

Bearing Witness is a Blessing



AISHA HAUSER, MSW, CRE-ML
Lead Ministry Team,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship

Growing up in an Egyptian Arabic speaking home, we never just said, “hello” to greet each other. We would say “Ahlan wa sahlán” which translates to “easy family.” You are part of our family and it is easy to be together is how I would explain this. An affirmation of connection.

I learned that the Zulu greeting is “Sawubona” which means “I see you, I acknowledge you, I recognize you as a person.” What a powerful and life affirming greeting.

I acknowledge you.

I recognize you as a person.

This month's theme is witnessing, and the greetings I describe above are a way of witnessing who we are to each other in community. As humanity has become more transient in the last few hundred years, many of us travel and live in many places throughout our lives. This means our friendships and connections are fluid. Before the internet, I would maybe receive a handwritten letter from a friend I met after they or I moved to a new town. This was a rare occurrence.

Now that social media is a pervasive part of our lives, I have found that I am able to remain connected to peo-

ple that I got to know and care about during a moment in time when we lived in geographic proximity to each other. I can follow people as they acknowledge milestones in their and their loved one's lives.

Through TikTok, I have learned more about non-famous people all over the world and here in the United States than I ever would have on any other platform. People who are interested in transforming our hurting world into a more healing and equitable place.

We all are continuing to bear witness to the genocide in Gaza, the Congo, Haiti, Sudan among other places, thanks to social media. Awareness has been brought to our phones. We can never again claim, “we didn't know.”

We do know. What we do with that knowledge is part of choosing how we move forward as a collective.

The Church of the Larger Fellowship would never have the reach it does at this moment in history if it wasn't for the internet and social media. We as the CLF are able to bear witness to the lives of our members all over the world, including our beloved incarcerated UU community.

Bearing witness is part of the ways we share stories of our lives and the

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Quest

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“For the
dead and the
living, we
must bear
witness.”

ELIE WIESEL

in this issue

BEARING WITNESS IS A BLESSING
Aisha Hauser

WITNESSING
Multiple authors

WITNESS IS A SACRED ACT
Donte Hillard

FROM THE UUA PRESIDENT
Rev. Dr. Sofia Bentancort

A FAREWELL MESSAGE FROM ROSE
Rose Gallogly

GENERAL ASSEMBLY DELEGATE INFO

WITNESSING

*What does it mean to bear witness to another person or a situation?
When have you felt witnessed?*



PHOTO BY BRAD WEAVER ON UNSPLASH

JACOB

CLF member, incarcerated in AR

When you look up the word witness in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it gives you several meanings to include: to testify, to be present during the action, to give evidence, to furnish proof, and one with personal knowledge or experience. For most inmates, I'm sure the word witness can equate to snitch/rat or even alleged victim, but that is not and should not always be the case.

In most cases to bear witness to another or a situation means that

one is present to see the action, inaction, or solution that comes, but there is another layer to witnessing that is often forgotten. The witness is also there to furnish their personal knowledge of experience that relates to the situation. To truly bear witness is to serve as teacher, mediator, referee to the situation while being sure the party or parties learn, and hopefully award the pitfalls you already journeyed through, which is why bearing witness for our brethren is so important.

As a follower of the more earth-based or Pagan traditions, you are

often left to stumble alone for a long period of time before finding witness, teacher, or guru depending upon your lineage. Then the moment that you find like-minded individuals, to bear witness for you and to bear witness for, learning blossoms in an explosion as you help each other. I felt this when I finally found my circle here in prison and we began exchanging books, ideas, knowledge and help. The joys of bearing witness to both the good, the bad, the ugly, and the indifferent for each other expands your knowledge base, your support base and your religious growth exponentially. ■

MICHAEL

CLF member, incarcerated in CA

To bear witness is to be with that person or situation so completely, it is as if you are the person or situation. Perfect empathy. It is also to behold the truth.

I have experienced this with people I have taken with me on journeys into the deep. I could share in their moments of awakening.

There is also the one who pried open my mind with masterful skill and as I came to understand the profound truth I was being introduced to, I found a moment of union with my teacher, who witnessed my awakening. ■

Regrets

CHRISTI (I. CEE VAGANTE)

CLF member, incarcerated in AR

Throughout the much and manifold
when all the tales are truly told
and living's stories reach an end
(though time remains to now amend)
it isn't more places, things and stuff
but failing to love others enough.

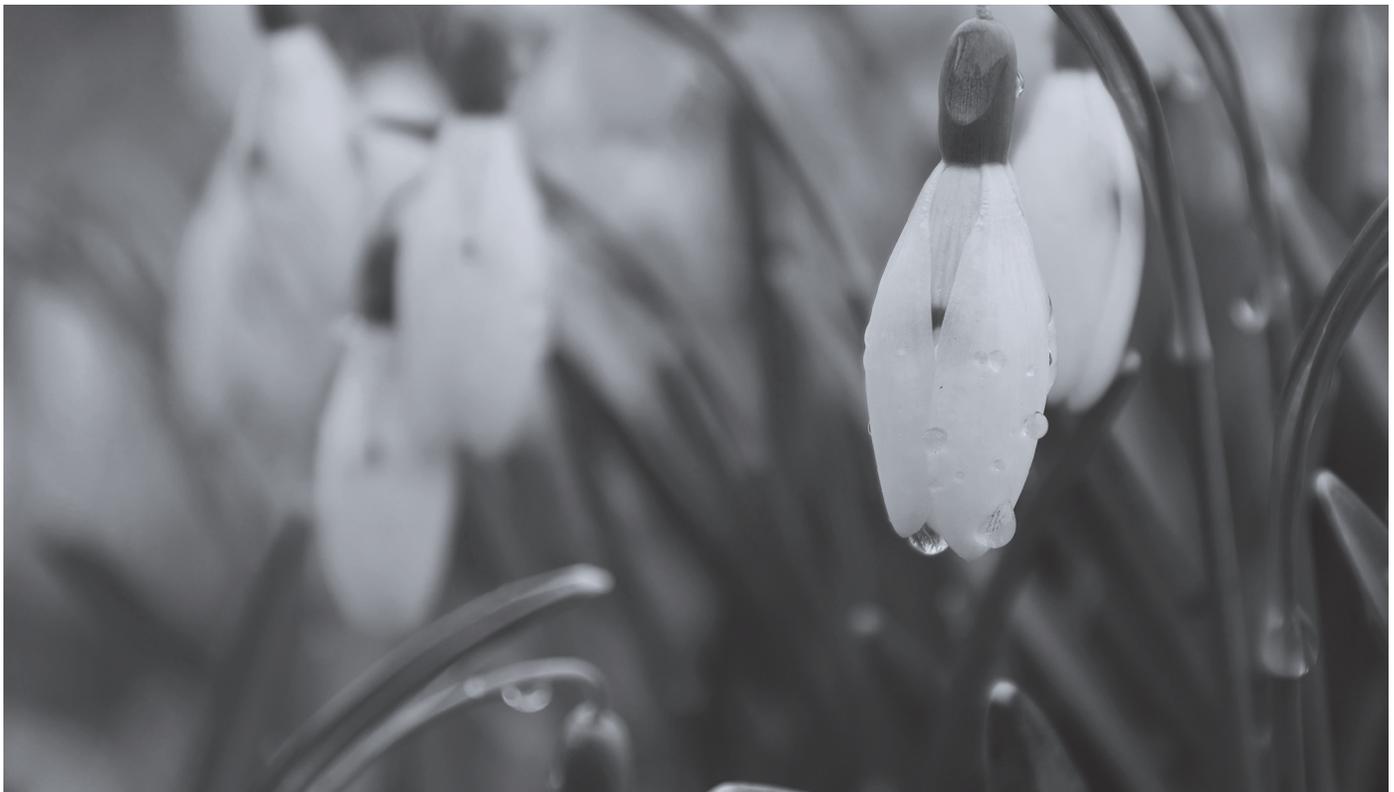


PHOTO BY JACK BLUEBERRY ON UNSPLASH

Witness is a Sacred Act



DONTE HILLARD

*Learning Fellow,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship*

To witness is a sacred act. In ministry, witnessing can be understood as the ministry of presence or “accompaniment: a ministry grounded in being present for folx wherever they are on their journey, not because we have solutions, but because it is our sacred duty to remind people that they are not alone. To bear witness can also mean, “I was there, I experienced it, I know this happened, I am a witness.” However, witnessing is not always about solidarity with others. Sometimes we must bear witness to our own experiences of

fragility, greatness, failure, success, grief, and/or joy. In this way, we recognize our own journey as sacred.

Unitarian Universalism, our living tradition, is a profound witness to the possibilities and promises of religious pluralism. In particular, ministries such as the CLF, Worthy Now, Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU), the Covenant of UU Pagans (CUUPS), Diverse & Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM), and Transgender Religious UU Professionals Together (TRUUST) are faithful witnesses of just how wonderfully specific and expansive this tradition is.

As a community, we gather in rituals

and worship to bear witness to our belief that another world is possible. It is through our embodied practices of ritual and worship that we open ourselves to transformation by actively rehearsing and conjuring our sacred vision.

If Love is the center of our Unitarian Universalism, then our ability to foster Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity will be our witness that the thriving of all things within this interconnected web of existence is not only possible, but necessary. In this sense, our words and actions should bear witness to our faithfulness to the values of Unitarian Universalism. ■

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lives of those we care about. Humans have been sharing these witness stories for as long as we have could communicate.

It is a blessed thing to be able to bear witness to the joys, sorrows, horrors, celebrations and all that it means to be human. We will support and love each other through it all. ■



PHOTO BY ELI PLUMA ON UNSPLASH

From the UUA President: Fierce Love Compels Us To Action



REV. SOFÍA BETANCOURT
President, Unitarian
Universalist Association

January 23, 2025

Fam, Family, Familia,
There are mornings when I wake with a deep need for wisdom that comes from sources beyond my own individual self – times when the struggle toward justice and the next faithful action eludes me and I find myself grateful that I am able to turn to the larger community, the legacy of my ancestors, and the shared values of our faith tradition that I hold dear.

I wonder if, like me, you have experienced such mornings over the course of the last week – rising to the knowledge that we cannot do this alone. The extraordinary good news, even amid so much pain, is that we don't have to.

Each and all of us is in fact a vital part of the fabric of this nation, deeply beloved and deserving of protection, safety, and belonging.

We should not need to repeat the basic truth that Trans people exist in this world. That our Transgender and Nonbinary beloveds – my family and yours – are not only real, but sacred. That each and all of us is in fact a vital part of the fabric of this nation, deeply beloved and deserving of protection, safety, and belonging. That Earth itself cries out for restitution, and we must not turn away from the fight for climate justice. I send love upon

love to the interconnected family that we are for one another, knowing that none of us goes it alone in these destabilizing and complex times. We are real. We are here. Together, in all the ways we can be. And we will remain committed to the struggle ahead and the future we will make together.

As the executive orders rolled out of the office of the US President on Monday, we witnessed the attempted unraveling of decades of work for a more fair and free nation. Among the documents signed this week was an unconstitutional executive order challenging the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, which enshrines the right of citizenship to those born in the United States. Passed in 1868, the 14th Amendment has been the lasting bulwark against the Jim Crow laws designed to dehumanize Black communities in the South.

These executive orders pave the way for large-scale deportations, the separation of families, and the unjust exercise of power in ways we can expect and ways we will discover in the years to come. We know they are already being challenged in the courts. Our work must be to challenge the bad theologies and oppressive systems that support them.

I am the daughter of immigrants. Both countries of my parents' heritage – Chile and Panamá – have been held under the control of US trained dictators. This shapes my analysis, as do all our relationships, identities,

and commitments. And I know that for many of us, these new executive orders do not contain abstract human rights violations, but very real harm that will impact us and those we love in our daily living.

We Unitarian Universalists are people with diverse identities, stories, and experiences. Yet we are personally, theologically, and covenantally bound together by the expansive Love that has always been the animating center of our faith. Far more powerful than any faction, leader, nation, or creed, it is this fierce Love that compels our deepest loyalty and our most courageous action. And it is this Love that moves through and between us, enabling us to nurture wisdom, guidance, courage, and grounding in ourselves and in one another.

We must respond with action. I encourage you to reach out to your local communities, support organizations that are long established in the fight for justice, and make your voices heard. Together we can build a future where love and justice reign.

In these days I send my love and solidarity – to each of you and to your families, communities, and organizing networks. To our faith, our nation, and the world. May that love take the form of courageous and faithful resistance and renewed commitment, today and in the days and years to come.

With faith and renewed purpose,
Sofía ■

A Farewell Message from Rose



ROSE GALLOGLY

*Publications Coordinator,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship*

When I first started working for the Church of the Larger Fellowship in the fall of 2019, I couldn't imagine a better job. I joined CLF staff as the Prison Ministry Administrator, working alongside Beth in our Boston office to help her with the many administrative details of prison ministry, and to help respond to the letters that were constantly arriving at 24 Farnsworth Street. For a few years at that point I had been deeply involved in local immigrant rights work, specifically supporting people who were incarcerated in immigration jails in my area; this volunteer organizing work had opened my eyes to the horrors of incarceration more generally, and showed me the power of human connection across prison walls. I was finding myself more and more drawn to the spiritual aspects of that work, and towards ministry more broadly — so having the opportunity to be a part of an ongoing, powerful ministry for those experiencing incarceration felt like an enormous gift.

It has continued to be an enormous gift to work for the Church of the Larger Fellowship over the last five and a half years. After about a year and a half in that Prison Ministry Administrator role, the new Lead Ministry Team rearranged some of the CLF's internal structure, and a

new role on staff was a clear fit for me: Publications Coordinator. My background in graphic design and print publications work, alongside my experience with prison ministry, set me up well to help carry out the Lead Ministry Team's vision of a new *Quest* that more clearly centered the needs and voices of our incarcerated members. On the first issue of *Quest* that I created way back in January 2021, we wrote, "This issue was made for you," on the front page. On the 45 issues of *Quest* that I've created since then, I have tried to keep that commitment front and center. While I know we have not done it perfectly, I very much hope that core commitment has come through to all of you who read this publication every month.

A lot has changed in my life over the past five years. Working for the CLF was my first step into the work of ministry, and since then, I've taken several leaps deeper into it. I also work as the Director of Religious Education at a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Boston, and last fall, I started seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry. I'm now on the path to become an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. Though my love for *Quest* and the CLF has not changed, my workload outside of this job has been growing and growing, and my schedule has been stretched to its limit. Unfortunately, I no longer have time to give this work the time and attention it deserves, and I am leaving this role.

I will miss many aspects of this work — but more than anything, I'll miss reading the submissions and reflections that many of you send in each month. Whether or not your words ended up being published in *Quest*, please know that I read them and cherished hearing your thoughts. In moments when I have doubted whether Unitarian Universalism has enough to offer this world, you all have shown me its power and potential. The CLF has reminded me again and again that putting love at the center can change everything.

Quest will continue, of course, as will the Worthy Now Newsletter and the other aspects of CLF ministry that I've been responsible for. The Lead Ministry Team and the rest of the CLF staff are phenomenal, and I have no doubt that our publications are in good hands. Still, my decision to leave this role has been hard and bittersweet. I very much hope that our paths cross again, in one way or another. Either way, please know this: serving the CLF, and specifically serving CLF members who are experiencing incarceration, has shaped the path of my ministry in profound ways. Unitarian Universalism is a better faith for having each of you as members of this congregation, and I will be a better minister for having been a part of this unique, radical, and love-centered church.

With love,
Rose



UUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY BALTIMORE • JUNE 18 - 22, 2025

Would you like to represent the Church of the Larger Fellowship at General Assembly?

General Assembly (GA) is the annual gathering of UUs from churches across the country to worship together, learn together and make decisions about how we run the association of congregations, and what we stand for as an association of congregations. GA 2025 will be held in Baltimore, Maryland and online from June 18-22, 2025 and will include worship, speakers, access to on-demand workshops, and sessions for association business (called General Sessions).

While anyone can attend GA, only congregational delegates can vote on association business. The CLF is entitled to 22 GA delegates. GA General Sessions

will be held on 6/18 from 5:30–6:30pm ET, on 6/19, 6/20, and 6/21 from 1:00–4pm ET, and on 6/22 from 2–4pm ET. Delegates should be able to be online to attend the majority of these General Sessions live. CLF delegates vote their conscience on matters related to the denomination of Unitarian Universalism, and are responsible for their own expenses. There is no registration fee for delegates who are attending business portion of GA (General Sessions) only and not the worship and programs.

If you'd like to participate in GA 2025 as a CLF delegate, please fill out the online application at clfu.org/delegate-application. Rev. Michael will be leading a training for CLF GA delegates later in the spring. For more information about General Assembly, visit www.uua.org/ga.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

Who has offered you witness? Does witnessing feel sacred to you?

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.



Angus MacLean
Church of the Larger Fellowship, UU
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

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Quest Monthly Editorial Team: Aisha Hauser, *lead ministry team*, Rose Gallogly, *publications coordinator*,

CLF Staff: Aisha Hauser, Christina Rivera, Michael Tino, *lead ministry team*; Jody Malloy, *executive director*; Beth Murray, *prison ministry administrator*; Rose Gallogly, *publications coordinator*; Cir L'Bert, Jr, *prison ministry manager*, David Pynchon, *data services coordinator*; Ashley Parent, *communications specialist*; Cameron Seymour-Hawkins, *tech manager*; Paul Spanagel, *administrator*

Learning Fellows: Donte Hilliard, Katherine Hofmann

Websites: clfuu.org, dailycompass.org, worthynow.org

Phone: 617-948-6150 or 617-948-4267

Email: clf@clfuu.org, worthynow@clfuu.org

**CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street,
Boston, MA 02210-1409 USA**

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