

1Story

Honoring the past year in a series of 12 stories



(Image Source: 4 Elements Reiki — Dreaming Earth)

Compiled by Grace Kelly, Maayan Falk - Judson and Preeta Banerjee

As a part of the Miller Center for Interreligious Learning & Leadership, this compilation serves as a kind of time capsule of the first 12 months of the COVID global pandemic, through which we - as a part of the Dignity Project Fellowship 2020-2021 - continued to meet and press into the richness of engaging across our various lines of difference.

March 2020

“The Busy Corner On Warren’s Street”

By Grace Kelly

There was the girl in the yellow T- shirt
That she wore habitually
And also habitually bought items with common factors
One day she'd buy tomato soup and tomato juice
Another day
Banana popsicles and banana candy
And maybe just straight up bananas as well
There was the man and his son
Who argued like the sun rose
Pushing things from off the counters
Coming in like a cloud of one consistent noise until one stormed off and left
And the other paid
For damages
And of course milk
Or sunny d
There was the 3 high school aged young ladies that came in at 3 pm sharp everyday since
they had been in middle school
Always laughing always chattering
However so polite in there greetings, thank yous, and how was your days
There was the youngest girl of the Robinsons who always came in for her fathers medication
And would also always try to slip a pack of
Cigarettes and taffy in her pocket as I looked for her change in the register
There was the twin boys and their mother
Who always seemed in a rush and a hurry
As she yelled when the boys asked for candy and treats
That they would get on the few occasions she was in a good mood
There was that homeless man
That walked crooked and loitered outside
As I brought him all the old food from my shelves at the end of the day
And the girl who always slipped him pennies and said hello as she walked by him to catch
the bus everyday
There was the boy who carried the saxophone and bought hubba bubba gum
And the angry aunties always complaint about the local youths
There was that young couple
With the girls arm always swung across her boyfriends as he pulled away and made his move
on other girls as she watched

But she still loved him anyway
There was the father of the girl and 5 other kids that would always buy a case of beers on Sunday
The old lady and her granddaughter who always bought little m and m packs
And that I called my girlfriend as the little one smiled and said hello
And the ups guys always blasting spanish music
While the next door Jamaican lady told them to turn it down every time they pulled up cause her customers at the patty shop complained she would say as she ran out waving her broom
There was the teen mom and her little boy
The man and his wife one of which I would see at least once a week
The middle aged white lady and her dog
The 4 young boys who moved from Bronx
And the old ladies from the church coming to gather food to feed their grandbabies who came over some days
There was the man and his son who argued
And the girl who wore a yellow t shirt everyday
All gather coming in and out my corner store on the left corner of warner street
Between the patty store and the laundromat
On that busy corner at Warren's street
Where folks who had nothing in common
From their up-raisin too there basic looks behavior and cultures
And every-thin in common from living
in the ghettos streets
Here it was here
Where me the shop owner and the yellow girl and the grandmother and baby and the three high school boys and the girl who stole cigarettes and the homeless man
All found a likeness in our unlikeness
On the busy corner on Warrens street.

Grace Kelly is a high school senior at Milton High School. She is a creative and is a writer, musician, and artist and uses different forms of art to help express her perspective on the world. This is one of her writing pieces that shows this form of expression.

April 2020

“Spring Poem”

By Sireeta Banerjee

Tweet tweet tweet, I hear birds singing their song
I walk outside and feel the spring breeze on my face,
I look around me and see green all around me on the trees
As I tell myself this is spring

Sireeta wrote this in 4th grade. She is now a 6th Grader in the Lexington Public School District.

May 2020

“The Impending Title of The Black Bird”

By Grace Kelly

Does a crows heart peak your interest
Or it's introductory dance of woe
What if it's voice and pain
Stain red and never grows

How they are always around others but somehow alone
Casted aside and nicknamed bad luck
Like the grande wings that stock its show

It breaches words unspoken
And leaves us speechless

As it talks of defeat
And is talked about
As if it is the comparison to all negatives
All death
All hated

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June 2020

“Vessel”

By Deborah Leipziger

My first visit to Jerusalem leads me
to iridescent glass vases
of the darkest purple
and waning blue
of green so pale
it seems the Dead Sea pours forth.

The colors bleed and blur like veins
moving and shifting
so that the very dripping is collected
remembered.

Deborah Leipziger is an author, poet, and professor. Flower Map is her first chapbook and is published by Finishing Line Press, <http://flowermap.net/> (June, 2013). Her poems have been featured in Salamander, Ibbetson Street, Voices Israel, Bagels with the Bards, and The Muddy River Poetry Review. Ms. Leipziger is the co-founder of Soul-Lit, an online journal for spiritual poetry. <http://soul-lit.com/> She is the author of several books on human rights and the environment, including The Corporate Responsibility Code Book, (Greenleaf, 2010).

July 2020

The summer of 2020 saw a racial awakening in our country. All folk, but especially White folk like myself, were called in a new way to reckon with the reality of racial inequities, injustices, prejudices, and microaggressions still pervading everyday spaces and sorely impacting our neighbors of color. I wrote the following poem back in 2010 within the really ripe first years of my racial identity journey. As a White woman, I am aware that the "water" I swim in places me and my culture at the center, as the norm. This centrism can lead to blindness and in my experience a far less rich life for me and far less just and whole life for others. In June 2020, I revisited this poem several times as a prayer of commitment and resilience to keep walking out from the center, to keep fighting for racial justice, and to keep building a circle where all can be seen and heard.

“ethnocentric Me”

By Shelton Oakley Hersey

within a circle, i'm the center. on a 12-inch ruler, i'm inch 6. in the space of a story, i'm in the middle. if i know anything or see, i know and see Me.

ethnocentrism... one word ethnocentrism... one effect, a doppler effect, a pyramid scheme: one word, one effect: blindness.

being in the center, shouldn't i be able to see everyone? yet being in the center, i can only see me. what about those around me? who are those just beyond my sight?

as soon as i bought into "me-ness" i sold stock in others. when will this end? how will this end? how can the end to my "me-ness" start with me?

because everyday i choose. and i choose you. so i walk away from the center and sit down on the edge. with every outward step, my eyes open to the horizon,

there they are - those who i never saw before! the hurt, the broken, the foreigner, the other, even the friend. a long journey out of the prison of the center...

a journey that may have started only with me, but a journey that ends and begins again
with You.

Shelton Oakley Hersey, has sought out, participated and facilitated spaces for reconciliation over the past decade. As the Dignity Project Program Director (a program of the Miller Center for Interreligious Learning & Leadership), she brings together emerging youth leaders of Greater Boston across differences, understanding the significant role in unlearning and relearning that which divides and unites us.

August 2020

“August”

By Mary Oliver

When the blackberries hang
swollen in the woods, in the brambles
nobody owns, I spend

all day among the high
branches, reaching
my ripped arms, thinking

of nothing, cramming
the black honey of summer
into my mouth; all day my body

accepts what it is. In the dark
creeks that run by there is
this thick paw of my life darting among

the black bells, the leaves; there is
this happy tongue.

Mary Jane Oliver (September 10, 1935 – January 17, 2019) was an American poet who won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Her work is inspired by nature, rather than the human world, stemming from her lifelong passion for solitary walks in the wild.



(Image Source: <https://www.creativeartworks.org/2020-social-justice-art>)

September 2020

“A Litany for Survival”

By Audre Lorde

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns

looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard

nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Audre Lorde (Feb 18, 1934 - Nov 17, 1992) was an American writer, feminist, womanist, librarian, and civil rights activist. She was a self-described "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," who dedicated both her life and her creative talent to confronting and addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, capitalism, heterosexism, and homophobia.

October 2020

“Untitled” (an excerpt)

By Andrea Bobadilla, Boston’s First Youth Poet Laureate

It’s not often life is forced to a halt
Forced to slow down on command ...
Brought to a screeching stop.
It’s not often the noise is called to a whisper
And the bustle reined in
Stay home
They say
Stay safe

Stay in...

The streets are fogged with quiet

Once busy roads are like a ghost town

Every human being walking, staying 6 feet distanced

It's a tragedy to the mind and soul

A break in the system.

Burdened busy bodies are used to

The torture of the routine we all once groaned to lift ourselves up to

Is now the routine we all crave

In these 4 walls, caught in my front yard,

I've been forced to be ever more in touch with myself.

[...] It's scary, but beautiful, to be attuned yet again with home

With the music deep within my spirit, the slow pace of my heartbeat pulsing

A reminder of the life in me that I don't enjoy enough -

The bittersweet cup of living

Caught up in the webs of society's do's and do-nots and success schemes,

The outside world does not have an answer for this one.

I think of this as an extended Ash Wednesday

A reminder that we are dust-formed and to dust we return.

A grim and real reminder that life is unpredictable -

That we cannot control it and that we should not try.

*For it is peaceful to ride the waves of uncertainty,
Than to scream for them to calm down.
Who are you to tell fate what to do?
[...] I see this time as a golden moment...
An opportunity to let the soul inside you to speak buried truths,
An opportunity to extend yourself beyond your limit,
To pick up old instruments from which you once found purpose,
To pick up old relationships with people you love -
that gave your heart a reason to keep pumping -
A chance to mend wounds that have been left unattended,
To bring light to places that have for so long been abandoned.*

Born and raised in Boston, MA for most of her life, Alondra Bobadilla found and nurtured her love for writing since she learned her first letters. She is a student at Fenway High School, and was named Boston's first-ever Youth Poet Laureate in January 2020. You can find the spoken word performance of her poem on Youtube, search for: "Boston's Youth Poet Laureate explores quarantine through poetry"

November 2020

“A Personal Story”

Joshua Greenberg

I am a grandson, son, brother, partner, student, devotee of all things food and drink, and proud Jew. My name is Joshua Doron, Raphael Beshert. I grew up in the foothills of the Poconos in Northeastern Pennsylvania, where my family hails from. Three out of my four

grandparents were born and raised in my home community, one I dearly love. Standing before the headstones, some now one hundred years old that bear the names of my not-so-distant ancestors, is something I was blessed to grow up with, something I realize not many others experience in our day. I'm the great-grandson of peddlers and dairy farmers just trying to make their way. I'm the grandson and nephew of coal miners and veterans, who put their lives on the line, had their bodies battered and broken in the hopes that their children, and their children's children would have the opportunities that I now in fact have and enjoy.

I grew up attending a small Orthodox Hebrew day school. While I was immersed in a traditionalist world early in my education, my home experience was nothing of the sort. Outside of the academic calendar I was raised in the Reform movement, attending shabbat and holiday services at our local Reform shul. It is where I had my bar mitzvah, as did my brother, and many of my relatives and friends. The tensions I felt growing up with one foot in both of these worlds was palpable. I learned early on of the discrepancies between the various approaches to Judaism. I often felt too "modern" for my day school and too "traditional" for my synagogue. Despite that though, I also learned from an early age that Jewish community – and I mean "it takes a village" kind of community – can easily transcend the surficial differences that the Jewish denominations, or really any community, experience. My bar mitzvah at the Reform synagogue was presided over by our woman rabbi and attended by my Roman-Catholic grandmother and my Lubavitcher heder rabbis alike, a scene of true community! It was from these experiences that set me on the path of being a rabbi.

After eighth grade I attended a Methodist high-school, then went off to start college at Yeshiva University. I withdrew from YU after my freshman year when finding the halls of that institution to be far too narrow for what the school claims to be. From there I went back home, did a semester at my community college, and then applied to and was accepted at Gettysburg College, where I enrolled in the Spring semester of my Sophomore year, and from where I ultimately graduated.

When it came time to apply to rabbinical school there was only one option for me to go to. Hebrew College best represents this short history of my life. Pluralism, a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, is what I grew up with even if I didn't realize it then. I hope to hold these many facets of my identity close to my heart for the rest of my life, pass them down, as well as add to them. Hopefully, and with the help of The One, I can one day be known not only as son, brother, student, but also dad, husband, and rabbi too.

Josh Greenberg is a fourth year rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Newton MA. He grew up in northeastern Pennsylvania and received bachelor's degree from Gettysburg College in religious studies. Josh is particularly interested in interfaith community building through dialogue and shared moments of ritual and spirituality with others from varying faith-based traditions.

December 2020

“Burning Bright”

By Preeta Banerjee, Ph.D.

Many feel cold,
isolated, alone,
and weary in the fold.
Yet there is no room,
left dark,
From the presence,
of my spark,
Fire is my gift
Burning Bright,
I uplift.

Ignorance a cage
a net,
Not allowed to change
that keeps some stuck
Yet my strength,
applied with heart,
pushes on

love is my art,
Fire is my gift
Burning Bright,
I uplift.

Preeta Banerjee, Ph.D. is a spiritual companion who draws on a broad and deep range of experience, having spent over 20 years in academia, coaching and consulting as an advocate, educator, researcher and author. She is a strong voice for combining spirituality, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and social change.

January 2021

“The Hill We Climb”*

By Amanda Gorman

When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade
We've braved the belly of the beast
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace
And the norms and notions
of what just is
Isn't always just-ice
And yet the dawn is ours
before we knew it
Somehow we do it
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a nation that isn't broken
but simply unfinished
We the successors of a country and a time
Where a skinny Black girl

descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one
And yes we are far from polished
far from pristine
but that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect
We are striving to forge a union with purpose
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and
conditions of man
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us
but what stands before us
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another
We seek harm to none and harmony for all
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
That even as we grieved, we grew
That even as we hurt, we hoped
That even as we tired, we tried
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious
Not because we will never again know defeat
but because we will never again sow division
Scripture tells us to envision
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree
And no one shall make them afraid
If we're to live up to our own time
Then victory won't lie in the blade
But in all the bridges we've made
That is the promise to glade
The hill we climb
If only we dare
It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit,
it's the past we step into
and how we repair it

We've seen a force that would shatter our nation
rather than share it
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy
And this effort very nearly succeeded
But while democracy can be periodically delayed
it can never be permanently defeated
In this truth
in this faith we trust
For while we have our eyes on the future
history has its eyes on us
This is the era of just redemption
We feared at its inception
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
of such a terrifying hour
but within it we found the power
to author a new chapter
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves
So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?
Now we assert
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be
A country that is bruised but whole,
benevolent but bold,
fierce and free
We will not be turned around
or interrupted by intimidation
because we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation
Our blunders become their burdens
But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy
and change our children's birthright
So let us leave behind a country

better than the one we were left with
Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one
We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west,
we will rise from the windswept northeast
where our forefathers first realized revolution
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states,
we will rise from the sunbaked south
We will rebuild, reconcile and recover
and every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful
When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it

Amanda S. C. Gorman is an American poet and activist. Her work focuses on issues of oppression, feminism, race, and marginalization, as well as the African diaspora. Gorman was the first person to be named National Youth Poet Laureate. * This specific spoken-word poem was performed by Amanda at the Presidential Inauguration in January 2021.

February 2021

“Kozma Street Cemetery”

By Maayan Falk-Judson

I cracked my knuckles and fidgeted, unable to sit still in my cramped airplane seat. My family was on a nine hour plane flight to Hungary, the place where my grandmother had grown up. I took a deep breath and thought about what my parents had said when I asked why

we were going. My dad had told me it was so I “Could have a sense of my own history.” Whereas my mom lectured that I would “Understand more about my grandmother’s life.” I, myself, was interested in seeing places that I had only heard about in stories before. I knew the real reason my nerves kept me awake, was that not only was Hungary the place my grandmother grew up it was also the place she was forced out of, and then her family was killed.

After we had exited the plane and settled into our hotel in Budapest we headed out. The whole family piled into our Hertz rental car and were on our way to the cemetery where my great-grandfather was buried, Kozma street cemetery. As we walked farther and farther into the graveyard the graves got smaller and were in greater states of disrepair. We knew that he was buried in a mass grave in the way back of the cemetery. It slowly dawned on me when we arrived at his section, and I saw the thousands of graves with numerous names on each one that we might not actually be able to find his name. My family searched up and down the rows looking for where his plaque was located. It was like finding a needle in a haystack. The longer we searched the more the ever-present smile on my grandmother’s face drooped, and I was afraid that she would not get to see her father’s grave.

After 30 minutes, searching was starting to turn almost desperate, we finally found the plaque, a little bit rusted, but clear enough to read his name, Eliezer Bodek. Right next to his name stood three men - an elderly man and what turned out to be his two sons - decked out in black hats and coats. The cemetery stretched for miles and miles with probably ten thousand graves and as far as I could see we were the only people there. So naturally, we started talking to each other. They were from Borough Park in Brooklyn, a Hasidic enclave. “Oh, that’s interesting,” my grandmother said in her Hungarian accented English, “because my mother lived in Borough Park, and my sister is a Satmar Hasid [part of the Hasidic sect].” They asked my grandmother what her name was again. And all at once, it felt like some strange puzzle being fit together. One of them took a deep breath, and said to grandmother, “I know this is crazy, but not 17 minutes ago I called your brother to tell him I was looking at her father’s grave, Eliezer Bodek.” At that moment I was in a state of shock, the world felt smaller, and I instantly felt closer to the three strangers we had just met.

My grandmother began talking to the older man about his experiences in the holocaust and they started comparing stories about their time in the camps. They realized that their fathers had been killed in the same place and spent their last days walking the death march together. While they were conversing in the middle of the sadness of our location and their history, their faces lit up. I’ll never forget the looks on their faces and the instant connection between them, that only people who had endured the same tragedies could experience.

At the end of the trip, I think seeing the thousands of graves was not as powerful as meeting those men and seeing that even in trauma there was still community to be found.

Maayan Falk-Judson is a junior at Newton North High School. She is also a member of the Newton Centre Minyan, and enjoys running and reading.

March 2021

“Patient”

By Kim Bress

I can't see
the seas that stretch before me.
I don't know who else
I may meet.
When you see me -
I don't know what you see.
The heaviness of my eyes.
The beat of my heart
as it weathers the passing time?
Patiently.
With me.

Kimberly Bress is the Assistant Director of The Dignity Project, an initiative of the Miller Center for Interreligious Leadership & Learning at Hebrew College. Kim has a background in Zen Buddhism, including several years of full-time monastic training, and has been a leader in grassroots organizing efforts that incorporate meditation as a tool for social change.

Closing Gratitude

An Excerpt from her poem, “Dark Matter”

By Manon Voice

like god speaking into the dark matter
of the universe on the first day there
has always been blackness first and
everything everything everything is a
shadow of our miracle

Manon Voice is a word revolutionary living in Indiana. She is a poet, spoken word artist, hip hop emcee, and social justice activist. Manon uses her voice as a revolutionary medium. She uses her voice to speak up, confront systemic issues, and uplift.

Maayan, Grace and Preeta would like to acknowledge Manon’s guidance and appreciate her work.