

**Reflections on my experience in Arizona last week, my arrest,  
what happened, why I chose to be arrested and my hopes for the  
future**

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**An open letter to Universal Unitarians - Standing on the side of Love**

I have been a member of the Unitarian Society in Santa Barbara since April 2010. I have attended at least a dozen UU Churches in various parts of the country since 1997. I was a member of the Morristown Society briefly before moving to Santa Barbara.

My experience of some of these churches, is that while I longed for intellectual discourse around the subject of religion, was refreshed by worship that included all faith traditions, appreciated the opportunities for social inter-action, I felt like a fly in a glass of milk. I felt observed, studied, judged, analyzed. This was by far a more preferred response from people I looked to for community, fellowship and friendship. In some instances, after the curiosity of the first few weeks, I became invisible. At least this is how I felt. I simply did not exist. This black woman sitting in the congregation was a non thing, a no matter, a non issue. These were very painful experiences

My experience at the Morristown Fellowship with Allison and the Santa Barbara Society with Aaron was quite different. Both of these ministers were willing and did meet personally with me shortly after I first visited their service. In Morristown, a wonderful group of volunteers coordinated rides for me to the train station after service, often included me in invitations to lunch after service and some even accepted my invitations to visit my home, attend a lecture I was presenting, share a meal I had prepared. For this experience, I am truly grateful.

I have lived in Santa Barbara for a couple of years, and was aware of the Society in Santa Barbara. More than once, I considered visiting, but found the massive structure more than intimidating. Wayne Mellinger a member of my facebook community and a person I highly respect because of his commitment to the homeless in Santa Barbara, posted sermon topics on facebook and shared reflections of Aaron's sermons. It is because of Wayne's **witnessing** that I decided to attend one Sunday in late March. A woman greeted me outside the sanctuary and asked me to sit next to her. She gave me her number and email address after service and asked me to please come again. I kept coming, each Sunday folks reached out to me, made conversation. On Easter Sunday, the church was packed, when I entered, a group of people seated together, insisted they would make room for me, even though it was clearly a tight fit. I felt so welcome. It was Aaron's sermons however that motivated me to ask him to meet me for coffee and to eventually sign the membership book. Aaron was a white boy with more soul than some black preachers I know. His words, his passion for social justice, his challenges to grow and change and make a difference moved me on a deep level. When we met for coffee, he shared his story and I shared mine. I knew this was a man I could respect and trust as a spiritual leader. Oh how I longed for true community.

My desire to participate in the protest, or answer the call that Rev Susan sent out was rooted in my three different experiences. (1) The recent experience of my Latino brothers and sisters here in Santa Barbara, (2) training offered by Just communities two weeks before the scheduled protest and my years of ministry and service in a variety of social justice ventures.

There are more Latinos in Santa Barbara than in any other area that I have lived. Shortly after moving here, I became aware of the contradiction between what I observed as a strong work ethic and loyalty to family and community common to many Mexican families I had come to know, and the way in which they were marginalized by mainstream Santa Barbara, often denigrated, victimized, and yes even de-humanized. Far too often,, I felt that all Latinos were grouped together, labeled as gang members, drug dealers, alcoholics etc etc. I wondered why more people in Santa Barbara could not or would not offer respect and gratitude to our brothers

and sisters in appreciation of their hard work and cultural contributions to our city.

Just Communities offered a Just Act training for free in July. The training was 7 days, it was bi-lingual and facilitated by two powerful, well informed, committed young women Raquel and Alena. Over the course of this week, I had to confront and acknowledge my own sense of discomfort in a bi-lingual setting and not understanding most of what the women were attempting to express about the reality of their lives. A few days in, something within me shifted, our group, comprised mostly of Latino mothers, community leaders and youth were becoming a community. My heart was opening, I felt their pain, understood their suffering. I also realized that I had been working for years with a lot of passion but not enough knowledge, skills and resources to successfully do the work of social justice.

Finally, the third reason for my decision to participate in the protest is the total sum of my entire life. After getting sober in February 1986, my life has been dedicated to building bridges across difference, advocating for ex-offenders, mothers who had lost children to the foster care system, Latinos who were unable to understand the charges, location and implications of their child's arrest and at risk youth. My decision to participate in the protest was deeply rooted in all three of these experiences.

Aaron and Nancy of USSB provided money for me to go. Carolina, Emrys and so many others helped coordinate a connection with Jan in San Juan Capistrano for me to ride to AZ. Jan instantly became, my sister my friend.

I feel the need to share with you my feelings about some of the comments in the UUWorld Magazine that I brought on the train as reading material. I read many comments about an article that appeared in a prior issue about the "culture" of UU serving as an a barrier to a more diverse, multi-cultural society. Some responses deeply disturbed me. Others, were so authentic, loving and sincere. Why should we change? We dont' have to apologize for shopping at Whole Foods, listening to NPR and not owning a TV. I felt stung by some of these comments, I was hurt by what I perceived to be elitism and arrogance.

I had mixed feelings about what I was about to do. Could I trust these people? Would I be in danger? Would I be accepted? Were they sincere in what they were doing? All of my fears were put to rest upon arriving in AZ. Everything, I mean every detail about the 4 days was welcoming, affirming, loving and supportive. The couple who provided hospitality for Jan and myself were Ray and Grecian former ministers in Arizona. They were surrogate parents, I felt safe and at peace in their home. The early morning of Thursday July 29 found us headed out to the prayer service that was to start at 6:30. We looked up, and there was the most beautiful rainbow. I will never forget the comfort I felt at that moment, assured that I was doing the right thing, for the right reasons.

We had missed most of the training, much of the discussion that first evening centered around Civil Disobedience. Pros and Cons were explained, questions were asked, concerns shared. What would be the financial cost of getting arrested, how long we would be in jail, who would be notified. We were given information and it was made clear to us that the final decision was ours. When we entered the church at about 6:20 am, it was already packed, it was hard to find a seat.

I would guesstimate about 400-500 people were in attendance. Jan and I sat about ten rows from the front on the left side of the church. In the row in front of us several Latino Women held up a large statue of Jesus on The Cross. Even though, I have never considered Jesus as my savior, I understood fully the meaning the cross held for these women.

It was an inter-faith service, bi-lingual and offered several families a chance to share of their experiences. We were told that after the governor signed the bill 8 Latino youth started to pray, they were age 14-21. They prayed every day, and the group grew to more than 1500 youth. When we started out on the march, these youth led the way. As I looked around the church, I saw so many yellow shirts, I was so glad that Grecian had given me a shirt, so that I would be identified as Standing on the Side of Love. We sang We shall Overcome, Kum Ba Yand many other songs. there was high energy in the church, a feeling of kinship, the satisfaction that comes from knowing we are living our lives on purpose. Near the end of the service, a senior Latino woman rose from her seat on the front row and mounted the stairs to the pulpit. I remember thinking that she looked like she was carrying the burdens of the world. She had been seated with her back to the audience, from the pulpit she could now see the hundreds of us that had assembled in support of her and others, her countenance quickly reflected the gratitude she felt. She was beaming and joyfully singing. I will never forget this woman and the gift that our presence gave to her.

At first, I had said that I could not walk and needed to take the Tram. After the service, I felt compelled to walk with the others, Jan promised she would stay with me. After about only 4 blocks, we saw Mar Cardenas and asked for a ride. I was stunned when I saw her arrested, she was the first one. After we were dropped off we walked quite a ways and had to turn around because we had long passed the Wells Fargo Bank the site of the scheduled CD. It was hot. My legs were swelling, I was in pain.

We were chanting, singing, holding hands, carrying banners, holding up our fists. At first when we arrived at the Wells Fargo location our group was off a distance from the Puente group. This didn't feel right. One of the organizers suggested we join Puente. This was a defining moment for me. I was clear about why I was here, to support them and others, it felt so right. I felt honored to be a part. Much later as we stood arm in arm in the street, a couple guys from Puente asked if we would help unfold a banner and hold it up. The banner was very large. About 40 of us stood holding it with one hand, clutching the arm or hand of the person next to us, we were in a large circle. Another group sat on mats on the ground and locked arms with one another. In what seemed like just a few minutes, we were surrounded by police in riot gear, I estimated about 100, Jan said more like 200. They stood facing us, than formed a group in front of and behind us. I was terrified. I prayed for strength. Our group was singing, chanting, some of us were crying, we were sweating, volunteers were pouring water over us to keep us cool. I looked from face to face, some of the women it seemed were glowing, it was though they had been transfigured. They were serene, confident, peaceful. They started singing breathe, this stopped my heart from beating so fast. The Latino guys were almost overcome with emotion, they were so grateful to us for standing with them.

The arrest seemed to take forever, it was surreal. Seeing us one by one taken away. I was in so

much pain I could hardly put one foot in front of another. The police who arrested me said, that he respected what we were doing, but had a job to do and asked me not to resist. Little did he know I could not have resisted if I had wanted to, he almost literally was holding me up. The fire department was called to provide me aid, the officers suggested that I may want to -reconsider my decision to be arrested. At this point they were clearly concerned. I said let's wait until my blood pressure has been checked. If it is up, I will not be arrested, if it is ok, I am going forward. By now Jan and many people from our group had already been taken away in vans. I was helped to a shaded corner of the building and offered a crate to sit on. My blood pressure was normal. The fireman was concerned that I may be suffering from heat exhaustion. As the police escorted me from this corner into plain sight, moving towards the police van, the crowd erupted, I looked around and was amazed by the joy, tears, gratitude, amazement on the faces of so many Latino men, especially. I lifted my fist and yelled I love each of you. The police decided they had better put the handcuffs on me.

Time seemed to stand still, there was so much chaos outside at the jail. The Sheriffs Dept had at least 100 men on site. We were finally taken inside to a holding cell, Rev Susan had witnessed the assault on a Latino man and she was distraught, she seemed almost unaware that her hands and wrists were badly bruised from the handcuffs, and she had been dragged. Her only concern was the welfare of the rest of us.

I was seen by a nurse, explained my health concerns, asked for pain medication, blood pressure meds and ice for my knees. They were very nice, I signed a release and they promised me ice and medicine. They explained it would take awhile to get authorization from my pharmacist. I felt relieved, confident that I would get the medical attention I had requested. At first, they could not find a wheel chair, it was very difficult for me, we had to keep standing and moving, I was in so much pain, I could hardly stand up.

By now, we had become family. We comforted one another, the women helped me use the commode, it was a bit challenging trying to do it myself while handcuffed. Some time around 5pm I was offered a wheel chair and was rolled to the back for finger printing. What happened next is very painful for me to recall. I was told they had orders for me from medical, A very unfriendly woman sheriff started wheeling me down one hall, than another hall. I had a sinking sensation in my stomach, I knew something was horribly wrong. I asked where are you taking me? Where is my group? She replied I am your transportation. We came to the door of a cell, she opened it pushed me in and said your orders call for you to be isolated. I was yelling no, please no, please no. I was frantic, begging don't leave me here, I cant stand up on my own, I am in so much pain. The woman sheriff said "nothing you can say to make me allow you back in population. But why? nothing made sense, my head was spinning, I was short of breath, please let me talk with someone from the Police Dept. At this point a male sheriff approached and said "you are now in the custody of the Maricopa County Sheriff, you have been booked into county jail, are under our jurisdiction now. I almost fainted, literally. Someone came with a mat and told me to get on the floor, I said I cannot get on the floor and if I was able to get down there, I certainly would not be able to get up. The male officer said "I saw you walking out there". I replied, yes I can walk very slowly but only after others help me up, I cannot get up and down without help.

I was left alone in the cell. My mind was racing, I was so afraid, I felt so alone. I realized that I had not been given a paper with charges as the others were, I was frantic. When the officer past the door I yelled, why have I not received my charges, she yelled because we have not finished processing you. I cannot explain the level of my despair, the depth of my fear. About two hours later a male officer brought a woman to my cell to await transfer to another facility. When he returned to get her I said "please help me" my name is Audrey Williams, please help me. He promised to look for my file as soon as he finished with the other inmate. Shortly, he returned with my chart, wheeled me to have the electronic set of fingerprints taken and I was given my charges. I experienced some relief, at least I knew what I was being charged with.

It was a long, very long night. I asked six times for medicine for pain, I was not given my blood pressure medicine. I begged for a blanket, it was so cold due to the air condition. Only one officer I think around 11pm the shift change, opened the door and asked if I was alright, I told him no, asked to see the nurse, begged for medical care and a blanket. He never came back. I would watch until someone passed my cell and would yell please help me. Altogether six times, please help me. At 5pm, the nurse and a sheriff opened the door, gave me blood pressure medicine, advised me that I would not get pain medication, because it had not been ordered by the doctor, and.....I was not going to get a blanket..they said .it was a done deal and they closed the door

I wept for the second time. Around 11 or so I had become hysterical and the inmate next door, called me a B and told me to shut up. I quickly pulled myself together, told myself I had to be strong. I made it through the night because I felt the prayers and support of the group. I knew I was not alone. I also prayed for them, slowly remembering each face, and offering a prayer for safety and protection.

At about 9:45 am, I was wheeled into court, there I saw my beloved family. My entire body began to shake uncontrollably, I was overcome with such intense emotion. The full impact of the isolation, fear and humiliation consumed my body. I ached from head to toe. Someone took my hand and held it tight. The public defender told the judge that I had not received medical care, the prosecutor asked for \$500 bond, the public defender said, this woman needs to be released. I totally lost it, I was crying uncontrollably, everything was moving in such slow motion. The judge said OR and gave me a slip of paper with my court date.

About two hours later, after being sent back to that isolated cell twice, I was wheeled out of the jail and was shocked to see the crowd, I wept. Rev. Susan came and held my face in her hands, I sobbed telling her how afraid I was. She held me. The crowd roared, yelled we love you, we are proud of you. I was told that they had held a vigil all night outside. I had no idea.

Just before I was wheeled out of the jail, the nurse came running and handed me 2 tylenol. Earlier when I had returned from court, he had questioned me about what happened, said my condition was self inflicted and said he would try and get me something for pain. While waiting in the hall for the ok to be wheeled out, three members of the sheriff dept begin to question me. Why did you a black woman and all these white people come here to get arrested? None of you are Latino, why are you here? I said we are here to support our brothers and sisters. He said was it worth it? I said I am honored to have stood on the side of love. One of them was clearly

angry, he asked where I was from, another said “you should have stayed out of this” “you don’t know the whole story, these people are criminals. I replied that is the same as saying all black men are criminals. I continued, saying that white women had stood with blacks during the civil rights movement, defying their husbands, risking their lives and financial support. Someone behind me yelled, yeah but you were not here illegally. I figured I had best shut up, before I was put back in that isolated cell again. One of these officers, wheeled me out and helped me into the car. He started praising God for keeping me safe, and praying for my health, I was shocked!

If you have read this far, please accept my sincere gratitude. I want you to know that becoming a member of USSB has been the best thing that has happened to me this year. My life has been very difficult. I started drinking at about age 14. I mostly drank alone. My parents were pentecostal ministers, there was so much mental illness, physical illness, ignorance, violence verbal, physical and sexual abuse in my young life. My father once said that “ A woman cannot pray to god alone, she has to have a man intercede for her. I was always so sad. As a little girl of about 8 or 9 I would find a quiet place and talk to Jesus. Jesus has always been my best friend.

I got sober in 1986, wanted only to be a better parent to my son than 11 and my 7 year old daughter.

I was a professional, respected in the community, my kids more than anyone else knew the horror of my alcoholism. I left them alone, came home with men whose names I didn’t know in the morning, promised my son daily that I would never drink again, only to be high by 9am the next morning. In February 1986 gave up Vodka and embarked on a spiritual path. Shortly thereafter, I started lecturing, hosting retreats, facilitating workshops working with youth and adults. I wanted to use my life to help some young person avoid the suffering I had endured. My life has been very lonely, I have spent many years in recovery from organized religion. I have struggled to piece together my own map of reality, I have tried to live with integrity based on my highest understanding at the time. I have never really been healthy. At one point I weighed over 400 lbs and have to have treatment to get off RX drugs and gastric bypass surgery to save my life. I have been very ill over the past six years. I spent almost a year in hospitals and nursing homes . I spent weeks in and out of ICU. I had to learn how to walk again, after months in a wheel chair. There is no medical reason for my being alive.

What kept me alive was this vision that I have of a “healed America”. My body was so weak, but my soul was strong. I could see what our country could be like, I imagined a loving and just society. I have always loved America, with a passion that I cannot explain. Yet at the same time, I have felt like a stranger in a foreign land, longing for Africa and a return to my people and culture/

I have learned to accept this contradiction and live with the ambiguity of being a black woman in America.

Our country is in crisis. I have worked in horrible ghettos across this country, I have witnessed such despair. I often cannot sleep and will walk the floor at night with my hands raised praying for our youth. Unitarian Universalism could I believe, be an answer to much of the ignorance, despair and religious ignorance in our culture. A beacon of hope, a light in the darkness. So many people are reaching out, wanting answers, longing for community. I honor UU’s for their

stand on social justice. I stood opposite our President Ramos and later sat near him after we were arrested. How proud I was to be a part of this group.

Our actions, while having made a major impact on AZ and the entire country, I am concerned that many are even more vulnerable now because of our actions. This is not simply about immigration reform, rather it is a fight for the very soul of our nation. It is my desire to travel this country energizing a grassroots movement - One America. I believe that Standing On The Side of Love is our most effective weapon. I need your help, I ask for your support. I will go into communities consumed by violence and despair, offering hope. I want to be a part of empowering others to help themselves. There is so much opportunity before us, to make a difference.. Why should you do it? Why should you open your hearts and doors to make room for a more diverse church, celebrating the richness that diversity brings? Why should you join with community groups to bring about economic justice? Why should you organize and lobby to bring about a more just society? I say to you, ***do it because it is the right thing to do.....Do it, please, because if you don't who will?***

In the spirit of love

Audrey Addison Williams