

“Bearing Witness with Your Life”

**Sermon written and delivered by
Rev. Jennifer Youngsun Ryu
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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READING:

From Sun Magazine, September 2005, by Daniel H. Harris, Huntsville, Texas

In the early sixty's, my family lived in Alabama, the “Heart of Dixie,” or so the state motto says. I was taught to take pride in the fact that our city did not fall to the Union Army during the Civil War: General Lee may have surrendered, but we never did. One evening my father came home from work at the meatpacking plant and announced that there was to be a cross-burning in our neighborhood that night. A white man from out of town had brought his black wife to live here, and the Ku Klux Klan would not stand for such an affront. After we'd finished our supper, Dad took down his shotgun and gave it a cleaning. Mom pitched a fit. She didn't think Dad should be involved with this mess; after all, he was a married man with a family. Dad left her crying on the porch as he climbed in his old Dodge pickup and drove off. Dad came home the next morning after the sun had risen, tired and bleary-eyed. Mom clucked around him like a hen over a lost chick, but pride sparkled in her hazel eyes. There had been no cross-burning the night before, because my father had spent a sleepless night sitting on a porch and waiting, shotgun across his lap, beside a man he didn't know, to face a flock of cowards wearing sheets whom he knew far too well.

SERMON:

The masthead on our new letterhead says, “Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists: A Welcoming, Worshiping, Witnessing Community.”

Yes, we are welcoming community, practicing the art of hospitality, open to all seekers. And now, we are an official Welcoming Congregation, explicit in our openness to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. We do this because other houses of worship, despite claiming to be welcoming and hospitable, have made explicit their rejection of these folks who are our friends, our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters.

We are a worshiping community, honoring the infinite, the holy, the ineffable mystery through music, poetry, ritual and prayer, and even through sermons.

And we are a Witnessing Community. Witnessing. What image does that word paint on your mind's canvass? Witnessing

You come out of the Farm Fresh one day and see a car back out of a parking space. It cuts the corner too soon and scrapes the back corner of the car next to it. Witnessing.

You are called to testify in court about what you saw in that parking lot. You swear to tell the truth. Witnessing.

Ding Dong—you open the door, two ladies in their Sunday dresses are standing on your doorstep. Colorful copies of Watchtower clutched in their arms. Witnessing.

These are different ways to witness and each is helpful in shaping our understanding of what it means for the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists to be a Witnessing Community.

I hear someone's fundamentalist button going off. Are you nervous that the new ministers are going to ask you to distribute UU tracts in your neighborhood?

Don't worry. That will come in two weeks when I preach on Evangelism.

Witnessing at its most generic level means to see something. You observe an incident.

Or you provide evidence based on something you know. You speak the truth as best you know it. This is also witnessing.

A lot of religious witness sounds like this. Only, it's usually about truths vastly more important than what happened in a traffic accident.

Religious people declare what they believe to be true about things like love, justice, wholeness.

This is a long way from observing a fender bender in the grocery store parking lot, but something is still missing. None of these descriptions really get all the way to the bottom of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist Witnessing Community.

A UU witnessing Community does not just observe, does not just give testimony, does not just proclaim a particular truth, even about something of the utmost importance.

To be a witnessing community is a high spiritual aspiration.

To be a witnessing community, is to live life in a way that bears witness to our most cherished values.

To be a witnessing community is to embody our message, rather than simply speaking it.

Bearing witness, like bearing weight, bearing a child, bearing pain, often involves difficulty, inconvenience even risk.

Why would anyone take that on? Our lives are often painful, inconvenient and difficult as it is. So we're willing to read about an issue, maybe join a discussion group, but changing the way we live is a huge leap.

What will prompt that first muscle to move?

How will we move from “talking witness,” witness in the abstract, to a “living witness” that bears witness to our highest values?

Consider this story about a group of friends in Scotland. They are drinking buddies and hiking buddies.

One day, they’re in the pub, lamenting the lack of any real woodland in the Scottish border hills. Centuries of cutting down trees and raising sheep has made the hills bare. They start talking about how nice it would be to have woodlands, not just for the shade, but for the biological diversity and complexity.

What they did next was completely, extravagantly unreasonable. After all, these people had jobs and families to take care of. They did it anyway.

They spent the next two years trying to find a suitable piece of land.
They spent two years after that raising money to buy the land.
Two more years of research into finding the species that thrived on that land thousand of years ago.

Another year of recruiting hearty volunteers to help plant trees on a steep hillside.
And finally, infant willows, tiny hazels and young birch are flourishing.
(story found in Resurgence Magazine, Nov/Dec 2003)

How did these individuals move from “talking witness” to “living witness?”

They allowed themselves to be affected by the living witness of the barren hills they loved. They also allowed themselves to be affected by the talking and living witness of other people.

These people are everywhere.
But they seem to be speaking an archaic language.
They seem to be guided by a faith that we can no longer feel.
And so these teachers pass in front of us,
Often they are labeled extremists, fanatics, dreamers, or at least, people who are wasting their time.

A man sits on a porch and waits, shotgun across his lap, sits beside a man he doesn’t know to face a flock of cowards wearing sheets whom he knows far too well. Bearing Witness.

A small, yet dedicated group of WUU’s examine the way their live their lives, reflect humbly on their impact on the Earth and start to change the way they live. Bearing Witness.

The UU Congregation in Fresno, California builds a \$4 million dollar building and becomes the first church in the state to comply with environmental standards. It was hundreds of thousands of dollars over budget; the paperwork was astonishing. In the minister's words, it was a truckload of trouble, "but our faith calls us to do this." Bearing Witness. (story found in Aug 11, 2007 article, Contra Costa Times)

The Earth, too, bears witness to the sanctity and unity of life. When we quiet our minds and enter the sanctuaries of nature with reverence, we can receive the truth about the interconnected web. No longer is that truth merely a string of letters pressed hard in the pages of our hymnal, it becomes an experience of the body feeling no separation: me, the mountain, the sheep, the birds, the rain, the wind—no separate self.



On the night before the Buddha achieved enlightenment, he was struggling with doubt and anxiety. So he reached out with his right hand to touch the ground, and he asked the earth to bear witness to his struggle to wake up--to be enlightened. We all need help waking up, even the Buddha.

The Earth helps us by bearing witness to the sanctity and unity of life.

The Earth also bears witness to the spiritual dis-ease of humanity. It is just as spiritually healthy or sick as we are.

Humanity's illness in these times is our delusion of separateness.

Albert Einstein observed that, "A human being is part of the whole, called by us "universe," ... [yet]He experiences himself, has thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Open your eyes and open your heart to the bearing of this kind of witness, by the Earth, by other people, wherever you can find it—and it will change the way you live your life.

Bearing witness requires a body, and the Earth has a body, a gorgeous body. Astronaut Edgar Mitchell got to see it from an angle that we'll only see in photographs. "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon," he describes, "in a long, slow motion moment of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery."

That body bears witness to humanity's delusion of separateness. It shows on her skin like an open wound.

If you like to sit in the window seat when you fly, you can see those wounds: clear cutting of forests, mountaintop mining, industrial runoff, huge lots cleared for new homes, acres of sod instead of trees, glistening pools of water that animals cannot drink.

The earth bears witness to humanity's delusion that we can separate ourselves from the natural world, control it, take it, use it up.

The Earth also bears witness to humanity's spiritual well-being. Imprinted upon her skin is evidence of human beings waking up to the truth of the interdependent web of all existence. Evidence of people living with the deep knowledge that they are connected to all things, so deeply that streams sing with health, animals roam freely, finding food and shelter in abundance.

In London, the largest world's largest urban forest--17,000 acres of forest, 65,000 trees--sits in the midst of 9 million people. City residents are welcoming falcons as their new neighbors, and waking up to the sound of owls. Fish are swimming in the Thames, even salmon have been spotted in the estuaries.

When we strive to be spiritually healthy people, that health is reflected in the land and also reflected in our brothers and sisters.

It starts here, on Sunday mornings.

It continues when you go to lunch or meet in your small groups.

You keep talking about your deeply held values, the stuff that makes your heart soar, and the stuff that makes your heart break.

If you discipline yourself not to spend too much time in abstract conversation, then a muscle will start to twitch, and you will start to move your body.

The way you live your life will start to bear witness to what you hold most dear.

Then someone will see your living witness.

She will be affected.

She will sit down with a few friends--maybe in a pub.

They will begin to think extravagant, unreasonable thoughts.

They will say extravagant, unreasonable things to each other.

Muscles will begin to twitch.

Trees will be planted.

Burning crosses will be averted.

Hearts will soar.

And the Earth will sing.

So may it be.

Amen.