

## Poetry to Enrich Spiritual Practice: Breaking Open

from a session with Margaret Hasse and Marg Walker  
at Unity Church – Unitarian, January 14, 2026

### Hug

Margaret Hasse

"To fit together"  
is one branch  
in the language root  
of arm."

How regrettable  
that arms name  
the hardware of war.

The only right  
to bear arms safely  
is the caring capacity  
of our amazing  
appendages that  
comfort and caress  
have and hold,  
cradle and rock,  
clasping each other  
close.

## **Meadowlark Song**

Margaret Hasse

What hurt you today  
was taken out of your heart  
by the meadowlark  
who slipped the silver needle  
of her song  
in and out of the gray day  
and mended what was torn.

## **Paying Attention**

Jana A. Bouma

Sometimes a light shines  
from deep within a thing.  
A thing worn, well-used.  
An old shoe, a wooden stool,  
a rusted sign hanging above the door.  
Sometimes the light spills, buttermilk-yellow,  
and you don't have to do a thing to feel  
refreshed as if drinking from a cool pail.  
Sometimes it shines from an old face  
passing on the sidewalk.  
It will carry you, in a dream, to a familiar street  
where you walk, shaded by the trees  
that you know are no longer there.

## Ordinary Life

Barbara Crooker

This was a day when nothing happened,  
the children went off to school  
remembering their books, lunches, gloves.  
All morning, the baby and I built block stacks  
in the squares of light on the floor.  
And lunch blended into naptime,  
I cleaned out kitchen cupboards,  
one of those jobs that never gets done,  
then sat in a circle of sunlight  
and drank ginger tea,  
watched the birds at the feeder  
jostle over lunch's little scraps.  
A pheasant strutted from the hedgerow,  
preened and flashed his jeweled head.  
Now a chicken roasts in the pan,  
and the children return,  
the murmur of their stories dappling the air.  
I peel carrots and potatoes without paring my thumb.  
We listen together for your wheels on the drive.  
Grace before bread.  
And at the table, actual conversation,  
no bickering or pokes.  
And then, the drift into homework.  
The baby goes to his cars, drives them  
along the sofa's ridges and hills.  
Leaning by the counter, we steal a long slow kiss,  
tasting of coffee and cream.  
The chicken's diminished to skin and skeleton,  
the moon to a comma, a sliver of white,  
but this has been a day of grace  
in the dead of winter,  
the hard cold knuckle of the year,  
a day that unwrapped itself  
like an unexpected gift,  
and the stars turn on,  
order themselves  
into the winter night.

## Water Sign

Margaret Hasse

Two-year-old Charlie loves water,  
loves the force of water  
in gutters, pipes, the second hose  
bought to keep peace between brothers  
who spray tomatoes with the intensity  
of fire fighters at a five alarm fire,  
loves the sources of water:  
faucet, penis, rain, spit.

He longs like a pilgrim for wet places  
where his worship is  
complete submersion:  
bathtub, swim pool, lake.

To praise water,  
he secludes himself in the bathroom.  
Ascending a stepping stool to the sink,  
he opens valves to an endless rush  
of new pressure in copper pipes.

So much water, why not share it?  
Give it away until it seeps  
through the floorboards,  
showers into the kitchen,  
fills the bowls on the table,  
flows on the heads  
of his amazed mother and brother  
who do not immediately recognize  
that grace might descend like this—  
inconveniently—  
from a complete enthusiast  
who needs to be forgiven  
for being generous  
with whatever he loves.

**The Leaky Faucet**  
Ted Kooser

All through the night, the leaky faucet  
searches the stillness of the house  
with its radar blip: who is awake?  
Who lies out there as full of worry  
as a pan in the sink? *Cheer up,*  
*cheer up,* the little faucet calls,  
*Someone will help you through your life.*

## Lead

Mary Oliver

Here is a story  
to break your heart.  
Are you willing?  
This winter  
the loons came to our harbor  
and died, one by one,  
of nothing we could see.  
A friend told me  
of one on the shore  
that lifted its head and opened  
the elegant beak and cried out  
in the long, sweet savoring of its life  
which, if you have heard it,  
you know is a sacred thing.,  
and for which, if you have not heard it,  
you had better hurry to where  
they still sing.  
And, believe me, tell no one  
just where that is.  
The next morning  
this loon, speckled  
and iridescent and with a plan  
to fly home  
to some hidden lake,  
was dead on the shore.  
I tell you this  
to break your heart,  
by which I mean only  
that it break open and never close again  
to the rest of the world.

## **My Mother's Lullaby**

Margaret Hasse

When my mother  
smelling of milk and bread  
brushes the long robe of my hair,  
the vines spring roses.  
We wake in a white bed  
floating with feather pillows.  
Morning patterns her face.  
She curls me in her arms;  
she is a seashell,  
white and full of song.

And now I come to tuck  
my little mother into bed.  
I am too young to be empty-armed  
and the weeds in my throat  
will not let me sing lullabies.  
Waiting has teeth in it.

My mother smiles at me  
and wraps around herself.  
I won't see her cry;  
her wheat body does not even shake.  
She will not know  
how the echoes return.  
Silent tears are turquoise  
peacock feathers that tickle  
and the hyena in me laughs,  
crazy, crazy.

And my mother  
on her thin shelved bed  
hears the dogs move restlessly,  
the clack of their nails on linoleum.  
She knows they have come for her.  
She whimpers, they whimper.  
Soon there will be no one  
to tell me what I was like  
when I was a child.

## Going on Alone in the Great Conversation

Margaret Hasse

Mother, you used to say that old  
was just going on, no special feeling,  
except of surprise.  
You said that dead was a great conversation  
continued. With the stars? I wondered.  
With the living? With dreamers?

Mother, the last time I saw you was last night  
though you have been dead ten years.  
Your face glowed, all of you  
coveted in its sweet perfection.

Your only fault: you didn't stay  
long enough. I want to talk with you.  
With luck, your hands would pet my hair  
which can never be touched enough.  
With time, I could have smelled your smell,  
yellow perfume, the dry flower of makeup.

Instead, after a glimpse of you,  
I was like a child on the green grass  
in the sputter of tulips, the parent departing  
in a big black car.  
I cry after it: *Come back.*  
*Take me with you. Me go along.*

Me go on alone. Much later when  
I am seventy, your age when you died,  
dear mother, I'll be your twin in the mirror.  
We will both be wearing lavender,  
absurd Easter hats and smiles because  
we've faith in what's new and what is given.

Because we loved reading out loud,  
the words, each one a new penny dropped in a jar.  
Because we loved walking.  
Because we have kneeled at each other's sickbeds,  
and you passed on the little secret notes  
and the gene codes, these bow legs from you,  
these valentine eyes, this sentimental breathing.  
Because we are each a word in a great conversation,  
and the word is good.

## **Prodigal Son**

Margaret Hasse

How to hold on, how to hold off  
biting nails down to skin.

Somewhere out there  
is a son on the run, on the make,  
in the bars, behind bars,  
beneath that mound of blankets  
beside that beat-up Target cart.

“Try meditation,” friends say, “try oracle  
cards. Talk with a cop, a therapist,  
join a group, join the Y, make a pact, pray.”

How to hold on, how to hold off  
biting nails down to skin.

“It’s a hard time for the homeless,”  
a newscaster intones,  
“10 degrees below out there.”

Out there in the back yard  
a tattered squirrel scrounging  
around a chewed hole  
in a beat-up bin falls in,  
doesn’t scramble out.

I put on my coat, go  
to help what I can.

## Grief

Margaret Hasse

Green tea in the night before first light.  
It's early, even for me.  
How to hold the day  
in my arms like a day-old baby  
struggling to survive,  
her curled fingers tiny as wren's feet.  
I dreamed my son  
was back in his room  
playing solitaire  
and not in a jail cell alone,  
his phone care spent.  
I know how one hand holds the other  
orbiting each knuckle with a thumb.  
I'll do what I need to do.  
I'll fall softly like light rain on myself.

## **The Peace of Wild Things**

Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

## Half a World Away

Marg Walker

Her backpack is light, even airy.  
She studies maps, learns exchange rates.  
Slips in a slim volume of Sara Teasdale  
in case her native tongue might comfort.

He marvels, *Aren't you afraid?* meaning  
*Why can't you be more like me?* Jokes,  
*Don't forget to come home.* She won't

think of him at all while she's gone  
until one night, half a world away,  
alone in her shabby hotel,  
she opens the volume and reads

*Shall I be faithless to myself  
Or to you?*

And just that suddenly  
she stands with all the women before her  
who've known the price of either choice.  
They open their hands to receive her  
with sorrow, and with welcome.

## **The Journey**

Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

## The Arms of the World

Marg Walker

In a field of gold, the afternoon glow,  
beneath the high flung blue

of summer, with you I walk again,  
drink in the sun, the scent of grass,

wind's brush, insects' hum,  
at play in the arms of the world

and glancing up into the fathoms  
see to my amazement the secret

contents of the sky disclosed –  
untold chandeliers of stars –

impossible by day! – a riddle  
of silver sparks hung in pale blue –

and turn to speak, but you  
are nowhere in the sunlit field.

Ah. This is the sudden truth of it  
and the wonder: all is present.

All I've known moves with me  
through my days,

the unseen no less my compass  
and my essence.

Let me not fail to praise  
these veiled and layered realms

not skim as stone does over water  
or water over stone

but belong to all affections,  
the stone, the water, the impossible

stars, this field, this sun, and you –  
though you're not here –

with me in each astonishment

## **Dream Cradle**

Marg Walker

At length, I wandered through the house  
and found the infant whose cries had  
gone unanswered. Her swaddling  
was in disarray, prodded by tiny fists.  
The room was dark. Empty but for the cradle  
and two women I now perceived  
in the shadows. It was strange to me

that they did not soothe her but stood  
apart. Their similar shapeless dresses  
were of sepia brown, like old photographs,  
and it came to me that this was my mother,  
young again, and her mother at her side.  
Some silent confusion and instruction  
seemed to pass between them, as if

neither knew what should be done  
and feared a need this strong.

I bent to untangle the child's covering.  
At once she grew calm. Her mouth –  
so remarkably like mine – softened.  
When I saw that her eyes were my eyes  
there passed between us an understanding.  
I lifted her. From now on I will carry her  
wherever she needs to go.

## **In Your Own Hands**

Marg Walker

I lived through it.

I took my time.

Night wind riffling the cottonwood  
outside my open window

the kitchen corner where two walls met  
and where I placed my forehead more than once

the headline posted on my refrigerator:  
*Scientists prove the body's supply of tears*

*is endless.* "More bad news,"  
I penciled in the margin

and went off to work. All of it  
helped. Meanwhile the faithful moon

silvered my pillow. When I'd learned  
enough my heart returned to me

whole and unashamed.

Let no one say you are not enough.  
Let no one stop you from regarding your life

like a treasure, flawed but dear,  
holding it up to the light

and turning it to radiance in your own hands.

## **Sweet Darkness**

David Whyte

When your eyes are tired  
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone  
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark  
where the night has eyes  
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure  
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb  
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon  
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.  
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds  
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet  
confinement of your aloneness  
to learn

anything or anyone  
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

**if you must begin again**

Marg Walker

begin here

in silence

hold your  
hungry self  
in your own  
loving arms

in the clearing  
a wisp  
of new moon  
slips  
from the grasp  
of the trees'  
dark inventory

look up

its contour  
foreshadows  
the fullness  
that is to come

## What If the Forest Floor

Marg Walker

*“And what if / In your dream / You went to heaven /  
And there plucked a strange and beautiful flower”  
Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

What if  
the forest floor  
papered now  
with leaves  
at season's end  
is akin  
to this age  
you are  
which is all ages  
you have been  
and all wisdoms  
therefrom?

And what if

it can only be  
now  
that you find  
in the loam  
among the tumble  
of leaf mulch  
and red berries  
a strange and beautiful flower  
you've never  
before seen  
and know it  
as yourself?