

Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

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2025 Feb

Borders/Boundaries

Chalice Lighting

Kate Harris: “Borders reinforce the idea of the alien, the Other, stories separate and distinct from ourselves. But would such fictions continue to stand if most of us didn't agree with them, or at least quietly benefit from the inequalities they bolster? The barbed wire begins here, inside us, cutting through our very core.”

Check In Opening Questions

In what ways has “setting boundaries” been a challenge for you? When have you crossed a border? What’s the next border for you to cross?

The Desert Belongs to No One and the Sky is Wide Open

Rev. Josh Pawelek, excerpt

I come back time and time again to the words of one of Unitarian Universalism’s spiritual forebears, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who once said, “Spirit primarily means wind; transgression; the crossing of a line.” Although it was not the point he was making, I have always heard in these words a claim about what it means to be a spiritual person. Like the desert that belongs to no one, like the sky that is wide open, wind knows no borders. It blows where it blows. It transgresses. It crosses lines. It picks things up from one place and puts them down in another. If spirit primarily means wind, then I say being a spiritual person means cultivating a willingness and a desire to cross the lines that separate us from the rest of life. Being a spiritual person means actively transgressing our habitual ways of thinking, our creeds and dogmas, our unexamined assumptions and conventions that keep us separate from the rest of life. To be a spiritual person means being willing to cross borders, especially those that arbitrarily and unfairly separate us from the rest of life. If you are in doubt, err on the side of crossing.

Borders and Boundaries

Sarah Lauer

At the boundary waters
between my self and yours
there sits an island, shrouded
in mossy dreamings and
carpeted with all the possibilities of
fallen leaves.

When we meet
in the stillness of this space,
bear witness to pain, to joy, to love,
there is, for a moment, a place
where soul touches tender soul.

It is there, and then gone,
a gift of deep connection,
the reassuring knowledge that
these barriers are an ending
and a beginning both.

These rippled horizon-line edges
give us our safety, our sense of self
and yet,
I believe meeting here,
in this space between,
is also the closest we can come
to real magic.

Borders/Boundaries

Sally Boeckholt

On a map, the edges are clear –
Straight black lines run east and west,
North and south, they separate us.

Borders of water, of rivers and seas
Flow and connect us as they
Divide us.

The boundary is the edge,
The point beyond which
Lies what we call: other.

Across the line, over there,
Another woman takes her sweet old dog

For a walk, thinks about what her children
need,

Runs through the list of things
She needs to do today.

The world would have us
Be other to one another.
Yet time and again,
I imagine her laughing,
Imagine us friends.

In the midst of trust
The edges blur, become breath,
Become water, flowing
Your sorrow brings me tears.

As The Dam Falls

Faithyna Leonard

What a strong dam,
A dam that can hold back gallons beyond
gallons of water.

A dam that holds life in it place and gives
stability a home.

A dam that gets pushed against but
always stands its place.

What a weak dam,

A dam that leaks away
and burst into rivers.

A dam that slowly let's life seep away
within the cracks.

A dam that cannot handle anything more.

What a dam,

That has its strengths,

But slowly begins to break.

The Geography of Light

Martha Sherick Shen

Human Geography is fraught with maps
Boundaries and Borders
Colored with flags
Held High with money and might
The Rich Claiming countries
Firing words into
Bricks hard as stone

Piece upon piece
building
Walls without windows
A fortress of clay
brick upon brick carried on shoulders of
men too weak to resist
women and children there's nowhere to
flee
Seas without ships
Wars without end
Death and destruction
It wretches my Soul
Human Geography!!!!
But... Think of This:
The Geography of Light!
comprised of Stardust and Explosions
creates unfathomable oceans
whose dark murky depths inhabit white
fish
and grow Sun-glistened light-waves
forming
frothy white foam
and bubbles of breath
fortuitous dream-laden domes to caress.
the Geography of Light!
Mountainous valleys and deserts of sand
prosperous plains and jungles of land
shadows of growth
oblique greening leaves
shelter the undergrowth of humus and
seeds
night-vails of rest prowl with life's other
side
giving strength and moonlit timeless tides
yet
sadly, we've prodded and plundered the
earth
molding cities of cement
whose crusted facades I lament
grow nothing but money on nebulous
land

How fearfully our human hands shape the
basis on which we stand
under the Light from the heavens above
changing the face of the Earth and its
acceptance of Love
Human hands are the geography of
Change
casting Light and Shadow across the
Range
of the cultures we've plundered
or irreverently cast asunder.
As our Perspective
Creates the topography of
Dominance and War
whose
artificial light overshadows objects of
worth
creating distorted visions of death and of
birth
the night sky obscured
needs refreshing to view
in-depth and insight our constellations
anew.
I'd hoped for a map
I often have asked
to give me insight
"Are there no Cartographers of the
Geography of Light?
Everything's confusing and blurring my
sight.
The Sun has eclipsed
the Earth holds her breath
folding in Faith it's blockbuster buildings
its highways and byways
running wires of heatwaves
as the trees give way
and the heavens lay waste.
Until
Finally
Quarantined in the Quiet
I Grow Leaves

and layers of bark
I Become the Tree.

my limbs stretching upwards and onwards
soak up Sun
roots delving downward dwelling in Dark
I'm leafing with stomas breathing with
scope

Light receiving
Life redeeming
full throated Bird Song
beseeching
this new Geography of Hope.

the Geography of Light!

Meditation

Steve Dick & Jill McAllister, from "50 Ways to Cross a Border," UUA General Assembly, 2012

Knowing we are always together with everyone on this celestial Island we call Earth.
There are more — so many more — people here than those we see around us.
We reach out in concern.
Crossing a border. We speak out in dialogue.
Crossing a border. We offer our love and support.
Crossing a border. Stretching, growing, risking.
We cross a border and live from the other side.
We have become — the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee.
We are now — the wounded, the frightened, the hungry.
We live — the fraught existence of the alien.
Soon we return to the comforts of the familiar.
Safe in the security of not being the stranger.
But transformed nonetheless — by crossing the border — in our minds and hearts.
Crossing the border — that divides humanity into friend and foe.
Crossing a border — that leaves so many outside.
Crossing a border — that separates and fragments.
We reach out. We speak out.
We share in love, pulling, stretching, challenging the border —
Until that which alienates – us in our own souls – and in the boundless community of life –
Is transcended.

READINGS

Read these pieces with pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering to you. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.

The Self has a Fuzzy Boundary...

Sources from contemporary brain neuroscience, to the Buddha, to psychology's Dialogical Self Theory, say (or are often cited as saying) that there is no self. What do they mean?

They are saying that there is no such thing as what we usually assume is our self. What does not exist – these schools of thought and many others would agree – is a discrete (apart, detached from others, separate) and permanent Self. There are two points here:

(1). The Self is not permanent. You are constantly changing. You are not the being that you once were. "You can't step twice in the same river," as Heraclitus said. This is so not only because the river is continually changing, losing its waters into the ocean and gaining new waters from tributaries, but also because you are changing in the same way the river is.

(2). The Self is not separate. The line between self and not-self is fuzzy, porous, and constantly shifting. The part of you over which you have voluntary, conscious control is typically what feels most like “you” – but did you voluntarily choose what foods would be your favorite, or who you fell in love with, or what movies made you cry? Examine your experience, and I think you'll notice that food preferences, romantic attraction, and cinema emotions mostly, if not entirely, “just happen” to you. Lying in bed at night waiting to fall asleep, thoughts flow through your brain – but did you ever consciously decide what to think about? Even your thoughts – most of them, anyway – “just happen” to you. Even the parts of you that feel like the “core” of your self are composed of and created by non-self factors that you did not choose. There is no discrete self.

No permanent self. No separate self. But there's definitely a self. It's rather like a hurricane: constantly changing, without a distinct border, and just barely coherent enough to be given a name.

If we keep in mind that nothing about us is either permanent or distinct, then we will see that satisfaction in life, likewise, is not permanent, and is not so separate from dissatisfaction. This will help us be less attached to the expectation of satisfaction. Life's dissatisfactions are lighter when we don't expect otherwise.



...But Don't Let It Be Too Fuzzy¹

Creating healthy boundaries doesn't just solve an immediate problem of someone wanting more than you can give, it actually can re-shape how you see yourself, your relationships, and the people with whom you have built these relationships. When we create boundaries that reflect who we are and what we value, they can change our lives in a variety of ways.

Types of Boundaries

Physical: "Don't get so close to me." "Don't enter my room without asking."

Emotional: "Please don't criticize me when I share my feelings."

Time: "I can only stay for an hour." "Do you have time to help me figure this out?"

Sexual: "We need to use contraception if we're going to start sleeping together."

Ethical: "I just can't lie for you. I'm sorry."

Intellectual: "It's okay to disagree."

Financial: "We can't afford it now, and I won't let you charge it on our credit card."

Spiritual: "I'm not okay with you insulting my faith just because you don't share my beliefs."

When someone violates a personal boundary, it's important to remind them of the boundary and share with them the way their disrespect of it makes you feel. Setting boundaries is one of those practices that you may need to do more than once with the same people until they realize that you mean what you say. However, the benefits of "resource ownership" are well worth the work.

Setting clear boundaries for ourselves helps us also recognize other peoples' limitations, which fosters compassion. Boundaries free us from feeling the need to respond to others' self-serving demands. Clearly communicating your boundaries sets up a defense that you can feel safe honoring, thus allowing you to attend to the things that matter most to you. You gain a sense of self-respect by not setting aside your needs to fulfill the needs of others—and others will respect you more for having drawn this line.

Boundaries show others where you stand — which invites others to do the same. Boundaries declare that your self-worth will not be based on what others use you for, but on how you decided to use your talents and your gifts.

Relationship conflict diminishes when you make it clear what is and is not reasonable to expect from you. If you state your boundaries firmly and live them publicly, people lose the ammunition they might have had to guilt you into agreeing to something to which you don't want to agree – which means less stress and less anxiety for you, as well as better understanding and greater acceptance from others.

It can be hard at first to communicate where your boundaries lie, but it does grow easier as you practice articulating your boundaries and honoring what you've articulated.

¹Abridged and adapted from Suzanne Degges-White, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/lifetime-connections/202111/10-ways-better-boundaries-can-improve-your-life>

On the Other Hand: Some Kinds of Boundaries are Overrated²

Most collaborators bump into one another through shared activities like pick-up basketball, improv comedy groups, rifling through old records at a flea market, at a welding workshop at the local arts studio, or a coding class at the community center, through friends at a party, or through shared space like a co-working kitchen or apartment complex courtyard. Friendship, like love, happens when you're just going about your already fabulous life, doing things that sound fun and interesting, and intersecting with other people doing the same.

The once thick, black line between personal and professional connections appears to be fading for many of us. It certainly has for me. My best collaborators are also my best friends. It can be messy, sure, but the benefits of being able to show up as my whole self and spend time with people I love, while making money, far outweigh the extra intention and accountability I have to put into it. We know how to bring the best out in each other. We can more effectively mentor one another through challenges because, unlike a colleague who might be at arm's length, we're aware of one another's history, our idiosyncrasies, our emotional lives. Best of all: when we kickass, we get to celebrate together.

Even the language that we use to describe colleagues these days blends the personal and the professional; people affectionately refer to their "work spouses." In part, it's a critique of how much time some of us spend at work, but it's also an acknowledgment of the intimacy that forms between people who are closely aligned and looking out for one another. If you're going to spend something like eight hours a day interacting with someone, let it be someone you really, genuinely love.

Dr. Amy Banks, author of *Four Ways to Click: Rewire Your Brain for Stronger, More Rewarding Relationships*, argues that "boundaries are overrated." She doesn't mean that healthy relationships don't have some balance between intimacy and distance but that we're all better off when we're brave and authentic, even among people we have a professional connection with. She writes: "Relationships are a dynamic process of experiencing, learning, and integrating your knowledge so that you are able to see both yourself and the other person more deeply and more clearly."

It's as if we used to see people within our professional networks as a bowl full of apples to be sliced and diced in the most efficient, lucrative ways possible. Now we're seeing people as onions with layers to be peeled.

We understand ourselves better through our friends and collaborators' eyes. And we have more fun.

You have to venture out and seek human contact. You have to ask good questions of people that work far afield of you. You have to bump into enough people that you eventually latch right on to your ideal collaborator.

²Abridged and adapted fr Courtney E. Martin <https://onbeing.org/blog/why-boundaries-are-overrated-even-at-work>

Open National Borders³

If we care about poverty and justice overseas, we need to start working towards a world of globally open borders for all.

Closed borders are a form of global apartheid. Borders preserve the privilege of the wealthy at the expense of the poor. They do this by preventing the movement of the world's poorest people, restricting their access to the resources and opportunities available in wealthy countries. Modern immigration rules exist to enable those in power to keep out anyone deemed 'unwanted'. Punitive immigration policies mean that families are routinely torn apart for not having enough money, and people are criminalized simply for seeking safety, or a better life.

Borders don't prevent people migrating. They simply make their journeys harder and often force them into the hands of smugglers. Many of these people left their homes because of reasons outside their control, whether that was conflict, poverty, economic injustice or climate change. The UN's Refugee Agency estimates that 20 people are forced to flee their homes every second.

Closed borders produce violence. The number of people dying while crossing borders has reached unprecedented levels. Intensified border enforcement forces people to take more perilous journeys. And those who make it face further violence or incarceration and deportation. In the US: "37,000 people are detained each day on average, an alarming 140% increase from the start of the Biden administration. ICE detained more than 260,000 people over the last year alone. This includes people who have lived in the U.S. for decades, parents of U.S. citizens, parents separated from their children, and people who arrived recently seeking asylum or a better life." (National Immigrant Justice Center, 2024 Sep) The related policy of mass deportation means sending people back to the very violence and hardship they fled from in the first place. They return to risk persecution, torture and even death.

Open borders would allow more migrants to return home safely. For example, in the 1960s, 70 million Mexicans crossed into the USA, 85 per cent of whom later returned to Mexico. As the US border has become heavily militarized in recent decades, however, it has increased the danger associated with moving, and thus discouraged immigrants from going back.

Open borders make the world richer. According to economist Michael Clemens, opening the world's borders could double global GDP. That is because the change in a worker's location to a higher value economy increases their economic productivity. And because migrant workers often send money back to their country of origin through remittances, migration can have a positive impact on developing countries' economies too. In addition, according to the Organization for Economic Co operation and Development (OECD), across Europe, the average immigrant household contributes more in taxes than they take in benefits.

This might sound like a naive utopian dream today, but so too did many major struggles for social change in the past, until people fought for them – and won.

³Abridged, adapted, updated fr Jonathan McIntosh: <https://newint.org/blog/2017/11/29/why-open-borders>.

Faith Crosses Borders⁴

We are called to cross borders. Unitarian Universalists around the world are involved in that work everyday. Some borders are between countries, others are theological. Some borders are marginalizing, and many are fraught with challenges.

REV. ERIC CHERRY: Unitarian Universalist minister Reverend Carl Scovel once told a story about a man in the midst of mental and physical crisis steadily who pursued isolation: ignoring requests to talk and finally locking himself in his bedroom. The man's wife warned this man and then broke down the door with three swings of an axe. Love breaks down doors, metaphorically and also literally. In the same way, faith breaks down borders. It crosses borders metaphorically every time that a spiritual certainty, a religious idea, or a dogmatic position is confronted by a new one. The source of the new idea could be your next door neighbor or your spiritual neighbor halfway around the globe. That is a kind of faithful border crossing.

But faith also crosses borders quite literally when Unitarian Universalists carry their faith with them across geopolitical, social, economic, and other kinds of real borders. Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists from Transylvania and Mexico and Bolivia do so this very day. And multiple others from places as diverse as Burundi, Hungary, India, Uganda, the Philippines, Germany, and God knows where else have as well in just the past few months.

Sometimes these border crossers meet obstructions, like severe or harsh and unjust visa requirements. Sometimes they meet frightening immigration officials who interrogate them extensively or dismiss them with hardly a word. Other times, they meet warm hands and smiling faces, welcoming arms and open minds. Sometimes they meet all of this in a 24 hour period.

Faith also crosses borders every time a father tries to traverse the Sonoran desert because his family is in desperate need of a wage earner. Faith crosses the border every time a Guatemalan woman is dropped off penniless, starving, and injured in Nogales after 180 days of US detention. Faith crosses borders in thousands of circumstances and meets unknowable contexts. And so we can say that faith crossing borders is often an act of courage and as natural as love breaking down doors.

FRANCISCO JAVIER LAGUNES-GAITAN: Nowadays, Mexicans are in a moment of violence in our immigration rates to the US. But our liberal faith is slowly but steadily crossing the cultural border southwards, into Mexico's mind, heart, and life, luckily, on its way to get full citizenship.

Thanks to the internet, some of us got to know the Unitarian Universalists' great, deep theology, inspiring poetry, well-crafted sermons, illuminating jokes, and visions of wonder, open hands in action for human rights, full equality, and social justice—a glimpse of a liberal, religious community of real praxis. Beginning with an invitation in an email group, we've created a Mexican all-native Unitarian group. In February 2006, we lit the chalice of our living

⁴from "50 Ways to Cross a Border," UUA General Assembly, 2012

tradition. Since then, teachers, computer wizards, thirsty seekers, activists of social justice—we are experiencing spiritual growth in our coming together, sharing our religious home and finding our own collective soul as Libre Congregacion Unitaria de Mexico. We are crossing the cultural border with a post-Calvinist faith into a growing post-Catholic society. The critical assimilation of our liberal religious faith and practice is beginning a conversation with our sensibilities, our history, our own native religious liberal traditions, and references. We are crossing the border of class and preaching with feet and hands, reaching out to some of the most neglected people in our society. Our emerging group supports prison education ministry in two prisons in Mexico City for four years now. There, they badly need and greatly appreciate spiritual empowering resources and humanist tools for critical thinking.

OLGA FLORES: Countries and borders are human creations, demarcating territories and false temporal powers. We've come to believe that countries and borders we live within have always been defined this way. We have engaged in wars to defend these imaginary borders. But these borders are imagined, illusions that we accept even to the point of preparing our young ones to kill to maintain these borders. The rivers, the forests, or the migratory birds do not have any nationality. They live within none of our borders, as our souls also cannot live within these borders.

This is why the Unitarian Universalists of the world, and of Latin America in particular, affirm the principle, “respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.” In this way, we participate in movement and actions to defend the integrity of ecosystems and biodiversity, to stand against predation and the destruction of nature.

This year, Unitarians in Bolivia joined in supporting the Eighth Indigenous March in defense of indigenous territory and National Park Isiboro Secure— TIPNIS. We walked nearly 500 miles together with 1,000 indigenous children, women, and men to try to unify the spirit of Bolivia. And we have seen that we can have an impact. After 60 days of walking, when the March arrived in La Paz, almost the whole population of the city received the marchers with bread, jewels, food, toys for children, flowers, song, and much emotion. In that way, we reached the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

from Letters to a Young Poet
Rainer Maria Rilke

The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust. A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky.

Questions

1. Do you stay away from boundaries or push them?
2. Are you afraid of or attracted to crossing boundaries? (and is this question different from the first one?)
3. Do you have a border between your personal and professional selves?
4. What has it done to our sense national borders to have seen, since the late 1960s, photos of Earth from outer space – where no national borders (except coasts) appear?
5. What is the importance of respecting boundaries in a marriage? (see Rilke excerpt)
6. Are boundaries – such as between work life and personal life – overrated, as Courtney Martin argues?

Our Spiritual Exercise

What are the borders between people – between groups of people – that justice and compassion calls us to cross? This month, can you identify such a border that you have tacitly observed – and then cross that border?

Family Page
Faithyna Leonard

As we continue to grow together as a community, we recognize the importance of understanding and respecting both borders and boundaries in our daily lives, relationships, and spiritual journeys. As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in nurturing a deep sense of compassion and respect for one another, and part of this involves setting healthy boundaries that honor our individuality and personal space, while also acknowledging our interconnectedness.

In our next exploration together, we invite you to reflect on the concept of boundaries through the lens of a few wonderful children's books that offer important lessons on asserting oneself, speaking up, and fostering mutual respect. These stories provide simple yet powerful reminders of the importance of knowing when and how to say "no," how to stand up for oneself, and how to support others in doing the same.

We encourage you to read the following books with your children and discuss them together:

- Jenny Simmons, *I Can Say No*. This book empowers young readers to assert their boundaries and teaches the importance of saying "no" when something doesn't feel right, showing them how to protect their personal space and feelings.
- Angela Murphy, *Speak Up, Wonder Pup*. Wonder Pup learns how to find his voice and speak up in difficult situations, helping children understand how they can express themselves when they are faced with challenges.
- Patty Lovell, *Speak Up, Molly Lou Melon*. Molly Lou Melon teaches children the value of standing tall, being proud of who they are, and speaking up for themselves, even when faced with bullying or peer pressure.
- Christina Furnival, *The Not-So-Friendly-Friend*. This book explores the dynamics of friendship and how we can navigate the complexities of relationships by recognizing when a friendship crosses our personal boundaries and how to handle those situations with grace.

* * *

Check Out. What overall message stands out for you?

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Chalice Extinguishing. Words of Kamand Kojouri: "Let borders become sunlight so we traverse this Earth as one nation and drive the darkness out."

Connecting is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Text not otherwise attributed is by Rev. Meredith Garmon. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme. Next issue: 2025 Mar: Dignity