

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday December 16th 2018

Reading: “Valentina Mejía”

For decades, “Guest at Your Table” has been introducing Unitarian Universalists to real people impacted by human rights issues and to grassroots leaders making a difference around the world. This year, the UU Service Committee’s theme is “Justice Across Borders”, with four stories that provide a personal glimpse into the lives of Central Americans making the perilous journey north in hope of finding refuge in the United States. Each Sunday in Advent, we’ll meet one of the “guests” whose lives have been changed because of the generosity of Unitarian Universalists like us, and, in turn, their stories will be an inspiration to us.

Today’s guest is Valentina Mejía, though for reasons of confidentiality that is not her real name.

Facing violent threats against her life, Valentina Mejía fled her home in El Salvador with little money, nowhere to go, and no one to travel with. Approximately 3,000 miles stood between Valentina and her hope of being granted asylum in the United States.

Valentina found comfort in joining a group of over a hundred other Central Americans facing similar threats and holding similar hopes — the Viacrucis Guadalupeño Refugee Caravan. Finding safety in numbers, the Refugee Caravan was making the dangerous journey to the US border together.

Along their journey north through Mexico, Valentina and other members of the Caravan looked out for one another, marched for migrants’ rights, and even took the time to help repair strangers’ homes that were damaged by a recent earthquake. After one month of traveling with the Caravan, Valentina crossed the US border from Tijuana to request asylum on November 12th 2017.

Unfortunately, the end of Valentina’s difficult journey to the United States marked the beginning of new challenges. Valentina was swiftly detained by

Immigration and Customs Enforcement and placed in an immigration detention center in Orange County CA.

Equipped with shackles and armed guards, and with limited access to the outside world, the detention center was just like a prison. Additionally, having already endured a long history of violence and trauma back home, Valentina entered the detention center in urgent need of medical care but was repeatedly told that it was unavailable.

After seven months, an Immigration Judge set Valentina a \$15,000 bond for her release — an unusually high figure, likely due to her association with the Caravan. Valentina did not have this money, and, unlike many asylum-seekers detained in immigration jails, did not have family or friends to help pay for her bond or to give her a place to stay after being released. In this time of need, the UU Service Committee's California-based partner, Freedom for Immigrants, stepped in to help.

Freedom for Immigrants supports immigrants in detention centers and works to permanently end the practice of immigration detention. Through a hotline and in-person visits, Freedom for Immigrants gathers stories from those in detention, provides pro bono legal advice, monitors conditions in detention, and documents abuses. As soon as Valentina's bond was set, Freedom for Immigrants rallied for support. In collaboration with Pueblo Sin Fronteras, it organized a special fundraiser to collect the \$15,000 that Valentina needed — and the money was secured in mid-May. It also found her a host home, where she has been living ever since her release.

Today, Valentina supports other women who are still detained in the Orange County jail, writing them letters and answering their calls. She explains, "We're going to keep working to help others who are now in detention."

Sermon: "Finding Joy"

This year, our home has a Christmas tree. Our daughter had been asking for one, and my wife found one on sale. It has the little lights pre-wired into it, so the three parts of the tree needed only to be slotted together and the branches be spread out and voila! It sits in the corner of our living room and it's delightful.

Now I should also say that Allison found some ornaments for the tree, and she was very careful to find shatterproof ornaments. And that's because we have cats. Actually, neither of us ever thought we would have a tree — because, as I say, we have cats — but when Olivia started asking about a tree, well, all I can say is that the child's opinion carries more weight than the cats' behavior.

You see, cats and Christmas trees don't mix. It's not hard to find pictures on Facebook of cats climbing Christmas trees, cats with their rear ends sticking out of Christmas trees after having just leaped into them, cats falling off Christmas trees, indeed cats bringing Christmas trees crashing down. You can find videos of cats caught in the act of pretty much destroying Christmas trees. And we've had cats who were climbers, and we knew that if we had a Christmas tree, it wouldn't last long.

So far, though, our new tree is surviving. Sure, the cats like to sit by it and bat at the lowest-hanging ornaments, and there aren't many low-hanging ornaments anymore because those that were low-hanging were batted around by the cats. But Allison was smart: our ornaments are shatterproof, remember, so we've just picked them up and relocated them to higher branches. And should one of our cats decide to climb the tree — and this would be the smaller cat, who is not only more spry than the other but also has much less common sense, even for a cat — our tree has a pretty wide base and isn't particularly tall. As Allison has pointed out, our Christmas tree also doubles as a Hanukkah bush, which does actually work because all of the ornaments are blue and white.

Either way, it brings us joy. A large part of that, for me, is that my family had a Christmas tree when my sister and I were growing up. Our house had an enclosed, glassed-in porch, and that's where we set up the tree. Unlike here in the US, nobody in England decorates the outside of their house, since that would be considered akin to exhibitionism. Having inside lights that you can see from the street, well, that's socially acceptable. And as far back as I can think, I remember my parents setting up the tree and stringing the lights on it and then all of us decorating it with ornaments and foil-wrapped chocolates of which we were allowed to eat just one each day until Christmas. So a nice, decorated Christmas tree touches on powerful memories of family for me. I hope that, now that we have a tree like that, it'll be just as meaningful for Olivia, and will bring her joy, too.

Now today is the third Sunday in Advent, and it stands somewhat separate from the other three. For one thing, the corresponding candle on the Advent wreath is rose-colored — or, at least, pink — rather than the purple of the rest of the season. And this rose-colored candle is the Candle of Joy, because the first word of the first piece of music in the Latin mass for the third Sunday in Advent is “Gaudete”, which means “Rejoice”. Sometimes known as Gaudete Sunday, today is about setting aside the otherwise serious and somber preparations of Advent and taking the opportunity for rejoicing and celebrating and lifting up joy.

Now it might seem strange to think of joy as a *spiritual* value. Hope and faith and love, of course, and each of those takes their turn on the Advent wreath. But joy? Where does that fit into *religion* as a serious business? Actually, more than you might think. If you look at the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, for instance, joy is mentioned way more than hope is mentioned. Love is mentioned quite a lot, as you might expect, seventy-four times across the four gospels, in fact, and faith is mentioned fairly frequently at forty-one times, but then joy is mentioned twenty-five times and hope just four times across all four of the gospels. That surprised me. Thinking about it, both Matthew and Luke have nativity stories, and joy features pretty heavily in both, such as in various angelic announcements, but I was still surprised that hope wasn't mentioned more often.

Setting aside the question of how joy fits into the religious aspects of Christmas, there's also the fact that joy is a challenge for many people to realize at this time of year. For one thing, there's the sheer stress of the season, particularly for those families that just can't avoid the drama when they get together. For another, there's the fact that people can be born and people can die on any page of the calendar, so there will always be loved ones whose deaths are all the more poignant when an anniversary or a birthday falls during the holidays. For those people who are grieving such loved ones, the meaning of those holidays is forever changed. A few years ago, for instance, one of Allison's uncles died, quite unexpectedly, on Christmas Eve. For his wife, for their children and grandchildren, for their extended family, the stories of the holidays now include Frank's death, so that amongst what are otherwise happy occasions, they must find a place for their sorrow, too. Given that the holidays are not purely happy for many people, some congregations hold what are known as “Blue Christmas” services, recognizing and thus giving voice to the sadness that those people are experiencing at this time of year.

Now it might seem strange to speak of joy and sadness at the same time, but that's because we often mix up joy and happiness, when there is, in fact, a difference. Theologian Henri Nouwen described that difference by noting that while happiness is a result of external conditions, joy is “the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death — can take that love away.” Since there is a difference between joy and happiness, then, joy can be present even in the midst of sadness.

I can see that in the story of Valentina Mejía, one of this year's “Stories of Hope” from the UU Service Committee.

The first place I see it is in the comfort that Valentina found by joining the Viacrucis Guadalupano Refugee Caravan. Rather than trying to make a three thousand mile journey by herself — and a notoriously dangerous journey at that — Valentina found safety in numbers, joining over a hundred other Central Americans fleeing violence and death threats.

Second, not only did the members of the Caravan help one another along the way and use their collective voice to draw attention to migrants' rights, but they also helped people along the way as they made their journey, even stopping to help people — strangers, to them — whose homes had been damaged by an earthquake.

Third, after being freed from the prison-like detention center in Orange County CA, thanks to the efforts of one of the UU Service Committee's partners, Freedom for Immigrants, that raised money for her bond and found her a place to live, Valentina helps other women who are still imprisoned in that detention center, supporting them through letters and telephone calls.

These may not seem like examples of joy if we're actually looking for signs of happiness, but I do consider them examples of joy, in that Valentina found a supportive community, in that she was part of using that community's strength to help others, in that she was shown love by people to whom she was a stranger, and in that she, in turn, shows love to people who may well be strangers to her.

Now I don't want to suggest that there's some simple, magical recipe for joy. Nouwen's description of the difference between happiness and joy makes it sound like

happiness is the easier option. After all, we just have to put ourselves in a situation that makes us happy! Okay, that's not actually easy, but taking Nouwen's definition of joy as "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing [...] can take that love away", well, we can't just will ourselves to it. It takes trust, because it's risky. It also asks a lot of us, to truly *know* that we are loved unconditionally.

Back in the Spring, I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Some of it was everything going on nationally and internationally. Some of it was personal, including both Olivia and my father being very sick. I couldn't sleep, so I was exhausted, and I had no appetite. I couldn't enjoy anything. It was hard to handle even small problems, and big problems seemed like the end of the world.

In addition to getting professional help, I reached out to others for the support I needed, to family, friends and colleagues. None of them could fix what I needed to be fixed, but they listened to me. As those of you who are in Fellowship Circles know, simply being heard, by someone who is listening with deep compassion, makes a big difference. In short, I was offered unconditional love. Gradually I was able to enjoy small things again, and finding ways to help other people helped me, too. It was never about being *happy*. There's very little in external conditions to justify *happiness*, in my opinion. But, putting in the work I need to do, I can find joy, and the surest foundation for it, I've found, comes out of human interaction and relationships.

I know this is can be a challenge for those of us who are introverts. After all, I recognize that part of the popular conception of personality types is that extroverts are more happy and introverts are more sad. That's because it's easy for extroverts to get together in groups and be loud and boisterous and have lots of fun. Most introverts, on the other hand, would gladly take a pass on a party. As the T-shirt puts it: Introverts unite! Separately! In your own homes!

But even for those of us who are exhausted by spending time with groups of other people, exhausted even at the *thought* of spending time with a group of people, there's joy to be found in maybe less socially demanding forms of human interaction and relationship. I know on Sunday mornings here, the time between services can be quite raucous, with people bustling around and talking with one another, speaking more loudly in order to be heard over everyone else who's now speaking more loudly for the same reason. I'm convinced that one of the reasons why we are such a warm and

welcoming congregation is, in fact, that we've unwittingly selected for extroverts because our cramped and crowded and loud space is, for introverts, a good approximation of hell. And yet, I see people talking to one another, one-on-one or maybe in a group of three, in quieter corners, in the library or the Sanctuary, maybe outside if the weather's kind, or going over to the office building before Forum starts. And what I see, even on the faces of our introverts, is joy, the simple pleasure of being with people who will support us, who love us, and whom we love and will support as well.

One of my favorite UU quotes comes from my colleague, the Rev. Wayne Arnason. It's in our hymn book, and it's frequently included in the comfort shawls that some congregations make as part of a knitting ministry and then distribute to those members suffering from loss or hardship. The quote is as follows:

"Take courage, friends.

"The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high.

"Take courage.

"For deep down, there is another truth:

"You are not alone."

This is an essential spiritual truth, and knowing it makes a world of difference. We are not alone. There is too much that's bad in our world that is a result of fear, and at the cold heart of every fear is the thought that we are alone. Knowing that we are not alone, on the other hand, is the bright heart of every joy. It is knowing that we are not alone that gives us the courage to reach out to one another, to find a companion, a friend, to build a relationship, to discover the yearning to love unconditionally, and to truly know that nothing can take that love away.

May it be so.