

## **How Do We Get Free - Embodied Trauma and Healing in Church and Movement Spaces**

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According to the *Manual on Ministry*, Members-in-Discernment are encouraged to move beyond the “specific skills, qualities and competencies” and to embrace the Marks as a way “to help to paint a picture of a person’s initial preparation for an ongoing formation in authorized ministry”. We are called to pay attention to the fact that “the individual marks do not remain in place as stagnant elements of a picture; they tumble and shift and influence other marks, growing and reshaping across one’s journey in Christian discipleship and in authorized ministry”. And so with that in mind, you will discover the way i approached writing this Marks of Ministry paper might be different from others that have been submitted. Join me in the tumbling and shifting of these Marks in order to paint a picture of the dreams to co-create a spiritual community that seeks healing and freedom to re-imagine the ways in which we follow the ways in the path of Jesus before his birth all the way through the tomorrows still to come.

i chose to write the majority of this Marks of Ministry paper in letter format, although not all Marks are expressed in that manner. Historically, letters have been an important tool and source of not only biographical information, but also a creative approach to allowing the person writing the letter, the time in which to fully embody what is being expressed as well as a way to truthfully “say” or share the most difficult of emotions. Letters allow the reader to peek behind the curtain and experience a sense of intimate knowledge and witness the growth of the person writing the letter. The letters of prophets, poets, and other writers allow the readers to find the harmony between the contextual research of what is asked as well as the artistic interpretation of the writer. Letters are often the most intimate of self-expression, allowing the writer and the reader to engage in realities in new and exciting ways.

With that, i hope you give me the grace to share my understanding and experiences of how i will engage in the craft of ministry on and in behalf of the United Church of Christ through this time honored tradition. Please note that all of the Marks are listed separately except for the *Mark of Nurturing UCC Identity* - which is woven into each of the Marks as well as noted in my conclusion.

### **Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions**

*“It cannot be denied that too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the strong and the powerful and against the weak and oppressed-this, despite the gospel.” -Howard Thurman*

For where i'm at right now, my understanding of this Mark can be expressed with an understanding of my relationship to a continual learning praxis through academic endeavors and the opportunities to preach or present in public forums. Much of my continuing education explorations and moments where i've been invited to preach or present, can be found in my Curriculum Vitae but for now, i'll focus on a few monumental and transformative experiences and opportunities.

i'm am actively participating as a Former Fellow with the Faith & Justice Network (formerly the Newbigin House). This fellowship program is based out of the Bay Area but engages Christian practitioners from across the world. Here is a little summary about the program from the Executive Director, Rev. Peter Choi:

“In the beginning, G-d made the world good. It's a beautiful opening we have in the Bible, even if much of what follows is hard to understand. After all, none of us has the whole story. What we do know is that the way of Jesus and the work of justice are two prominent themes of scripture we can ill afford to ignore in this world of beauty and sorrow. And so together, the Faith & Justice Network are seeking faith through different perspectives and learning justice, which is another way of saying we are pursuing a more beautiful, diverse, expansive, and liberating vision of Christian faith at work in the world.”

We gather bi-weekly and monthly with theologians and practitioners from across the world to delve into matters related to Christianity and its interactions and impacts on those living on Mother Earth. We are made up of all faith expressions, gender identities, theological pinnings, and ages.

If i had not known better, the Fellowship appears to have been modeled by the tenants of the United Church of Christ in regards to its practices and beliefs of an Extravagant Welcome, Continuing Testament, and the process of changing lives. It's not an exaggeration to state this particular experience has been so fulfilling for me - i was witness to how during the racial tensions of 2020 along with the COVID-19 pandemic and the awakening to Cis-white patriarchal approaches to Christianity, the Fellows engaged deeply in learning what an extravagant welcome looked and felt like as well as how the fellowship deeply changed many of us.

Personally, where i felt hollowed out by my experience with Seminary, i've found a deep engagement with this learning and bonding experience. my experience and dance with the

teachings during the Fellowship helped me to reimagine how to interact with the New Testament and New Testament contemporary thought supported by theologians. Our time together encourages Fellows to critically engage in better understanding the history of Christianity and its impact on society, especially to those with whom Jesus most interacted.

i've also recently participated as a Fellow with Transformative Programs, a program associated with The Embody Lab. This foundational program was a 3-month online program that explored how we embody unjust social conditions, how oppression affects our relationship with our body, and how we can harness the body's wisdom in making our social justice work more grounded, responsive, and sustainable. It accomplished this by bringing together seasoned practitioners, elders, and community change agents to share strategies and offer tools in the collective work of transforming our bodies and our world.

i, as well as others, were led by practitioners working at the intersection of embodiment and social justice, meeting twice a week in online classes, practical workshops, and integrative learning conversations that culminated in a collaborative creative project focused on real-world applications. my creative project was explored and expressed through the co-development of the monthly Hope Healing Humanity Circles hosted by AZ Faith Network. This experience opened me up to embodying the passion for the oneness of the Body of Christ while seeking to understand and engage in continual healing work - both personally and communally.

While both of these programs offered additional reading sources specific to the topics, it also encouraged exploration in and with other mediums in which to enhance our experiences. For me, i didn't want to be stuck in front of a ZOOM screen or inside the pages of a book more than i needed to be, so i started exploring the outside world again. i found myself in hospital rooms with those who serve the Sheriff's department and in churches that are open as Heat Respite Centers, on the phone with callers of the San Francisco Night Ministry, my students and comrades, womxn inside Perryville Prison, and strangers on public transportation. i'm learning in real-time what it means to combine embodiment practices with spirituality or an understanding of what it means to be a brick in the bridge of G-d's love.

With all that i'm engaged in, i've been a direct witness to many of those who are unhoused, identify as LGBTQIA, and others who have shared with me about their experiences of being harmed by a Patriarchal White American practice of Christianity. What i'm learning is trauma runs deeper and can appear to be felt more intensely than what G-d's love can. This breaks me open in a lot of ways. Because of those shared vulnerable moments, i'm continually looking for new ways in which the United Church of Christ can not only recognize our roles in those moments where we proclaim a faith that causes harm but also

to help heal ourselves and then walk alongside others as they journey towards healing the trauma they've accumulated. How i help to continue to explore what this means for me and the congregation and community that i serve in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ is what excites me the most. Experiencing what we as a denomination continue to do to evolve is a journey i embrace and am excited to help cultivate.

Regarding my own practice of preaching and teaching, i've been blessed with the opportunity to explore my craft and to be held with Grace by the congregation at Church of the Beatitudes. i know they have been challenged with some of my sermons and yet, they have been kind in allowing me space to learn and grow. Also, i'm now in the post-experience of serving as a Pastoral Apprentice with Encanto Community United Church of Christ - and what a time to have served in this role! That experience was fulfilling in a lot of ways. i was able to experience a new congregation with an active youth program as well as experience what it takes to come into a new congregation that was welcoming of my approach while knowing our shared time together was temporary. To find harmony with knowing nothing outside of brief stories of the congregation and their history, i had to explore a theology while being true to my practice and also welcoming to all different perspectives. i also had to learn how to not invite change or even introduce all the ways in which they can enhance their mission work beyond the church's building and rest in the fact that even in temporary settings, honoring what was done and what was to come was the best practice.

This church was 100% different than Church of the Beatitudes as well as my experiences working with The Fountains UMC. my ability to allow the Spirit to work through me in order to learn how to be patient, flexible, and a leader with a listening ear and to love alongside others was enhanced in ways i'm still dissecting.

To myself and to those i hope to serve and walk alongside, i'll commit myself to continue learning and understanding the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament. my interactions and experiences engaging with these stories have always occurred through Seminary or in church bible studies and more recently with Podcasts. Yes, i mentioned Podcasts... i'm a consumer of Podcasts and find in lieu of gathering in-person with people during the confinement times of the pandemic, i was held and encouraged to learn more through the guests and moderators of those programs. With all of this institutional learning, i know, for me, learning more about G-d's love for all living creatures cannot happen in solitude. my practice of learning more about our ancient texts and stories as a way to guide our today and our tomorrow, must happen in community and i'll forever be an advocate of that kind of curious exploration.

i think it's important to note here as well i'm a 5 on the Enneagram. i first learned about the Southwest Conference's belief in the practice and importance of the Enneagram in 2019 and not too long after, i participated in a leadership fellowship program through Vitalyst Health in which we had to take the Enneagram assessment in order to help guide our learning. According to the Enneagram Institute,

“the personality type Five is named The Investigator because, more than any other type, Fives want to find out why things are the way they are. They want to understand how the world works, whether it is the cosmos, the microscopic world, the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdoms—or the inner world of their imaginations. They are always searching, asking questions, and delving into things in depth. They do not accept received opinions and doctrines, feeling a strong need to test the truth of most assumptions for themselves,” ([Enneagram Type 5](#)).

What this means is, i truly embody the characteristic associated with that and they are: i am alert, insightful, and curious. i'm able to concentrate and focus on developing complex ideas and skills by being independent, innovative, and inventive. And without a doubt, i want to always seek out knowledge, especially when it comes to my craft. i believe in order to better understand the New Testament, i must attempt to understand the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament through the history, types of writing, the language used, the political motivations at the time, and the experiences of those most impacted by all of the social conditions. What i have discovered about myself during this time of discernment is that i also want to learn more about the voices we do not hear in the Scriptures - what can they or do they provide us with today, and how can we highlight those experiences to shed light on the importance of what it means for us to live alongside one another while proclaiming our love for Christ.

i also know each time i craft a sermon, i get a little better. my goal with my sermon telling is to become more of a storyteller and one day i'll get there as i gain my trail eyes (see re; in Spiritual Journey paper). In regards of what to preach, much of what other Pastors have shared with me seems to make more sense to me now that i'm creating each week. For instance, what is our role to communicate and connect the congregation to what is happening in our world right now to how much do i want to craft my sermons as to become a “Peleton Pep Coach”... perhaps it's a combination of both or more. i've worked at this by participating with storytelling exercises as well as taking an online course in the Fall of 2022 called, “Sermon Camp: How to Write a Sermon by Friday” through Faith + Lead Academy.

The texts and theologians that have most formed who i'm today and how those connect to bringing forth the Good News of G-d and G-d's Love have been Womanist, Black, and Liberation Theologies and Theologians - womxn inside Perryville - and random folx i have met through small divine interactions. While this may not always be the case, i've now embodied the theology of freedom in everything i do. i pray as i continue on this ordination endeavor, those i walk alongside engage in the winding path of co-creating a sense of freedom and dignity for all those that Jesus walked, talked, ate, and drank with.

### **Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Practice**

*"Theology is not disembodied or atemporal. On the contrary, theology is the attempt to express the word of the Lord in the language of today - in the categories of a particular time and place," Gustavo Gutierrez*

Dear Creator G-d,

i've struggled much throughout my life searching for what it means to identify as Your Child.

Early on i found myself really confused at why You were given the characteristics of a loving and all-knowing, all-powerful G-d who would allow bad things to happen to your children. And, at the same time, finding myself falling in love with the image of a Son who was amongst the sheep and the shepherders. And let's be clear, i've never understood this thing called the Holy Ghost... at least not until recently.

It took being in the presence with womxn whose only hope centered around the Love You filled them with even in the confined prison cells they inhabited. When writing my required Spiritual Journey paper, the whole process had me feeling as if i was stuck in newly created mud around the base of a cactus after a fresh monsoon rain - too afraid to move - too afraid of what comes next.

Did this "call" need to happen like with so many stories of mystics or prophets - or did i need to hear You speak to me directly? How am i to prove to other humans what i hear or feel when i'm aware of Your presence? How can i prove my "call" is one that is divinely guided and furthermore, i'll or it'll be this way for the whole time i tend and serve alongside Your people?

Right now, part of my call is to flesh out what it means to be comfortable expressing to "church folx" about how i don't *only* feel Your presence in a church setting. In fact, as You know, for me, it rarely happens there. i feel Your guidance, Your presence in literature, in nature, in the moments of the exchange of Love and Grace with others, and in hindsight, even in the moments of consternation and harm. Of late, i understand how Your mercies

are meaningless without Your justice. And the concept of justice has no bearing if You cannot be offended. i embrace Your presence in all spaces and in all times - even if those times are prayers for, moments during, or reflections upon.

The verb “to call” in Hebrew is *yiqra*. Like the English verb, it can mean many things - to summon, to proclaim, to be invited. i’ve been invited to use my gifts and my curiosity to continue to walk alongside others in this process of life, collectively. i pray much gratitude to You for allowing nature and humans and literature and storms and poverty and brokenness and love and grace and kindness help me embody being human, being one of many. You show this to me over and over again - all through the times when i didn’t want to listen - i was invited into the space of discovery of what it means to be alongside others... to explore what it means to be a part of something much larger than i’ll ever really get to understand.

One long common thread in my life has been the desire to teach, to learn, to explore, to dialogue, and put that collective growth into action. What has grown from these moments now, is the curiosity about what it means to be alive in the world and the spaces i find myself in to embody and exude a Liberating Love that each of us are given with our first breath. At the current moment, those spaces and moments happen through my outreach to communities experiencing homelessness by learning the story of someone’s name and the dialogue around what dignity means to us; exploring freedom from a theology practiced beyond the walls of confinement where the sin of someone’s worst moment of their life is worn like the cross carried upon Jesus’ shoulders; in the learning more about the ways humans impact the environment and desire for land occupation that forces human migration; when sitting in the “in-between” spaces with congregation members and faith practitioners who aren’t a part of any institutional church; and all of this while struggling with the theology of what Your Love really means in these real lived experiences. i know that these moments aren’t here forever and i’ve got to be comfortable with the “what next and the yes, and”.

These are the invitations You have given me - a purpose and a passion that has been a nagging feeling and it hasn’t gone away. Like Octavia Butler’s protagonist in her “Parable” series, Lauren Olamina, i’m not creating anything new, i’m discovering what was there all along - antiquity, growth, justice, love, and liberation. And in that, learning what it means to bring others with me - summoning of all to better understand how to live a life knowing one is loved and what our collective roles as a church are beyond charity.

If You haven’t noticed, i’m all the way “leaning into” the journey or the invitation to the still speaking You who continues to show me the presence and the call in all things and all beings.

Saying yes to this invitation prior to COVID-19 and now deeply exploring this invitation in the midst of this global calamity, has led me to better understand my journey is one centered in liberation and justice through action and deep study of the written text. And, to one of understanding my “divine” invitation is really one that centers Your Love to discover how to be with people in the spaces of the in-between of life (however each of us define that) - to practice collective healing and to embark on the journey of understanding - towards freedom.

To be named is to be summoned into being and to name is to participate in this project of living. G-d, please continue to show Yourself in the rivers and the valleys and in the brokenness and the blending together. Keep my heart open Dear Lord, to be wise enough to slow down to feel Your work deep within and to observe Your work in and through others. As i continue to embark in the embodiment practices, working with my therapist and my spiritual director, know i see and feel Your presence and yearn for Your tears in the form of the nourishing rain that fills our senses with new life, new opportunities and possibilities.

Your Humble Servant,

Ellie

### **Building Transformational Leadership Skills**

*"So much of the journey depends on our frame of mind and perspective. We can dedicate our whole lives to a practice without ever being open to its teaching. We can spend countless hours reading the sacred texts, chanting the prayers or living in silence, but never discover gifts of gratitude, service and love. The path of awakening is carved not by the years we live in self-denial but in the lessons we learn in radical acceptance." - Cameron Trimble*

Dear Future Church,

Please forgive the forwardness of writing a letter to a congregation i've yet to meet and to be in relationship with, for this letter is to serve as evidence of a step taken to envision a future from just a singular perspective.

In recent years, i found myself embedded in an abolitionist endeavor that utilizes the methodologies of the humanities to understand freedom. One of the guiding statements one comrade uses is, “creating the conditions/possibilities...” When i first heard this statement, i thought to myself it would make a good bio line for a social media post but what does it really mean?



i've found myself in varying organizing circles over the last 8-years and this is evident in my extensive Curriculum Vitae. From Arizona rural community arts and humanities cultivation to a Women's prison to helping to facilitate the need and start of the Welcome Center (now run by the International Rescue Committee) to advocating for the dignity of those who are currently unhoused or experiencing homelessness - i realize this is a great line to embody in order to practice empowerment of the collective as well as being flexible with whatever the outcome. And, this is exactly what i and others have experienced.

The approach we took in these endeavors varied is one i'll continue to model and explore better practices in future organizing and work settings. For me, the question or the drive behind co-creating a new way of living has opened up the many ways we may associate the concept and experience of freedom. How we use exploration and being curious while supporting one another towards a dream of a future that each collective has imagined, has been empowering and awe inspiring to see what comes into fruition - and each of them is different. You see, there is no prescription or one-size-fits all no matter how much our sensibilities crave that type of model. Afterall, isn't this the very model of the United Church of Christ?

From a religious perspective, particularly from a Christian perspective and throughout our Ancient text, i've discovered the Love G-d displays through all the hard and traumatic stories to the acts of Jesus being truly present with people is how we must move forward. This is how we learn how to embody the Spirit. This is a type of Love that creates the conditions/possibilities for another way of imagining freedom. Freedom to be - Freedom to Love - Freedom to fail - Freedom to succeed - Freedom of Rest - Freedom to ask the hard questions and to be held - Freedom to explore what our relationship to power could and should be -Freedom to move beyond "history repeating itself".

While this Embodiment of Love or of Spirituality may be my call, i know it may not be the call of the congregation that calls me to serve them, and that is okay - for i believe in co-creating the conditions for a process of becoming and being relational to each other by breaking through the imaginary borders we have created to feel safe or to feel loved. This means we must move beyond ourselves and into a collective space for any of this to really work. We have to learn how to be vulnerable and held. Perhaps this means imagining a church which reaches beyond the building's walls and property, beyond our own hesitations and beliefs that were formed to deem who is worthy of the dignity of G-d's love, and to grow through the hard and the good while embodying the Spirit of transformation and freedom.

And, we have to do all this while living in a world where we need to do paperwork...justify our actions through bureaucratic means...to participate in capitalism...to actively be aware

of the harm we cause others who are different than ourselves and to take the steps necessary to heal ourselves when we cause harm and when the same harm has been inflicted on us and then work towards transformation. And, as history has demonstrated over and over, we must continue to do all this while the world is shattering around us, exposing our faults and our weaknesses just as the morning light that bursts through night's skies does every morning.

Within the "packet of information" required for this ordination process, you will see examples of the work i've done around cultivating "transformational leadership" all laid out in a nice Curriculum Vitae but what you won't see is that all of this has been guided and nurtured by the ancestors who came before me, the mystics and prophets here on Mother Earth now, and the dreams of a world for those who come after my time here.

Comrades, Beloved Community, we can't do this alone, nor should we want to. The magic that happens when we support others, when we feel supported, when we allow the Spirit to come into our lives and open up the possibilities is immeasurable. i look forward to the opportunity to give Grace and to be held by your Grace.

In All that Shatters and Becomes New-

ellie

### **Participating in Theological Praxis**

*"Truth is embedded in the stories, songs, dances, sermons, paintings, and sayings of our peoples. Because many of us learned how to do theology in European and North American universities and seminaries, we have had to be converted to a radically new way of doing theology," James H. Cone.*

i believe in all the places i find G-d or the Spirit, i'm asked to pay attention with all of my senses. As a writer and someone who embodies a Spirituality of Justice, the gift i am most in tune with is the gift to pay attention to my senses - as Liturgist Cole Arthur Riles states, "my spirituality has always been given to contemplation before anyone articulated what exactly 'contemplative' was," (Cole, viii). For me, the gift of paying attention to one's senses means one has to engage and practice the art of slowing down.

Not everyone's senses experience the same thing, which is a beautiful expression of how we are different because we can't control our senses - they are because they are. How we come to experience them and then communicate them to ourselves and others allows us to fully engage with one another's experience through listening and engaging with others' stories, learning about their rituals, attempting to understand their beliefs - discovering what they

are passionate about and what makes them fearful. All of these experiences aren't devoid of our senses.

For this mark, i invite you to read how i experience and interact with my own sense of slowing down to pay attention to my senses and how that process informs my growing theological praxis. And so, please allow me the space to share brief stories of how the recognition of my senses ties into my theological praxis.

*i have got a favorite sound.* In every place i've lived or visited, i've always found a way to nestle by a tree. While without wind, one may not pay attention to the sound a tree makes but it doesn't mean it doesn't make a sound. In fact, trees' radiant sounds are always a multitude of sounds in harmony with the life in, on, and around them. "Trees make symphonies without their trunks, ever moving, almost as if the stillness of their centers amplifies their sound," (Cole, vii).

With a gentle touch, the bark moves under one's hands making the sound of brushing a book across a smooth table. There is a gentle deep hollow sound a tree makes when touching it or when an animal moves about on it. In the winter time in Philadelphia, tree branches snapping from the weight of the snow or of ice makes the slow piercing cracking sound followed by a soft thud. And the wind, oh G-d how the wind assists in magnifying the shuffling and caressing harmony between the wind and the leaves and the leaves and the leaves and the leaves and the stems.

*i find myself a bit jealous of the life sustaining things around and beneath the roots of trees, for i wonder what types of sounds mushrooms hear from trees?*

You see, the thing about my favorite sound - the sounds of trees - doesn't happen in solitude, for it happens in harmony with all the things around it. This very relationship is how i embody teaching, preaching, and leadership. We are convivial people living in a convivial world, even though American Christianity and American political life douses us with ideas and practices of individuality. i can't teach if i don't know how to listen. i can't preach if i don't know how to listen. i can't lead if i don't know how to listen. This is why the sounds of trees are such great metaphors for the type of person i've almost always been and for what and how i'll strive to be within faith communities and without faith communities.

What kind of being am i if i don't honor the many sounds our Mother Creator gives me everyday?

*i have a favorite sight.* The shadows that clouds cast onto Mother Earth - the shadows of people moving about - shadows of buildings on the concrete below or against other buildings - the shadows of pool waves against a set of indoor window blinds - the fluttering shadows of leaves dancing in the wind.

i once had a fortune cookie fortune that read: "If i wanted people to nod in agreement with me, then i'd just look at my own shadow." In fact, it might be the only type of shadow i don't like at this stage of living and being curious. i desire to cultivate varying moving shadows that surround me. The shadows of people and living creatures have different shapes - ways of moving - ways of reacting and responding - ways of joining together in order to feel as if i'm truly a part of the human condition or even a part of this human experiment.

*i have a favorite taste.* The taste of any food not cooked by me! Kidding aside, my favorite taste is when i remember to slow down and take my time enjoying the food or drink in front of me. i'm not sure if it's growing up with siblings, or working retail, or being on the move with my son as a single mother all those years, but i truly struggle with slowing down while eating. And in that, i miss out on honoring the labor that went into growing and caring for the food, picking and then packaging it, even those who drive long nights on America's open road to drive and deliver from one destination to another to cutting and cooking it, and plating and serving it.

And that is what tasting something truly is for me. The slowing down to honor the labor. There are stories baked, steamed or sauteed into every crevice of the food if only my cravings would communicate with the rest of my body to slow down and to pay attention. i've had moments of recognizing the taste of something when i'm hearing the stories about it and those moments become memories which become embodied in the way i move and communicate in the world.

*i have a favorite smell.* For one long year, i was a long-term substitute for a 3rd and 4th grade classroom in a school on the Eastside of Phoenix... that year was **not** my favorite year of smelling, at least not while being in the classroom. i say that with some humor because it was that very year where those 3rd and 4th graders and i would rush out of the school building when we knew the rains were coming. We loved being in the rain with all of our senses being awakened and coming alive. The contrast of the smell of maturing little humans in the process of growing up to the smells the rains brought to our desert couldn't have been more glaring and more on point. That is when i began a new stage of understanding about how two opposite things can exist at the same time and those two opposites can be beautiful even in their contrasts.

Petrichor is the name given to the smell of rain in the Sonoran Desert. i can't pinpoint the exact reason why i love that smell so much because there are so many reasons... like really, so many reasons. For me, it is the sense of smell opening up all the possibilities of living. Smells bring back memories, helps to place us in time and space, helps us imagine... to dream. So many endless possibilities.

*i have a favorite feeling...* well, i've so many favorite feelings which build memories upon one another like Uno cards piling up in the discarded pile. Just like those Uno cards, my favorite feelings share similarities in color or shape; there are feelings that are skipped and reversed only to create new or recall old memories and experiences; and there are feelings that are doubled or quadrupled when they are experienced out in the open with others.

Right now, my favorite feeling is the feeling i get when learning alongside others - whether it's in my GED classrooms, with womxn inside Perryville prison, or with the congregations that trust me to engage in the larger theological questions about G-d, Jesus, and why we are all here or when i am hanging with my comrades and dear chosen family. Each time i find myself in these spaces, the feelings remind me of the first time i get to recommend a book or a song or a television show or a movie that inspired, moved, or motivated me. There are childlike goosebumps building under the skin, that kind of feeling happens when we allow ourselves to be curious and open to the rough moments of learning something, sitting with it, and then making it our own to live with or to discard.

It's in these spaces where i feel most alive. It's in these spaces where G-d's presence - Sister Spirit - guides me to better understand what it means to be alive and in community with others.

i believe the practice of slowing down allows me to explore varying types of theological reflections that evolve as i will. i also pray the modeling and practice of slowing down will invite the congregation i am invited into, to integrate theological reflection beyond our shared time together and help to reimagine a way of living and practicing our Christian principles across all sectors of life - to build on what the United Church of Christ has been and continues to be in our world - a denomination that seeks to repair brokenness and transform the ways in which we each hear and experience G-d still speaking.

### **Strengthening Intra-Inter personal Assets**

*"In the Hebrew conception of the world, all of creation is connected. The well-being of the whole depends on the well-being of each individual part...[they] understood goodness to be located between things," Lisa Sharon Harper*

Dear Self,

Oh how you have grown. When putting together my Spiritual Journey paper, i was given the opportunity to discover i did indeed have common threads that wove together a fascinating story of self. This fascinating story of self begins with self-doubt influenced by a patriarchal small town mentality and is sprinkled in with some good ole Protestant work ethic and healing found in an embodied community and an embodied practice of learning and growing.

i remember when i was in my early 20s, the early stages of motherhood and discovering who i was - modulating between trying to hide i was a young single mother in a world where everyone around us was married, making a lot of money, and appearing to be successful in the world. i remember being so embarrassed by my situation, i scraped together some extra cash to purchase a cubic zirconia ring in order to "show" the world, i, too, was a part of what made womxn and mothers "successful".

It was around this time, and i don't remember specifically what happened, i found myself on my knees bawling... no, sobbing while in the shower asking for G-d to. just. give. us. a. break. At that time, and perhaps to some degree still to this day, i believe all that happens in life is a lesson to be learned from. And from this experience i fell into a deep period of being numb. i don't remember feeling a presence or a lack of presence of G-d or the Spirit for a bit of time - i was just existing. What was happening though, was more than moving 2000+ miles to a city i knew nothing about - i was learning how to be with G-d in more than all the ways i was taught. And reflecting back on it now, this is when i learned what being in community looks like.

And then it happened. G-d reappeared in our lives but this time teaching us through abundance and not scarcity.

Although my son and i had nothing of material wealth or even that matter, any financial stability, what we had was the kindness of acquaintances and a certain sense of grit to make it all happen. We got to experience the natural beauties of Arizona and what i've come to understand now, a sense of desire to transcend boundaries and borders. Both of us learned how to dream and imagine a new way of living - just the two of us surrounded by the helping and guiding hands of coaches, neighbors, co-workers, and barbers. It was really a community together helping to raise us.

Self, do you remember all the long Thursday evening drives and Saturday morning hikes with Zeffy to attend the Sons of Singles programs held through the local Methodist church? Oh it was a struggle to get him to go but then, by the grace of G-d, he found his rhythm and his confidence and began to break free of his shell. And then there were the barbers at the

local Black barber shop that helped to introduce me to a new way of parenting a young Black son and taught him about culture and language and laughter in ways that were deeply rooted into a sense of something deeper than either of us could understand.

Oh, and the writing classes... do you remember the writing classes, Self? You discovered gifts you never knew you had. i still believe it made us better humans - more observant of how the Spirit moves in and through life. Yes, it was the Spirit or at least the sense of Spirit that i currently understand today. It was an energy that drove me to want to love everyone and everything in the midst of an elementary understanding of being alive in my 30s with a teenage child. The writing also helped open up a path to discovering shared stories and the paths of so many not given an opportunity to express themselves.

This discovery of writing helped to connect me to many things at the time, that hadn't revealed themselves to me yet. Writing and the process of writing was the one thing i was able to engage in and it helped to expand my scope, my perspective and more importantly, it cultivated a desire to slow down and to go deeper into life. Writing took me to college and then to seminary and then to art school and then to start my own writing program. Writing helped me get through the deep dark times of lost loves and struggles of a strained parent-child relationship. Writing with womxn incarcerated inside Perryville Prison helped to connect me to the Divine in ways i could've never appreciated through my religious upbringing or even my formal seminary education.

And then, my world seem to crash around me. Do you remember what you felt Self, when your close relationship with your son seemed like a distant memory? Do you remember what it felt like to have a lover betray you? To have Seminary hollow you out and no one to help and guide you in where G-d was? Do you remember finding salvation in a job only to be falsely accused of being untrustworthy by a boss who had just received a glowing review of your work by the National governing body? Do you remember losing contact with all the womxn inside the prison? Do you remember feeling as if all you were was a victim?

And by the Grace of G-d, i turned to therapy. i discovered the varying ways of connecting to my trauma and somewhat (it's still a process) embracing my "emperor has no clothes" attitude in toxic community organizing and religious spaces. i learned what it meant to be a white Womxn and how that not only impacts the communities i walk alongside but how it impacts my own sense of self. i learned what it meant to be a Queer Womxn - meaning i could finally define Queer and call myself that out loud.

It took all those rough, hard-to-explain moments to turn back to G-d. And not the G-d i grew up believing. This was a G-d that invited me to be in relationship - to be open towards

discovering what i now call an embodied spirituality. To be open to being with all of Creation in the moments of the in-between.

Self, you made it - whatever "it" is - you are here. Present in the now. Present with self and all the bodily and emotional reactions to living in a world broken apart - lost, lonely, confused, harmed, and not understanding what healing could be like.

Whatever might come, you are present in the broken world that waits in the darkness for the light that is me.

Love,

ellie

### **Working Together for Justice and Mercy**

*"We should try to live in such a way that if the Gospels were lost, they could be re-written by looking at us." Anthony Bloom*

When i first developed an outline for this paper, my goal was to save this 'Mark of Ministry' for last as it was going to be the easiest of marks to write about since my very existence breathes and bleeds justice and mercy. To provide some transparency, i feel this particular 'Mark' encourages a pompous declaration of some type and well... at this stage of life (and this has not and is not always the case), i do not feel as if i'm ready to talk about my own attempts to walk alongside comrades whose very lives depend on a new definition and praxis of freedom. So, my approach for this 'Mark' is not a letter as you have seen in the previous 'Marks' but stories told by others who have the advantage of seeing me in my blindspots - seeing and encouraging me to move in a more equitable and transformative way. And for this gift of their stories and reflections of me, i'm grateful and humbled.

*"You have demonstrated these two areas beautifully by taking your time volunteering to teach several classes for the ladies in Perryville. You shared with us, not only knowledge but also radiant genuine love and concern for everyone despite their belief systems. You were listening, acknowledging, and giving counsel when asked. You demonstrated kindness and hope. You validated to the womxn that they are important and not forgotten. You truly represented the love of Christ". -Vivian*

*"Three words come to mind when I think of ellie hutchison: humility, reflection, and learning. Others include compassion, faith, dedication, enthusiasm, and tireless spiritual advocacy. Still, they all stem from her humble approach to recognizing that belief, like learning, is about self-reflection - with others. Contemplation, what one does in a temple, and Ms. hutchison's case, the worlds inside prisons are also temples, is one of her most significant gifts. I want to*



*share a few stories with you to give a sense of my experience working with ellie and witnessing her impact on others and that others have on her. I think of the quote from Octavia Butler, "All that you touch, You Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change."*

*I had the honor of working with ellie on the Humanities behind the Walls (HBW) project through Arizona State University, where she was a volunteer teacher and facilitator. I can attest through conversations with ellie that out of these experiences, she is partly the person that she is today. Her calling path was first illuminated during those years, asking the questions that she was asking. We worked together in the Introduction to Humanities class. Not only did ellie bring to bear her training in creative writing, literature, and communication, but I also witnessed ellie's deep listening skills from her theological studies. She would bring comments or statements made in previous classes into conversations, making links and connections that were not apparent at first. The talks were about relationships that develop, evolve, and grow over time, like one's relationship with God and spirituality.*

*ellie then developed her class which was essentially a study of religion and spirituality, introducing students to religious texts, not only in Christianity, to have an interfaith dialogue. As is the case in the United States, the dominant religion in prisons is also Christianity, but often a particular form of Christianity that traffics in the prosperity gospel, the Book of Daniel and Revelations, and blames people for their choices and decisions rather than understanding the social context within which someone lives and makes decisions. ellie was intentional about what she chose to offer as readings and curriculum, established trust with those studying by always beginning with agreements between the participants, and made herself available after and before class to continue the discussions. These interactions were essential and energizing for folks who do not always have access to these spiritual conversations and reflections. We may live in the spiritual world of our God, but we also live in the social world of man. Understanding the relationship between the two is vital to have strong faith and surviving and perhaps thriving in a complex world. I would hear from students about how ellie could pose spiritual questions in a language that transcended sectarian alignments. Discussing one's faith is vital to strengthening, maintaining, and deepening one's beliefs - noting that religion and faith are different.*

*In 2018, HBW was able to offer classes on the Lumley unit, the maximum-security unit at Perryville prison for women. There has never been any programming or education whatsoever on that unit due to classification rules. ellie's class she developed was packed to the brim, like a rural church on Easter, and was a breath of fresh air for the folks on that abandoned unit. I witnessed ellie walking alongside other people as they learned new things and contemplated the impact of learning new things on whom they knew themselves to be in the world they understood to be changing. I know that it was here that ellie's learning, reflection, and*

*humility led her to hear her calling. When we listen with others, we can hear the universe, our God, and the possibility of forgiveness rather than vengeance, the latter one of the dominant logics of the prison, the criminal justice system, and society. I hope these few examples give you a sense of the breadth and depth of ellie's commitment to the good deeds and work at the heart of any spiritual practice.” - Alan Eladio Gómez, Ph.D.*

*“I am happy to share the ways in which ellie hutchison has demonstrated ‘Working Together for Justice and Mercy,’ which I have come to understand are values upheld by the United Church of Christ. I am an Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies at Arizona State University’s West campus. I have lived and worked in Phoenix since 1994 and have taught ASU students for twenty-eight years. Recently, I have conducted research pertaining to the history of Mexican labor in Arizona and worked with the Litchfield Park Historical Society to document oral histories of the Mexican community that worked and lived in los campos of Litchfield Park.*

*I first met ellie through my colleague and friend, Dr. Chris Marin, former archivist of the Chicano Research Collection at Arizona State University. Chris set up a time for us to meet with the goal to consult her about how to hold public venues to heighten awareness about the publication of my co-edited book, *Mexican Workers and the Making of Arizona* (2018), published by the University of Arizona Press. In her capacity as founder of la Phoenixera Writers’ Guild, ellie was interested in supporting our efforts, largely because she recognized the historical erasure of the Mexican community that has taken place in scholarly literature and in our general understanding of Arizona history and wanted to do what she could to bring it to people’s attention. I must confess that I was a little unclear about what she had to gain from assisting us and was slightly taken aback that she would dedicate her time to help us achieve our goal without wanting something in return. But that she did!*

*ellie was responsible for organizing our first very successful event—a book reading and “platica” with a focus on Mexican women workers at Fair Trade Café in downtown Phoenix. She worked with the owner of the café to schedule us, used her knowledge of social media to advertise the event, and did a stupendous job of setting the tone for the evening with her introductions. I wish I could describe the energy that permeated the café that evening. It was heartfelt and memorable as attendees expressed their appreciation for the book and for a gathering that allowed them to feel like their history mattered. ellie continued to organize a second event at Guadalupe’s El Mercado, and a third event at Changing Hands Bookstore in central Phoenix, also very well-received.*

*In all my communications and interactions with ellie, I found her to be responsible, sensitive to the communities with which she was conducting outreach, and foremost, kind, and thoughtful. My respect and admiration for her only grew over the course of our collaboration and I began*

*to feel a deep appreciation for her personhood. I have come to see that her life is dedicated to the weakening, if not dismantling, of injustice and oppression. She understands working with and in concert with a diversity of communities. Her abilities to navigate and pursue positive change in communities is unmatched. I believe she possesses a unique combination of academic knowledge, interpersonal skills, and a religiosity that enables her to build bridges between and within communities.*

*It wasn't long after these events I received a notice from ellie that she was working at the United Church of Christ downtown and focusing on assisting asylum seekers. I gathered she was working long hours and working with many people and organizations to respond to the crisis. ellie later invited me to facilitate a discussion at UCC on the film, Dolores, a feature film capturing the life and contributions of Dolores Huerta, former Vice-President of United Farm Workers. Of course, I agreed to do so and was pleased that members of the congregation came out to learn about her life and engage in discussion about what she meant to the successes of the United Farm Workers and the Chicana/o movement overall.*

*When ellie announced she was going to be giving a sermon at UCC, I decided I had to be present. For the first time in forty years, I walked into a church on a Sunday morning to listen to a sermon. I don't know what else I can say to convey how impressed and enriched I have been by her presence and spirit. I left the sermon feeling uplifted and a little more connected as a human being. And when I learned she was temporarily situated at Beatitudes, I attended her sermon at the new location. Again, I left better than I walked in. I have complete confidence that ellie will continue to cultivate faith in one and all and inspire human connection, justice, and understanding. Should she be ordained to minister and obtain a position in Phoenix, I have no doubt attending services on Sunday would become a part of my life". -Gloria Holguín Cuádriz*

*"I deeply appreciate the opportunity I have to work with my colleague ellie, in the Circles of Hope, Healing, Humanity program in Arizona Faith Network. In these circles, people of diverse religions practice healing and recognize our interdependence. My colleague ellie has been an inspiration to me in learning about hope, resilience and social justice. I have learned from my colleague's faith, appreciating our relationship building. As a Buddhist, the opportunity to collaborate and learn from Christianity is much appreciated." - Vasu Bandhu*

*"From October 2018 to March 2019, the First Church/UCC, located in Phoenix at 1407 N. 2nd Street, was engaged in receiving and providing temporary care and respite for Central American immigrants and refugee families seeking asylum. They stopped in Phoenix, their host community, while being transported to locations in other states. There was a need for volunteers to assist in providing for their needs and I often went to First Church in the evenings and did what was needed. I helped serve food. I filled paper bags with a variety of*

*packaged pastries or foods, or toiletries and hygiene kits for men and women, and first-aid items. I helped sort donated clothing and shoes for the refugees and families to select and take with them on their journeys. I used my Spanish-speaking skills to translate written materials from English to Spanish for them. I learned that families escaped poverty and women no longer endured domestic abuse. I saw how families loved their children very much. I also better understood that climate change played a role in their decisions to escape their villages and homes and come to the United States, no matter the difficulties.*

*During this time, ellie hutchison served First Church as their Community Development and Outreach staff member. Her own office work occurred during the 8-to-5 day-light hours. But ellie usually remained after-hours in the church facilities and into the late evening and early morning hours to help refugees become accustomed to their new surroundings. A volunteer health-care provider and nurse often sought out ellie to learn if there were children or adults who needed prescriptions filled or had specific medical needs that required immediate attention. Transportation drivers often sought out ellie to explain the changes in arrival or departure schedules that brought or took refugees to First Church and then away.*

*I spoke with husbands and wives who had high praise for ellie's warmth and attention and were happy that she cared for them during their transitions from their homes in north Central America to the United States. Practicing the radical hospitality of God and confronting injustice and oppression in difficult political times is what ellie did for numerous very late nights and early mornings when refugees and asylum seekers came to First Church. ellie built relationships of mutual trust and interdependence with the refugee families and their friends in a short matter of time. Her own faith in the goodness of the oppressed asylum seekers was enough for ellie to help develop a safe space and community protection for Central American refugees. In other words, ellie engaged in mission and outreach and saved the lives of many and worked with others for the sake of justice and mercy." - Dr. Christine Marin. Professor Emeritus. Arizona State University, Tempe*

### ***Caring for All of Creation***

*"To love a place is not enough. We must find ways to heal it," Robin Wall Kimmerer*

Dear Universe,

"i apologize for all the times i believed i was the sun around which these planets whirl."

This short poem by my favorite poet, Sherman Alexie has become monumental in my understanding of how to love you Dear Universe. It's hard at times to fully understand the impact of my co-existence with you. i'm not sure if it's time-related - meaning you change at your own pace - too slow for the regular human who is inundated with trying to survive a

capitalistic pace of being - or, if it's "the higher on the food chain" mentality and our ingrained sense of dominionism.

i often yearn for the ability to get lost in the seasonal changes. As soon as the majestic life-giving monsoons with the three different colors of admiral blues, violet purples, and tortilla browns fill the skies all at the same time arrive in Arizona, i'm already wishing and dreaming of the days when the temperatures drop so the mosquitos disappear and we can all move around outside without our indoor sweaters or the fear of the burning touch reaching for an outside door handle to walk into a store or a friend's home. But, when that season does come, all i can dream about is the early to mid-winter's nourishing rains that aid me in the process of learning how to grow the indigenous foods such as the 3-sisters that thrive here in the desert. And as soon as that time arrives, i can't wait to see the Palo Verde's bloom and drop their angelic cadmium yellow blooms, scattering the Arizona landscapes just as snow does in many regions of our shared world.

This goes for the seasons of life as well... i seem to already be lusting after what might lie ahead. While this is okay to imagine and to dream, doing so while not recognizing where i am or what i come from is another thing.

i don't know how to get lost.

That might be it actually. i rely so much on the concept of seasonal change, i forget to just be.

Traditionally (and this is different for every culture and even within those cultures, every family), our celebrations and rituals began with humans being curious about the changing of our planet. While these changes help us to not only be fed, it guides us in understanding how both death and life are in harmony with one another. The understanding of these changes or seasons or rituals are indeed perhaps needed more now than ever.

What i mean is, since my time in Seminary and all those moments in the "in-between of then and now", i'm learning more about how many of us don't know how to deal with death or life and certainly not understanding those two things happen at the very same time. And yet, you Dear Universe, teach us that every day... through our sacred texts, our art, our literature, through the constant change happening in the shores of our beaches or through the ways mushrooms bring life by also nourishing death, and maybe even more importantly, as we age, when we pay attention, our bodies teach us about this type of harmony living every day.

i've been in spaces where i've witnessed not only how to care for human creation but also how to thrive and endure during seasonal changes in places where no such thing was to exist. While throughout nature, i've been witness to the beauty of diversity and creativity as well as life and death, the space that has brought me to wanting to cultivate my love and ministry of G-d and G-d's creatures has been the womxn's prison. Every day, womxn incarcerated inside Arizona Department of Corrections - Perryville Womxn's Prison, care for one another in ways people who claim to be free could not fathom. It is in confinement, these womxn are models of what living and dying means at the very same time. What could our living and breathing world be like if we didn't confine one another and from a Christian perspective, isn't this indeed what we are guided to see in our sacred texts - freedom to love - freedom to be - freedom to change?

*So what will it take for me/us to slow down enough to pay attention to your needs? Is slowing down an answer that i'm giving value to that perhaps has no spiritual or worldly evidence of actually being what you need me/us to be in order to be in relationship with and to honor your vast greatness?*

In Christianity, there are two very different creation stories and yet, there are two. G-d found and continues to find many different ways to help us remain curious about who we are and why we are here and what it all means. As much as i'd like to credit our sacred texts for learning how to love and be in relationship with myself and one another, i know that that has not had an impact on me - meaning i've not read a verse or a story out of the Bible and had an epiphany. In fact, it still doesn't happen, even in all my attempts. It's been the moments where i've chosen to allow myself to be open to relationships with myself and others; with the words and stories being read or shared; when i am out with my feet playing with the soil and the smell of the trees fills my nostrils and the breeze brushes my skin; and when i've honored my curiosity by slowing down and at times, getting it all wrong where i thought i experienced epiphanies.

Epiphanies, often post-experience and reflection, are relational. Caring for all of Creation is relational. Understanding how to care for myself emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically is relational. Providing hope to a broken world or for the people surviving brokenness is relational. For everything is both living and dying at the very same time. Dear Universe, my desire for my ministry is it will always be relational. That in those relationships, with all the ways i mentioned above, i learn how to always apologize for believing i was the sun around which these planets whirl.

i need to make mistakes and i need to learn how to give myself the grace and the love of G-d, of Jesus, and you Dear Universe show me every day. i need to find ways to cultivate curiosity the way i've learned how to propagate and cultivate the Foxtail Blue Agave, the

Monstera Delicioso, the “mother-in-laws” tongue, and the three types of pathos i’ve scattered around my apartment - my sacred space.

But most importantly, i want to model that and the recognition of the gifts i’ve been given to those who i strive to live and thrive with and for - never at the intention of a sacrifice of another living creature but also understanding that too most likely will happen. And, when it does, give the same grace G-d, Jesus, and you Dear Universe has given me.

For now, and only for now, i’m signing off, only to return to this letter and this work and this dance and these whirls tomorrow and all the days that follow.

Love,

ellie

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion...it feels funny to end a paper this way now i’ve opened myself up to you so intimately. So allow me to use this final space to provide some more background on my approach or my thinking - or maybe even to clarify.

By sharing the Five on the Enneagram, i hoped to demonstrate how who i am will always be filled with seeking knowledge to better engage our texts and traditions. The gospel is not a “set-in-stone” document and neither is our denomination. Where we find ourselves in today’s world, i believe we’re beckoned to imagine a new way of practicing Christianity and i think not only is the United Church of Christ positioned to do this, but on an intra and interpersonal level, so are all the numbers on the Enneagram and i hope to find myself immersed and dreaming alongside them - to discover the freedom that comes from healing and transforming.

When approaching the Building Transformational Leadership Skills Mark, i cringed at the possibility of listing things out - why write this out if one can just read through my Curriculum Vitae? In fact, it was this Mark that lit a spark to try to share what i learned through failure and success by writing a letter to a congregation who takes a leap in dreaming with me. To write down what i’ve done is only a small part of the story. i hope this Mark is one that demonstrates this journey will always be a continual learning process all while embodying the great responsibility of doing so in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

The Mark on Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Practice is a written prayer to G-d. i took this approach because it was important for me to share how difficult it was to engage in this process during the time of our Pandemics (COVID, race, class, and emergence) while not being able to relate with the community in ways we were normally used to doing. All our ways of living and being and believing were now disrupted and not only what did that mean to me, but what did that mean for the rest of folx? Would we be able to imagine a new world and be okay with the former collapsing? “Maybe G-d himself needed to show us what the most tragic and noble reparation could look like, the sacrifice of life itself, so we might learn the courage to make repairs when our moments come,” (Riley 136). It was during this time i learned how to return to the praxis of being within - through and in my body/senses - and almost always through the practice of prayer.

There are many unanswered questions in my letters and that is intentional. Are the questions that come from our trauma ever fully answered? i don't know the answer to this. For me, the asking of the questions without providing an answer is one i continue to experience within my body. It is during these times i engage deeply in prayer, into therapy, into Spiritual Direction, into new rituals, and into deeply engaging texts that help to guide me towards transformation.

i imagine that i'll get pushback on the Mark related to Justice and Mercy. i felt my approach to this Mark would allow me to introduce and share the stories of those who i walk alongside. It's imperative for me to have humility about the positions i embark on for i'm not walking in other's shoes, i'm walking alongside folx in order to live in a way Jesus and so many before and after him lived. It's also about asking the questions of what does developing a sense of agency versus having ownership (as an agent of G-d in whatever way of being called) which is different from running an organization?

Throughout all of my Marks of Ministry paper, it was my intent to intimately share a little bit about myself while also seeking to demonstrate the desire for a partnership covenant - one that seeks to work together, learn together, feel together, succeed and fail together. i pray you see and feel my openness and desire to support the community i'm blessed to be called to serve in and on behalf of a denomination that has struggled to become one through the respect of honoring all the parts. i pray you see my faithfulness in the journey to follow the mission of Jesus and to struggle with and practice the gospel of Christ. For it is time for us to seek freedom for all. “Freedom requires patience with ourselves...it's the process of your soul learning to trust again - trust that it can rest and love and be still without being destroyed,” (Riley, 189).

And now, a prayer.



*“We now turn our thoughts to the Creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the creator. Now our minds are one.” - Onondaga Nation*

Thanksgiving Address