WORTHY NOW SERVICE MESSAGE

Reflection:

"If they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

Baldwin wrote these words on November 19, 1970 in a letter to Angela Davis in solidarity after her arrest. These words are not a warning like those we usually hear, "you'll be next," or, "first they came for…". It is an understanding. Baldwin knows, deeply, that being targeted by the state can happen to anyone who finds themselves out of favor with those in power. LGBTQ, BIPOC, and disabled people, union organizers, sex workers, the unhoused, even women in bathing suits have found themselves the target of state based violence.

Criminalization as a tactic is not new, yet under increasingly fascist conditions in this country, we may find the connections between our struggles more easily.

- Nicole Pressley, Organizing Strategy Director of the Unitarian Universalist Association Side With Love; excerpt from the article Solidarity as Resistance in the Quest for Meaning publication by the Church of the Larger Fellowship

The Church of the Larger Fellowship has a long history. It originally started for people in rural areas and small towns during the Pony Express era. Later they communicated by mail and phone. Now, of course, they use online services.

Since 1999 they have provided weekly worship services on YouTube for people all over the country. They offer pastoral care and the Quest for Meaning magazine.

Then in 2016, a minister decided to provide some services for incarcerated members as a free service for them to connect with their UU faith while serving time in prison, primarily to offer correspondence classes at first. With 50 incarcerated members by the 2nd year, the ministry took off and spread by word of mouth.

Now you have to understand that over 1.2 million adults are incarcerated in federal & state prisons in the US and the current 1,700 Unitarian Universalists who are incarcerated are still a very small number, but it is the fastest growing segment of UUs. And now the CLF is the largest UU congregation in the U.S. with well over 3,000 members. Although half of them, being incarcerated, are unable to make pledges.

The prison ministry, called Worthy Now, has a penpal program as an additional service to these members. Any UU can participate without joining the CLF. They have safety precautions for those who are concerned about criminals knowing personal information about you. Penpals have to be 3 states apart. My current penpals are in Wisconsin and New England, so quite a bit of distance. They only provide our first name to the UU who's incarcerated.

They use a 2-envelope system, so you address the envelope to your penpal in a size 8 envelope with a return address provided by Worthy Now and put on a stamp, then put that envelope into a size 10 envelope with your own return address and the address Worthy Now provides to send it to them and have them postmark it for you. Alternatively, you can send it to the prison or the scanning company the prison uses, with the provided return address, if you're not concerned about the postmark. Then the process is reversed when the incarcerated member sends their letter to their free-world penpal.

Privacy is definitely a concern for some people as they have said that being LGBTQ makes them more of a possible target, especially

if they have a unique name. And even if they have gained trust in their penpal, they worry that their fellow inmates can get the information. So the system they have alleviates their fears. So far there have been no problems as far as a paroled member having inappropriate contact with their former or current penpal.

Additional volunteer opportunities are sending Holiday Greetings and Birthday greetings – one does not have to be a penpal to do that.

Besides staff support, free-world penpals have occasional Zoom meetings and there is a Facebook group.

I first signed up for a penpal in June of 2023 following our General Assembly where I was reminded of the need for more penpals. I received my penpal's name and address along with instructions that July. They give you ideas of what to write, as well, and people get more ideas on the Facebook group. So I wrote a letter right away.

My penpal, Michael, sounds like a fairly typical person who got caught in the school to prison pipeline that you may have heard of. If you are unaware of it, briefly this is from the organization, Stop Recidivism:

"The NAACP Legal Defense Fund depicts the pipeline as "funneling of students out of school and into the streets and the juvenile correction system perpetuates a cycle "depriving children and youth of meaningful opportunities for education, future employment, and participation in our democracy". This is especially apparent when it comes to examining how minorities (Hispanics

and African-Americans) are disciplined in school in comparison to their Caucasian peers....

“Court referrals are the primary factor in kids becoming first time offenders, and inevitably repeat offenders, otherwise known as recidivists. The juvenile justice system is not currently equipped to treat non-violent behavioral issues. Rather, they are herded like cattle into the courts and ensnared in a cycle of the criminal justice system that many never seem to escape.” Many of you may be aware of the history of this if you read the book “The New Jim Crow” by Michelle Alexander, which was published in 2010, and certainly there have been others since then.

Of course, not all of our UUs who are incarcerated are part of that system, but some are. And my first penpal, Michael, is. He told me I could tell you anything I wanted. But primarily I would like to say that he was imprisoned at age 18 and he’s now age 44, so he’s been incarcerated longer than he was in the free world, and he’s been incarcerated almost his entire adult life. He admits that he hasn’t been paroled because he does have trouble sometimes controlling his temper and gets angry at guards who treat them unfairly and deprive them of basic needs that they have a right to.

You see the prison he’s in is one of in the oldest in the country having been built as a large brick fortress in the mid 19th century and has had some grave issues recently. In June of this year, 8 prison employees plus the former warden were charged with felony crimes related to the abuse and deaths of 4 inmates at the prison over the previous 12 months. There was also a fifth death in August. One

died of dehydration, another killed themself while in solitary confinement due to a lack of mental health care, another had a stroke at age 24, and another died of an overdose.

Drugs in the prison is a constant problem even though they have suspended in-person visits for the last 2 years.

So Michael has sued the prison system a couple of times for their abuses. He's learned how to do it through library books and some books that he owns and he keeps in his cell.

He is an avid reader like many UUs are and that is how he found out about Unitarian Universalism.

Since the hard copy mail is very slow, we could only exchange letters about once or twice per month as it takes about 2 weeks for letters to get one way. So now we are using a text messaging system, which costs a small amount per message, but it's less than US postage. And we recently started video chat twice per month.

He has a large family that he keeps in touch with: mother, siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins. Not all those in prison are so fortunate. However, after 2 years of suspended in-person visits, they started again only during week days when they are working, so they have not been able to go there. They also don't like to use the video system. He says his mother tells him that it makes them miss him more, so they only have phone calls to each other.

I hope to be talking to him later today.

I'd be happy to talk to anyone interested in more information after the service or later if you'd like to contact me. There are not as many free world penpals as there are incarcerated UUs who'd like a penpal. And if you'd like to help with Holiday cards, I can let you know when we're doing that. You can also check out WorthyNow.org.

We will be taking a special collection for Worthy Now in March.