



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### The Stories We Can Tell

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Acting Senior Minister  
April 12, 2015

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@neighborhooduu.org](mailto:information@neighborhooduu.org)

---

Since December, I've been periodically mentioning a special community event our church is sponsoring on Thursday, April 30th. It's called, "A WALK FOR CHRISTOPHER: Acknowledging the Six Month Anniversary of Christopher Walker's Murder in Altadena." His murder took place Thursday, October 30, at the Fair Oaks Burger, about 6 blocks from where my family lives.

Chris Walker was recruited to be a Crip when he was only five years old, via Pasadena Little League Baseball – his parents, a strong middle class family who gave Christopher a steady upbringing in their lovely home in Altadena, didn't know until he was 11, and his mother Ursula Walker's first response when she found out was, "There are gangs in Altadena and Pasadena?" She had no idea.

The Crips' influence on Christopher was stronger than his parents' and he remained gang-affiliated until he was a young man. But then, over the course of several years, he turned his life around. He had a steady job and he carpooled with his mother early every weekday morning as they worked only blocks apart in Los Angeles. On the day he was killed, he was waiting for his food order in front of Fair Oaks Burger, about to pick up his daughter at preschool, when he was shot from behind.

I've been working closely with Ursula Walker, to plan this event, in a really collaborative spirit. It was her idea to make it a walk so it could be even more visible to the community. Here's the purpose of the event, in Ursula's words: "*A Walk for Christopher*" is being held to bring ordinary people together from all walks of life where they will be encouraged to contribute their support in a variety of ways which we hope will make a difference towards curbing gang violence in our community.

We have most of our speakers confirmed, leaders in serving at-risk youth and gang intervention, and we've already gotten confirmation that the local NBC TV station will be covering the event.

She's also given me permission to share with you today a few paragraphs of one of the emails she sent me early this week. This is her truth-telling. Not everyone here may agree with it. But she makes some good points that we all need to hear. She writes,

*Again, I want to express my deep appreciation for your interest in the crime against our son and our family story. As you may recall, events surrounding the Michael Brown/Ferguson shooting that took place in August of last year continued to dominate the news, and the story was still going strong during the time that we were preparing to bury our son. While I believe that all human life is precious, I was saddened and appalled to see the number of individuals willing to march and riot for the death of this young man when it seemed that he had most likely initiated the events that led to his own demise.*

*My son was innocently waiting for a burger when someone came up from behind and shot him to death. If we are going to demonstrate about an unfair and untimely death, surely this one—about a young hard-working father would apply. But, unfortunately, since this narrative had to do with blacks killing other blacks, no one seemed to care—and, in the midst of funeral planning for our Christopher the media visions of various speeches and demonstrations held for Michael Brown, were even more disheartening.*

*There is a statistic indicating that Police have killed over 5,000 civilians since September 11, 2001. However, my search for murders committed under the heading of gang violence (you know, mostly black-on-black, or brown-on-brown), in 2011—for one year alone, rendered a daunting number of **12,664**. These people were most likely sons and daughters, and mothers, and fathers, with one common denominator—they were victims of violent gang murder! So, not to downplay the value of the life of any one individual, but a total of 5,000 civilians killed by police nationwide over the last 13 years equals just about 385 people per year—a much smaller number than the whopping 12,664 listed as gang related. [Think about that—that's four 9/11s each year] Yet, no one (or very few) speak up. I believe events such as the one you're planning is well-overdue. For our family—and for Christopher, Thank you again.*

When farmer and writer David Mas Masumoto addressed the full room of water policy wonks at the state water policy conference in late March, he invited them all to consider how we tell the story of California's water challenges. There are characters and conflict, urban vs. agricultural users being the clearest example. He said he sees a new culture of water unfolding before us, and that it matters who writes the story, how is it framed, and who tells it. He said a good story educates, entertains, and elevates.

Then he asked for a show of hands. Who thinks the story of water in California is a drama? Who thinks it's a comedy? A tragedy? Or a mystery? I thought it was a drama, thinking of all the people who already don't have access to clean and affordable water in this state, most of them people of color.

David Masumoto suggested, in all seriousness, that the policy wonks should try to make the story of water a comedy. That because the scarceness is frightening, comedy would make it easier for the public to accept all the ways we need to change how we live. I can see some public service announcements riffing with, "Hey, it's okay if you no longer look your best since you only shower once a week now to save water—everyone else is doing it, too. Take pride in your stench, Californians!"

I noticed that the most important keynote speaker we had, Pat Mulroy, who served as the General Manager of Southern Nevada Water Authority for two decades, also known as the Queen of the Colorado, raised her hand to indicate she thought the story of water was a mystery. When she spoke to everyone, you could hear a pin drop as she basically dressed down the group for failing to come to resolution over the California Delta. She pointed out

how seven western states plus Mexico all share one huge integrated plumbing system, and how she would hate to see the policy wonks on the street with their hands in their pockets, apologizing, saying, "sorry we messed up, that we couldn't come to agreement before it was too late."

If Pat Mulroy, the Queen of the Colorado can dress down a roomful of CA policy wonks and indicate she thinks the story of water is a mystery, that's definitely worrisome. I went up to her after she spoke, and asked what she thought an effective interfaith response would be. She only had one word for me that she repeated three times. "Conservation, conservation, conservation."

It was the same answer I received from another big wig, John Morris, a board member of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, our biggest wholesaler of water. When he realized I was clergy, he seemed to be impressed, and shared with me that he was an elder at First Presbyterian in Pasadena. He said, "Tell your parishioners that even if they watered their yards just ONE day less a week, it would make a huge difference for saving water, and it wouldn't affect the landscaping."

Then, a few moments later, he leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, "There is soon going to be regional water rationing." Then he looked agitated and took a big breath before he whispered again, "mark my words, by July 1<sup>st</sup>, there will definitely be regional water rationing." It seems he saw me as some kind of emissary, someone who can relay and warn people on the ground, about what's about to go down.

As an Altadena resident, I buy my water from the Lincoln Avenue Water Company, which has mountain sources that go into a big reservoir site. We just received their annual report of operations, which informed us of a huge, expensive wall they recently built, designed to enhance security of the reservoir. It concerns me because investing in a wall doesn't increase supply – it only protects the water we have left from others getting their hands on it. Already we are preparing for water wars, and my own water company is erecting their ramparts.

Pat Mulroy also brought it home when she said that water is the biggest risk facing humanity in the next ten years, and that only 20% of the world's population has reliable water supply.

Now I want to bring in the gang justice issue and talk about how it's related to water justice. I first learned the term "water justice" from the Rev. Lindi Ramsden, who led the UU Legislative Ministry of CA for a decade, and led the historic victory of Governor Brown signing the Human Right to Water Legislation a few years ago. This law was actually referenced at the conference when a policy wonk said that a creative lawyer could use it to create a lawsuit. Problem is, the people who have no safe and affordable drinking water also can't afford a lawyer.

But “water justice” is related to “environmental racism” – these both are concerned with how, as resources get scarce, it’s the marginalized communities who suffer the most, who have the least power. I’ve mentioned up here that the Flintridge Center, a Pasadena non-profit whose excellent programs had measurably reduced gang-affiliation suddenly went belly-up last month. Funders have decided there are more pressing problems, apparently. I see it as an indicator that where society has cared little about those susceptible to gangs and gang violence, as Ursula Walker said in her email to me, now it seems we care even less.

In the midst of writing this sermon, I was called by James Macpherson, the editor of PasadenaNow, the online magazine – he wanted permission to publish the blog I wrote for this past Friday that talks about *A Walk for Christopher*. He also wants to cover the event, and we got to talking about reduced funding for programs that serve marginalized communities, and he commented that the city of Pasadena is a prime participant of that trend.

To me, it’s no accident that such funding is retracting on the eve of the era of water wars. When we go into survival mode, our brains become more reptilian, less capable of thinking creatively and compassionately. It’s actually a common characteristic of the gang mentality – they, too, feel they are in survival mode, which is one reason the tragedy of homicide is prevalent. As the world becomes more frightened by scarcity and more reptilian, now more than ever before is the time for religion to play a saving role. We can tell stories of hope and redemption by enacting compassion and service to our community.

I was on an online radio program this past Thursday, my colleague and buddy Chuck Freeman, hailing from Round Rock, TX hosts, “Soul Talk Radio, A Spiritual Feast to Leaven the World Soul,” and I’ve been his guest about once a month for a while now. One of the questions he asked me was, how can religion engage the average person in today’s world, to the point that they act, that they affect change in their lives and their world? My answer began with Jesus. In Jesus’ time, before there was TV and the rest of it, it was story that captured people’s attention, and that’s what Jesus did so well, he told compelling stories and parables. It was a creative medium Jesus employed, and it’s always been true, that religion is at its best when it creatively inspires action of some kind.

And that’s my message today: we need to think about the stories we can tell, and the creative thinking, planning, and enacting we do so we can tell those true stories that give people hope, that save lives, and that’s what *A Walk for Christopher* is all about. It’s a vital and creative way to bring all kinds of different people together in common purpose, who share common values – that black lives matter, all of them, even the ones where no non-black person was involved in the killing.

All the focus lately on police killings is an important issue, it’s a starting point. But it’s really just the tip of the iceberg, when it comes to the decades-long tragedy of gang violence and murder. The reason gangs came into existence has its own story, they didn’t happen by

accident. You can hear that story by watching the film, *Crips and Bloods: Made in America*, or an older film, *Bastards of the Party*.

I knew I couldn't be the only person who cares that Christopher Walker was murdered for no good reason – hundreds and thousands of people care, our community is thirsty for events like this that indicate hope is alive in ordinary people who are willing to show up and learn how they might make a difference.

I found Ursula Walker through the help of an LA Times reporter, who covered the story back in the fall. Ursula called me right away, nearly in tears, she was so excited that something like this might happen. "I didn't think anybody cared," was the first thing she told me. She had wanted so badly for an event like this to take place, but because grief makes everything hard to do, she didn't have the energy to organize anything herself. She told me they had even called Al Sharpton, to see if he could play a role, but he didn't bite.

That's how Neighborhood Church can be creative and ignite people's passion – *we* can be the Al Sharpton that creatively connects the dots and makes things happen, inspired by an urgent sense of need in the community and compassion. If you'd like to help me with this, and volunteer to help it run smoothly the day of, please send me an email or call me. We will have a flyer and more information by next Sunday.

I foresee Neighborhood Church being able to tell a lot of great stories in the years to come, because we are aware of the challenges our community faces. We have our finger on the pulse, and we have our values of compassion and equity to guide us in what the right thing to do is. We are leaders in finding ways we can work creatively together with others in the community.

The times are getting scarier, but I take comfort in our 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> UU principles, that the inherent worth and dignity of every person is an integral part of how we respect the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. We can't have one without the other, and they only have meaning insofar as we integrate them into the fabric of our everyday living, so they are never mere words, never mere principles, but stories we can tell, complete with struggle, courage, tears and laughter, ordinary heroes, hope and singing.