

The System is Working as Designed

Dearest Beloveds,

April 13, 2021

We come to you once again following the state-sanctioned murder of yet another Black man, Daunte Wright. We write to you with anger, grief, rage, and hearts torn asunder. We know many of you will feel similarly. We also feel fear, afraid for the next Black person whom police will murder. Will it be our sons, niblings, daughters, brothers, sisters, siblings, parents? When will it touch us even closer, as it is bound to do?

We know this to be true because the system is working as designed. The policing system of the United States is working exactly as designed. There is no reforming a system that is predicated on the belief that Black and brown lives are worth less than white ones. That Black and brown people are to be over-policed, feared, caged, and their lives are worthless. This belief has been part of the national consciousness since the arrival of colonizers. It is easy to deny Black and brown people their rights to humanity. Rights that include democratic representation via voting, housing, health care, food, and education. And also the right to simply exist — to walk down the street eating candy, to play in a park, to sleep in one's own bed, to drive home to one's child — without being killed by the police.

As the Church of the Larger Fellowship moves to center the lived experiences of those from historically marginalized communities, there will be disagreement over how to live out our Unitarian Universalist theology. As your Lead Ministry Team, we can make clear that there is no police reform but only abolition. There is no freedom without justice. No divine peace without holy struggle.

A Prayer for us all: Spirit of life and love, give me the will to notice and say the things that need to be said. To gain resolve and respite in the shadows and then move into the light with renewed courage to speak and fight for the truth. To remember that I am not free until we are all free.

In Unitarian Universalist Service,

Christina Rivera
Aisha Hauser, MSW, CRE-ML
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Quest

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*There is no
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CLF LEAD MINISTRY TEAM

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REV. DR. MICHAEL TINO
CLF Lead Ministry
Team

In response to my November article about why we use the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” Clifford, a CLF member incarcerated in Illinois, asked me to look into the work of political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who wrote extensively about power and accountability from her vantage point as a survivor of the Holocaust in Germany.

Specifically, Clifford challenged my assertion that “I do not blame individual officers” for police violence against Black people. Drawing on Arendt’s work, Clifford wrote, “by not placing blame for particular action or inaction on the individual officers we not only strip them of the personal responsibility necessary to holding them... accountable, we undermine the importance and significance of the actions of those officers brave enough to stand up against the system.”

Hannah Arendt, in the essay Clifford asked me to read, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” writes, “where all are guilty, none is.” Making the case that “it is better to suffer than to do wrong,” Arendt says that individuals have a moral obligation not to perpetuate systems of injustice, even when their own lives or livelihoods are at stake. Clifford, and Hannah Arendt, of course, are correct. It is vital—even in an unjust system—that the individ-



PHOTO BY MAX BENDER ON UNSPLASH

ual perpetrators of acts of injustice be held accountable for their actions.

Arendt also notes that politically, “those who chose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil.” “Acceptance of lesser evils,” she continues, “is consciously used in conditioning the...population at large to the acceptance of evil as such.” This is precisely how systems as violent and unjust as modern policing in the United States have become institutions that most white Americans support and trust—those of us acculturated to whiteness have been conditioned to accept evil.

Clifford is also right when he asserts that the notions of responsibility and accountability are not limited to extreme cases. Each of us makes moral judgments every day. Each of us makes choices for good or bad every day. Each of us has the option, again and again, to choose to participate in perpetuating wrong or to oppose it. And each of us should be held accountable when our actions cause harm to others.

It is here that we find tensions inherent in the principles that Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote. One example is the tension between freedom and responsibility. Our fourth principle says we affirm “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Freedom has limits. Elsewhere, the “right of conscience” promised in the fifth principle is not always compatible with the “justice for all” we seek in our sixth. Conscience has limits, too.

As a covenantal faith, we rely on how we agree to be together to help us decide what to do. And we rely on processes that help bring us back to covenant when we cause harm—processes of accountability in which we are asked to stop the harm that we are doing, to understand the harm we have done, to make amends for the harm, and finally, to agree not to do it again. Within our faith, just as in our society at large, these processes are imperfect. And yet, they are how we move forward towards creating better systems. ■

Introducing CLF's new Prison Ministry Manager



CIR L'BERT JR.
*CLF Prison Ministry
Manager*

Dear Quest readers,

Hi, I'm Cir L'Bert, Jr., the new Prison Ministry Manager for The Church of The Larger Fellowship.

I'm 35 (which I think makes me the oldest possible millennial), a single father, and have worked as a waiter, warehouse picker, and indie theater manager.

My hobbies include combat sports, history/folklore, and podcasting about pop culture. I'm a lifelong hip-hop head and lover of the blues.

I'm also a lifelong native and product of Akron, Ohio, where I'm active in the local arts and organizing scene as a writer, public speaker, and racial justice advocate.

A decade ago, my place within my community was less assured. In 2009, a night out with friends resulted in my arrest, and subsequently charged with OVI, drug possession, and carrying a concealed weapon.

After lawyer fees and thanks to my demand to be treated fairly, the drug and weapons charges were dropped (the drugs were revealed by lab analysis to be postnatal multivitamins that I'd purchased for my partner at

the time, and the weapon in question was a knife I'd bought at a flea market in high school).

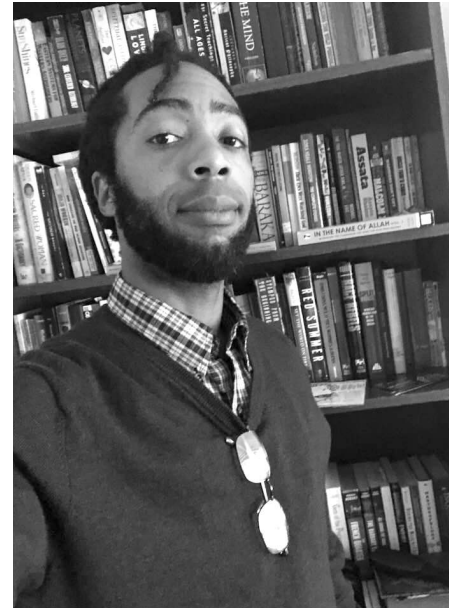
Even so, I spent two years on probation, with six months of that under home monitoring, thirteen days in jail, and one weekend at "DUI school."

Even though I'd only dealt with a fraction of our carceral system, the experience left me frustrated, drained of energy, and depressed about the time I'd lost.

During the final phase of my probation, I'd been required to show proof of attendance at two AA meetings, though I had the option of substituting one of those with a church event.

My parents and brother had started going to a UU church so I decided to give it a try. The open dialogue on religion was refreshing to me, who'd been raised Christian. The focus on social justice was especially important, as my experience with the court system had validated so much of what my parents had taught me about systemic racism and inequality.

More than that, UU gave me a path to deepen a lifelong passion for philosophy, reconnect with my local and wider community through service and advocacy, and helped restore my own sense of worth and dignity, which had been damaged by the carceral system.



I believe that Unitarian Universalism is a liberatory religion. Our First Principle affirms "the worth and dignity of every person" (including the incarcerated), our Fourth Principle calls for a "free and responsible search for meaning," and our Sixth Principle calls for "justice for all."

And now, we are widely adopting the Eighth Principle in our churches, which calls us to "dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

Unitarian Universalism has helped me find a community where I can continue my journey of liberation and abolition. I'm glad it has led me to this moment and I look forward to serving as your Prison Ministry Manager. ■

My Graveyard of Honor

DERECK

CLF Member, incarcerated in VA

AFGHANISTAN – I can never go back, but it doesn't let me leave. It latches on to you like an addiction, mentally and physically, and tears you apart like a ravenous dog. The jewel of the orient, along a highway of silk, into the graveyard of empires.

It gnaws at you, especially when you know you can't go back, mustn't go back. Yet you go back, like a bad habit, finish a mission started but never completed. Always passing it along to your relief/replacement. Not knowing if they will ever be as good as you see yourself.

You want to go back to finish what was started for the ones who have fallen not wanting all of the past 20 years to have been in vain for the sacrifice by them and their families.

Every time I left I'd say I'll never return, I'll find a new job; but never did. Like my addiction, "I quit, and never again," but always going back.

A bad compulsion that eventually became exposed to the truth and justice at the barrel of a gun pointed at me, and my family as they slept. I had turned into the monster just like the ones I fought in Afghanistan. Unable to return on my next mission and finish honorably, I ended in shackles with a stain I cannot get rid of. Head hanging low unable to

comprehend why I let myself fail. Why I didn't do more to help myself instead of walking down the path of destruction I made.

Failing to do my part and seek help for a habit that was getting out of control. Not letting someone, anyone, help me. All the tools, weapons, and loving support were there, but I spurred them away. Saying, "I can handle this."

This war I have been fighting; long before Afghanistan became part of my vocabulary. Fought long before the Soviets were there.

Afghanistan is the "graveyard of Empires," but for me it is my mind. Trying everyday to stay out, and in the light,

locked up by the Commonwealth in an institute of supposed "Corrections." Trying to resurrect something; salvage the positive from this disaster I created.

I was headed back to "The Stan," but ended up here! Locked away from society, thrown away, seen as a worthless cause, my honor stripped away by my behavior.

Is it possible to return with honor? Salvage something of my life left, and the family I hurt so bad? Make something good out of all this?

Working day by day, one step at a time, working the steps, seeking the counseling, having faith, and soldiering on. ■



PHOTO BY MOHAMMAD RAHMANI ON UNSPLASH

Remembering our beloved

In the March 2021 issue of Quest, Rev. Jennifer shared a prompt to send us remembrances of incarcerated loved ones whose deaths may have not been marked by the outside. Here are some of the names and reflections we received.

MICHAEL

CLF Member incarcerated in OH

March/April 2020, the Marion Correctional Institution, Ohio, became ground zero for COVID-19 within an incarcerated environment. Such a helpless feeling, being in total lockdown, surviving on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, watching CNN Headline News and seeing film clips of protesters outside the fence with signs reading, "Let Them Go."

The virus was brought into the prison by a guard who was not screened before reporting to work. In the beginning, inmates were routinely moved from one living area to another, and were not permitted to wear a face mask. This institution quickly became the poster child for what not to do during a pandemic, as over 1,900 inmates were infected, hundreds of men were transferred to hospitals and 17 inmates had lost their lives.

By year's end, our administration leadership was given an award, "Warden of the Year" and was

granted a promotional job to the ODRC Central Office.

Do not stand by their grave and weep, learn from their sacrifice and offer a moment of silence in their memory.

We remember:

Charles Abrams
Jan Becker
Richard Berger
Larry Bruce
David Farmer
George Henderson
Rodney Hobbs
Robert Johnson
Johnny Johnson
Lance Love
Romulus Neda
Kenneth Roth
Walter Sayre
Aco Simonoski
George Small
Robert Williams
Jesse Zeigler

CHRISTOPHER

CLF Member incarcerated in KY

Boxer. He was a close friend who died of COVID-19 last year at Green River Correctional Complex. His daily thing was working out, drinking coffee, and wearing his state jacket. He was positive, and encouraged me to smile, be kind, and do what I had to do to stay in shape. He always told me to stand up for what I believe in and never waver or give up. His favorite saying was, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it, let it run its course." I live by that. Boxer's deep human kindness and spirituality is a guide for me.

DERECK

CLF Member, incarcerated in VA

"Speedy." I didn't know him well, or his name, but he was a funny old man walking with a cane. Didn't know why he was here; it doesn't matter. He was friendly to everyone. He was the 2nd victim to COVID here at Dillwyn from the sad, pathetic response the admin had. Blessings and "speedy" travels on the Big Journey.

Remembering our beloved

JENNIFER

CLF member incarcerated in CA

"Casper" Shively, an elderly white man who was confined here at Salinas Valley State Prison, CA, was infected with COVID-19 and was hospitalized for severe symptoms, which caused his death. I first met Casper in 1991 at New Folsom (CSP - Sacramento), the first year of my incarceration. Casper was an Asatru/Odinist and worked as the chapel clerk at my facility. His long gray hair and beard and Thor's Hammer necklace reminded me of the Vikings.

Perhaps we should honor Casper by ending mass incarceration and releasing our elderly, chronically ill prisoners, rather than allowing more deaths by COVID-19. Support #CagingCOVID!

KEVIN

CLF member incarcerated in VA

Sadie (Chris) Virden was a light to everyone she came in contact with. Sadie could see through the 'put-on' smiles and 'fake it til you make it' smiles and be there to just listen. I talk with her mom about two times a week and I can see where she got her liveliness from. She had about as much spirit as someone who was actually free, and lived within the realms of even knowing that she was in prison, but still was a strong spirit and force of life. She will never be forgotten.

Earl Monroe was days from the gate and lived a life of someone whose life had taken its toll, but still fought to be free, and lived a full helpful life, seeing others as if they always needed something — an ear, a shoulder, just someone to be there for them.

Buffalo / Louis Michael Healy. If a card was ever needed, a drawing to be done, a portrait of family — his hand was always at work to take pencil/pen/ colors to paper and get it to families for their birthdays, anniversaries, or just a 'I love you, thinking of you.' He always had a smile; even as broken as he was, he never showed it, because he felt it showed weakness. This was coming from someone who spent the majority of their lives incarcerated. He smiled still to show that one must be strong, always. The true Native brother that he was, he always looked out for other fellow Natives, no matter the tribe.

These three all passed within the same year and a half of each other in our unit. We had 5 total deaths in the whole facility from September 2018 to January 2020 (Sadie in September 2018, Earl in December 2018, Buffalo in August 2019, Farmer in November 2019, Byrd in January 2020). Rest in peace to all, you are all loved!

CAROL

CLF member incarcerated in AL

My sister Dona Jean Robinson was not incarcerated physically in a prison, but mentally and emotionally she went to jail the same day I did. She stood by me, answered every single phone call, and we always

had words of love, and memories of happier times. You see, my sister was very sick, but she hardly ever complained of being in pain because she wanted to be that person who made me smile. My beautiful sister passed away on March 25, 2021. She was my

best friend and confidant will forever be loved and truly missed. She was 53 years old and had congestive heart failure. I know that she is in a happier place and I can't wait to see her so we can dance in the sky together. Rest in peace my beautiful sister.

CHRISTIAN

CLF member incarcerated in IL

Lopez, aka D-Town, was a person who was hard not to befriend. He possessed a heart almost the size of the state he was from, and had the type of personality that instilled hope and faith in those that had little. The more I continue to reflect on his character, the more I'm beginning to understand how our emotions are like filters, ones in which we may view the aspects of reality at any given moment. Those truly familiar with D-Town would tell you he was

known for his humble attitude and his contagious smile. Some couldn't comprehend how a person who so much time could always be so happy.

I believe the emotional filter Lopez operated out of the most was love. For example, where most people may have judged another fellow inmate to be a pest or potential thief, Lopez might have just seen a dude in need. D-Town died of an overdose back in 2015, but his memory lives on through his works.

DEZI

CLF member incarcerated in CO

Unfortunately, I know far, far too many fallen soldiers and comrades to offer individual tributes. So I say to all of our sisters and brothers who lost their lives in the belly of the iron and concrete beast, that death is no enemy to man. It is a friend who, when the work of life is done, cuts the cord that binds the human boat to its shores, so that it may sail on to smoother seas.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on the idea 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.

Grief is weighing heavily on so many of us. Whether you are grieving a loved one lost in the past year, to COVID-19 or otherwise, or you are grieving someone lost long ago but never forgotten, the weight of loss never fully leaves us.

Do you have any rituals or other spiritual practices that help you to hold and tend to your grief? Are you struggling with grief and looking for more support or ideas to help you hold it? Either way, we would love to hear more about what grief looks like for you and how it lives in your daily life.

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.



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