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Christopher Basgier
Auburn University, chris.basgier@auburn.edu

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Contemplative Correspondence and the Muscle of Metaphor: An Interview with Rev. Karen Hering

Christopher Basgier

Karen Hering, a Unitarian Universalist minister serving Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, Minnesota, is author of Writing to Wake the Soul: Opening the Sacred Conversation Within. In her book, Rev. Hering leads readers through the practice of contemplative correspondence, which she describes as “a spiritual practice of writing rooted in theology and story; drawn to the surface by questions, prompts, and ellipses; and most fully experienced when its words are accepted as invitations into conversations and relationships with others” (xx). A committed Unitarian Universalist myself, I first learned about Rev. Hering and her book from my own minister, Rev. Chris Rothbauer, after I delivered a lay-led service at Auburn Unitarian Universalist Fellowship titled “Writing as a Way of Being Human,” inspired by Robert Yagelski’s Writing as a Way of Being. I bought her book and began working my way through it, writing from its myriad prompts on topics like love, grace, and redemption.

I was nearly finished with it when I had opportunity to interview Rev. Hering about the ways writing can serve as a meaningful contemplative practice in our present moment. We spoke via Zoom on the eve of the 2020 presidential election, she in her garret office, me in my kitchen. Our conversation ranged far, from her experiences reading while bedridden during her childhood, to the power of metaphor for expanding our spiritual purview, to the ways embodied writing can counteract the detrimental effects of whiteness.

We began our conversation with a traditional Unitarian Universalist ritual: a chalice lighting and a reading. The chalice itself symbolizes “the light of reason, the warmth of community, and the flame of hope” (“Flaming Chalice”).

Christopher Basgier: I found this reading, called “Across the Distance,” by Laura Thompson, and it seemed appropriate, given that we’re having this conversation from half a continent away.

Across the distance, the light from within me shines, sending love to all
Across the distance, your light is fuel that warms me
and helps to keep my own light burning
Together, we keep the flame of community burning bright

I thought that was a nice one.

To start our conversation, I'm hoping you can tell me about your history as a writer. When did you first begin to see yourself as a writer? What is a significant memory you have about learning to write? When did you first come to see the potential of writing for spiritual practice?

Karen Hering: I cannot actually remember either not wanting to be or not thinking I was a writer. In my childhood, I had a number of illnesses that kept me bedridden for long periods of time. I was in grade school, and during that time, my best companions were my books. I spent a lot of time reading. I wrote to authors that I was reading, and I made a pledge to myself. I said, these books have seen me through this difficult time. If I can do the same for somebody else when I grow up, I would like to do that.

CB: Do you remember who you were reading?

KH: These were children's books, like Scott Corbett, along with a whole bunch of Caldecott winners. My perennial favorite was P.L. Travers' series of Mary Poppins books—not the Disney version of Mary Poppins, but those beautiful novels that are chock full of mythology and symbolism. Only later did I learn as an adult that Travers was quite schooled in mythology.

CB: That's a great reading-focused memory. Do you have like a distinctive memory of writing in your youth that sticks out in your mind, either in school or self-sponsored?

KH: Well, the first time my writing was recognized by somebody outside of my immediate circle was in high school when I received the writing award from the National Council of Teachers of English. It was a really big deal for me because I wrote something that was a particularly dark piece of fiction. In my own world at that time, I thought that was probably not going to be very popular, and indeed it was well received. That was the first time that I thought, oh, okay, this is something that I can do that will connect to people outside my immediate circle. I did not know published writers when I was growing up, so my imagination of what it meant to be a writer was very limited, and that early recognition was very important to me. (I'm happy that this interview might be a way of saying thank you to NCTE for its work encouraging young writers.)

CB: Can you excavate that memory or conception of what it meant to be a writer to you?

KH: I imagined it to be someone who was steeped in story as a window to the world. I could think of all of these stories that had changed my life, but to think of them as originating somewhere? I didn't know anybody who even had a home office where they would do writing. That was beyond my upbringing, so I didn't even know to imagine that. I could think of Jo in *Little Women* sitting in her little garret room. And as you can see here, I have a garret office now. So maybe that's part of it!

CB: I often talk with my students about the myth of the lone author alone in his (gender purposely identified) office, spouting genius onto the page, and how that can be such an intimidating image for writers who don't have that kind of experience, who don't have that kind of space, who don't feel like they can do that kind of "genius level" writing. It

makes writing inaccessible. But it almost sounds like you didn't have that kind of intimidating conception to even block you from writing.

KH: That's a really good point because I would not have imagined writing as an academic pursuit, which already strips away that sort of ivory tower idea of it. If anything, I would have thought that it was something that somebody did in the wee hours of night processing their lived experience. That's very much how I grew into it myself. I was a journal keeper.

I remember my very first journal as a kid, writing on the very first page, "If anybody ever finds this, please, don't judge me for what is here. I'm just trying to make sense of things." I laugh at that now because that's sort of at the heart of how I open my writing sessions. I say to suspend your inner critic. This is just a conversation between you and your soul and it doesn't have to be written perfectly. I do remember writing that in my first journal, and from that point on my journals were where I went to understand what life was about and to understand my relationship to others.

CB: It's amazing to think that, even then, you were recognizing the potential for an external audience and trying to address them before you then were able to address yourself, to have that conversation with yourself.

How did you come to the work of ministry, the path of literary ministry, and Unitarian Universalism?

KH: I grew up in a conservative Christian tradition and in a very devout family. It was a big part of my upbringing. To this day, the church my family belonged to doesn't ordain women, so I had a deeply-ingrained message that ministry was not a path that was open to me, but I understood very quickly as I grew up in that tradition that not only was that path not open to me, but my whole understanding of faith was not welcome in that tradition. But over time, I learned about other perspectives, even within Christianity, that were more open. I sometimes say I was raised in the Missouri Synod Lutheran, I was educated by Jesuits at the university level, then I was deeply shaped by activism in interfaith social justice work and shaped again by going to a United Church of Christ seminary. And along the way, I was welcomed and nurtured by Unitarian Universalism that became my own faith home.

So my own life experience has made me honor what happens on the borderlands of religious life. I welcome the exchange between different communities and traditions of faith. I think we learn from one another, not only about other views, but we learn what our own view is, and we learn to recognize where they are related and where they are different.

I didn't initially think I was going to be a minister. I thought I was just going to seminary to steep my writing in theology. I still had this idea that writing had always been a spiritual practice for me, and I was going to go steep it in theology and find out what that meant. As they often say about seminary, you can only see so far down the road, and you can expect a lot of turns in the road as you follow your call. I found that to be

true. I went in thinking I was getting a Masters of Theology and the Arts, and I took another turn and got a Masters of Divinity.

Then as I was pursuing ordination I realized, oh, maybe I'm not even being ordained to a congregational ministry. I'm being ordained to a literary ministry. I had a spiritual director while I was in seminary who said, "Karen maybe what you're being called to do hasn't yet been created."

And indeed, that is part of my understanding of writing as a spiritual practice, too, because the whole practice is based on offering people writing prompts that are really just unfinished sentences. It says, here's the beginning of a sentence. Take it where you will. Follow it wherever it leads you and see where you come out. That to me is where each of us is asked to go in life as well. The idea that any of our sentences are complete before we participate in them is not part of my theology and my outlook, so it made sense that I ended up making up my ministry.

CB: Can you tell me a little bit more about the development of the ministry? How did it take shape? After that moment with your spiritual director, how did you say, okay I guess I gotta figure this thing out, and then start crafting it and making it explicit?

KH: My seminary program ended with a class that was about each of us really explaining our call, and writing that out in a paper and naming how we knew that was our call to ministry. As I began writing that paper, I thought, oh, this is not congregational ministry. This is something else. I was kind of terrified in that moment because I thought, I am naming something I've never seen in practice, not in this way. It's not that I made this up whole cloth. It's based on a very long practice of creative process work with a lot of people. But I was putting it together in a new way as a ministry. I delivered my paper to the class describing a literary ministry and I thought I was at least going to be met with skepticism. Instead, they all cheered and they said, "Well, thank God you finally figured that out! We've been waiting for you to see this!"

CB: They knew before you did!

KH: Yes, yes! After that, I presented the idea to a minister who had served on our national body that approves people for ordination. I said, "Okay, so I want to be a literary minister and here's my proposal before I go to the national committee, please tell me what might be of concern to them?" He looked at it and he said, "I love this. Do you want to do this here?" That was the beginning of a long partnership with the congregation where my ministry is still rooted.

CB: When did you first hit upon the term *contemplative correspondence*, and why those two words?

KH: That naming was collaborative too. While I was working on *Writing to Wake the Soul*, I'd been leading this spiritual practice of writing for a good number of years already, but I hadn't named it yet. I just called it "open page writing" at the time. As I sat down to write a book about it, I realized I needed a name. There was another Unitarian

Universalist minister who was working on her own book at the time, and we were writing buddies. We would call each other every two weeks and name where we were in our work and what was working and what was challenging. One day I said to her, “I gotta name this. Here are a couple of options, but none of them seems right.” And so we just brainstormed. Out of that brainstorming these two words surfaced as the right name.

Here’s why. Because the practice is contemplative: it asks us to quiet the noise of the world for a while, to sit in the silence until we hear something that comes from our own heart and from the larger spirit of life or source of oneness that we connect to. To me, that’s what contemplative practices do. They are both deeply personal listening and tremendously connected to something beyond us. The term named this as a contemplative practice, but then it also said, this is a correspondence. First of all, it’s a correspondence between you and yourself, between you and your page, you and your heart. You are writing to and from yourself, so you really don’t have to worry about getting it wrong. You are the speaker and the receiver, so misunderstanding should be reduced. Just let the words come how they do. It is also a correspondence between things. It’s a form of writing that asks us to look at the relationship or correspondence between you and your sacred source, between you and me, between this and that, between the particular and the universal. That to me is a really important part of it because there is a lot of writing practice and creative process work that is very good in and of itself, but it’s not quite as deeply stitched to something larger. For me, naming this as contemplative correspondence says, yes, this is rooted specifically in your life experience, but it is about so much more. And that “something more” is what makes it a spiritual practice.

CB: In the introduction to *Writing to Wake the Soul*, you explain that contemplative correspondence resembles a number of spiritual practices, from *lectio divina* to Tai Chi to yoga. Do you engage in any of these other practices? If so, how would you characterize the relationship between them in your life? How does that practice intersect with or supplement the writing in your life?

KH: I practice Tai Chi, and in a particular kind of Tai Chi that is taught by Chungliang Al Huang. He is the founder of the Living Tao Foundation and his form of Tai Chi is perfect for me because it’s all about metaphor! He has recreated different Tai Chi forms, some based on the metaphors of the five Chinese elements.

You know, the writing practice of contemplative correspondence is all about metaphor, and a metaphor is really just a bridge between the tangible, embodied world and that “something more” beyond it. And to me, the body is the greatest metaphor. If you look at words that are especially emotionally resonant, they tend to come from our embodied experience. That is the joy of poetry. It lives in this tangible, sense-filled world of the body. As the Chinese poets say, poetry describes that material world. Then at certain point, the poet lifts their eyes to a wider horizon. I love that lifting of the eyes. You can almost hear it in a poetry reading when the poet gets to a certain line in the poem, and everybody in the room goes, *ahh*. You hear gasps. That lifting of the eyes is such an important part in writing as a spiritual practice too, because it’s the moment at which we connect our own lived experience with something more universal.

That's actually also how writing can be healing. If you write about a painful experience and you never lift your eyes to something larger, there is evidence to show that you can be re-traumatized by that writing. It's when you connect it to something larger—it might be your belief in a particular god or creed or faith tradition or it might be your belief in the cosmos. Just something larger than you.

So going back to embodied practice, for me that is a way of keeping my awareness in my body in a way that opens it to what's beyond. The way that I practice Tai Chi increases my awareness of the 360 degrees in which my body always rests and moves. If I'm not doing Tai Chi, and if I'm just listening to the culture that I live in, it's very much oriented to what is right in front of me. I can forget everything that's behind me. I can have very limited peripheral vision to what's on either side. When I do an embodied practice, it reminds me that I am a 360-degree being. When I open myself to that, I open myself to an awareness of myself as being nested in a bigger relationship to the world, both to what I am able to perceive and what's beyond it.

I also have to say that embodied practice is particularly important for me as a white person because dominant white culture teaches me to live right here in my head. And this particular writing practice is about, you know, increasing the correspondence between head and heart. What holds those together, but our bodies?

Since I started doing this spiritual practice [of Tai Chi] I have dramatically increased the role of embodied practice in the writing sessions I lead. I almost always include an embodied component when I'm doing a writing session, especially if it's a longer retreat, because I've found our access to our bodies is a really important way to listen, to understand our wholeness as human beings.

CB: I definitely agree with that. I've been meditating for many years, long enough to know that I'm not very good at it! But I've settled into a pretty consistent body scan meditation, and my experience speaks to what you're saying too. It helps me recognize that I am a body, and that I'm whole and enough, just in that way. It also helps me learn to listen to my body's cues, which often mean not listening to those thoughts in my head that might be trying to lead me astray down the path of anxiety or catastrophizing.

I've been working on bringing that into the writing practice as well, trying to notice more intentionally how my body feels when I'm writing, either when I'm journaling as part of my practice or even when I'm writing for work as well. I've noticed that that helps keep me much more present and actually helps improve focus.

KH: Have you also noticed a difference in the style or content of your writing, as you've done that?

CB: Well, what I've noticed is myself slipping into actually writing about the embodied practice. It's almost a content difference, not a stylistic difference. About three or four weeks ago I got into this tangent as I was journaling. I started writing about the sensations in my hand and how it ached as I wrote. My hand, writing with the pen, was sending messages through my nerves and into my brain. I'm also processing visual

information at the same time. There's a feedback loop, or you could say a correspondence, between the hand, the nerves, eyes, brain all engaged in this activity in the present moment. So I find my writing slipping into, like, here's how my body is feeling right now as I'm doing this thing, which is really interesting, too.

One of my favorite prompts that I thought was one of the better metaphors for me as a writer engaging with your book was the "land of love" prompt.¹ You know the one where you're thinking about, what does the landscape look like when you're thinking about love and relationships? I'm from Virginia Beach originally, so I used the beach, the ocean front, as the metaphor. That's very much an embodied experience for me to write because it reminds me of being a youth and growing up there having my first kiss on the beach. All of that is part of it. And then, I carried the metaphor to thinking about stormy seas or thinking about the dunes protecting what's beyond from the hurricane, the flood waters. I found in that moment of writing that it wasn't just an intellectual exercise where I was thinking about what kind of clever metaphor I could say. Instead, I found an idea that actually really speaks to me in a pretty deep way.

KH: That's great to hear. In my experience of working with people, once you open yourself to a metaphorical understanding of your life, it presents itself to you with its richness. We're so oriented toward particular kinds of metaphors that resonate with our own lived experience. The landscape is one of them. One of the things that I like to do with people is have them draw maps of the landscape they're going through as they live through change, and I ask them to playfully name the places in that terrain. It never ceases to amaze me that, when people begin to imagine what they're going through as a terrain, as a landscape, it comes to life for them and they understand it in a way that is so much more meaningful than the abstractions of saying, oh, this is a really hard time. No, I'm actually stuck in the swamps of boredom right now, or facing the canyons of despair. It opens the way to being able to understand and appreciate your own experience, which I think is really the gift of language, isn't it?

CB: We're naming the things that otherwise are ultimately one unbroken chain of sensory data. We have to put boundaries on it and name it as a thing in order to make sense of it and interact with it.

In the introduction, you write, "I've watched writers and non-writers alike gaining fluency in their own languages of faith . . . and becoming more adept at translating into and from the faith languages of others; and I have seen firsthand how this has been empowering and healing beyond anything I had expected" (xix-xx). Does a story stick out in your mind of a person you witnessed gaining this fluency, becoming empowered, or healing through writing? Why does this person's story stick out in your mind? (If you

1. This prompt invites writers to "[s]ketch a simple map showing the land of love you have known, or the geography of love you have not yet entered but might wish to explore," and then "consider how its characteristics have shaped your experience or understanding of love" (116).

feel okay telling somebody else's story in that way, which I also understand you might not want to do.)

KH: I can definitely share a story that is in the book, which I got permission to share from somebody in the congregation where I was working. I told everybody I was going to lead a program on brokenness. This man came to me and said, "I want to come, but I'm really nervous about it. I have so much brokenness in my life." He came to the writing session. I gave a writing prompt using these broken pocket watches. He picked one up and he just wrote and wrote in the silence. At the end of this session, I often ask people whether they want to share anything that they've written, and he completely surprised me by reading four lines from his poem. It's a beautiful poem.

He had been writing about broken relationships with his adult children, and he wrote:

broken though this watch
time continues measured or not
broken though this heart
love continues returned or not (Mikesell, qtd. in Hering 9)

He stopped in my office after the writing session. He said, "My healing has begun." It took him a whole extra year to finish that poem, so he wasn't lying. His healing had *just begun*. We know it takes a long time both to write a poem and to heal. He published it in our arts journal. I think it was the first piece of writing he had published. Then he came to read it at the annual coffee house reading. He'd never done a public reading before, and he didn't know a lot of people in the congregation. And he was so nervous about it. As soon as he read that poem, though, people came to him at the break and said, "Oh my gosh, you could have written that poem about me." It was this journey of deep pain that found its way to the page because of metaphor—and because the practice connected that pain to a larger context of meaning, the writing supported his healing. Then to have him go on and share it with others? It just kept rippling out and out.

That is the power of metaphor, and that is intended to be the language of religion, you know: the language of poetry and story that connects us to others. It's when we get stuck on religious stories as being literal that they become divisive and harmful. A metaphorical understanding of religious stories doesn't reduce their truth, but it makes room for other truths—and for the complexity of multiple perspectives.

In a world where we have so much strife around religious difference, I think it's really important that we build that muscle of metaphor. That's where I see this practice really helping people.

CB: Earlier you mentioned the risk of writing re-traumatizing if it doesn't "lift the eyes." Have you seen or experienced any other potential negative consequences that have shaped your approach to this?

KH: I think a danger with personal writing can be when it is allowed to be too small and too private. One of the most important things that I do in every writing session is

to begin by asking people to agree to release their inner critic as a first step to permitting the words to move from heart to page. That inner critic is often very empowered by writing. As somebody who's always enjoyed writing, I had not realized how debilitating that inner critic can be. I think each of us practicing writing as a spiritual discipline needs to have some way of releasing that inner critic, because it's damaging to us and it's damaging to others when we project it outward as well.

Each of us can only write our own story. I mean, we can imagine our way into others' stories if we're writing fiction, or we can research our way into writing other stories as nonfiction, but for the spiritual practice of writing, we're really locating our writing in our own lives. We're centering our own lives, but in centering our own lives, we have to understand that everybody else is centering their lives. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, the danger of a single story is not that it's not true. It's that it's incomplete.² I think in any spiritual practice of writing, if we just do our own writing, and we tuck it in a drawer and we don't either share it directly or share its impact with other people, it gets too small.

That is also the reason why I like to quote many different voices in a guided writing session because that in itself is bouncing each of our individual stories around with others' in a larger context of lived reality. That correspondence between my inner story and all these other stories will reveal a deeper truth and a wider understanding of what it means to be human in this time.

CB: Do you have a favorite prompt that always gets you excited to use in a workshop or that you feel bears particularly interesting fruit? Or does it vary depending on who you're working with?

KH: You know, there is one prompt that I use more often than any other and it's one that I had no idea when I first did it how powerful it would be.³ What you do is you write about something that you wish were otherwise, and you write it down on one side of a half sheet of paper. Then, you cut or tear it in half lengthwise, divided up on horizontal 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper, and you glue it down, so you have a big white space in the middle. Then you underline or circle words on either side that stand out to you for any reason. They might be things that you really appreciate or resonate with. They might be things that you really resist. You circle or underline them, and then you write something new down the middle of the page that's now broken open. Often I just say to people, start with the words, "What if..." and use as many of those words that you circled and underlined as you like, including in entirely different meanings, to write a new piece of writing down the middle that imagines a different way for this to unfold. There is something cathartic about cutting or tearing it apart.

2. Adichie's full quote is, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete."

3. This prompt appears in Hering's book in the section titled "A Road Called Hope," pages 157-58.

CB: I very vividly remember I tore really slowly and really listened to it because I wanted to feel that feeling of it splitting apart. I thought that was nice.

KH: Yeah and some people will actually cut around the words so they get this squiggly line. Everybody does it differently. This gets to what you were asking about the dangers of writing: sometimes the danger of writing is that we think that because we wrote it down, that's the way it is. And I would say that's also a hazard of the culture of whiteness. The culture of whiteness teaches us to value the written word over the spoken word. The written word, then, is regarded as something calcified and permanent. Codified. This exercise reminds us that a written word is just a word that landed on paper. You can tear the story open make a new space and repurpose those words in whole new ways, and as long as we're living, the story is never finished. So there's something very liberating about it. I've had people say they took that and then later on they tore it, cut it open again, and did it again.

CB: Tell me about the process of writing the book. What was your day-to-day writing process like? How did you decide on the structure and organization? Did you take inspiration from other books as you were doing this? And also, I'm curious about the extent to which writing the book itself was a spiritual practice for you, too?

KH: As is often the case, my physical surroundings made a big difference for me. I was writing this book at a time when the street we lived on was under construction. We could no longer even drive into our own driveway. There was noise out there, and also this sense of disconnection from the larger world. We were kind of cut off. I was holed up in my home office writing. It happened to be during an earlier presidential election, and we had a volunteer campaign worker living with us, who was working horrifically long hours. He would get up early in the morning, go off to work and not come home until very late at night. I just kept saying to myself, "Well, I thought I was done writing, but he's not back yet from his campaign work. I should do a little more work on the book, too." So those things were really influential just in keeping my butt in that chair to do the work.

As far as the structure of the book goes, the book proposal I had written said that I would like to name a set number of words that are faith based words that I don't want people to abandon. Together, my publisher and I worked out which of the words I had proposed were going to make the list of ten in the book. I suppose in a sense, that part of the structure might have been influenced by somebody like Kathleen Norris, who has a book called *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, in which she writes reflections about particular words, not as writing prompts but as an invitation to understand religious or theological words in the context of contemporary life.

CB: I will just say, in terms of not letting people give up certain faith terms, I was really surprised by how much I got out of the grace chapter. I consider myself fairly agnostic, fairly humanist. I take a lot of inspiration from Buddhism. Grace is not a term I usually think with, but I kept noticing all these moments of grace that I had experi-

enced and that I continue to experience. And that was a very uplifting set of prompts to work through.

KH: I'm really glad to hear that because one of my personal goals is to let these words shine a little bit. They have depth to them. I understand the inclination to abandon them because many of them have been abused. But when we lose the word *grace*, we give up a good name for such a powerful experience.

CB: *JAEP*L readers are particularly interested in pedagogy, or philosophies and theories of teaching and learning. You've already talked a lot about several of your pedagogical practices, including bringing in objects to write from, the use of metaphor, and turning off the inner critic. Are there other elements that inform your philosophy or your theory of teaching and learning when you're facilitating workshops and retreats?

KH: I guess I would say that I am deeply committed to teaching and learning that connects the particular and the universal. That's why the physical objects are often so helpful because people go to the particular and then the metaphor just keeps opening out. In any learning situation, I like to think of each person in the setting, teacher and learner, as being their own connection between the particular and the universal. It's really important to me to connect, not just between teacher and learner, but between learner and learner and learner and teacher because in my philosophy of teaching and learning, those are just roles that we hand back and forth to each other as we share glimpses of both what makes us particular and what universal truths hold across our differences. It's really more of an ecology of learning to think of how interdependent knowledge and understanding really are, and how incomplete any knowledge is that is boxed into one particular perspective. When it is connective instead, it's so much more trustworthy.

CB: So what does that look like in practice? Because of my own whiteness and masculinity, I have to be very conscientious about not dominating the conversation in teaching situations. So I do a lot of question asking, I invite others to speak, and I try to use silence so that there's not necessarily the expectation that I'm always going to be the one doing the speaking. Do you have tools like those that you try to leverage to disrupt your power as the facilitator and get that collaborative interchange going?

KH: One of the things about this practice that serves that purpose just by definition is that I think of myself as being in service to the people who come. My job is really to line up a whole bunch of inspirational materials, almost like blotches of paint on a painter's palette. They've got a brush in hand, they've got an empty canvas, and they get to dab and do what they will with it. My job is to put as much variety out in front of them as I can.

I will also say as a white person, I was educated in a time when most of the people that I studied were white men, and North Americans at that, or Europeans. When I wrote *Writing to Wake the Soul*, I actually finished a whole draft of the manuscript and I had been trying to draw from a diversity of sources. After I had the first draft written, I made an Excel spreadsheet and I had categories for race, era, gender, different religious back-

ground, and nationalities, and I looked at everybody that I had quoted and I mapped it out and I was appalled. It was still heavily balanced toward white men from North America or Europe. Oh my gosh, I thought I had really tried! So I went back and I pulled out a bunch of references and added others in the next draft.

To me, part of quieting my voice is to notice and change the people I'm quoting and the people I'm drawing into the conversation. I'm still learning how to do it better, but I think it's a really important thing for all of us to do.

CB: It's a really big topic of conversation in academia right now, too. I'm co-authoring a piece right now and we're really thinking about who we are citing and whether we are really doing justice to their intellectual contributions, versus just kind of doing drop-in quoting. We're really trying to be very careful about that. So I think you're right. I think it's been the last six months that it's gotten much more on people's radar. It's been there in the last several years, but I think it's become imperative now.

So that actually is a nice segue to the last question: what are your thoughts about the role that contemplative correspondence or literary ministry can play in our current cultural moment when we're separated and coping with COVID-19, we have uprisings against racial injustice, climate crisis, and the looming election tomorrow? Where do you see this fitting in with that bigger picture?

KH: I think it's a really important tool for each of us to understand who we are and how we're nested in a larger context. My understanding of systemic racism is that it absolutely depends on convincing us that we are separate from one another, and that there are a whole categories of people that are not connected to other categories of people. That same philosophy also separates us from all beings in the ecological disaster we're living in. For me, learning to listen to one's heart and one's own truth and to do that in an embodied way awakens both an awareness of, and a longing for, connection. That is a key part of our humanity. We are interdependent beings. We could not be otherwise, and yet dominant white culture tells us it *is* otherwise.

We need to be able to find ways to listen to that deeper truth of our own in a way that is open to surprise and to the embodied awareness of connection. We need to understand that we cannot separate our own wellbeing from that others. To think that we can exclude somebody or oppress somebody or suffer exclusion or oppression ourselves and not feel the impact on our own wellbeing is a great falsity.

I feel like many of the troubles, and especially the polarization of our times, are based on us being out of touch with ourselves. Deep inner listening that is connective and not narcissistic is one of the most profound things that can happen to us as human beings. And the gift of language and story, as we already noted, is embedded in that connectedness. Once we have words to name our story, we want to share our story. And once we've shared our story, we want to hear somebody else's. And then there is a lively exchange that calls us back into that ecology of being.

CB: Wonderful. So much wisdom there. We could use a lot more of that today. Thank you.

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