

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses!

Rev. Susan Davison Archer

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I named today's service after a passage from the Christian book of Hebrews, purported to be written by Paul, but probably actually by some other early Christian leader.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of **witnesses**, let us...lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. —Hebrews 12:1.*

So what does such a passage have to do with us? This verse is referring to as “witnesses,” many of the early heroes and prophets of Jewish texts, and then to its own testimony about Jesus. I confess I am using it because I am inspired mostly by the image of it; think of it, the image of so many witnesses that they made a great cloud, maybe something like the gathering of clouds we displayed earlier this morning, or maybe like the New Zealand clouds you see on the order of service. It is the image I find very powerful, and not necessarily all the content or context of the verse itself. While we can learn and be inspired by Moses and other heroes of Judaism, and while Jesus was a wonderful teacher and prophet, for most of us Unitarian Universalists Jesus is not the “author and finisher of our faith,” as this passage eventually proclaims.

The verse does, though, in part call up our own religious heritage and those who have come before us, and in fact, bulwarks of those in many faiths who have demonstrated in their lives a commitment to a world that is more just, more compassionate, more reasonable, more loving. Those people are indeed with us in some sense as witnesses to our faith, whether or not we see them in a cloud.

But for us, in our communities of faith, communities that recognize that inspiration can be newly revealed, “so great a cloud of witnesses” refers also to us, at a very grass-roots level. One interpretation of that language of witness comes through words by Annie Dillard: “We are here to witness to creation, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature, so that creation need not play to an empty house.”

Dillard is suggesting that we need to pay attention to one another, to be witnesses to one another, to our very presence in this life, to our creativity and joie de vivre, to our sadness and ideas, and we need to be witnesses to the courage, love and commitment of others. This is where life's richness comes. When we earlier called up our own cloud of witnesses, they represented people who were testifying that Glenis had paid attention to them, to their groups, that she had cared about them and helped them, but, even more, they were testifying that caring is what this community is all about.

So, WE also are the cloud of witnesses – it is WE, all of us, one to one, or as a group, it is we common, ordinary people who are witnesses. And what are we witnesses to? The best! To LIFE ITSELF and to the possibility inherent in each one of us, and in our larger society. In the past few weeks I have particularly noticed with great joy amazing manifestations here at Cedar Lane of both kinds of witness – within our community and by our community in the wider world. Lots of energy and new ideas and for some, a new sense of relatedness, connection. This witness is in fact always here somewhere. In my role it is a privilege and pleasure to get to see it in bits and pieces because I get to be connected with so many facets of congregational life. But in the past few weeks it has felt much greater – truly like a wave, perhaps mirroring some of the waves passing through our country, but also distinctly our own.

For instance, our Social Justice Empowerment weekend, with 120 folks whose energy and vision for change could scarcely be contained.

For instance, our Martin Luther King celebration – not only upstairs but also down, where we saw the spirit of the younger children in writing to their new president about the dreams they have for the world.

For instance, the visit of Joe Gomer, the Tuskegee Airman, hosted by our Inauguration housing committee, who graciously joined a good crowd of us last week.

For instance, the Inauguration as viewed in our own sanctuary– people not campaigning for one party or candidate but giving witness to a new possibility that comes to the world at this time of changing leadership.

For instance, focus groups that are gathering to talk about how to revitalize Cedar Lane and what we value most about us. And what I have heard often in these weeks from various people how another individual here has made a difference in their life, in their sense of themselves, their sense of possibility; and how amazing the energy is when we join together for collective purpose.

We heard testimony to some of that in the video clip earlier, about teaching, about engaging with social justice work.

And there is also, each time we are gathered for a memorial service, to help those among us in the midst of loss. Life teaches us that loss comes too frequently, but it also teaches that sustenance through loss comes from a community that cares, and reminds us that if we are to have life with all its wonder and depth, loss, too, will be inevitable. But we can walk through that together.

Ours is a faith that has built communities; it is not about dogma, not about doctrine, but about witnessing how to live. Our congregational documents and ways of being have to do with our relationships to each other and the sharing of vision.

And we didn't just stumble into this way of being, with a focus on how we are with each other rather than doctrine. This is imbedded in our history, our theology, our heritage.

Let's look at one of our earliest congregations. One of our UU ministers, and fervent student of the particular covenantal nature of our faith communities, gives us a peek into the Dedham, Mass. church - from Alice Blair Wesley (Minns Lectures):

By 1637 there were about 30 families in Dedham, all very recently settled here. They had come from various parts of England...

Upon reaching this piece of the American wilderness, they first had to design a town government. Then, [finally] with pens built for their animals, initial crops seen to, houses up, furniture unpacked or freshly pegged together, and so on, they began to think of founding a church.

*So, guess what these New Englanders did in 1637 to get to know one another and to approach - gently, slowly - some very profound and personal religious issues. They set up a series of weekly neighborhood meetings, "lovingly to discourse and consult together . . . and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, * * * [gap in the record] that we might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and gifts of one another." Meetings were held every Thursday "at several houses in order," in rotation. Anybody in town who wanted was welcome to attend. [Gosh, do these guys sound like our ancestors!]*

Then, they adopted a few simple rules for their meetings. Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts. Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed upon question. Then everyone else could speak by turns. Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing. The record reports that all their "reasonings" were "very peaceable, loving, & tender."

[Wesley notes] . . . what a contemporary ring those rules have! I have sat myself in hundreds of hours of Unitarian Universalist discussion meetings with exactly those rules.

[She also notes] For any who might suppose our 17th century free church ancestors talked mostly about original sin, predestination and hellfire, I am glad to be able to tell you, not one of those topics is even once mentioned or so much as hinted at, in the record of the founding of the Dedham Church . . .

In these pages there is much use of the words: reason, . . . deliberation, encouragement, advice, advise, counsel, . . . agreement, liberty, . . . There is also repeated use of the words: sweet, comfort, help and brotherly. But by far the most commonly used words in this written history are: affection, affections, affectionately, embrace and love, loving, lovingly. . . . Why? Because then and now and for as long as human history lasts - when all is said and done, done and said some more - the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members. The laypeople who founded First

Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in our churches now, “Love is the doctrine of this church. . .”

And thus it is, that what we will witness to is not doctrine, particular belief, or dogma, but again, over and over, to our covenant, the way we are with one another, the ways we witness to the quality of that being.

And Wesley reminds us that it was these folks, these New Englanders who took such care with one another that *also* “*assumed that the strongest - maybe not the only - but the strongest, clearest, most authentic voice in their whole society - for justice, peace and reasonable laws - would come from the free church.*”

What I want to lift up this morning is that the opportunities for us to support one another, to witness to one another and to our very deep and abiding values, are with us every day. They present themselves to us almost casually – as we make phone calls about committee meetings, as we stand in line for coffee, for Lobby Day, in workshops and classes, as we prepare receptions for memorial services, in countless other ways and times. We are a community of witnesses, to our values and to the living and growing of each life here.

We ARE here to abet creation, to witness to it, so that creation – as a community and within each of us – need not play to an empty house.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” Thus it says in the Christian book of Hebrews. We Unitarian Universalists may well take the passage to encourage us to pay attention to all those around us in our faith community who witness to the values of our faith. It can also call us to pay attention to the power that comes from having those who care about us witness to our own strengths, our becoming, our changing and our growing souls. And it calls us to extend our witness beyond these walls.

It is also part of our own UU cloud image, that we are not witnesses to one story – as in the one in Hebrews, with Jesus the author and finisher of faith, but rather many stories – your story and my story, with what happens when we mix those stories together – It’s yeasty! Like our Pledge Drive Committee reminds us, “Your Story, My Story.” It becomes OUR story, details ever changing based on the mix of experiences, needs, losses and joys, inspiration for the mission of our collective community, and our ministry to one another in the particularities of our lives. Many great clouds of us, gathering, witnessing, affirming the power of life and our care for each other and the world we live in.

Let us close with these words from Starhawk:

Community. [Religious Community.] Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the

*words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will
open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will
celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins
our strength to do the
work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we
can be free . . .*