

## **Books That Have Inspired Us**

Miami Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Dayton, OH, Rachel Feltner, 2016

### Chalice Lighting Words:

“I spent my life folded between the pages of books. In the absence of human relationships I formed bonds with paper characters. I lived love and loss through stories threaded in history; I experienced adolescence by association. My world is one interwoven web of words, stringing limb to limb, bone to sinew, thoughts and images all together. I am a being comprised of letters, a character created by sentences, a figment of imagination formed through fiction.”

— Tahereh Mafi, *Shatter Me*, 2011

### Check In

### Meditation

### Discussion Topic:

*Opening Question: Going around the circle, what is your favorite book? Please give a brief synopsis or an explanation of why it is your favorite.*

### Reading:

Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation. In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared.

One of the greatest formative experiences of my life preceded Harry Potter, though it informed much of what I subsequently wrote in those books. This revelation came in the form of one of my earliest day jobs. Though I was sloping off to write stories during my lunch hours, I paid the rent in my early 20s by working at the African research department at Amnesty International’s headquarters in London.

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I shall never forget the African torture victim, a young man no older than I was at the time, who had become mentally ill after all he had endured in his homeland. He trembled uncontrollably as he spoke into a video camera about the brutality inflicted upon him. He was a foot taller than I was, and seemed as fragile as a child. I was given the job of escorting him back to the Underground Station afterwards, and this man whose life had been shattered by cruelty took my hand with exquisite courtesy, and wished me future happiness.

And as long as I live I shall remember walking along an empty corridor and suddenly hearing, from behind a closed door, a scream of pain and horror such as I have never heard since. The door opened, and the researcher poked out her head and told me to run and make a hot drink for

the young man sitting with her. She had just had to give him the news that in retaliation for his own outspokenness against his country's regime, his mother had been seized and executed.

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Every day, I saw more evidence about the evils humankind will inflict on their fellow humans, to gain or maintain power. I began to have nightmares, literal nightmares, about some of the things I saw, heard, and read.

And yet I also learned more about human goodness at Amnesty International than I had ever known before.

Amnesty mobilises thousands of people who have never been tortured or imprisoned for their beliefs to act on behalf of those who have. The power of human empathy, leading to collective action, saves lives, and frees prisoners. Ordinary people, whose personal well-being and security are assured, join together in huge numbers to save people they do not know, and will never meet. My small participation in that process was one of the most humbling and inspiring experiences of my life.

Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's places.

—J. K. Rowling, 2008 Harvard Commencement Speech

***What transformative books did you read during your childhood? Has the types or genre of books you read changed as an adult?***

***Going around the circle, how have books inspired or transformed you? This could be from insight, personal growth, spiritual growth, ect...***

***Are there certain books you turn to when you are in need of comfort, advice, hope, or encouragement?*** (Question from UU small group ministry session "Books" by Rev. Margie Allen and Rev. Dr. Linda Anderson)

***From the Latin scribere "to write" comes our word scripture. What has this word come to mean to you? Would you consider any books you know and love to be "scripture" by your own definition?*** (Question from UU small group ministry session "Books" by Rev. Margie Allen and Rev. Dr. Linda Anderson)

## Closing words:

"We don't need a list of rights and wrongs, tables of dos and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence. *Thou shalt not* is soon forgotten, but *Once upon a time* lasts forever."

— Philip Pullman