



# GAY BUDDHIST Fellowship

FALL 2019 NEWSLETTER

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fellowship supports  
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the spiritual concerns  
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gbf's mission includes  
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environment that is  
inclusive and caring.

## Participating Joyfully in the Suffering of the World

By Larry Robinson

*Larry Robinson has been practicing Buddhist meditation for 47 years, mostly in the Zen and the Vipassana traditions. He is a member of the Occidental Laguna Sangha in Sebastopol, studying with Bruce Fortin in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi, a long-time environmental and social justice activist. He is a retired eco psychologist and former mayor of Sebastopol. He serves on the board of directors of the Center for Climate Protection and the board of trustees of Meridian University. His Large and Foolish Project, in the words of Rumi, is to restore the soul of the world through reawakening the oral tradition of poetry. He is also the founder and producer of Rumi's Caravan.*

It's a great pleasure to be with all of you here again this morning. I recognize some of your faces from previous times. Just sitting in this space with you all feels so wonderful. The silence, the sense of peace, the love here, it's palpable. So, it's a great privilege to be here and to bring my sweetheart Cynthia with me this morning is also a great treat.

In the Mahayana tradition, the Zen and Tibetan tradition, the goal of our practice is not nirvana, it's not to get off the wheel. But it's really to embody and awaken *Bodhicitta*, the awakened mind. The vow is to live with and for all beings and to participate joyfully in the suffering of the world. I think we're all increasingly aware of the suffering in our world, the suffering of this world. So what's a constant practice for me is to open my heart to that suffering and not be overwhelmed by it to the point that I'm incapacitated.

So, how to do that? How to participate joyfully in the suffering in the world is what I want to talk about today. Buddha spoke about the three characteristics of existence - impermanence, emptiness, and no self. Now, these are really different aspects of the same thing. The *Heart Sutra* really speaks about emptiness and the essence of that message is form is emptiness, emptiness is form. There is no difference between form and emptiness, and yet we live in the world of form, the world of *samsara* where things appear to be real and they are real and yet we also live in the realm of the formless. So our work is to bridge those worlds to live in both those worlds simultaneously without separating them.

# How do we cultivate equanimity? It's by remembering the transitoriness, the impermanence of everything.

What emptiness really means is not that there is nothing here, but that there is nothing that is separate from everything else. The essence of the *Heart Sutra* is the understanding that everything in this universe, everything in us, every one of us is absolutely interdependent, inter-being with everything else, that every suffering in this world arises from this mistaken belief in our own separateness. So the key to the joyful participation is understanding and seeing clearly this false belief in our separateness, which is where the *no self* notion comes in. And when we really examine our own processes and we sit in meditation and indeed as we interact in the world, if we're truly honest with our selves, we find that there is nothing in us that is permanent, nothing in us that is not connected to everything else.

The notion of impermanence is a reminder that everything is in constant flow, in constant flux. These flowers may appear to be permanent but we know that yesterday they were growing from the earth and tomorrow they will be composting into the earth. This is the same with us. When we understand the impermanence of each of us, how can we not open our hearts to each other to see how temporary each of us is here and how temporary all of our complaints and successes and issues are. We're just passing through and yet we are the wave passing through the ocean and we are the ocean - so all of that simultaneously. Dogen, the great Zen teacher, says that, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened into the 10,000 things." By which he means that our real liberation is in remembering that we are this ocean of existence.

The *brahmaviharas*, which I've spoken about here before, are the great virtues, the divine abodes. There's compassion, loving, kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity, *upekkha*. So it's *upekkha* that I really want to speak about today. Equanimity. How do we cultivate equanimity? It's by remembering the transitoriness, the impermanence of everything.

One of my favorite koans that I'm working with or it's been working with me for several years is 'this precious jade tea cup is already broken.' In my work in the world, which mostly has to do with climate change and developing public policies to do what we can do to avert the worst disasters that are coming down the pipe from climate chaos, sometimes I get overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge with the denial, denial that lives in me all the time, and the almost malicious

denial that we see coming from Washington these days. So, this koan that I spoke of, this precious jade tea cup already being broken reminds me that it's already happened. My death is a given. Everyone we know and love is already in the process of dying. So, we can give up trying to prevent that from happening, trying to hold off the reality and in that find the courage to embrace the suffering, to lean into it and do what we can to ease suffering that's right in front of us.

I was recently in Laos in the old capital of Luang Prabang, which is a beautiful old city on the Mekong River. There's a tradition there, along the main street of the town, the monks from the six or seven temples and monasteries every morning at dawn come out with their begging bowls and members of the community line up to make offerings to these bowls and to these monks, and by doing so, accrue merit. I had one of those moments of minor momentary enlightenments where you see the figure-ground shift and I realized that they were not begging for their daily meal. This was a practice of gratefully receiving whatever is being offered. At

**At that moment I realized that this is what my practice needs to be at this time, which is to gratefully receive whatever is coming my way.**

that moment I realized that this is what my practice needs to be at this time, which is to gratefully receive whatever is coming my way -- the collapse of the ecosystem, my own mortality, my wife's eventual death, the loss of everything I love - to welcome that at the same time I'm welcoming the sustenance and the beauty and the joy and the love that is coming. Holding that *all* is the work.

It may seem like a paradox, like a contradiction but Carl Jung once said that, "Emotional maturity is not about resolving the paradox and the conflicts, but by growing large enough to contain them all." This is what the *Lotus Sutra* also speaks about, form and emptiness, embracing it all.

One of my favorite poems is by Jack Gilbert and is called, *A Brief for the Defense*. He says,

*Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.*

# We're just passing through and yet we are the wave passing through the ocean and we are the ocean - so all of that simultaneously.

*But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. There is laughter every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit there will be music despite everything. We stand at the prow again of a small ship anchored late at night in the tiny port looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront is three shuttered cafes and one naked light burning. To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come.*

One of the things that I love about this poem is that it reminds us of our responsibility to participate joyfully. Because when we bring happiness and joy into the world we add to the sum total of happiness in the world. Happiness is not a zero sum proposition. Your happiness does not diminish mine, it adds to it. This is the practice of *mudita*, of sympathetic joy. When we take joy in someone else's happiness we are also adding to the happiness in the world and relieving suffering in the world. This is part of the *bodhisattva* practice.

## “This precious jade tea cup is already broken.”

So participating joyfully is truly a spiritual and ethical and moral responsibility for us, to cultivate that joy. And, at the same time to accept, receive, understand and see clearly the suffering around us and wherever we see it, to act to relieve that suffering. Shantideva, one of the great Buddhist sages, once said that, “The source of all misery in the world is seek-

ing happiness for oneself. And the source of all happiness is seeking the happiness of others.” When we seek happiness for ourselves, what we're actually doing is reifying this illusion of our own separateness.

That illusion of our separateness is the Buddhist definition of ego. That illusion of separateness leads us to grasp what we think will make us happy and push away what we think will make us unhappy. So the practice of *upekkha*, of receiving with open hands and open heart whatever is coming our way is the practice of happiness. We have our opinions of what is good and what is bad. But when we really think about it we realize that we really don't know enough to know if the ultimate outcome of something is going to be good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

There's an old Chinese story of a peasant who has acquired this magnificent horse that is the envy of all his neighbors and they all say, “Oh, what a fortunate man you are to own such a magnificent horse.” He says, “Maybe.” Well then one day the horse runs away and the neighbors say, “Oh, how unfortunate to have lost your horse.” He says, “Maybe.” Then one day the horse comes back leading a whole herd of wild horses into the man's corral. The neighbors say, “Oh, how fortunate you are.” He says, “Maybe.” Well one day the man's son is trying to break one of the wild horses. He's thrown and he breaks his legs. Neighbors say, “Oh, how unfortunate.” “Maybe.” Well then, the king's soldiers come to draft all the young men in the village and send them off to war. They can't take his son because his leg is broken. The neighbors say, “Oh, how fortunate you are.” “Maybe.” There is no end to this story. It goes on. That's how it is with all of our stories: there is no end. Maybe, good fortune, bad fortune. Who are we to know?

We have our opinions but that's all they are. The third Zen patriarch, Seng-T'san, said that “The great way is very simple: merely cease to cherish opinions.” We can't help having them, you know? Opinions are like assholes, everybody's got one. Multiple ones, but we don't have to hold onto them. Recognize that it's just your opinion. *There* is liberation. *There* is freedom. In letting go of our expectations of what has to hap-

pen, what ought to happen for us to be happy, we loosen our grip, and, loosening our grip *is* the way to happiness. The second noble truth is that the source of suffering is grasping at what is, trying to make permanent what is impermanent and always changing and flowing away, trying to hold onto that or pushing away what is coming our way. The Buddha Way is to get out of the way and just be the way, and receive whatever it

is with gratitude.

This city is named after Saint Francis of Assisi and the practice that he taught was the practice of gratitude. In Latin the word *gratias* means both gratitude and grace. He said it's the same thing. The definition of grace is unearned, undeserved, unanticipated comfort and blessings coming to us. When we resist what is coming toward us, he likened it to putting an umbrella over your head. When blessings are coming into our lives, we hold up this umbrella and we feel deprived. He said that the practice of gratitude is how we take down the umbrella and receive the blessings. Gratitude is saying, "Thank you"

*taking our feelings we are saying thank you  
with the forests falling faster than the minutes  
of our lives we are saying thank you  
with the words going out like cells of a brain  
with the cities growing over us  
we are saying thank you faster and faster  
with nobody listening we are saying thank you  
thank you we are saying and waving  
dark though it is*

So here is a challenge. How do we say thank you when everything in us says "no I don't want this?" Remember the peas-

## In letting go of our expectations of what has to happen, what ought to happen for us to be happy, we loosen our grip, and, loosening our grip is the way to happiness.

and then our thank you is what opens that channel for blessings to come to us. Saying thank you when love is coming our way or beauty or something delicious or something we wanted, it's easy to say thank you when the things that we want are coming our way. The challenge is to say thank you when it's the hard stuff.

Here's a poem by W. S. Merwin, former poet laureate of the US who died in March. This is a graduate course in gratitude. He says,

*Listen*

*with the night falling we are saying thank you  
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings  
we are running out of the glass rooms  
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky  
and say thank you  
we are standing by the water thanking it  
standing by the windows looking out  
in our directions*

*back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging  
after funerals we are saying thank you  
after the news of the dead  
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you*

*over telephones we are saying thank you  
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators  
remembering wars and the police at the door  
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you  
in the banks we are saying thank you  
in the faces of the officials and the rich  
and of all who will never change  
we go on saying thank you thank you*

*with the animals dying around us*

ant and his horse. What do we say when the results of this election are leading to disaster? I remind myself the results of the 2016 election in this country led to a real awakening of commitment and vision and passion by a generation that had given up on politics. I don't know how things are going to unfold for the next one or the one after that but I know that there is something arising that will not be denied.

William Stafford, another wonderful poet says,

*Yes  
It could happen any time, tornado,  
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.  
Or sunshine, love, salvation.  
It could, you know. That's why we wake  
and look out — no guarantees  
in this life.  
But some bonuses, like morning,  
like right now, like noon,  
like evening.*

So remembering the impermanence, the good passes, the bad passes. Our opinions come and go, like the thoughts in our head. So, we don't have to hold onto them but we can still trust that the impulse in us to kindness comes from this deepest truth of our absolute interconnectedness and interdependence on each other, and remember how ephemeral all of our lives are.

Here's one of my poems.

*Falling*

*In these awe-filled days of fire and flood  
We watch and wait and wonder  
When that fierce hand  
Might reach at last for us.*

*Those of us not yet touched by calamity  
Quake, knowing in our bones  
That though we may be spared  
This time, time will level us all.*

*No magic amulets, no prayers,  
Good deeds or good looks  
Can promise protection  
From our terminal condition.*

*And those who have watched a child  
Swept forever from our arms  
Or fled the flames that swallowed  
Our hopes and our memories*

*Or hid from the bombs  
Or the predator's gaze  
Know that nothing now will ever be the same -  
As if anything ever were.*

*For all of us are falling  
Like ashes, like rain,  
Like petals or leaves;  
But we all are falling together.*

*And if we knew, in truth,  
There was nowhere to land,  
Tell me: could we know the difference  
Between falling and flying?*

When we recognize that we are all falling and none of us knows who we are or what we're doing, how can we not open our hearts to compassion for everyone? Even those that don't wish us well. Because we know that they are creating their own hell and they will continue to suffer for that; whereas if we open our hearts we are creating heaven for us and those around us.

So compassion is what arises in us naturally as we awaken. Somebody asked the Dalai Lama to describe his religion. He said simply, "Kindness." So I'm gonna leave you with one final poem with that title by Naomi Shihab Nye.

#### *Kindness*

*Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.*

*How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.*

*Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase  
bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
it is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you every where  
like a shadow or a friend.*

Thank you for your kind attention.

#### **HAL HERSHEY (1946-2019)**

Having had a recurrence of Leukemia, our beloved GBF brother Hal Hershey took his last breath on Saturday evening August 10th. His lover and husband of 29 years, Don, was at his side in their home, where Hal most wanted to be. During the course of his illness, Hal was very appreciative of all the loving support he received from friends, family, and his caregivers, and expressed a peaceful readiness to go. He was an active member of GBF for many years, a key member of the Program Committee, and will live on in the many hearts of those he touched. Shine On Brother!

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## Sunday Sittings

### 10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday at 10:30am we meditate together for 30 minutes, followed by a talk or discussion till 12pm. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30pm, after which those who are interested usually go somewhere local for lunch. Our sittings are held at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (look for the red door near 21st St between Mission and Valencia Streets).

**MUNI:** 14 Mission or 49 Van Ness-Mission, alight at 21st St, walk 1/2 block

**BART:** 24th and Mission, walk 3 1/2 blocks

**PARKING:** on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage. The Center is handicapped accessible.

## Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over \$800 through members' generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40.

Information: (415) 861-4910

## How to Reach Us

[www.gaybuddhist.org](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

Mail correspondence:

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**PMB 456**

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GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

**[www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship)**

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The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is a charitable organization pursuant to Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3) and California Revenue and Taxation Code #23701d.

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**September 1 - Open Discussion (Labor Day Holiday)**

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**September 8 - Walt Opie**

Walt Opie was introduced to insight meditation in 1993 at Spirit Rock and attended his first residential retreat there in 2005. He is a graduate of both the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders' (CDL4) program and the Sati Center Buddhist Chaplaincy program. Walt is a participant in the current Insight Meditation Society (IMS) Teacher Training program. He leads a monthly sitting group for people in recovery in Berkeley and serves as a volunteer Buddhist facilitator at Solano State Prison in Vacaville. In addition, he is Executive Director of the Buddhist Pathways Prison Project (BP3).

**September 15 - John Martin**

John Martin teaches Vipassana (Insight), Metta (Loving Kindness), and LGBTQI themed meditation retreats. He leads an on-going weekly Monday evening meditation group in the Castro, teaches both an Advanced Practitioners Program group and a Dedicated Practitioners Group and is the co-guiding teacher for the LGBTQueer Sangha at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City. John serves on both the Spirit Rock Teachers Council and the Governing Teachers Council. He has had a dedicated practice while being engaged in the working world and emphasizes practice for daily life. He completed the SRMC/IMS/IRC 4-year teacher training in 2016. John served as a hospice volunteer for many years, first with Shanti Project and more recently with Zen Hospice Project.

**September 22 - René Rivera**

René Rivera is a leader and bridge-builder, working and learning in all the spaces in-between race, gender, and other perceived binaries, as a queer, mixed-race, trans man. René has been a student of the Dharma since 2004 and has been a part of the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) Alphabet Sangha since 2008. He has participated in the Commit to Dharma and Practice in Action programs at EBMC and the Community Dharma Leaders program at Spirit Rock. René is a community teacher at EBMC and also offers meditation and mindfulness instruction at other centers such as Spirit Rock Meditation Center, SF Dharma Collective, and others with a particular focus on offering the Dharma to QTPOC folk.

**September 29 - Trip Weil**

Trip Weil has been practicing in the Theravadan tradition since 2004. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leader and Dedicated Practitioner programs. Trip serves on the board of San Francisco Insight, where he also leads sitting groups and teaches meditation classes. He is a psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco and a former attorney.

**October 6 - Rev. Liên Shutt**

Rev. Liên Shutt is a Dharma Heir of Zenkei Blanche Hartman in the tradition of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. Born into a Buddhist family in Vietnam, she began her meditation practice in the Insight tradition of Spirit Rock. She is a founding member of the Buddhists of Color in 1998. Her Soto Zen training began at Tassajara monastery where she lived from 2002-2005; after which, she practiced monastically in Japan and Vietnam. While she has placed her trust and faith in Soto Zen, she continues to enjoy the deep silence of Insight practices and has completed retreats in the United States and Thailand. Drawing from her monastic experiences, she endeavors to share ways in which the deep settledness of traditional practices can be brought into everyday life. Liên's strength as a teacher is in making Zen practice accessible to all.

# Sunday Speakers

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**October 13 - David Richo Ph.D, MFT**

David Richo is a psychologist, teacher, and writer in Santa Barbara and San Francisco who emphasizes Jungian, transpersonal, and spiritual perspectives in his work. He is the author of *How to Be an Adult in Relationships*. For more information, visit [www.davericho.com](http://www.davericho.com).

**October 20 - Joseph Rodriguez**

Joseph Rodriguez is a Soto Zen student from the Shunryu Suzuki lineage, studying under Furuyu Nancy Schroeder (Abiding Abbess, Green Gulch Farm Zen Center) and serving as a board member of the San Francisco Zen Center. As a business executive and a long-time LGBT activist, his practice is to bring awareness, compassion, and forgiveness to daily life.

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**October 27 - Open Discussion**

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**November 3 - Alistair Shanks**

Alistair Shanks has been a dedicated practitioner and teacher of the Taoist Internal Martial Arts for over 20 years. Since 2008, he has been an adjunct faculty member at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine/CIIS where he teaches Tai Chi. Alistair was a volunteer with Zen Hospice Project from 2004 to 2014 and was hired to serve as the Volunteer Program Manager in 2016. His other volunteer work includes working as a Buddhist chaplain at San Francisco General Hospital and leading meditation sessions for inmates in the San Francisco County Jail. Alistair has a degree in Philosophy and Religion from SF State and a Masters Degree in Buddhist Chaplaincy from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. In his spare time he plays with San Francisco's legendary hardcore polka band Polkacide.

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**November 10 - Sister Merry Peter, SPI and Sister Mary Media, SPI**

Sister Merry Peter is a poet, writer, and former sex-worker who found her vocation through the Radical Faeries in 1987. Her life-long activism focuses on HIV-AIDS, queer youth, civil rights, and social justice. Her efforts include partnerships to provide street-level health services to sex workers, legal aid for LGBTQ refugees, and resistance to police violence. Sister Mary Media, SPI, a long-time member of GBF, is one of the original Sisters from the Order's founding in 1979 and currently serves as Mistress of Grants. She speaks frequently about the group's history and her vocation as a secular nun.

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**November 17 - Bill Weber**

Bill Weber is a senior Vipassana practitioner and a graduate from Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leaders program. He has twenty-five years of extensive retreat practice and currently practices at home with his husband or sits with a small group of gay men. He is also a documentary filmmaker and video editor, whose latest projects are *To Be Takei* and *The Untold Tales of Armistead Maupin*.

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**November 24 - Prasadacitta Dharmachari**

Prasadacitta Dharmachari will lead the sangha in Buddhist Chanting.

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By the power and truth of this practice, may all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness, may all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow, may all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is without sorrow, and may all live in equanimity, without too much attachment or too much aversion, believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF Dedication of Merit