

A Hard-Won Hopefulness: The Journey to Liberation



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In 2019 the Rev. Bill Sinkford and the wonderful staff at First Unitarian Portland invited me to join them for “Seminary for a Day,” when we reflected together on how our inherited liberal tradition is accountable to the theological work of liberation. Such transformation is central to the promise I find in our living tradition. I rarely speak of liberal theology in isolation unless specifically asked to do so. This conversation, this accountability, and this transformation are why I consistently draw on my understanding of our liberal and liberating faith. So what does that ask of us in this season where we are working together on expressing our highest values in community?

Recently the Rev. Dennis McCarty in his blog, “Thoughts from a Gentle Atheist,” reminded us of central values in Unitarian Universalism. “The worthiness of the human condition is one... investigation, research, and intellectual growth is another. Openness to change produced by that intellectual investigation and research is a crucial third.” This promise is described in the current language of Article II of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Bylaws

as “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” In the September 2022 draft of a revised Article II, it is described as both a promise to “collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically,” as well as “learn from one another and openly explore the depth and breadth of our many wisdoms.” The human worthiness that Rev. McCarty highlights is beautifully reflected across both versions, and both call us to the work of justice.

Latin American liberation theologies often speak of a preferential option for the poor, but also for a range of inequities in our living. The “preferential option” teaches that God themselves, the work of the Church writ large, our values, and our wisdom are centered on those most impacted by systemic oppression. Traditionally one might say that if we want to know God, we need to live in solidarity with those facing the injustices of poverty and class oppression.

Unitarian Universalists might say that we are most able to co-create the All-Embracing Love that our tradition teaches us when we center those most impacted by long established systems of injustice. We save one another, and remake the sacredness of the world, through prioritizing what is truly needed for that remaking.

[Hard-Won Hopefulness, cont. on page 3](#)

Quest

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“Nobody’s
free until
everybody’s
free.”

FANNIE LOU
HAMER

in this issue

A HARD-WON LIBERATION
Rev. Sofia Betancourt

LIBERATION
Russell

THE LEARNED AMONG US
Aisha Hauser

AMERICA
Gary

NEW CLF MEMBER DATABASE INFO
CLF Staff

LIBERATION

What does liberation mean to you? What does it feel like, and how do you access it?

RUSSELL

CLF Member, incarcerated in MD

I often hold deep discussions over the tier between me and my Brothers in Chains. The object is always to get each other to share what we've learned from life and insights we've gleaned while doing time.

Often this leads to arguments, but for the most part it leads to self discoveries. When I find myself learning

something unexpected from a brother I feel elated at the new information. Especially when it destroys a long held belief of mine that is ultimately wrong.

This is liberation to me. A changed view. A new realization, some witty information I'm made aware of, or simply something I've deduced via the open conversation that leads me to a feeling of evolving and getting closer to a certain truth. Often, these

revelations come simply because I don't look for them, but keep an open mind. It is often said that liberation can not be obtained in its actual form in physical life. I have discovered this to be a lie.

Liberation is anything that frees you from your current state of ignorance. We alone can prevent our own liberation. I strive to be liberated in my everyday affairs! ■



PHOTO BY ENGIN AKYURT ON UNSPLASH

Hard-Won Hopefulness, cont. from page 1

Anything less drives us away from our faithful living.

Today's Unitarian Universalism asks us to re-engage the largest questions of our living in the service of liberation. I want a Unitarian Universalism that troubles the waters of what we mean by freedom, just as the Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison Reed asked of us quite some time ago. I want a Unitarian Universalism that offers up its power and authority in the service of justice, and embraces new learning and surprise as *sacred offerings*. This especially when our beloveds directly impacted by injustice over generations somehow still welcome us when we show up in the spirit of lamentation, regret, determination, and a deeply invested discipline of hopefulness that together we might yet survive.

My hard-won hopefulness, as Ecowomanist scholar the Rev. Dr. Melanie Harris would call it, is that many of you might want to build a Unitarian Universalism together that is humble, that demands little from those who have been made to sacrifice much, and that prioritizes its commitments to faithful living even when we don't quite know how to make our way. That is the Unitarian Universalism that I believe in. Right now, I think it is on a journey from liberal to liberation. And I am orienting myself toward the day when those words have new and fully empowered meanings in the world. ■

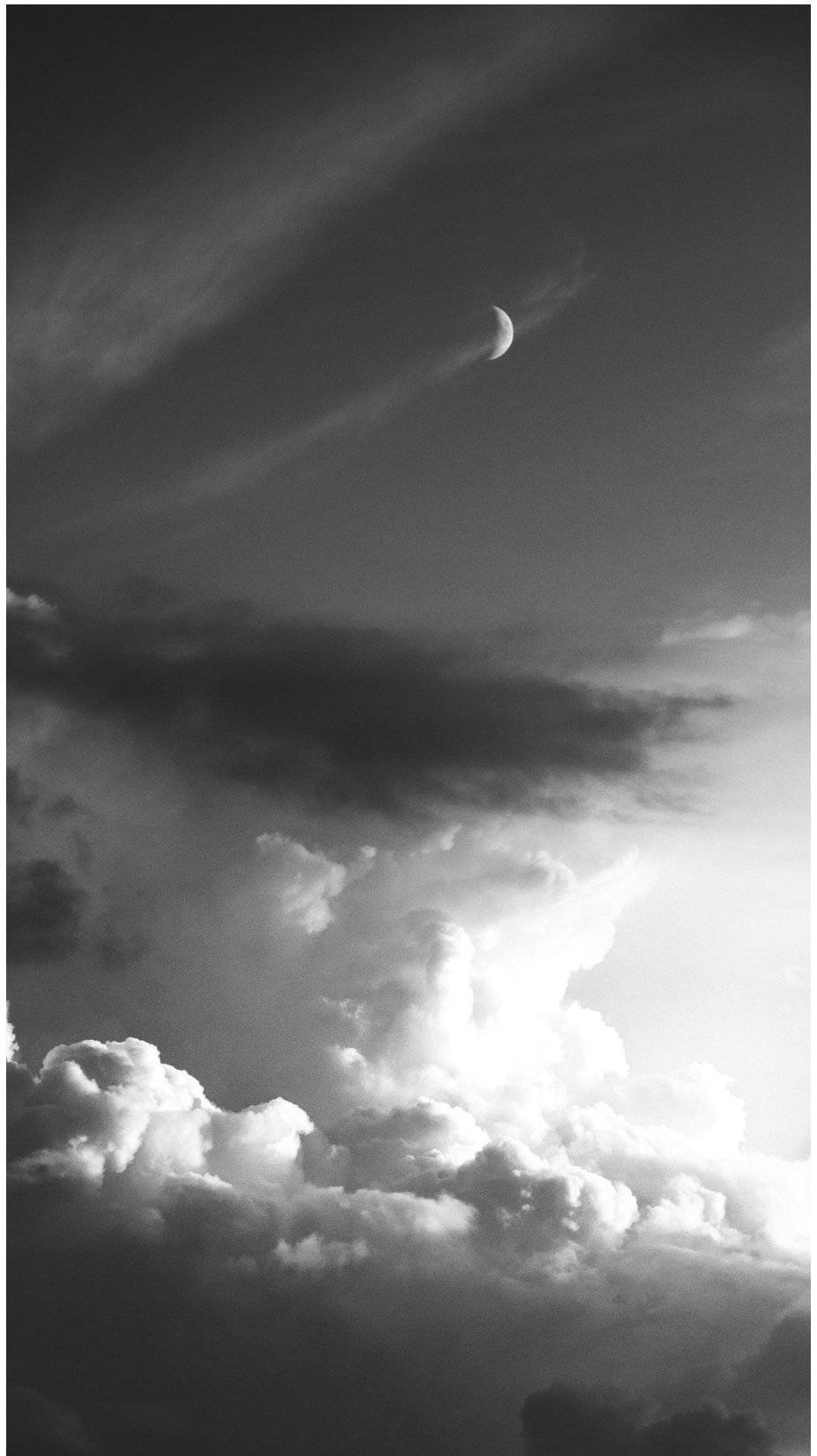


PHOTO BY SIIM LUKKA ON UNSPLASH

The Learned Among Us



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

The following is adapted from a sermon that Aisha gave in CLF online worship on Nov. 6, 2022.

A few years ago, I was having a conversation with a friend about learning to love myself fully, especially my body. I was jokingly explaining that I never learned to dress myself in a way that was truly flattering to my body type. She explained that the problem wasn't that I didn't know, it was that I was conditioned through marketing to think fashion looked a certain way and only on certain bodies. Primarily what looks good on thin, white women — and those things simply didn't look good on me.

She suggested I follow plus sized, Black women on social media. She sent me invitations to gorgeous Black models and activists who I continue to follow.

As their posts showed up in my feed, I was able to expand my notion of what is beautiful and as time went on, I was able to see myself through a more expansive and generous lens.

These fashionistas are unapologetic, fierce and simply beautiful.

One of the people I found myself in awe of was Leah Vernon, a Black

Woman whose posts continue to expand my imagination with regards to fashion, because she does not exist in a prescribed paradigm. She is the author of a new book, *Unashamed: Musings of a Fat, Black Muslim*.

Through Leah's posts and those of Black leaders like, Sonia Renee Taylor, Ijeoma Oluo, Jessamyn Stanely and adrienne maree brown, among others, I was able to change my perception of beauty through changing the default of what I was exposed to throughout my entire life.

Through a friend's recommendation, I was able to challenge assumptions I held about myself and about beauty for my entire life. This has helped me experience beauty differently and in a much more liberated and loving way, for myself and others.

This brings me to an email the CLF received a while back about the assumptions the writer seemed to hold. The person, who is not incarcerated, wrote to us asking why they seemed to be getting the "prison ministry version of Quest." They said that, though they support work with incarcerated people, it is not their work, and they have no interest in being a part of that ministry — they would simply like to get the traditional version of Quest.

Over two long email responses, I told this CLF member that as we center liberation at the CLF, we care about giving opportunities for all to grow

an awareness that extends beyond an intellectual understanding that there are "people in prison." For those of us who are not experiencing incarceration, reading the thoughts and feelings of those who are is powerful. I invited this member to consider the possibility that they have something to learn and be moved by something written by someone whose words you may not otherwise be exposed to, and emphasized that the Worthy Now Prison Ministry is not separate from the ministry of the CLF. We are one entity and one congregation that centers Unitarian Universalist values of community care.

This exchange and the response of this person to the changes in *Quest*, a publication that for decades centered primarily on the words of ordained clergy, had me thinking about assumptions being made about others.

We are a faith community that does not promise heaven or hell. In essence, we are trying to figure it out. Why are we here? What does it all mean? How do we navigate this beautiful, scary, joyful and painful thing we call life?

I don't have answers to these questions and the hard truth is no one really does with any degree of accuracy. No one is an expert at being human, not even faith leaders.

[The Learned Among Us, cont. on page 5](#)

[The Learned Among Us, cont. from page 4](#)

What we can offer as faith leaders is a place to grapple with the questions and create a container that invites into an expansive and loving way of being.

Faith leaders receive training to become either ordained, credentialed, or lay leaders in order to have a shared understanding of the container we are creating. Faith leadership is not a science, it is where those given the sacred charge of ministry (in all its forms) choose to be in an accountable relationship with the members of the congregation and in many ways an accountable relationship to UUism itself. I center UU values in how I approach my faith leadership, a leadership rooted in religious education.

Revelation is not sealed, and as part of the search for truth and meaning, learning from those most impacted by oppression is a crucial way to learn the ways we need to do better and love more as we work to dismantle systems that actively cause harm.

When the three of us, the current Lead Ministry Team, started our leadership of the CLF, one of the aspects of this ministry we knew we wanted to transform was that of *Quest* and how this publication can more faithfully serve *all* of our members, both incarcerated and free world. The three of us were in agreement that *Quest* can both include reflections and sermons

[The Learned Among Us, cont. on page 6](#)

America

GARY

CLF member, incarcerated in SC

Last night, I awakened
from a dream
I dreamed of an America
in which those sworn to protect
and serve, abused and killed instead
An America whose hunger turned barbed
wire into shredded wheat and
stomachs became caskets
An America where masks were discarded
and grown men hid under sheets
as they stormed halls of democracy
An America who forgot her history
her polls claiming hate was history
an animal extinct like polar ice caps
An America in which no one escaped the
brutality of law and order ran amok
or escaped the massacre in a nightclub
or massage parlor
or a high school
or a supermarket
An America that claimed there were "good" Nazis
but... didn't Uncle Sam go to war
to stop the goose-stepping in '44?
An America where a wall grew in a
land that once told a foreign leader
to "tear down this wall"
An America where hatemongers
quoted the words of Dr. King
and you are no longer safe in a church
An America whose Statue of Liberty
was silenced, her torch gone cold
the ashes our new mascara
An America whose populace quaked
slouching towards a coming apocalypse
Was it just a dream?

The Learned Among Us, cont. from page 5

from faith leaders and our members, both incarcerated and those that are “free.”

In the email I referenced earlier, this CLF member took exception to being called a “free world member.” In retrospect, I realize that this person is accidentally correct to take exception to this term.

As Fannie Lou Hammer said, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

Every day in the U.S., it is painfully clear how those in power who want to affirm white supremacy and patriarchy are doing all they can to make sure no one is truly free. The rights of half the population have been taken away with the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*. There are hundreds of anti-trans bills across the United States and there are people running for office in the U.S. that are running on platforms of intentional disenfranchisement of those with target identities. While the CLF is based in the U.S, the results of policies enacted by the U.S. government impact people all over the world.

It is more important than ever that those of us in faith leadership positions center the voices of those most cruelly impacted by the systems of oppression that harm us all.

However, those with privileged identities have been deceived into believing they are separate and somehow

protected from oppression. This is a lie. Humans are inextricably connected and the destinies of the most powerful are tied to the most marginalized, history has demonstrated this over and over.

Countries with wealth disparities like the ones we have now in the United States do not last, and in fact topple.

We have an opportunity to save ourselves by caring for each other and learning from each other by being open to the reflections from those who are most in harm’s way. Not only Black people, but also indigenous people, trans people, immigrants, those with seen and unseen disabilities, but also learning from people who are incarcerated, most holding some or all of the identities I just listed.

Let us embrace the opportunity to be nourished and impacted by the reflections of people we may never meet in person, but whose lives matter.

I want to share with you the words of Joseph, an incarcerated UU and CLF member. Joseph shared their reflection of the idea of sacrifice. They write:

The value of sacrifice is relative. Without sacrifice, I would not be here living life as I know it. If my mother hadn’t sacrificed her time and put her dreams on hold, then she wouldn’t have been able to raise me so lovingly. She was 20 years old, barely an adult and I feel certain I wasn’t planned. She probably had many other plans. Maybe traveling, concentrating on school. I thank mom for her sacrifice, it was very valuable to me.

Some sacrifices seem small to us but can be very valuable to the recipient. Perhaps you sacrifice some time once a week to go visit a nursing home. If you have spare time, you would normally watch TV or spend it on the internet, you could make a sacrifice that is of little value to you, but could be of enormous value to the nursing home resident who has no family.

Our sacrifices are offering to the group soul of humanity. No matter how small or large, if it does good for one, it is good for all. Depending on my commitment and intention, my sacrifice doesn’t have to be public. When things are done without my attachment to the result, they are more pure and powerful. Some sacrifice all their lives, in order that others may live. Some make small sacrifices of that social awkwardness to overcome that to share a kind word with a stranger. No matter how small a good thing is, it is still good.

In sharing their reflections in Quest, incarcerated CLF members — people who have had their freedom taken away — are now giving the gift of their presence and reflections.

It is incumbent upon those of us with more privilege to examine our assumptions and do what we can to learn from those most impacted by this cruel and harmful system we call the United States. It is incumbent upon us to center love, community, compassion and liberation.

May we be humble in how we receive and move through this faith community and the world. ■

New CLF Member Database Includes a Donor Self-Service Portal: We Need Your Help to Migrate to New System!



TECH & MEMBERSHIP STAFF
Church of the Larger Fellowship

The Church of the Larger Fellowship is migrating our member and donation database. Our new system, called Church Center, allows you to see your history and make changes to:

- Contact information
- Stewardship donations
- User profile

If you have access to the internet, it is now so much easier to manage

your information with the CLF! Just go to clfu.churchcenter.com and log in following the prompts.

As part of this migration, we are asking everyone who has set up a recurring donation with us prior to June of 2022 (in our old system) to recreate their recurring gift in Church Center. It is not secure for us to move your donation between systems ourselves. In addition to reaching out via email to those who are affected by this, we are also now reaching out via Quest. If you have received such an email before and ignored it out of concern that

it may be a scam, rest assured — it is not! The CLF does need your help to complete this migration. We will eventually shut off our old system, and when we do, we will lose your donation. Without your generosity, we can't do all of our important ministry. Thank you!

Once you set up your recurring donation in Church Center, our staff will be notified to shut off your old recurring donation in our old system. We appreciate your prompt attention and willingness to help us make this upgrade a success! ■

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 is your relationship with liberation? How does it connect with your faith?

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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