

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday December 23rd 2018**

**Reading:** “Argelia Barajas”

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 Argelia Barajas.

In isolated areas of rural Georgia, it is not always easy for immigrants facing rights violations — including police harassment, wage theft and unfair housing practices — to know where to turn for support. Familiar with this kind of fear and uncertainty, Argelia Barajas, a Georgia resident originally from Mexico, wanted to help other immigrants feel safe and empowered in their new homes.

An opportunity for Argelia to help came when the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights or GLAHR, the UU Service Committee’s grassroots partner supporting low-income Latinx immigrants in Georgia, put out a call for volunteers over the radio. As soon as she could, Argelia began volunteering with GLAHR to help educate immigrants about their rights. Believing that knowledge of the law is key to helping immigrants move from fear toward empowerment, Argelia explains, “The greatest help that GLAHR has given us is knowledge. Knowledge conveys power, security and strength.”

Volunteering with GLAHR not only allows Argelia to support other immigrants through education about their rights. It also helps her feel safe and empowered herself. She explains, “When I first came to GLAHR, it was with fear because I did not know my rights, and I did not know the laws and their consequences. But the trainings and the weekly meetings gave us more security, in order to be ready for any circumstance that

arises — ready with knowledge of what to do, what to say, and how to be prepared with all of one’s documents in order, and in a place decided upon by the whole family. For me, this has made a great difference.”

With support from the UU Service Committee and thanks to volunteers like Argelia, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights is able to reach Latinxs in all corners of the state, sharing information about immigration laws, their rights and defense strategies. GLAHR also advises local policymakers on immigration- related issues, assists in filing lawsuits on behalf of Latinxs who have suffered abuses, and has a hotline that immigrants can call for advice and referrals.

Argelia explains, “GLAHR is an organization that cares with its whole heart for immigrants, for their total wellbeing, through knowledge of the laws.” Thanks to GLAHR, she adds, “I do not feel myself to be a criminal but a citizen with rights and clear responsibilities to respect the laws and the rules, to pay taxes and honor our authorities.” Through her volunteering, she spreads her knowledge and hope to others.

**Sermon:** “Knowing Love”

I first learned the embodied affirmation with which we began our service during my internship at First Unitarian in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I was taught it by Albuquerque’s Director of Religious Education, who also taught it to the children in the RE program so that they’d have a simple way to explain what it means to be Unitarian Universalists. She used it in services from time to time, too, so that the adult UUs would have something in their memory as a back-up to their own, personal elevator speech. Now the phrase “open minds, loving hearts and helping hands” came from someone else, but putting it together with the hand motions makes it easier to remember the whole thing, I think. “We are Unitarian Universalists, a people of faith with open minds, loving hearts and helping hands.”

I’ve known the Blake Covenant longer. I’ve known it since I first became a UU, in fact, and that’s because services at the Unitarian Society of Hartford in Connecticut regularly included it after the chalice lighting as an affirmation that everyone in the congregation said together. “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” According to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on

Appraisal, the Blake Covenant is one of the most common pieces of liturgy in UU congregations. The 2005 report summarizing the results of the Commission's four-year-long study of Unitarian Universalist theology notes that the Blake Covenant (or derivatives of it) is used regularly in about half of all UU congregations, more often even than "Spirit of Life".

Now both the affirmation and the covenant are clear evidence of the central place of love as a value in Unitarian Universalism. I don't think that comes as a surprise to anyone that love is such a central UU value, though. After all, it's not hard to find plenty of other examples, from "Side with Love" (formerly "Standing on the Side of Love"), the UUA-sponsored public advocacy campaign, to our Fellowship's own Mission to "grow in wonder, connect in love, engage in service and inspire generosity". In the development of that Mission, in fact, love was the first of our four values to be identified, so readily did people agree that it is one of our values. And in naming it, we're not just saying that it's a nice idea: we're saying that it's part of our identity, that it's part of who we are, that it's essential to the core of who we are, that part of our reason for existing is to "connect in love".

That's important, because no value that we name should be so named merely because we think it's a nice idea. Rather, all of our values — whether they're at the essential core of who we are or are lifted up by Unitarian Universalism at large, in our Seven Principles or otherwise — are values that our living tradition calls us to put into practice, to make real in some way. That's why, during each service so far this month, I've been considering each of the values represented by the Advent wreath, but I've done so by putting each one of them into terms that require action for them to be real. So hope is not mere wishful thinking, a passive optimism that things will somehow be okay. Rather, hope is about putting in the time and the effort required to try to ensure that things will be okay. And faith is not simply believing something as true, whether as a Platonic abstract or as part of the world we construct within our own heads. Rather, faith is about living our beliefs, manifest in the ways that we treat other people and our world. Even joy is not simply something that happens to us when things go our way. Rather, finding joy comes from actively sharing hope, keeping faith and knowing love.

That's why, when it comes to explaining it to children, whether we do that through the embodied affirmation or in some other way, love is not just about what's in our hearts; it's also about what we do with our hands. A religion that celebrates "open

minds and loving hearts” and then leaves it there is pretty useless, in my opinion. As UU theologian James Luther Adams put it, “a purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion.” Helping hands are required, they’re essential for those open minds and loving hearts to actually be worth anything. Unhelpful hands, after all, can come just as easily from closed minds and cold hearts, so it’s when something that would otherwise be purely spiritual is brought out into the real world that we can tell the difference.

In the Blake Covenant, by the same reasoning, the phrase “love is the spirit of this church” is immediately followed by the phrase “service is its law”. What’s more, the last piece of the covenant that Blake names is “to help one another”. One practical example of this was given in our opening hymn which, as well as a rose and star, considers love as a guest for which we should prepare by cleaning up the house, making the living room warm and welcoming, and setting the dining table for a good meal. In other words, another way in which we put love into action, another way to “connect in love”, is by practicing hospitality.

The story of Argelia Barajas gives us one more way to put love into action. Since she knew what it’s like to feel uncertain, afraid and powerless, Argelia began volunteering with one of the UU Service Committee’s grassroots partners, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights. Specifically, her volunteer work consisted of educating immigrants about their rights under immigration law, helping them to know the law and its consequences, and sharing information with them about defense strategies. As Argelia explain, this education is about being “ready for any circumstance that arises — ready with knowledge of what to do, what to say, and how to be prepared with all of one’s documents in order”. In short, as Argelia puts it, “knowledge conveys power, security and strength.” Sharing that knowledge with the people who need it is, then, an act of love.

And this brings us back to our texts. Sure, maybe we can see the connection between loving hearts and helping hands, but open minds — minds ready to learn and grow and wonder — are just as much a part of this, too. The Blake Covenant makes this connection explicit: it’s not just about figuring out what’s true and what’s false in some coldly rational way; it’s about seeking the truth in love.

Again, love as a value is no merely passive ideal. Rather, it's about being conscious of love itself, being able to discern the difference between what is genuine compassion and kindness and what is actually exploitation or even abuse that is falsely present in the guise of love. This may be something that needs to be learned, and indeed it must be, given the apparent prevalence of personality disorders such as narcissism.

At this time of year in particular, it's all too easy for the word "love" to be bandied about, as if simply saying it or writing it in a Christmas card will make everything okay. Love, in fact, asks a lot of us. In the words of our middle hymn, "love knocks and waits for us to hear". It's about us responding to the invitation so that we, too, can help heal broken hearts and ease troubled minds. It asks us to quiet fears and seek to set things right; it asks us defy small-mindedness and mean-spiritedness by consciously working on our open minds and loving hearts; it asks us to put our hands, our voices, our abilities to use to make a difference; it asks us to engage in service for the greater good.

Love also asks us to express gratitude, particularly when someone else has answered love's invitation in one of these ways. So, since this is the last Sunday before Christmas Eve, my last Sunday in the pulpit in 2018, I'd like to take the opportunity now to express my love and gratitude, for us to show our thankfulness, to everyone who has served this congregation, this faith in various ways over the last year.

So, if you have been part of our Fellowship's leadership during 2018, by serving on the Board or as a committee chair or a trustee, I invite you to stand as you are willing and able so that we may express our gratitude to you for your service.

If you have served on a committee during this year, or have led a program or training as sponsored by one of our committees, I invite you to stand.

If you have taught a Religious Education class, facilitated a workshop or offered one or more sessions at the Forum, I invite you to stand.

If you have preached a sermon here on a Sunday morning, if you have lay leader, if you have played a part in one of our multigenerational services, or if you have otherwise been involved in Sunday services, I invite you to stand.

If you have sung in our ChorUUs, played in the Winds or otherwise brought the gift of music to our services, I invite you to stand.

If you have helped to maintain our facilities, both inside our buildings and outside on our grounds, from organizing closets to raking up leaves, I invite you to stand.

If you have brought food to a potluck, whether after services, as part of our Wednesday evening program, or at another time, or if you've made food for Soup Socials, Membership Orientations or other such occasions, I invite you to stand.

If you have served on a hospitality team, whether greeting or ushering or making food or serving food or getting the coffee going or bringing in Half-n-half or cleaning up afterwards *so this really should be just about everybody*, I invite you to stand.

And if you have supported this Fellowship with your gifts of time, talent and treasure, from your pledge to the simple yet most important gift of your presence, I invite you to stand as you are willing and able so that we may express our gratitude to you for your generosity.

This month, each of the readings for these Sunday services during Advent has come from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's "Guest at Your Table" initiative. This is just one way in which the UU Service Committee introduces Unitarian Universalists to real people impacted by human rights issues and to grassroots leaders making a difference around the world. In your Order of Service, there's an insert naming all of the "guests" that we have been meeting this month, describing as well the UUSC's grassroots partners that have helped these individuals and many others in their search for freedom and justice and empowerment.

Going back to its predecessors, the Universalist Service Committee and particularly the Unitarian Service Committee, the UUSC has an eighty-year history of advancing human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies. That's eighty years of work grounded in the belief that all people have inherent worth and dignity, and thanks to our support, the UUSC is a leading voice for human rights and social justice in the United States and around the world.

A large part of that support comes from the annual “Guest at Your Table” program, inviting Unitarian Universalists at their home dinner table or at congregational meal times to consider one of the UU Service Committee’s beneficiaries as if they were actually sitting down to eat as our guest, and then, bringing this work to mind, to put some money in the collection box. Many parents have used small boxes such as this to teach their children to be mindful of their own blessings, and to express gratitude through generosity. We can practice this here at the Fellowship, too, with this larger box at Soup Socials and Wednesday evening dinners, amongst other congregational meal times. If you’ve been a UUSC member and wish to renew your membership for next year, you can do so by putting your renewal in this box. And remember that, thanks to the generosity of the UU Congregation of Shelter Rock in Manhasset, New York, all contributions of \$125 or more will be doubled. I’m also pleased to let you know that half of our Christmas Eve collections tomorrow evening will go to the UU Service Committee.

There’s a saying that justice is what love looks like in public. The same could be said for generosity and gratitude and education and service, for these, too, are the products of love made manifest, the outcomes of love put into action, the results of love made real in the world. With the longest night of the year now behind us, may our love shine with the brightness of the rising Sun, with the beauty of the rising Moon. And as we prepare to enter a new year of growing and connecting and engaging and inspiring, may the spirit of life guide us into ever deeper understanding that we might dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another.

May it be so.