

Celebrating Our Tangled Independence

UU Church of Vancouver

July 2, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

My extended family used to have a big July cookout. We'd have three or four generations together in all our goofy glory. There were grandmas with their camcorders chasing after the toddlers. My cousins would be telling stories and laughing so hard they couldn't stand up. I'd luxuriate in the precious continuity of family life.

Central to every gathering was food. So much food. So much fussing. One year, a cousin and I decided to try something new: a sign up sheet. We thought we could enjoy the cookout more if there was a manageable amount of food. We thought we had buy-in from the group. We were so pleased with ourselves. But on the big day, the tables were near collapse under the weight of coolers, and boxes, and bags of food. Mountains of carrots and celery sticks. So much dip. One of my aunts had signed up to bring macaroni salad, and she did. So did my mom, because, she explained, my brother would only eat her macaroni salad. There were 11 adults at this event. I counted 9 bottles of salad dressing, 5 of them ranch.

What did I learn?

Some people really prefer chaos.

Some people really really don't like to be told what to do.

Groups experience power struggles.

There's a lot going on under the surface that has nothing to do with deviled eggs or banana pudding. People don't necessarily trust others. They question their motives, have doubts about change—and they need to make the point that they will not be pushed around.

And yet we love each other, with forgiveness, with intensity, with the knowledge that we are linked even if they get on our last nerve. And one day we'll ache at the memory of those family gatherings, and long for a taste of one of those macaroni salads.

My family relationships are like my relationship with my country. Much is good, kind, and supportive—and also petty and traumatizing. Usually a relationship is worth the effort. I may set firmer boundaries, but it's extremely rare for me to make a complete break with someone.

My country has good qualities, but at this moment in history, I'm overwhelmed by what's wrong. I know it's difficult to change a culture. I couldn't even get my family to trust someone else to bring the ranch dressing to a cookout! But for me, it's important to stay engaged, to find common ground, to do everything I can to defend people who are under attack. And so, on my nation's birthday, I renew my dedication to work for change.

Celebrating Our Tangled Interdependence, by Jennifer Springsteen

Today marks the 245th year of our country's constitutional beginning. How do we align our cruel history and our pride in this beautiful land? Let's start with George Washington's birthplace and wind our way into Juneteenth, finally a nationally recognized holiday.

The 4th of July celebration is upon us. Independence Day. This is a holiday that makes me personally conflicted, and frankly I've had a hard time trying to figure out how to talk about all that's in my head or in my heart. We are celebrating our founding fathers' fight against the injustice, occupation, and tyranny of a cruel king, while they themselves were slaveholders and participated in the buying and selling of human beings. And while they wrote the Declaration of Independence members of the Iroquois tribe were consulting our founders on governance right there in Independence Hall. Even still, the founders wrote in that declaration that Native Americans were war-mongering savages.

To put it gently, there is a real lack of self-awareness going on in this country that I want to lift up and consider today as we talk about independence and freedom.

There are two branches of freedom: freedom from and freedom to. Freedom from absolute monarchy, freedom from a life of enslavement and a life of poverty. Freedom to carry a gun, to defend oneself. Freedom to seek asylum in this country and freedom to work. Freedom from state led violence. Freedom to make decisions about one's own body. Freedom to worship as one chooses.

Frederick Douglas' writes in his 1852 Independence Day speech, "Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. — The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me."

From Douglas' speech to the Civil War, the emancipation of slaves, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Lives Matter movement. Who has shared this inherited justice and liberty? And why are we as a nation still struggling with the hypocrisies written in our national documents and state laws?

I grew up in a historical town in Virginia, (the "Seat of the Confederacy," y'all), where I'll return in August, and on my mind today are the 4th of July celebrations of my youth, those that began my confusion and consternation about the founding of our country.

My hometown is Fredericksburg, Virginia, the stolen land of the Manahoac and Powhatan people and it sits along the Rappahannock River. Ferry Farm is George Washington's boyhood home, and being the Revolutionary War's Commander in chief (along with everything else), Washington's footprints are all over the town.

I loved our celebrations in Fredericksburg. The festivities began at Old Mill Park on Sophia Street for the annual 4th of July raft race and landed at the City Docks, with bluegrass music and cloggers, a BBQ pit (where my family volunteered to work each year). The rafters, usually worse for wear after being in the hot sun drinking beer, dove into the river and swam for shore to the cheering crowds at the docks. There were flag quilts for sale and Civil War bullets and other paraphernalia. Little Declaration documents on parchment paper, rolled and tied with string sold for a quarter.

The year of the bicentennial, my 2nd grade teacher had us decorate sheets of material with flags, flying sparks and other colonialisms. She fashioned our handiwork into aprons and caps for the girls and britches with suspenders for the boys. These we were to wear that summer at our celebration. Even the Black children, who made up half our class, were meant to wear the festive garb. Just as Frederick Douglas reminded us, in 1776, the Black folks of American were still enslaved, and the indigenous peoples spilt allegiances between the British and the rebels unsure of what would be best for their freedom's plight. So where did my Black classmates fit in with the big celebration? From whom were we all independent?

In that second grade year, my classmate, Michael Wright, came in from recess crying and declared, "I don't want to be black anymore." When I told my parents that evening, that Michael didn't want to be black, my father said, "No. I'd reckon not." That memory is seared hot in my heart.

I understood something was amiss, because the other thing that occurred each 4th of July in Fredericksburg and still occurs to this day, were the reenactments. *Civil War*

reenactments. All along Old Mill park grown men dressed in grey and blue play-camped and play-cleaned their guns and play- fought one another. Horses clip-clopped down the streets. Were we adding the independence of slaves to that of our white founding fathers? I'm doubtful.

So no wonder my mind gets tangled in the history. We climbed atop cannons outside our confederate-general-named schools. I played mumbly peg under the stony eyes of Hugh Mercer on Washington Avenue near Kenmore, the pre-Revolutionary home of Betty (George's sister) and her husband Fielding Lewis. Inside Kenmore, you could get a slice of gingerbread and a dixie cup of tea from a Black woman paid to dress as a slave. I jumped on and off the slave block on William Street whenever I passed. Even now on the 4th, flags are placed on the graves at the civil war cemetery. Union and confederate soldiers joined together in death.

BUT, my hometown has continued to raise its awareness: when I returned with my four year-old-daughter in 2009, indigenous celebrations and teach-ins were included at the docks. A Juneteenth celebration and parade are now held each year starting at that same Old Mill Park where slaves crossed the river to freedom in Stafford—these are great changes.

In his poem, "I, Too", Langston Hughes writes:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Have we arrived at Hugh's imagined tomorrow? True that our President made Juneteenth a federally recognized holiday, and good that it comes before the 4th July, so we can hold that truth of our history close before we launch the freedom rockets.

And yet,

This month our Supreme Court upheld a ruling in an Alabama case, which ruled that state's redistricting of the voters in the "Black Belt" violated the 1965 Voting Rights Act. However, they did not move to strengthen the language of the act to pave the way for further cases of potential violation based on race. And the affirmative action decision is simply too soon. We have not yet arrived at institutional equity in this country. I worry we have lost ground.

Where is this country's collective self-awareness? I don't ask for people to be ashamed as Hugh does, but they probably should be.

Freedom from. Freedom to.

What of theology? My Muslim friends Mary and Khadim tell me that we arrive in this world with a stamp that is uniquely ours. That stamp includes all the Divine attributes: love, grace, gratitude. So, we have this Divine inheritance, this soul stamp, and we either live into it or deny it.

We also have a human inheritance. Our DNA, our history upon this earth. Our human and divine inheritances must come into alignment. We need to find a way to purify, align, transform. How do we do this work? We practice these little deaths by letting go of our desires and impulses, our ego thins—the word used is "to efface," same as for the cervix. Once we've thinned and thinned, our awareness begins to change. It opens, and allows for transformation to happen.

This practice, the effacement, happens over our lifetime. We have to practice to get it right. It is the idea of "Know thyself and know thy Lord."

It sounds very internal, very personal, which of course it is, but we don't live out our Divine destiny in a vacuum—we are knitted into our families and with the earth and animals and communities and governments and laws.

Extend the metaphor of thinning our ego and we are back where the conversation began: raising our awareness of who we are in this world. The thinning allows us to see more clearly, both inside and out. Do we lean into our divine destiny, or deny it? Are we acting in love, grace and gratitude in all aspects of our lives? Are we fighting tyranny abroad but also in our own neighborhoods? Do our expectations of free forests and lakes and oceans include giving up some of what was taken by our founding fathers even if that means we don't get to inhabit or hoard or even enjoy all of what we have considered our country's human inheritance? Do we make reparations to indigenous people and those kin to slaves?

I truly hope the closer we all get to aligning with the Divine source of all, the more self-evident these truths of our human inheritance will become. The closer we are to what is holy, the less important one election will be, one war, one wallet. The more we as a people of faith live into the holy attributes of grace, love, and gratitude, the closer we grow in our interdependent web of existence. Not independent of one another, *interdependent*.

In college I left my hometown fireworks for the big celebration in D.C. I don't remember who all played over the years, but one year it was the Butthole Surfers. Imagine: barefoot on the lawn with Lincoln staring from his marble seat while the Butthole Surfers headlined the 4th of July at our Nation's capital. Imagine less than five years later, the Million Man March on that same National Mall. Imagine 26 years later, an angry white mob keyed up by injustices they were fed, storming the U.S. Capital, our shared American inheritance.

Despite a rising awareness of where we've gone wrong, I can celebrate that our country has room for such risky change.

We have not all inherited a place at the table. Of that we must be keenly aware. Whose destiny is it to slide back their chair and let another sit? Whether you leave the table or come to take your place, will you live into that destiny or deny it?

I haven't come to any conclusions here, but there is something important that happens when a religious people come together and share their understanding of a thing. There is something holy in this. And I'm grateful.

Will you pray with me?

God of many names and of no name, Spirit of Life, we come to another moment in the journey of our awakening. We are far from where we must be as an interdependent people in

this country. Guide our hearts, our hands, and our feet. We are full of love and possibility.
Guide us. Ashay and Amen.