

May This Be My Last Time?



VERDIS LEVAR
ROBINSON

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Last semester, in a class on global Christianity at Meadville Lombard, I was reading examples of the early Christians in the Roman Empire taking a stand and becoming martyrs. I was inspired by their resilience and sacrifice as they were being persecuted for their conversion to a new faith. Those who became martyrs could have possibly saved themselves by denying who they were and who they served but decided that it was better to die in faith and in truth than to live in denial and a lie. They were followers of Jesus Christ and followed his example of faith and commitment unto death—his Crucifixion—for they believed that the ultimate sacrifice would yield the ultimate reward—for them, it was everlasting life.

The early Christian martyrs' sacrifice of their lives made me reflect and think: For what cause would I be willing to risk my life? For what cause would I give up my security, my comfort, my safety? For what are we called to martyrdom now, in this time, and in this place? In my practice, I call upon my ancestors for guidance.

When I do, the spiritual *Wade in the Water* comes to my mind almost instantly. "Wade in the Water, God's

Gonna Trouble the Water." But then the Civil Rights Movement comes to mind, and the risks it took to bring about change that was felt globally. By the later years of the Civil Rights Movement, activists began to realize that water had already been troubled. It was no longer about, "God's Gonna Trouble the Waters," but that the waters were already troubled, as activists through the years had been rocking the boat of white supremacy and racism through their own successes, through boycotts, through protests, through massive voter registrations, through sit-ins, and through marches, and we saw backlash of against all of them by segregationists and racists, peoples and institutions that did not want to see them succeed.

As a professor of African American history, I remember lecturing about the Freedom Singers leading those gathered in Black churches, mostly in Alabama and Georgia, with rousing songs to lift up their spirits and get them ready for what they were about to face. These resistance fighters staged many peaceful, nonviolent protests met with fury, violence, and incarceration—like the early Christian martyrs. Their songs went from "Wade in the Water" to "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" to "This May Be the Last Time." It was the last time for some of them, but the looming threat made them prepare for the

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Quest

Vol. LXXV, No 8

September 2021

"The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

MAYA ANGELOU

in this issue

HOME

Multiple authors

HELLO FROM THE CLF BOARD CHAIR

Rev. Aisha Ansano

'TIS MABON

Gary

WIDENING THE LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

CLF Nominating Committee

HOME

Where in your life have you felt most at home?

We posed the above question in the most recent issue of the *Worthy Now* newsletter (a biannual newsletter sent to all incarcerated CLF members), and received the responses on the next two pages in response. Thank you all for offering us this window into yourselves and the experiences of your lives through your reflections — we are so grateful.

ROBERT

CLF Member, incarcerated in MA

Home. A small word with big meanings. They say that, "home is where the heart is," and I couldn't agree more. It's been nine years since I've been home, and I feel every day that yearning to return.

Growing up, I never thought I'd have a home to call my own. I had loving parents who provided for me, so there was always a place I could call home, but the fullest meaning of home never fully resonated within

me. Since I have autism, I thought that I'd never find someone to love, who could love me. I thought I'd never have kids, be a father, a teacher, a protector.

Then I found her, and it all clicked. It just made sense, felt right, all the way to my core. We had a little one, we got our own place, and another little one was on the way. All was right in the world.

Until it wasn't. I was torn away from my home. I fought to have the opportunity to go back, but was denied.

Separated from them, I was emotionally torn to shreds. The pain is still so great. Now, they are still torn apart, neither of our kids under her care, or even cared for by the same person. Our family of four now lives in four different places.

So I end with this: home is a precious thing. It's delicate, fragile, nearly ethereal. It is perfect in its imperfections. Never take it for granted, for you never know when your world will be upended, and it will be gone. ■

KEVIN

CLF member, incarcerated in VA

I feel most at home where I both give and receive respect from those around me. Respect leads to a great deal of appreciation in which accountability is held. This appreciation and accountability from respect can and should lead to honor and

loyalty, which combined, should lead to trust. Trust leads to love. With love comes a place that we feel comfortable and safe — an environment we can call home.

This can be anywhere as long as we hold all these things together. We must have courage to make that first step, and hope and faith that it

will all lead to a place one can call home — not necessarily a house or a building, but a place of real peace, a sanctuary called home.

In my life, I find this sanctuary with my girlfriend of 37 years, along with my son, mom, sister, and those who have the qualities I've described above. ■

EDWARD

CLF Member, incarcerated in OH

This is an easy one to tell. Every year I would make the journey down I-75 to a town called Middlesboro, Kentucky. My travel was always around the fourth of July. It is a tri-state town with neighbors called Tennessee and Virginia. There is a spot that I would go to that is located at the top of a small mountain. The spot is called "the Pinnacle." It is located about 2,200 or 2,400 feet up the mountain. To get there you drive up a winding road with hairpin turns. Once there, you walk a path that is maybe a hundred yards to my favorite spot, the pinnacle. It is a man-made ledge that stretches about ten feet over the edge of the mountain. Up there you can see all three states. On a very clear day you can ever see North Carolina from there. An airport sits off to the right. A man-made lake is in the middle. To



PHOTO BY FLICKR USER ANTHONY VIA FLICKR

the right is the town of Cumberland Gap, Tennessee.

While there, I feel Gaia's strength flowing through the spot. The view

is spectacular. It is a calm and peaceful place where you can talk to God or the Goddess and God, whatever your preference. There is where I feel at home. ■

TALON

CLF Member, incarcerated in CA

Home is such a strong word. For most of my life, I have never really felt at home anywhere. From living with my family, to foster housing, to juvenile hall, to prison, home has been seemingly unattainable for me.

The closest concept of home that I have is when I was 13, in a court-ap-

pointed group home for a bad decision I chose to make. It was the first time that I felt truly safe. There was no more violence, abuse, and expectations to be someone that I never really was. I was happy.

My current incarceration is due to another bad string of choices I made. I have spent the last eight years working on myself to create a new me dedicated to helping others and

living a productive life. During this process of self-improvement, I have learned that happiness comes from within.

So, I realized that as long as I am happy, home is where you make it. Home is within oneself, and family is who we choose. Despite my incarceration, I am at home, and the CLF is my family. ■

HOME

continued

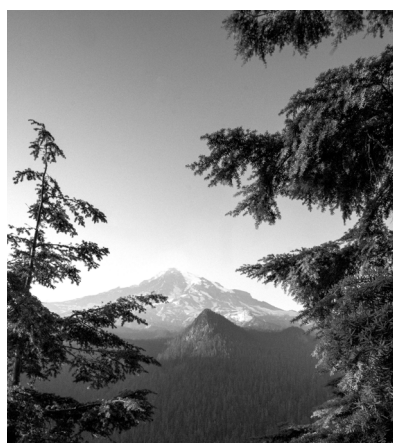


PHOTO BY DAVID GAVI ON UNSPLASH

ERIC

CLF member, incarcerated in TX

For me, home was never really a place. It has always been more about the people I've surrounded myself with. I've never had a place to call home, but I've felt at home with people who loved me, and in nature, with the full cycle of life. We come from earth, are placed in the bosom of earth, to be reborn again.

I think there is no better place to call home as the place where life begins: in the wild, like our ancestors once had. Not in a building, but a place you can go to rest. One day I'll have that again.

Some prefer a house or apartment, but for me, home is outside where the wild things roam. ■

Hello from the CLF Board Chair



REV. AISHA ANSANO

*Chair of the Board,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship*

Hello beloveds,

I'm Rev. Aisha Ansano, and I am thrilled to be serving as the new Chair of the Board of The Church of the Larger Fellowship!

You may recognize my name from the last few years. I just completed my first 3-year term on the Board, and I've served as the Board liaison to the Nominating Committee during this time. I was also a member of the search team that called our amazing lead ministry team, which was a complete joy.

When I joined the CLF Board 3 years ago, I didn't know much about the CLF besides a general familiarity. When I got the email from the Nominating Committee, I wasn't sure if I would say yes—but during the conversation, I got excited for the work that the CLF was doing, and the potential work that could be done. And so I said yes, decided to make a commitment to this congregation, to give my time, energy, and resources to help make it thrive. And I said yes again to serving on the Nominating Committee, because I knew firsthand just how much the

conversations had by the nominating committee have a huge impact.

And when the Board was putting together a search team for the new lead ministry of the CLF, even though the task felt daunting, I said yes, again. I said yes because I was excited to be part of the visioning for the next phase of the CLF. I said yes because even though I knew it would be a lot of hard work, I wanted to be part of the conversation to help shape the next chapter of the CLF.

I have not said yes because I think I'm the perfect person for any of these jobs. I've said yes because the CLF is important to me, and important to Unitarian Universalism. Even when I'm nervous about taking on a new role, or not sure what to expect, I say yes to service to the CLF over and over again, because the CLF gives me hope for our faith and how it can live into our dreams of what it can be.

A little bit about me: I'm an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister living in Malden, MA, a city north of Boston. I am the affiliated community minister at First Parish in Malden, which means that, while I am not on staff, I serve and support the congregation in other ways. My dream is to plant a dinner church, to create a

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PHOTO BY MELISSA ASKEW ON UNSPLASH

'Tis Mabon

GARY

CLF member, incarcerated in NC

After the close of Summer,
before the land lies 'neath snow,
there comes the Magic of Autumn ,
when all nature is aglow.

Days grow ever shorter,
harvest time is nigh,
'tis Mabon now my love,
as the earth breathes a sigh

The Moon doth shine her glory,
reflecting Maiden, Mother, Crone,
the Wiccan Year comes full circle,
like our love which we have shown

So arise my love and come away,
let us sing, feast, and make love,
for Wiccan Mabon is a celebration,
of the Goddess' bounty from above.

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community where people gather together around the table for worship and a meal, where all are welcomed exactly as they are. The pandemic has put those plans on hold for the

moment, but I've been lucky to create Nourish UU Dinner Church Consultants with my friend and colleague Rev. Emily Conger. Through Nourish, we help Unitarian Universalist communities create communal, embodied worship experiences through the model of dinner church.

I'm excited to continue to serve the CLF in my new role as Board Chair, and can't wait to experience what comes next for the CLF, together.

Yours in faith,
Rev. Aisha ■

Widening the Leadership Table



Church of the Larger
Fellowship Leadership

Over the last year, the
CLF Board, Nominating
Committee, and Lead

Ministry Team have been examining how to best serve and be accountable to our membership, nearly 50% of whom are currently incarcerated. As part of that process, the Nominating Committee and the Board looked at who is serving on the Board and other CLF committees, asking:

- Which voices and perspectives are missing from our leadership tables?
- How can we bring a liberation lens as well as a racial analysis to our work as we bring new people into CLF leadership?
- How do we live in integrity with our Unitarian Universalist values by making board and committee service more accessible to a wide variety of people, including those with personal or family experience with incarceration?

With the blessing and full support of the board, the Nominating Committee began exploring what changes need to be made in the culture of CLF leadership teams that would make board service an engaging, uplifting, and spiritually satisfying experience for those with direct experience with incarceration, including formerly incarcerated people and family members impacted by incarceration.

The Nominating Committee began a process of educating itself, learning from those with prison ministry experience and those who work in organizations supporting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. We spoke with leaders from the prison abolitionist organization Black and Pink which supports LGBTQ and HIV-positive prisoners. At their suggestion, we read the book *The Church and the Sex Offender*. We considered economic, racial, cultural, and other issues that might be barriers to participation in leadership. A joint conversation between the Board and the Nominating Committee about necessary cultural and procedural changes is in process, as well as plans for more education for current board members.

As the work of educating ourselves and removing barriers to service proceeds, the Nominating Committee is committed to bringing the vital voice and perspective of our incarcerated members to the leadership table. Although at this time, it is not possible to include on the Board those of our members who are currently incarcerated, we are committed to nominating one or more formerly incarcerated people or family members with direct experience with incarceration for anticipated available board openings. We will begin talking with potential candidates for board service this fall.

The CLF Board is responsible for the vision and mission of the CLF. The

CLF Board met twice a year in person pre-pandemic and held regular meetings and discussion via email and videoconferencing. (During the pandemic, all meetings have been virtual.) There is also committee liaison work which board members may volunteer to do. Transportation and housing for in-person meetings and other expenses is covered by the CLF budget. If you would like to serve the CLF in some capacity, but board service doesn't seem like the right fit, we are also looking for potential volunteers with a finance or HR background to be part of CLF committees.

Might YOU be a person with this perspective who is interested in finding out more about board service or committee work?

Is there someone you know who might enjoy and be good in such a role? Please pass this article along to them, and encourage them to be in touch. Or, reach out to us and let us know so we can follow-up. Please email nominating@clfu.org with the subject "Board/Committee Interest" or return the tear-off form with your questions and comments, as well as your suggestions about potential new CLF Board and committee members. See the tear off section on the next page for a reflection question. We'd love to hear from you.

We are excited about this new approach to CLF leadership and hope you are, too. Thank you! ■

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inevitable. They may have to give up their lives like the early Christian martyrs.

What about now? In this time and in this place? What kind of lives are we living, bowing down to fear and oppression? For what cause would YOU willing risk your life? For what cause would you give up your security, your comfort, your safety? For what are we called to martyrdom now, in this time, and in this place? ■



PHOTO BY JASON LEUNG ON UNSPLASH

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.

FROM THE CLF BOARD, NOMINATING COMMITTEE, AND LEAD MINISTRY TEAM:

What skills and talents are necessary for a liberatory lens on CLF leadership?

What support might you need to help grow these skills?

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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Unitarian Universalist

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