

## **“Lives Lived”**

Rev. Shawn Newton and Rev. Lynn Harrison  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
Online Service via Zoom  
10 January 2021

### **Remembrances**

#### **Shirley Douglas**

She was born the daughter of a preacher man.  
Tommy Douglas, to be precise,  
before he became Premier of Saskatchewan  
or the first leader of the federal NDP.

She studied at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London,  
and went on to a career as an actress.

After marrying Donald Sutherland in 1966,  
she moved to Los Angeles  
and became active in the American Civil Rights Movement,  
the opposition to the Vietnam War,  
and the effort to gain greater rights  
for women and immigrants.

She raised funds for the Black Panthers  
and, in 1969, was arrested for “Conspiracy to Possess Unregistered  
Explosives,” after being accused of buying grenades for the Black  
Panthers.

Apparently framed by the FBI for her activism, she spent five days in  
jail and had her U.S. work permit revoked.

She was eventually exonerated, but returned to Canada and made  
Toronto her home.

Over the last decades of her life, she worked for nuclear disarmament, and, not surprisingly, advocated tirelessly for the protection of publicly-funded health care in Canada.

She died on April 5<sup>th</sup>, three days after her 86<sup>th</sup> birthday.

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### **Reva Gerstein**

Here at Toronto First, our pastoral care team keeps a list of community organizations that can provide support to people in crisis.

The Gerstein Center is high on that list—providing 24/7 telephone crisis intervention and counseling to adults who experience mental health problems.

It was founded in 1989, by psychologist Reva Gerstein.

She was born in Toronto on March 27, 1917 and died on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

In 1946, Dr. Gerstein became the first psychologist in the Ontario school system when she was hired by the East York-Leaside Board of Health.

She went on to work for the Canadian Mental Health Association, created “Mental Health Week” in Canada, hosted a CBC Radio program on mental health issues, founded the Hincks Treatment Centre for Adolescents and made countless other contributions in education and mental health care.

In the words of her grandson, interviewed for the Globe and Mail obituary, Reva Gerstein believed “that our society would not be judged or remembered for the size of its waterfronts or the height of

its buildings [but that] it would be remembered for how we treat the most vulnerable, disadvantaged people in it.”

Dr. Reva Gerstein was 102 years old.

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### **Larry Kramer**

Larry Kramer was a novelist and playwright and public health advocate, but he will be best remembered for his in-your-face brand of activism—and for the critical difference that it made.

While he often rubbed people the wrong way, it was Kramer’s unrelenting concern for others’ well-being that prompted him to found, in 1982, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, a community-based health organization whose purpose was to: “end the AIDS epidemic and uplift the lives of all affected.”

Frustrated with the bureaucracy and homophobia that slowed the U.S. government response to AIDS, Kramer founded ACT UP: the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power.

ACT UP was confrontational by design.  
And it worked.

ACT UP dramatically changed public health policy and the perception of people living with AIDS.

Funding for drug trials and medical support significantly increased.

As caustic as he could sometimes be, Kramer’s commitment saved the lives of countless people around the world.

He died on May 27<sup>th</sup>, at the age of 84.

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## **Alex Trebek**

I have many cousins in the United States,  
and I've seldom felt so close to them  
as the night my cousin Emily  
competed on "Jeopardy."

She didn't win...  
(the correct answer was "What are espadrilles?")  
but she got to meet Alex Trebek—which was  
something well worth celebrating.

He was born in Sudbury in July, 1940.  
He earned a degree in philosophy from the University of Ottawa, and  
he started his broadcasting career at the CBC...before moving to the  
U.S. and eventually becoming an American citizen.

When he died at age 80, he had hosted "Jeopardy" for 37 seasons.

It was a program that celebrated the joy of general knowledge...as  
well as the ongoing importance of always asking questions!

Alex Trebek's warmth and kindness will be remembered,  
as well as the grace he showed in living with pancreatic cancer for  
two years until his death on November 8<sup>th</sup>.

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## **Kathrine Johnson**

If you've seen the movie "Hidden Figures,"

you know who Katherine Johnson was.

Born in 1918 in West Virginia,  
she had, from an early age, a certain knack with numbers.

At 19, she graduated from college with highest honours  
with a degree in Mathematics and French.

She was then hand-picked to be one of first three Black students to  
integrate the graduate school of West Virginia University.

She left the program after a term to have children  
and become a schoolteacher.

In 1952, she took a job in the all-Black computing department at the  
National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

She spent the next four years analyzing flight data  
and, by the time that organization became NASA,  
had gained a reputation for the solid reliability of her calculations.

When there was a question about the 1962 flight trajectory  
of the Friendship 7 command module, John Glenn made clear that  
he trusted her math over what the computers of the time could do.

Glenn said: "If she says they're good, then I'm ready to go."

This pioneer of human spaceflight died on February 24<sup>th</sup> at the age of  
101.

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**Song: "Just the two of us" - Bill Withers**

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## **D'Andre Campbell and Chantel Moore**

2020 will be remembered not only for the coronavirus pandemic and the dramatic political events south of the border, but for the Black Lives Matter protests and calls for police reform across North America.

We could fill this service with the names of people who died because of systemic racism last year.

Many such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, are familiar by now, but others sadly less so.

D'Andre Campbell, a 26 year-old Black man, was shot and killed in Brampton, Ontario on April 7, 2020 by Peel Regional police.

Campbell was living with mental health issues and he had called police for help on the day he died.

Family members say that after entering Campbell's home, two police officers used their tasers on him before shooting him with a handgun while he was on the ground.

Also 26 years old when she died was Chantel Moore.

An Indigenous woman from the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation on the West Coast, she had recently moved to New Brunswick to be with her mother and her six-year old daughter.

She was shot and killed by police during a wellness check on June 4<sup>th</sup>.

Our hearts are heavy as we hear of these deaths, and as we consider how many lives are lost as a result of systemic racism in Canada and elsewhere.

May our Unitarian principles guide us toward the work we must do, to bring about racial justice and reconciliation.

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**Lorena Borjas**

“When transgender women in Queens needed a safe place to be tested for H.I.V., Lorena Borjas turned her home into a clinic.

“When others were arrested and charged with prostitution, she bailed them out.

“When some faced deportation after an arrest, she created a non-profit group to arrange for their legal representation.”

Borjas, who was described as an “indefatigable activist who drew on her own experiences as an immigrant transgender woman to help others” died of Covid-19 complications on March 30<sup>th</sup>, at the age of 59.

She was born in Mexico City and moved to New York City when she was 20.

She was convicted of several prostitution charges, which were later vacated by a judge who noted she had been forced into human trafficking.

She was fully pardoned in 2017.

We honour her today for the ways she took from her own hardships a commitment to help others in similar circumstances.

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### **Christie Blatchford**

For the past forty years, no-one who read Canadian newspapers could not know the name Christie Blatchford.

Known for her toughness and tenacity as a reporter, she cared deeply for the victims of injustice...moving her readers to care deeply, too.

Driven by what others described as a very strong moral compass, she often formed personal connections with the people she championed in her stories...going well beyond the usual boundaries of journalism.

In 2006, she covered the war in Afghanistan while embedded with Canadian soldiers, spending weeks hunting the Taliban in the mountains of Kandahar—an experience she would later name as a highlight of her career.

She wrote for The Toronto Sun, the Globe and Mail, the Toronto Star and the National Post...earning deep respect from readers and fellow journalists alike.

Christie Blatchford died of cancer on February 12, 2020.

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### **Josephine**

As Unitarian Universalists, we honour the interdependent web of which we are a part.

While we lift up today the lives of many people who died this past year, it seems fitting to name a much-beloved gorilla who passed away in 2020, as well.

Particularly since some of you may know her.

Josephine arrived at the Toronto Zoo on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1974, three months before it opened to the public.

She had made the journey as a three-year old from Gabon, West Africa.

One of the oldest living gorillas in a zoo in North America, Josephine was the mother of five offspring and the grandmother of five grand-offspring.

Those who worked with her considered her sassy, spunky, and something of a foodie.

She would savour her treats, taking several bites of a single almond, and taking ten minutes to enjoy every bit of a fig.

As Western lowland gorillas are at risk of extinction, Josephine was an ambassador for her species and contributed to behavioural research at major universities across Ontario.

Josephine died at the age of 49 on December 6<sup>th</sup>. She is mourned by the gorilla troop at the zoo, as well as her keepers and the general public that has come to know her over the past five decades.

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## **Laura Smith**

Canadian singer-songwriter Laura Smith was born on March 18, 1952 in London, Ontario.

She died of cancer in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia on March 7<sup>th</sup> last year, just shy of her 68<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Known for her song “Shade of Her Love” as well as a beautiful adaptation of the traditional “My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean,” she released four studio albums, and a new retrospective has just been released by Borealis Records.

We often talk about the interdependent web of existence.

In the world of artistic expression, we can see it in how one artist influences another.

Laura Smith influenced me, with this song in particular.

I’ve thought of it often this past year, as I’ve taken up a new pastime during the pandemic.

(Song: “Four Letter Word for Lonesome”)

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### **Paul Bear Vasquez**

You’ve either seen the video or you haven’t.  
If you have, you’ll know exactly who I’m talking about.  
If you haven’t, you won’t.

(Fear not, I’ll include a link to the video  
in the chat at the end of the service  
as well as in the spot on our website  
where today’s sermon would normally be posted.)

The amateur video in question involves a man, Paul Bear Vasquez, taking in the sight of a double rainbow in January 2010.

He just keeps excitedly exclaiming, “Whoa!”

For several minutes.  
And then he weeps—at the beauty of it all.

The video went viral. And has been seen by millions.  
People worried that he was not well.  
People wondered if he was really, really high.

Whatever the case, the double rainbow,  
which you can see on the camera  
was, indeed, stunning—stretching across  
from one side of a valley to the other.

May we all be able to live with such awe for the beauty of the earth.

Paul Vasquez died at 57, in September.

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### **Terry Jones**

The scene is a restaurant, occupied by a man and wife, a waitress, and a table of Vikings.

When asked what is on the menu, the waitress, played by Terry Jones, says:

“Well, there's egg and bacon;  
egg sausage and bacon; egg and spam;  
egg bacon and spam [...]  
spam sausage spam spam bacon spam tomato and spam...”

And then the Vikings start chanting: *Spam spam spam spam...*and it does go on!

Terry Jones was beloved for that sketch as well as so many others in the tv series Monty Python's Flying Circus.

Of interest to heretics among us, he also wrote and directed “The Life of Brian” in which a young Jewish boy named Brian Cohen is mistaken for the Messiah.

The film was banned in Britain, Ireland and Norway.

In the film’s defence, Jones said it wasn’t about Jesus Christ, “but about [the people] who for the next 2,000 years would torture and kill each other because they couldn’t agree on what he was saying about peace and love.”

Like so many gifted comedians, Terry Jones guided us toward “the meaning of life” through laughter.

He died on January 21st, 2020, at age 77.

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### **Salome Bey**

Born in 1933 in New Jersey, Salome Bey became a Canadian after moving to Toronto in 1964.

Bey met her husband-to-be, Howard Berkeley Matthews, when touring Toronto in 1961 at the First Floor Club, a Yorkville hot spot that stood near where the Toronto Reference Library is today.

Once settled here, she played the jazz club circuit across the country, she became known as “Canada’s First Lady of the Blues.”

Beyond playing clubs, she crafted revues and stage productions.

She received multiple honours and devoted herself in later years to nurturing the talents of many young Black Canadian artists.

The great Canadian singer Jackie Richardson said of Bey:  
“She is Mother Earth. She has such depth in her voice,  
such depth within her soul... She is so rooted, so earthy with it.”

Salome Bey died on August 8<sup>th</sup> at the age of 86.

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**Song: "I Can See Clearly Now" - Johnny Nash**

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### **Benediction**

Having heard about all these “lives lived” in 2020,  
may we see the meaning and purpose of our  
own lives more clearly.

May we continue on our paths with joy and courage,  
knowing that we are linked to so many others  
who’ve gone before.

In the breakout rooms in coffee time after the service, you’re invited  
to reflect on which life stories resonated most deeply  
with you...and how they might guide and inspire you in the days to  
come.

As we extinguish our chalice,  
may the light of our lives continue to shine.

Blessings to you all.