

A Theological Mandate of Liberation



REV. AISHA ANSANO

President of the Board,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship

The following sermon was originally given at the service to formally install our Lead Ministry Team in their role as ministers of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, which took place on June 25, 2022, during UUA General Assembly in Portland, OR. A reflection on the entire installation service, and pictures of those present in person, are on pages 4-6 of this issue.

Hello beloveds! What a joy to be here with you all this morning, celebrating the installation of the Lead Ministry Team of the Church of the Larger Fellowship! And what an honor to be asked to share a reflection with you all on this joyful occasion.

I have served on the Board of the Church of the Larger Fellowship for the past 4 years. I served as the Board liaison to the nominating committee, and on the search committee, and am now the President of the Board. And yet: when I was asked by the nominating committee if I would consider joining the Board, I was pretty sure I was going to say no.

I didn't know much about the CLF at the time, and I didn't think that I had the time or energy to serve on the Board. I was already feeling a little overwhelmed by all of my other commitments, and I had never served on a Board before, and I just didn't think



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it was for me. I knew I would have to give something else up to do this work fully, that I didn't want to say yes and then only serve half-heartedly. And so, I went into the conversation ready to say no.

I am so grateful that instead, I said yes.

I said yes because I learned what the CLF has been, is now, and can be. I said yes because my wildest dreams for Unitarian Universalism, my deepest hopes of what is possible for this faith, seemed possible because of the CLF. I said yes because I believe that the Church of the Larger Fellowship can help lead us to liberation. It is already doing so. I said yes because the CLF says yes – to justice, to radical welcome, to liberation. I said yes because there was really no other answer.

The Church of the Larger Fellowship has always held space in our denomination for folks on the margins— from our beginnings as a “correspondence

Theological Mandate, continued on page 5

Quest

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*“The world
is full of
magic things,
patiently
waiting for
our senses to
grow sharper.”*

W.B. YEATS

in this issue

THEOLOGICAL MANDATE OF LIBERATION

Rev. Aisha Ansano

AWE

Multiple authors

CALLED AND INSTALLED

Christina Rivera

THE RAINBOW

Timothy

AWE

How do you cultivate awe and wonder in your life?



PHOTO BY DAN MEYERS ON UNSPLASH

JOSEPH

CLF Member, incarcerated in NC

How do I cultivate awe and wonder in my life? These are actually byproducts of daily observations of my surroundings, and doing a mental or physical gratitude checklist. If I remain mindful of the many blessings and miracles of seemingly ordinary life, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

For instance, every person, animal, insect, plant, mineral, atom, and subatomic particle has a purpose. That is an awesome wonder. Also, looking into the daytime sky, one sees the clouds floating by on the sun, giving

life and warmth. And at night, we see the stars and the moon, luna in all her glory. How can we view these things without being awe-struck? Even though at the moment I am deprived of these experiences, I still have the vivid memories that can not be taken away, and they will suffice until I am released and able to soak in the day and night sky without restriction.

Think about the human body and all its functions. The breath, the heartbeat, the blood stream. What a truly awesome, wondrous creation. Think about the miracle of the moment, right now, breathing, blood flow, consciousness, the

mind, thoughts, memories, life. The knower that witnesses these things. The awesome power of love and compassion that can destroy hate and violence.

When I mentally or physically write a gratitude list, I feel wonder that I am even still alive to write it. I am in awe and wonder that I received this chance to start over, and enjoy the things in life that I had forgotten I enjoyed.

I pray that I will continue to be content with what I have right now, and have the desire and enthusiasm to keep doing the next right thing, making the next right choice. ■

ULTRA-VIOLET

CLF Member, incarcerated in FL

Awe here goes. How do I cultivate it?
To prepare land for the praising of
crops. To not only prepare the land
that is my soul, for the production,
experience and recurrence of awe,
but to also both improve upon and
develop by careful attention, training
and study, a life which is awestruck.

Hmm... That's an awesome question.
An awfully intriguing notion; I find
myself compelled to contemplation,
of which I shall here expound upon.
Awe here goes.

Homage, spectacular wonder and
a smidge of fear, simultaneously
felt in one moment or experience.
That's awe.

I think back to when I was a child.
When this kaleidoscope of an
emotion was more frequent, more
common, yet no less powerful, yet no
less enchanting.

We grow up and lose something,
don't we? We forget how to play with
reckless abandon. Our imaginations
lose their zeal. Our sense of wonder
abates.

Why?? How??

Questions I pray liberate your mind
and soul, should you find your an-
swers.

As a child I knew. The world (con-
temporary society) tried to teach
me otherwise, but I refused. My



PHOTO BY MYLES TAN ON UNSPLASH

spirit rebuked their soul siphoning
psychologically crippling delusional
doctrine.

As an adult, my path of enlighten-
ment which taught me to "empty thy
cup," has only strengthened my re-
solve. Preserving the purity, in which
awe has so firmly taken its roots.

I still play in the mound of snow left
by the plow trucks on the side of the
road like a 5-year-old child (pretend
bad guy sound effects and all).

After much theological, theoretical
and politically correct intellectual
discourse, I still imagine what could
be, with awe for its potential fruition.

I daydream absurdities, fantasies
and abstractions. So vividly creating
alternate dimensions, to which I
teleport often.

My cup ever empty, I wonder still of
aliens, of outer space, of why they say
animals don't have free will. I wonder
how orangutans figured out how to
make boats and go fishing (yes! Oran-
gutans make boats and go fishing). Did
they learn from us or did we learn
from them? I wonder how scientists

and zoologists figured out that dol-
phins recognize their reflection.

I ponder why in this age of scientific
advancements, where astrophysicists
and astronomers can tell us of distant
galaxies, suns and planets; their orbit,
chemical and elemental composition,
temperature and weather conditions
and every minute details literally
down to the core.

But I can't go online or to the library
and get a surface picture of the
terrain of a single planet in this solar
system (and I don't mean the comput-
er generated photos NASA loves to so
factitiously parade). Yes, how could
one not wonder...

Thus I prepare the land that is my
soul for the resurrection of awe. To
both improve upon and diligently
develop, an existence which is auspi-
ciously awestruck.

With homage, spectacular wonder
and a smidge of fear, I stand at the
cusp of a rabbit hold called life. And
with honor strong, un-defiled amaze-
ment and a bit of fright, I smile like
a child and dive headlong, awe here
goes awe right. ■

Theological Mandate cont. from page 1

church” for geographically isolated Unitarians to today, when over half our membership is incarcerated Unitarian Universalists, and many religious professionals, BIPOC UUs, and geographically- or otherwise-isolated UUs find their spiritual home here. The CLF has been, and continues to be, a place of radical welcome, a congregation that believes in the power of liberation and the potential of Unitarian Universalism to forge a way to that liberation. The CLF is a congregation that continually draws the margins toward the center, that invites us all to think about what is possible and how we might make it come true. The CLF is a place for big dreams and for trying new things, a place where there is so much space and excitement for innovation and experimentation.

The CLF has proclaimed, over and over, that the way we’ve always done things need not be the only way, and then forged ahead to make it so. Can we serve incarcerated Unitarian Universalists with love and dignity, in a system and a world that tries to convince them they have and deserve neither? Yes. Can we engage UUism and the questions of the moment through an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural lens? Yes. Can we call as the leadership of the largest UU congregation a collaborative team of religious professionals that break expectations? Yes. Can we do difficult, sometimes uncomfortable work with love, knowing that liberation is possible and that we can help

make it so? Yes. Yes we can.

Cole Arthur Riley is a writer and poet who created the “Black Liturgies” project on Instagram. In her recent book *This Here Flesh*, Arthur Riley uses stories from her life to reflect on questions of spirituality and liberation. In a chapter entitled “Dignity,” she writes the following:

“Our liberation begins with the irrevocable belief that we are worthy to be liberated, that we are worthy of a life that does not degrade us but honors our whole selves. When you believe in your dignity, or at least someone else does, it becomes more difficult to remain content with the bondage with which you have become so acquainted. You begin to wonder what you were meant for.”

So, beloveds: what were we meant for? The wildest dreams of our spiritual ancestors could not have brought us here, and our wildest dreams may never take us where we need to be, but we are going to keep dreaming anyway, keep growing and shifting and trying again. We have a theological mandate for liberation, for worthiness, for honoring our true selves. We believe in our own dignity, and the dignity of others.

We are meant for liberation, for joy, for celebration. We are meant for justice, for compassion, for community. We—Unitarian Universalists, the Church of the Larger Fellowship, our free world and incarcerated and global members—we are meant for all of this, and more. So let us live into it, let us make these moves, let us

believe deeply in liberation and act as though we do.

Aisha, Christina, Michael: the search committee chose you, the Board affirmed you, and today the members of the CLF install you, as our Lead Ministry Team, all because we trust your dreams for the future of this congregation and this denomination. This is a time for big dreams, for throwing open our arms and saying come, you have a place here.

But we cannot simply celebrate your dreams and leave you to fulfill them. We will follow your lead, yes, but we — members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, and Unitarian Universalists throughout the denomination — we are also going to do this work alongside you. We must — that is the only way it can get done. Not because we don’t trust you to get it done — if I trusted any three people to make it happen, it surely would be the three of you — but because the work of liberation is collaborative, and is going to take all of us to fulfill it. Liberation is the work of community, of relationship, of coming together.

So beloveds — lead ministry team, CLF members, Unitarian Universalists — this is our time. Let us meet this moment, collaborate, and take a giant leap into together the belief that liberation is necessary, and possible, and that we all have a role to play.

Let’s create a world of justice and liberation now, together.

May it be so. ■

Called and Installed, Your Lead Ministry Team



CHRISTINA RIVERA
Lead Ministry Team,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship

One of the spiritual joys a religious professional receives is their installation to the congregation to which they've been called. Michael, Aisha, and I were called to be your Lead Ministry Team in 2020 and immediately knew that we wanted our installation to be at General Assembly (GA), not just because it is one of the only opportunities for CLF members to be together in person, but also to be able to share the spirit of our collaborative ministry leadership. Happily, June 2022 saw us with the first fully hybrid virtual/in-person GA in Portland.

We invited a team of worship leaders to dream with us about an installation around the topic of "A Theological Mandate of Liberation." Saying yes to our invitation were:

Sermon: Rev. Aisha Ansano, CLF Board Chair

Music Director: Francisco Ruiz, Director of Music UU Long Beach

Chalice Lighting: CLF Board of Directors

Embodied Movement: Rev. Jessica Star Rockers, former CLF Learning Fellow

Voices of the Congregation: Lecretia Williams, Rev. Erien Babcock,

and Rev. Dr. Althea Smith, CLF Learning Fellows reading the words of incarcerated UUs

Presentation of Stoles: Julica Hermann de la Fuente, CLF Board member

For those who have internet access, a video recording of the installation can be found here: bit.ly/CLF-GA. We were moved to laughter and tears throughout the service. We appreciated how every celebrant wove our unique religious professional identities throughout the service. The embodied ritual gave us roots and wings and the music was FIRE!

Called and Installed, continued on page 6



Musicians performing at the installation service, led by Francisco Ruiz (center)



Some of the joyful crowd gathered at the service in person

Called and Installed, Your Lead Ministry Team

Called and Installed, cont. from page 5



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CLF Board members Rev. Aisha Ansano, Darbi Lockridge, Martha Easter-Wells, Julica Hermann de la Fuente (left-right) lighting our flaming chalice

An installation gives the called religious community an opportunity to reflect on itself and its future. We hope this installation gives you a sense of our shared calling to ministry and our shared Theological Mandate of Liberation. To quote our sermonator Rev. Ansano quoting Cole Arthur Riley, writer and poet, "Our liberation begins with the irrevocable belief that we are worthy to be liberated, that we are worthy of a life that does not degrade us but honors our whole selves. When you believe in your dignity, or at least someone else does, it becomes more difficult to remain content with the bondage with which you have become so acquainted. You begin to wonder what you were meant for." ■



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Julica Hermann de la Fuente presenting Rev. Michael Tino with a stole as part of the installation ritual, with Christina Rivera (left) and Aisha Hauser (right) looking on



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*TOP: The Lead Ministry Team
BOTTOM: CLF Learning Fellows
Lecretia Williams (left) and Rev.
Dr. Althea Smith (right)*



PHOTO BY JOHN TUESDAY ON UNSPLASH

The Rainbow

TIMOTHY

CLF member, incarcerated in NY

I was walking in the yard.

He looked like a mob enforcer — probably because he was.

I'd seen him often, fierce and intimidating. We never spoke.

He was looking up. I turned to see a rainbow.

"You have to search for beauty. There is none here in prison."

"Is that a double rainbow forming?"

"Yes, they are rare."

"Gorgeous."

We watched with reverence. It faded away too soon.

"As a kid I'd run out after a rain to look for a rainbow."

"Did you find many?"

"No. Almost never. But I kept trying."

"Looking for beauty is always worthwhile."

We continued talking.

Sharing awe made us humble,

dissolving barriers,

allowing us to act like old friends.

It was beautiful.

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.

What does living into a theological mandate for liberation mean to you? How do you think the CLF is already doing that, and how can we do it better?

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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