

**The Light of Conscience
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Southlake, TX
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I meet regularly with two groups of people where the group members are asked to speak about what is going on in their spiritual lives. One is a specifically Christian group where I am the only one in the group with a Unitarian and Universalist approach to Christianity. The other group is a Unitarian Universalist group where I am a distinct minority, if not alone, in Universalist Christianity being my primary spiritual path. Both groups are places where members share with each other details of their spiritual lives. Members of both groups are required to meet regularly with spiritual directors. Yet, only the first group, the specifically Christian group, calls their practice of sharing “giving witness.”

I found this difficult at first. I am not used to people witnessing. I have negative associations with the word witnessing in this context as I have associated it with proselytizing and trying to convert

people to one's particular beliefs, usually a form of Evangelical Christianity. I was very uncomfortable with people speaking about what God is doing in their lives and what God is putting in their hearts. I struggled with this for some weeks until I became firm in my belief that the second group I belonged to, the Unitarian Universalist group, was doing the same thing – bearing witness to what was going on in their lives, what was in their hearts. I want to reclaim witness. Bearing witness is about living true to your deepest convictions, living a life of conscience, speaking to that conscience and conviction. Letting the light of conscience shine and bring its divine power to bear on your life and those lives you encounter is something worth reclaiming and something worth my witness.

I want my life to bear witness to what I believe and hold dear – not a bad New Year's resolution, come to think of it. I don't my witness to be just words, and yet I want the courage of conviction to put my witness into words.

How do I put into words, how do I give witness to my experience of what is sacred and holy when I can hardly name it for myself, let alone describe it for others? How do I give witness to God when the word God isn't good enough for the reality I experience, because, well as wiser ones have noted: God isn't God's name? How do I bear witness to my divine mysteries when God isn't a mysterious divine being, but the Great Mystery behind everything? How do I bear witness to the Jesus of the Gospels when a religion about Jesus not a religion of Jesus dominates my culture and I feel I have more in common with the author of Jesus of Suburbia than the Jesus of the Gospel of John?

I feel dumb and unable to speak. How can you know my heart, you my listeners, my neighbors, my coworkers, my readers, my friends – my witness seems so different and out of place. My own witness and experience seems so different as to be wrong. Then I remember the witness exercise.

You've seen it or been part of it, yes? A crime or accident is staged for a group of people and then unaware they're in an experiment, everyone who witnessed the incident is asked to describe the crime or the accident. Like the people in this exercise, you and I may experience the same thing, but bear different witness to the event. After listening to many witnesses recount the crime or accident, there are many different versions of what happened. The car was going fast or slow. It was red or blue. The person involved was tall or short, black or white, a man or a woman, young or old.

So many of my neighbors recount the story of how God made the big blue sky and how God made the earth and God gave them a grandchild and put the answer to a problem or a decision in their heart, while I walked out under a divine sky onto a divine earth, and listened intently for the voice of the divine in the guidance of family and friends and the wind through the trees and my own heartbeat, wondering, finally if there's a difference between seeing God as

having created Heaven and Earth and seeing God in Heaven in Earth?

I wonder if I shy away from giving my witness to my neighbor sometimes because of what I might see in my neighbor or what I might see in myself? I wonder, if we reclaim witness, that you and I may find out more about what sacred sameness we see in common with our neighbors than what theological and philosophical difference separates us. The more witness we share, we may come to find out, for example, that we all see the sacred in creation and value the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. Until we bear witness, however, my neighbors and I are not a we having a conversation, but just another us and them. To that, I can bear witness.

To find out the power of witness I have to have the courage to act. Actions speak louder than words anyway. Anything I believe doesn't matter all that much. It's all just theology – which is God talk, or philosophy – which is love of wisdom, not actually wisdom itself.

Until you get to the “so what” part. So I believe this and I think that. So what. What difference does it make? How shall I live and act differently because I believe this way? How shall I *be* differently in the world because I think this way about things? This is how we bear witness to our deepest beliefs and core principles – by living out the “so what.”

I spent last week at Disney World - an incredible gift from my in-laws. I saw a lot of people walk through the World Showcase at Epcot Center experiencing a glimpse of the culture, history and cuisine from different countries around the world. I saw many of the same people ride slow moving boats past a world full of singing dolls cheerily proclaiming “It’s a Small World After All.” So What? What good is it if people take that feeling of good will towards others and generosity of spirit towards fellow travelers on spaceship Earth and leave Disney’s Magical Kingdom and let it remain just that – a good feeling?

Howard Thurman¹ reminds us that it's the "so what?" times of life that are vitally important. These are the times when we bear witness, when we light the lamp of conscience. When the feeling of good will wears off – that's when the work of Christmas begins.

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

It's about what you're called to do then: find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, bring peace to the people, make music in the heart. Pay attention to the verbs, verbs like witness: find, heal, feed, release, rebuild, bring, make. These actions speak louder than words. They are the way we bring our light to the world, make manifest our conscience, our faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

¹ *The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman*

As we saw Christmas Eve, it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. The light from your candle lights the next candle and so on and so on until the entire room is brightened. So it is when we bear witness to the truth in our heart to the world, not only in what we say, but through what we do. Our light inspires the next person and one by one, each soul sets the next soul ablaze until the work of Christmas, which can be hard work, gets done.

Our faith tradition is not an easy ride. When we light the lamp of conscience here we mean the lamp to be held aloft. A lot of people look at Unitarian Universalism, both from the outside and from the inside, see a religion with no dogma and no creed and think this is an easy religion or that you can believe whatever you want or that Unitarian Universalism is for them because it's church lite or religion lite, like lite beer or diet soda. That's not it at all. In fact, exactly the opposite is true. Our tradition is one of reason, tolerance and freedom of belief, but with great freedom also comes great responsibility. Each of us has to decide what to believe and how to

act – how to bear witness to the world about what’s in our hearts, in our conscience and thus we have the responsibility to form our conscience. There is a call to conscience in Unitarian Universalism to be constantly at work on our deepest selves; to be about the work of Christmas; to shine our lights into the dark places of the world and make it a brighter place.

Shining this light of conscience is a calling that’s sometimes hard to hear. Universalism says everyone is my neighbor. Everyone gets to be on God’s side – even bad people. Even the racist guy in line next to you at Disney World, even the parents with the two crying babies on the plane ride who pay no attention to their children, even murders, even people who try to blow up planes. Everyone is holy, somehow in a way I don’t understand sometimes. That’s good because I’m not so holy in ways I do understand some times.

How do you witness to this infinite acceptance and this call to shine your light? There are as many ways as there are as many of

you and they need not always be grand. You can march in the Pride Parade, console a grumpy child, find patience for a tired family member, visit someone in the congregation, lobby your senator or member of congress about legislation, host a family holiday twice in a row even though it's not your turn, listen attentively and say thank you, and most importantly, I love you.

Letting the light of conscience shine, bearing your witness to the world, is not an option, but an obligation. Whether or not we light candles or curse darkness is something learned by example, and the light gets more difficult to kindle when it burns low. You never know who's trying to learn to read by the light of your lamp.

Just before Christmas stories of two young men in our congregation made me very proud. One of these young men was in grade school, the other in middle school. Both of them spoke up, spoke out in their own way for people of different religious faith traditions. The young men stood up for our Jewish brothers and sisters, who were in different ways being left out or ridiculed as the

overwhelming Christian culture in which we live didn't notice or didn't care about its sensitivity to the work of Christmas as it celebrated the season of Christmas.

Give some thought over the next month to witness. To what do you bear witness? How do you bear witness? It's important work. You never know who might be listening or watching – it really is a small world, after all. Happy New Year and Let Your Light Keep Shining.