

SKAGIT UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

October 10, 2021

Speaker: Charles Katz with voice interpretation by Eliot Helman

Celebrant: Pete Smith

**“Going Beyond God toward Gaia”**

By [Charles Katz](#)

“To the skippers in our lives”

(blue shades are hyperlinked to sites, a few are surprises)

Hello you all in this fellowship living way up in the lovely and bit chilly northwest. I am honored and delighted to be able to share my journey as a deaf person with you all. I would like to open my talk here with two thank yous. The first thanks goes to my dear cousin living among you for bringing up the idea of her cousin talking about “life” as a deaf person. Thank you, Simme. The second thanks is to Breeann, my only niece.

Thanks to Breeann for asking me a simple question, “do you feel privileged?” during the not so long ago BLM-Trump time in America. My answer to her made me realize that I came into this world extremely privileged even though I was born deaf. That realization grew into deep gratitude, being so thankful that I am starting to struggle with it. That struggle, oddly enough, helped me balance myself a little more and made me calmer in life. What should I do with gratitude inside me? I wonder.

Out of extraordinary odds of being able to squiggle into my mom’s ova, I was born deaf to deaf parents guaranteeing a natural language acquisition for me and my deaf brother. This is something about 90 percent of deaf people, born before and during my time, did not have. Most of them grew up with parents who did not sign, [seriously affecting](#) many things, primarily their communication and language acquisition, both of which almost all hearing people like you naturally have, almost without thought.

My parents had deaf friends therefore my brother and I had an elderly deaf woman who babysat us often. I now look at her as my “deaf grandmother”. I had a lovely and smart deaf teenager who accompanied me on the train to school. I now look at her as my “big sister,” which I do not have. There was a bachelor friend of my dad

who came to my house for dinner so often that I now look at him as my “deaf uncle.” Another best friend of my mom is now, to me, my “deaf aunt”. I was fortunate to have an extra set of “family” even though I do have a biological one who mostly did and could not sign. Looking back to this made me so grateful that I ask again, what to do with such gratitude inside me?

I was also fortunate to attend a [state boarding school](#) 90 miles east inland in [Riverside](#), California, for eleven years, where almost everyone signed. Again, this was something my parents (and countless deaf people in the past) did not have as they were born to hearing and non-signing parents and attended schools with no sign language. Because everyone in my schooling years could sign along with my parents and their friends, I had access to many things: numerous deaf role models, extra curricular activities, editing the yearbook, participating in and leading organizations, and especially performing in some seven high school stage productions. All of that would never have happened to me if I attended public schools in my home district which, in the 1960s and 1970s, had absolutely no ASL interpreters at all. The [law](#) requiring this was first passed in 1975 when I was a sophomore in high school.

Again, against extraordinary odds, I was born deaf into a deaf Jewish congregation, which was incorporated just several months before. That is [Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf](#) which congregated first in Los Angeles in 1960 before buying their own synagogue buildings in 1966 in the [San Fernando Valley](#) where I grew up. This congregation, along with my lifelong reading, instilled into me the love and lore of Judaism, everything accessible to me as a little deaf boy. At my birth, there were only three deaf congregations of that kind in the whole world. Two are now no more and TBS is barely surviving today.

Now comes lifelong reading to satisfy my voracious curiosity. Because my parents were not highly educated and probably couldn't answer my questions, and because neighbors in my public space could not communicate with me, these reasons were probably why the curious katz inside me drove to books. Thank “G-O-D” for the books! Of the Jewish writers, I fell in love with the works of [Chaim Potok](#) and [Issac Bashevis Singer](#). After reading all Potok novels, my uncle told me to my delight that my family is distantly related to him. I travelled to [Poland](#) twice to visit my grandparents'

[birth city](#) and a few sites, such as [Krochmalna Street](#) in [Warsaw](#), from IB Singer's novels. I took everything I learned about being Jewish for granted until not so long ago. Looking back, I now gasp in realization how fortunate I was and should be grateful. What should I do with such gratitude in me?

Speaking of reading books, my gratitude should go to this one, "[Roots](#)" by [Alex Haley](#), which came into my life as a young teen of 14. Out of his 666 pages, only 5 words hit me hard. His saga led to this almost in the end: "And the baby was me." I didn't realize the magnitude of these 5 words until after I began creating my own saga that Alex sought out his "absent" history as an African American. He created a saga to explain his own blackness just exactly the same way I am trying to explain my own deafness.

For my BA degree, I went to [Gallaudet College](#), now [University](#), in Washington D.C. where my horizons expanded exponentially by being with extraordinary deaf people congregating there from all over the world, either as professors, administrators, visitors, or fellow students. During that time, an important work, "[Deaf Heritage](#)" by [Jack Gannon](#), was published. At that point, I had never read any book nor took any course on deaf history. That book opened the door into my passion in deaf history. It was another book, some five years later, with [Harlan Lane](#)'s "[When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf](#)" that "broke the dam". That book has fifty pages of bibliography with tiny lines of entries on each page. That stoked my passion even further and provoked me to travel. First to [Connecticut](#) and then elsewhere, I went to look at, handle, and read [papers](#) written by deaf people long ago to only about 200 years ago. That passion continues to be stoked almost daily with my own family history, [deaf school histories](#), and a small but fast-growing number of books on deaf studies. Actually, a couple of weeks ago I acquired the minutes of the board meetings of my TBS Sisterhood to be deposited in its [archives](#) at [CSUN](#). We are custodians of the materials and memories of our parents and I feel this keenly.

All that learning and love of deaf history led me to an important personal event in the summer of 1989. A year before, my university finally chose a [deaf president](#) after [124 years](#) of hearing white males running it. Probably out of jubilation, they hosted the first of only two, and probably the largest ever, international deaf culture festival called

[The Deaf Way](#). It was there watching a play performed only in mime, "[Telling Stories](#)", when I jotted down on its program book an outline of a stage play of how a "god" tried to raise a deaf boy growing up paralleling deaf history. I could say, the rest is (my) history.

That story, first thought of as a fable, in about a year later, became a play on deaf history using ASL, mime, and gestures and performed at UCLA. And then over a few months, that "fable" just grew and grew. It was this book, "[The Power of Myth](#)", by [Joseph Campbell](#) (with Bill Moyers) which told me that my "fable" actually is not a fable but a mythology. I went down on my knees in shock and, then later, in awe to realize that my people, the people of the eye, seeing people, or any signing people, do not have stories passed down across thousands of years which became religions and mythologies we now see and use among us today. The past few years made me realize I am trying to develop a [meta-story](#) to reflect the whole panorama of deaf history and deaf experience. I became slack many times thinking of that task because I learned that this is a job for generations of people to develop a mythology, not a single person or even a single generation. Yet, I tell myself always to move on because it takes one to put a seed in the ground.

The work mythologizing deaf history led me to many books which sustained me as I struggled to continue developing my "saga", now known as "The Deaf Child: A Mythology of the American Deaf Experience". Five drafts of the textbook were used in two high school and three college courses to teach deaf history and deaf studies. Still available only in [ASL](#) on [YouTube](#), the mythology is 12 hours long in 139 clips and I am in the process of translating each clip into English. Yes, it is a lifelong labor of love, an electronic bilingual textbook on deaf history using ASL and English.

There are two other life events, on a different plane, appearing innocuous at that time, but grew into importance later on. [One](#) of my closest friends from my Gallaudet days asked me to speak about him during his college years at his life service before dying from AIDS. Before giving the eulogy, a friend invited me to attend a pre-dawn sweat lodge ceremony deep inland from San Diego. That memorable morning was so meaningful. Three years later, another friend I worked with at [Lamar University](#) in [Beaumont](#), Texas, invited me to go with his family to an only twice a year medicine wheel ceremony nestled in the deep southwest of Texas by the Mexican border.

Meeting and conversing with two medicine persons were meaningful and that weekend was extra-memorable. These two Native American ceremonies opened my eyes to learn more about and to embrace our natives living among us here. It was their art, lore, and ways of life living on their [turtle island](#) or our America that helped sustain my soul. Over time, those events came back to me often and are now interwoven into my very fabric of being. Everything is interconnected all in one big grand planetary circle.

After many years of reading into new areas: [Jungian archetypal psychology](#), religion and mysticism of all kinds, and other forgotten books, I became more “calm” with those big burning questions we have. Oddly enough, I feel more spiritual after reading the [works](#) on religion and atheism by [Dawkins](#), [Dennet](#), and [Harris](#), and not so much from the brilliant screeches of [Hitchens](#). Yes, they are the four horsemen of atheism. Dawkins taught me in his book, “[Unweaving the Rainbow](#)” that it’s miraculous just to be in “awe of wonder” inside Mother Nature (or science). When I am inside [Gaia](#), I lapse into awe easily and, for me, that was enough, not needing stories already bequeathed inside me. I realized that I now outgrew Judaism and God. Some of us here are heeding the heralds on the continuing degradation of orthodox religions and the ascendancy of earth-based spirituality.

It was [Greta Thunberg](#)’s [House on Fire speech](#) that became the capstone of the argument convincing me that Gaia must come first before God or we shall suffer and perish. It was an amalgamation of books and life experiences that convinced me that there is probably absolutely nothing out there, that we live in only ONE house, and that it is only us to take care of ourselves and to take care of our only one circular home named Gaia.

Over millennia, human beings have sought meanings and understanding. I believe in having “belief”, no matter what. We need to realize that religions are mere stories passed on to us. Yes, we should celebrate them by retelling them often BUT with liberal revisions to match the times we live in. I feel those sacred stories MUST not be frozen to avoid being irrelevant over time like what we are now seeing in any orthodoxy in the practice of religions today.

And then a few months ago, thanks to this brother who is voicing for me right now, through him, I met an extraordinary person, an independent thinking female rabbi

named [Lynn Gottlieb](#). I found her unique, unconventional, and very refreshing. Do we know that there is a female rabbi [fighting](#) for the Palestinians by exhorting principles of [non-violence](#) using examples from the recent and distant past - Gandhi, MLKing, and all sources of Judaism ranging from the Torah to the esoteric Kabbalah? I didn't. I find her [principles](#) of [non-violence](#) extremely helpful for me to visualize what changes need to be made in our very own house.

I also kept returning to Buddhism (or simply trying to be a Buddha or Jesus, in any manner) to strive for inner balance and peace. I came to believe that we need to meld both eastern and western religions into a new generic meta-story for everyone on the planet to celebrate together inside our blue house. I now would like to share with you a quote by Joseph Campbell which is emblazoned on a [bookmark](#) by [Pacifica Institute](#). "The only *myth* that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is the one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet and everybody on it. That's my main thought for what the future *myth* is going to be."

Again I find it odd to sign this that we need to put aside all "religions" and go beyond them toward the light of Gaia who is also suffering along with us. Once the people in her blue home are mostly balanced and respectfully coexisting among one another, she will then heal and become healthier for all beings in the future on the planet.

If we place God over [Gaia](#), we will be in trouble. We need to keep, but go beyond, God and embrace [Gaia](#) in order to bequeath a slightly healthier home to our grandchildren. I am now trying to practice what I shared with you here. Try to eat less meat and more plant based food. Think less about yourself and more about the people around you. Use more solar or alternate energy and less on burning fossil fuels. Resisting or fighting less toward y/our challenges and accepting them more with non-violence principles and in loving kindness. Celebrate disability, mental illness, and death so that they are less negative in our lives. Serve more than be served. I think we could add a few more here.

I asked myself again here what I should do with the gratitude inside me? I think, hmm, express them more often and by serving others more always. As an eternal optimist, I believe Gaia and all of us in Her shall prevail. How? By us making critical

amends and working on them. Therefore, let's start with myself, yourself, and us all together. Peace out.

I hope I won't take all of my allotted time here with you because I want you all to have the chance to raise any more issues or questions you might have about being deaf. I prefer you all be more aware about sign language and deaf people by asking more questions . . .

Thank you.

---

CLOSURE with the [Opti-Mystic Oath](#)

I will act as a conduit of hope and encouragement to all I meet.

I will intentionally displace fear and loathing with hope and resourcefulness.

I will look trouble in the eye and devise a plan to survive and a plan to thrive.

I will innovate and create tomorrow's answers today.

I will bring the full force of my principles and personality to every client conversation.

I will live with purpose, pursue things with passion and reflect with gratitude each day.

I am immensely grateful for this opportunity to prove what is in me.

---

### **Books Mentioned in the Talk**

Roots: The Saga of An American Family by Alex Haley

Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America by Jack Gannon

When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf by Harlan Lane

The Power of Myth with Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers

The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture

Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder by Richard Dawkins

Trail Guide to the Torah of Non-Violence by Lynn Gottlieb

No One is Too Small to Make a Difference by Greta Thunberg

Of the Potok books, I recommend [Davita's Harp](#) and his classic, The Chosen

Of the IBSinger books, I recommend The [King](#) of the [Fields](#)

### **Recommended Books on Deaf People** (\* - great writing for ease of reading)

\*[Seeing Voices](#) by Oliver Sacks

\*[Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture](#) by Carol Padden and Tom Humphries  
[Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity](#), ed by Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray  
\*[In Silence: Growing Up Hearing in a Deaf World](#) by Ruth Sidransky  
[Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood](#) by Paddy Ladd  
[Introduction to American Deaf Culture](#) by Thomas Holcomb

**Recommended Books** (also hyperlinked)

[Reflections on the Art of Living](#): A Joseph Campbell Companion, edited by Diane K. Osbon  
[Animal-Speak](#) by Ted Andrews  
[When God Was a Woman](#) by Merlin Stone  
[Indian Givers](#) by Jack Wetherford  
[The Two Hands of God](#) by Alan Watts  
[God's Delusion](#) by Richard Dawkins  
[The Witch of Portobello](#) by Paulo Coelho  
[Food of the Gods](#) by Terence McKenna  
[Mother Earth Spirituality](#) by Ed McGaa, Eagle Man  
[The Sacred and the Profane](#) by Mircea Eliade  
[Introduction to the Science of Mythology](#) by C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi  
[Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors](#) by Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan  
[Guns, Germs, and Steel](#) by Jared Diamond  
[Honoring the Medicine](#) by Kenneth Cohen  
[The Fifth Sacred Thing](#) by Starhawk