans public and holds space for their grief could be a respite in the midst of a less accepting grief-support world.

Sabia-Tanis affirms that LGBTQIA+ exclusive “support groups are difficult to find but cherished when found.”¹⁹³ A member of the LGBTQIA+ community, himself, Sabia-Tanis shares his experience of finding specifically LGBT-focused groups:

In these spaces, there was so much less to explain about my loved one or myself. I could relax and tell my unedited story without needing to translate aspects of it or worry that it might make other group members uncomfortable. I did not have to pretend to be like anyone else there. But, of course, I did end up feeling a tremendous sense of commonality with the others who came.¹⁹⁴

Responses in Carastathis et al.’s study confirm such benefits. The study authors note that LGBTQIA+ exclusive groups “provided direct support and acceptance... and fostered feelings of being normal, safe, comfortable, and accepted.”¹⁹⁵

Such care can be especially beneficial for the disenfranchised grief—such as that of living orphanhood—that is all-too-common to the queer/trans experience.¹⁹⁶ As Eileen McKeon Pesek points out,

¹⁹² Sabia-Tanis, “Grieving Together: LGBT Bereavement Support Groups,” 195.

¹⁹³ Sabia-Tanis, 198.

¹⁹⁴ Sabia-Tanis, 198.

¹⁹⁵ Carastathis et al., 303.

¹⁹⁶ Sabia-Tanis, 198.

Disenfranchised grievers, even more than traditional grievers, need this kind of supportive [group] atmosphere because of the isolation, loneliness, shame, and guilt they may experience. The group setting allows them to hear and identify with others' stories. Their losses, deemed less significant or appropriate in general society, can be appreciated in the group.¹⁹⁷

In seeking practical ways to create such a group, congregations should consider a mix of leadership made up of church and non-church volunteers/staff. Again, this is especially important if the level of LGBTQIA+ representation is low within a congregation. Ideally, even if driven by a theological framework, the group should maintain secularity given the degree of religious and church harm many LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced, as well as the negative ethical implications of imposing a particular set of religious beliefs onto someone in crisis. Such secularity also leaves room for individual meaning-making.

Logistically, while remote (or Zoom-based) grief meetings can help to bridge geographic distance and other physical accessibility issues, in-person meetings allow for greater ease of assessing body language and tone of voice, and may help with privacy, especially for those in non-affirming living situations. In-person meetings can also lower the barrier of entry for those with a lack of access to broadband internet. For those living at a distance from the church or meeting place—particularly in more rural areas where other affirming options are difficult, if not impossible, to find—material support for transportation (e.g. fuel gift cards/bus passes) to the grief group could be especially helpful.

When organizing a grief support group, it is important to temper a congregation's expectations around what constitutes success and to give a group time to grow. As Sabia-Tanis notes,

¹⁹⁷ Eileen McKeon Pesek, "The Role of Support Groups in Disenfranchised Grief," in *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka, (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002) "The Role of Support Groups in Disenfranchised Grief," 132-133.

It is important to remember that it may take a bereaved person some time to decide to attend a support group. It requires courage to face grief and loss; it makes us vulnerable and can be very painful, even while it is healing. This means that offering a program once is not enough; people may need to see the program listed for many months before they decide to attend. Perseverance matters.¹⁹⁸

If you build it, they will come... eventually.¹⁹⁹ The important thing is for congregations to be consistent in their offerings to help build the trust and stability of awareness and presence within the community.

In addition to grief support groups, congregations should consider connecting LGBTQIA+ community members with mental health support and resources in the community for both grief-related concerns and concerns beyond grief. As McKeon Pesek notes,

[C]ommunities are best served when a variety of resources, including professionally led and self-help groups are available. The critical question often is not, “What type of group is best?” but rather, “Which type of group best serves this particular bereaved person?”²⁰⁰

This distinction reveals a need for true relationship-building with the LGBTQIA+ members of our community in order to build the trust and awareness required to help point folks in the right direction for needed services. To that end, it is important to take care to have a listing of affirming and supportive resources, including non-carceral options, especially given potential additional risks related to carceral responses for trans and gender non-conforming individuals.

Most importantly, throughout the process, congregations must trust the LGBTQIA+ folks in their communities to be the experts of their own experiences and stories.

Conclusion

¹⁹⁸ Sabia-Tanis, “Grieving Together,” 199-200.

¹⁹⁹ For more on running a bereavement support group, one helpful resource is William G. Hoy, *Guiding People Through Grief: How to Start and Lead Bereavement Support Groups*, (Dallas: Compass Press, 2007). It is important to be mindful of the limitations of this book at offering guidance for every possible scenario given its scope, particularly around living losses in general, and the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically. That said, it offers some useful tips that can be adapted to this setting.

²⁰⁰ McKeon Pesek, “The Role of Support Groups,” 133.

When LGBTQIA+ individuals lose family members when they come out, such loss is undoubtedly a type of orphaning—a state for which a multitude of religious and philosophical traditions mandate compassionate care for emotional needs that transcend the material. Though there may not be unanimity within the UU tradition as to what “authority” backs up such care claims, their relative universality underscores their culturally transcendent value and importance. Placing this commonality in conversation with the covenant that binds us in community within our congregations and with the community beyond our walls, strengthens a foundational imperative for that care.

Regardless of the theological flavor of one’s individual Unitarian Universalism, our interdependence requires of us a striving for greater compassion, greater justice, and greater welcome. As we continue the work of urging Unitarian Universalism and its member congregations into more authentically and effectively living into its aspirationally welcoming values, creating sacred space for the grief of those in the LGBTQIA+ community who have experienced an orphaning from unaffirming family is a small, but vital part of that striving.

Caring for our orphaned queer and gender non-conforming siblings in their grief is *sacred* work, *vital* work, *urgent* work, *life-giving*, *life-sustaining*, and *life-saving* work. May this offering stir our movement to take up this sacred work. The well-being of our queer and gender-nonconforming siblings hangs in the balance. Every moment matters.

Bibliography

- Abu-Zayd, Nasr. "The 'Others' in the Qur'an: A Hermeneutical Approach." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 3–4 (2010): 281–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453709358530>.
- Adeel, M. Ashraf. "Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions, and a Virtue Ethics of the Qur'an." *American Journal of Islam & Society* 32, no. 3 (2015): 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v32i3.268>.
- Article II Study Commission. "Final Proposed Revision to Article II." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. October 2023. Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/final-proposed-revision-article-ii>.
- Aung, James Ha Tun. "Ministering to the Marginalized in a Pluralistic Society: An Act of Pure Religion in James 1:27." *Journal of Asian Mission* 18, no. 1 (2017): 51-70. <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI GFE171218002976&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Blumell, Lincoln H. "A New Jewish Epitaph Commemorating Care for Orphans." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 47 (2016): 310–29. doi:10.1163/15700631-12340459.
- Bohache, Thomas. "Matthew." In *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, 487-516. London: SCM Press, 2006.
- Bonner, Michael. "Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (2005): 391–406. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1162/0022195052564270>

- Carastathis, Geoffrey S., Lynne Cohen, Elizabeth Kaczmarek, and Paul Chang. “Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian: Portrayals, Perceptions, and Resilience.” *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 3 (2017): 289–320.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1179035>.
- Child, L. Maria. *The Progress of Religious Ideas, Through Successive Ages, Vol. III*. New York: C.S. Francis & Co, 1855.
- Christiansen, Johanne Louise. “God Loves not the Wrongdoers (zālimūn): Formulaic Repetition as a Rhetorical Strategy in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, 22, no. 1 (2020): 92-132. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2020.0413>.
- Claassens, L. Juliana. “‘Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child:’ Considering the Metaphor of Divine Adoption in the Context of Trauma.” *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2023): 66-74.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010066>.
- Cole, Juan. “The Qur’an and the Modern Self: A Heterotopia: The Qur’an.” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 557-571,
<https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2018.0030>.
- Eldritch, Eric. “Coming Out Day 2023: Coming Out Spiritually.” Uplift (blog). UUA.org, Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/blog/coming-out-spiritually>.
- “Congregation Search Results.” UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 4, 2024. https://www.uua.org/find/results?browse_location%5B%5D=2523&lgbtq_welcoming=1&items_per_page=10&honor_congregation=All.
- Countryman, L. William. “James.” In *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, 716-723. London: SCM Press, 2006.

- Cowser, Angela Rosita. "Between Text and Sermon: James 1:17-27." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 74, no. 4 (2020): 374-376. doi:10.1177/0020964320936389.
- de Beer, Sanrie M., and Pierre J. Jordaan. "Heeding the Voices of Ὀρφανοὶ Καὶ Χῆραι (Fatherless Households) in James 1:27: Utilising the Greimassian Semiotic Square." *Neotestamentica* 55, no. 1 (2021): 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1353/neo.2021.0014>.
- Eagle, David E., Warren A. Kinghorn, Heather Parnell, Cyrilla Amany, Vanroth Vann, Senti Tzudir, Venkata Gopala Krishna Kaza, Chimdi Temesgen Safu, Kathryn Whetten, and Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell. "Religion and Caregiving for Orphans and Vulnerable Children: A Qualitative Study of Caregivers Across Four Religious Traditions and Five Global Contexts." *Journal of Religion and Health* 59, no. 3 (2020): 1666–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00955-y>.
- Ekknath, Easwaran. "Selfless Service." In *The Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Eknath Easwaran, 99-110. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007.
- Ekknath, Easwaran. "The War Within." In *The Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Eknath Easwaran, 71-82. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007.
- "Five Practices of Welcome Renewal." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/program/five-practices-welcome-renewal>.
- Guest, Deryn. "Deuteronomy." In *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, 122-143. London: SCM Press, 2006.
- "Guidelines and Action Steps for Welcoming Congregations." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/program/guidelines>

Harwood, Brandon J. “Beyond Poetry and Magick: The Core Elements of Wiccan Morality.”

Journal of Contemporary Religion 22, no. 3 (2007): 375–90.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900701637528>.

Holman Jones, Stacy, and Tony E. Adams. “Undoing the Alphabet: A Queer Fugue on Grief and Forgiveness.” *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 102–10.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613512260>.

James, S.E., Herman, J.L., Durso, L.E., & Heng-Lehtinen, R. *Early Insights: A Report of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2024.

https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/2022%20USTS%20Early%20Insights%20Report_FINAL.pdf

Kepnes, Steven. “Reflections on the Religious Other from Modern Jewish Philosophy.”

Contemporary Jewry, 40, no. 1 (2020): 67-83.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-020-09326-2>.

kfw. “out-living.” Undusted Corners (blog). March 17, 2023.

<https://undustedcorners.com/2023/03/17/out-living/>.

Khattab, Mustafa. *The Clear Quran*. Bolingbrook, IL: Book of Signs Foundation, 2015.

Lee, Seulbin. “Readings from and as the 99%.” *DIV 6600 - New Testament*. Class lecture at

Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN, March 22, 2023.

Lester, Terence. Twitter (X) Post. April 1, 2022, 7:06 AM.

<https://twitter.com/imTerenceLester/status/1509864821369548805>.

LGBTQ Grief & The Importance of Finding Support,” *Grief in Common* (blog), September 28,

2017, <https://www.griefincommon.com/blog/lgbt-grief-importance-finding-support/>.

- Loue, Sana. "Religious and Spiritual Traditions of Altruism, Community Service, and Activism." In *Handbook of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice and Research*, 281-294. New York, NY: Springer, 2017.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-7039-1>.
- McClellan, Daniel. "The Gods-Complaint: Psalm 82 as a Psalm of Complaint." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 4 (2018): 833–51. doi:10.1353/jbl.2018.0045.
- McKeon Pesek, Eileen. "The Role of Support Groups in Disenfranchised Grief." In *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, edited by Kenneth J. Doka, 127-133. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002.
- Meris, Doneley. "Complicated grief and challenges in LGBTQIA+ communities." In *Disenfranchised Grief: Examining Social, Cultural, and Relational Impacts*, edited by Renee Blocker Turner and Sarah D. Stauffer, 120-137. New York, NY: Routledge, 2024.
- Nanji, Azim. "Zakat: Faith and Giving in Muslim Contexts." In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, edited by Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, 319-329. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Peskin, Harvey. "Who Has the Right to Mourn?: Relational Deference and the Ranking of Grief." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 29, no 4 (2019): 477-492.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2019.1632655>.
- Roe, Stuart. "'Family Support Would Have Been Like Amazing': LGBTQ Youth Experiences With Parental and Family Support." *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 25, no. 1 (2017): 55-62. doi:10.1177/1066480716679651.

Sabia-Tanis, Justin. "Grieving Together: LGBT Bereavement Support Groups." In *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists on Health*, edited by Adrian Shanker, 193-201. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020.

Schmitt, Brad. "Best-selling Christian author's intense path to his public coming out: 'A man at peace.'" *The Tennessean*. March 12, 2024.

<https://www.tennessean.com/story/life/family/2024/03/12/christian-author-matthew-turner-you-will-always-belong-coming-out/72583244007/?>

"Search results for grief." inSpirit UU Book and Gift Shop. Accessed March 24, 2024.

<https://www.uuabookstore.org/Search.aspx?k=grief&s=FTS.RANK+DESC&ps=12&p=0>.

"The Seven Principles." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 4, 2024.

<https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

Smith, Mark S. "Canaanite Backgrounds to Psalms." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, edited by William P. Brown, 43-56. New York: Oxford University Press: 2014.

"Sources of Our Living Tradition." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>.

Strong, John S. "The Dharma: Some Mahāyāna Perspectives." In *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Inspirations*, 145-187. Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2008.

Sylvan, Dianne. *The Circle Within: Creating a Wiccan Spiritual Tradition*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2004.

Tanis, Justin. "Creating a Genuine Welcome for Trans People in Communities of Faith." In *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 115-127. Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2003.

Tanis, Justin. "A Search for Our Selves," in *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 24-54. Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2003.

TRUUsT and the Unitarian Universalist Association's Multicultural Ministries. *Experience of Trans Unitarian Universalists: Report on the 2018 Survey of Trans UUs*. Transgender Religious professional Unitarian Universalists Together, 2019.

https://truust.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/trans-uu-experience-survey-report_final_revised.pdf

Turner, Renee Blocker and Sarah D. Stauffer, "Disenfranchised Grief: The complicated interweave of death and non-death losses." In *Disenfranchised Grief: Examining Social, Cultural, and Relational Impacts*. Edited by Renee Blocker Turner and Sarah D. Stauffer, 3-23. New York, NY: Routledge, 2024.

"UPLIFT Programs Trans/Nonbinary+ Gatherings & Pastoral Care Space." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 8, 2024. <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/transnb>.

"UUA LGBTQ and Multicultural Ministries, Ministries and Faith Development." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://www.uua.org/offices/staff/mfd/lgbtq-multicultural-ministries>.

Vijayan, Laila L. "Revisit to the Life of Elijah and the Widow: Empowering Grace Amidst Vulnerability." *Bangalore Theological Forum* 54, no. 2 (December 2022): 42–52. <https://search-ebcsohost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIAW4230512000036&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

"Welcoming and Inclusive Congregations: Affirming LGBTQ Individuals and Families." UUA.org. Unitarian Universalist Association. Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming>.

Westervelt, Krista. *Unpublished Personal Journal, 2013-2021*.