

Reaching through the Bars

Bruce Pollack-Johnson, 9/17/17

Words of Inspiration, Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration

A year and a half ago, I received an interesting email forwarded by a friend from POWER from a public defender friend of his that read as follows:

I'm wondering if you have any friends/contacts in POWER who are Unitarians. I have a client on death row in Pennsylvania who is interested in corresponding with someone to learn more about Unitarianism. He is from northwest Philadelphia and has a compelling story:

www.terrywilliamsclmency.com

If someone were able to write him a few letters I am sure it would mean a lot to him.

I was interested, so I wrote back to her, got the inmate's mailing address, and started a penpal relationship. His name is Terry (Terrance) Williams, and we have been developing a friendship ever since. We started by getting to know each other, and talking about UUism, with somewhat sporadic letters back and forth. I sent him copies of materials about UUism, including copies of things from our UUCR website.

Last winter, Terry told me there was a way that we could talk on the phone. It took us a while to make it work (for a long time I didn't realize he was calling, because the caller ID just said "Securus" and I thought it was a solicitation call from a home security company). Finally we were able to communicate much more easily. He asked me to take pictures of the various things I was doing and send him copies. He loves it, because it is a way for him to live beyond the walls of the prison and feel like a part of the world. Sometimes he would call when I was with Linda, Jamie, or Ben, and he was able to chat with them and start to get to know them as well, having seen them in the pictures. He was starting to feel like a part of the family. One time this past summer he called while we were at our cabin in New Hampshire singing around the campfire, and we were able to sing "Lean on Me" with him. It was magical.

Terry has told me what it has been like to be on Death Row, which also means solitary confinement, for 31 years. He only gets at most an hour or two in a day outside of his cell to exercise in the yard (possibly with one other inmate, but in a small metal cage), take a shower, and sometimes work a janitor job. The rest of the time he reads, watches TV, mainly CSpan 2 (especially Book TV, like my mom did), and tries to maintain his sanity and sense of hope.

I have been able to print out things like the UU Principles and Sources (including the 8th Principle, of course) in large print for his walls. I found out that he had first learned about UUism from an article in the Inquirer about 1st Unitarian in Center City Philly, and he started reading and thinking about it, realizing that he really connected with it. That was why he asked his lawyer to send the email.

In June, I realized that I could finally actually visit Terry. His prison, SCI Greene, is an hour south of Pittsburgh, so is over 5 hours from us (and most of his support system) here in Philly. Our family was planning a visit to see my niece Sarah and nephew Aaron, as well as Aaron's new baby, in Pittsburgh, so I arranged to visit Terry while we were there. It turned out that I was able to visit from 9:30-3:30, and so I did! We had a great time talking through the plexiglass, and really cemented our friendship. I couldn't bring *anything* with me, including even a piece of paper, and could only use a smart card to buy food from the vending machines for lunch, but I loved every minute of it. Terry is very smart, compassionate, open-minded, positive, and clearly a UU at heart.

Terry told me about some people who are part of his support team outside the prison, including someone named “Mr. V”, or Jim Villareal, whom many of you from Mt. Airy and Germantown may know, since he was the beloved 5th grade Latin teacher at Henry, Houston, and Emlen Schools, as well as a therapist who has offered courses on dream interpretation for the Mt. Airy Learning Tree for many years. When Terry told me about Mr. V., I realized that I had not long before had a very meaningful interaction with Mr. V. at McMenamin’s Pub in Mt. Airy the night that Villanova won the NCAA Championship in 2016. Our family had gone to watch the game there because we don’t have cable TV. Mr. V. was a huge Villanova fan, and got very excited when he learned I was a professor there. After the win, he started dancing on the bar, and telling everyone I teach at Villanova. So I called Mr. V., reminisced about that special Villanova night, and he told me all about Terry, whom he had taught at Henry School.

Terry had a very rough childhood in many ways. He was physically abused by his mother and stepfather, including a time when his mother shoved him down a flight of stairs in *public* at school, and a time when he was threatened with a gun by his stepfather. He was sexually abused by a number of people from the age of 11, first by an older teenager, then for many years by a man in his 50s, and by a another older man later in high school, both of them sometimes being very violent with him. Terry was tried for the murders of both older men. At the first trial a couple of years later in 1986, some evidence of the sexual abuse was introduced by his attorney, and Terry was convicted of 3rd degree murder, and sentenced to 27 years in prison. But when the same prosecutor planned the second trial, she knowingly withheld the evidence of the abuse, a serious breach of the law, including evidence that the older man had abused other young people. Terry only met his lawyer for this second trial the day before jury selection, and the lawyer did not represent him well, later being disbarred and found incompetent. During jury selection, 14 of the 16 jurors who were rejected were black, even though blacks were less than half of the pool, a serious indication of racial bias. The lawyer told Terry to say he didn’t know the victim, and that the motive was robbery. A friend of Terry’s who had been involved was coerced to testify to this also (was threatened by the prosecutor with the death penalty if he didn’t). The friend was convicted of second degree murder, and Terry was sentenced to death.

Ten years later, in 1996, The Federal Defenders Capital Habeas Unit got involved after hearing of the terrible defense Terry had received. They tried to get relief from the Board of Pardons, contending that the prosecutor only pursued the death penalty in the second trial because they had won the first trial, and the Board voted 3-2 in Terry’s favor, but their vote had to be *unanimous* to take effect. As Terry’s execution date drew near in 2012, dozens of prosecutors and over 350,000 citizens petitioned the governor for clemency, and 5 of the jurors said they would not have voted for the death penalty if they had known about the sexual abuse. Even the victim’s wife did not want Terry put to death. In a last-minute appeal, Judge Sarmina opened the police files for the case, and the withholding of the sexual abuse evidence was revealed. She then ruled that there be a resentencing hearing, so that it could be considered. Unfortunately, this decision was immediately appealed to the PA Supreme Court by DA Seth Williams (who was later convicted of unrelated corruption), which reversed Judge Sarmina’s decision. However, Chief Justice Ron Castille, who had been the DA at the time of Terry’s original conviction and signed his death order, neglected to recuse himself. A new execution date was set for March 4, 2015, and Terry came close to being the first prisoner involuntarily executed in PA in 50 years. Fortunately Tom Wolf was elected Governor in 2014, and when he took office in January 2015, he signed an order giving clemency to Terry specifically, and also putting a moratorium on all executions in PA until a commission could determine whether the death penalty process in PA was racially biased or not.

The neglect by Castille to recuse himself was appealed to the US Supreme Court, who ruled in Terry’s favor that Castille should indeed have recused himself, even though his vote was not decisive in the decision. This *Williams v. PA* case is now a precedent that has helped dozens of other prisoners get retrials. Thus, one year ago, the case went back to the appeal to the PA Supreme Court to be readjudicated, and the decision just came back a couple of weeks ago in Terry’s favor. You may have seen the article in the Inquirer about it at

the time. There have also been excellent articles about Terry in *Mother Jones* and other publications, and there is a website about his case: www.terrywilliamsclmency.com .

So we are now at the point where Terry should be able to get a resentencing hearing. His lawyers indicate there may even be other actions that could result in his going free completely because of the withholding of evidence and racial bias, but they could take time. Unfortunately, Terry was 18 years and 4 months old at the time of the murder, so the recent ruling about juveniles not getting the death penalty just misses applying to him. Still, we can hope that the spirit of that ruling can be a mitigating factor for him as his case proceeds.

When I told Terry more about Restoration, he realized that he knew it as a kid, and remembers it well. He said he would love to join Restoration as a member. I think this is partly because a couple that had adopted him and supported him staunchly over the years both just passed away recently, and he is feeling that he needs a community to be part of. I started thinking and strategizing about how we could make this happen. I knew that there would be a problem because the only requirement for becoming a UUCR member is to sign the membership book in person. I talked with Tim Styer, who actually knew Terry from the neighborhood!, and he suggested that the Board and Congregation vote to suspend the new member bylaw specifically for Terry, so that he could sign a statement that could then be attached to the book. To lead up to this, I arranged to have Terry call in to get to know members of the Justice Council at our meeting in August, which was amazing, I arranged for today's worship service with Cathy McCoubrey, and the Board scheduled a Congregational vote at a Town Hall Meeting on October 15. I would now like to read you excerpts from the statement he put together for people to read before the Justice Council phone call.

August 6, 2017

Hi everyone,

Thank you for allowing me to greet you. I've been wanting this to happen. I want you to know I want to become a member of your congregation and the UU community. Life truly does come full circle. As a kid with friends I played with the football or ate the occasional pizza, or sandwich and drink brought from the pizza shop that was on the corner of Stenton and Sedgwick street. While sitting on the lawn of this very church.

I am happy to be inside of it with you today. I want to be with you during the time of worship and fellowship. Friendship is absolutely priceless and the friendships we make when we fellowship together are incredible. I also want to be your fellow UU brother. For many years I wanted so badly to have an extended family. I feel my ship has finally come in.

I'd like to share some things about me and some issues and causes that are important to me. ... I oppose any form of discrimination and racism, and I believe we should not tolerate or legitimize discriminatory practices or racist institutions. Hunger and homelessness, let's work to end such suffering.

Justice to me is a system that is fair and equal. Where the playing field is level in every area of society and government, rather than an imbalance of power that favors the strong against the weak. Peace instead of hostility. Cooperate with and love one another, and not separate and avoid each other. Human rights and human respect, speak out and act against injustices, evils, unfairness, and abuses of every kind. We must love each other exactly as we are, and support our LGBTQ Sisters and Brothers by challenging long-standing misconceptions and influence more widespread change for LGBTQ causes. I hope to help inspire people to live their truth and connect with people who are working toward their own identity. I STAND ON THE SIDE OF LOVE.

I believe ... UU is an exceptional community that unites rather than divides. We must see our similarities and differences as opportunities to enrich each other's lives. ...UU is a place for all races, genders, faith/religious traditions, and cultures to come together and strive for the common good. Your congregation has done just this. I am so inspired by ... UU's humanity. I am thankful

*that your congregation has opened your door and heart and allowed me in your presence today.
Christ tells us to love all people, even the prisoner, and the death row prisoner as he was.*

I'm longing for worship, spirituality and community. I want to bring and share my spirit and heart with your community and its social justice work.

A UU is what I want to be. This is what I want because it is me and I want to be in a place where I can be me.

It is my fondest hope that the UU community is my place of love and friendship and support where I can come to feel accepted, and welcomed into your faith community.

I hope I will matter to you.

In love and peace.

Terry

Restoration has been an activist about the prison system since the 1960s, when Chuck and Helen Oerkvitz got us to establish a bail bond fund and had us write to prisoners and give them cards and gifts at Christmas.

I encourage all of us to dig deep, calling on our values of love, justice, and Beloved Community, and to embrace this fellow UU neighbor, who has faced hardships in his life that most of us can't even imagine, to embrace him in his full humanity, to forgive him for mistakes he made as a kid and has paid dearly for, to welcome him immediately into our community, with its history of involvement with the prison system, and to vote on October 15 to do what we need to do bureaucratically to make it possible for him to become a *member* of the UU Church of the Restoration. Thank you. Amen. Namaste.