

***The Holocene Extinction***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
February 25, 2024

**Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby**

Today's theme is evil, and it's a topic that has been on my mind as we confront the evils of genocide, extinction and war.

When I was in elementary school, we learned about the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the dodo bird, and about the grim future of the California condor. The condors at one time soared above the redwood forests where I'm from, but by that time there were only a few left, in the southern California mountains. The condors were considered functionally extinct, meaning it was unlikely that the remaining 27 birds would be able to sustain their species. This was presented as the way of the world, unfortunate but, you know, not our fault.

I remember crying about it. I felt sad and hopeless.

When I was older, I learned about other types of extinction events that happened in and around my hometown after the California gold rush. My hometown was known for the massacre of hundreds of members of the indigenous Wiyot tribe in coordinated attacks around Humboldt Bay on Feb. 26, 1860. The Wiyots had gathered on an island and a few other locations around the bay for their world renewal ceremonies. That night, the younger men were off preparing for the next day's worship when white men who had formed a militia murdered the elders, the women and children. No one was ever charged. Surviving Wiyots were sent to Fort Humboldt, where half of them died from exposure and starvation, then dispersed to different reservations and rancherias in the region. My understanding was that the tribe no longer existed.

So much sorrow. And cases of genocide and extinction continue. So I think it's important to share that recent events in redwood country offer some hope.

During my hometown visit in December, I learned that California condors have been reintroduced to the area. The work is a collaboration among several agencies, including the Oregon Zoo, that are working with—and this part fills my heart with hope—working with the local Yurok tribe.

And there was other news about indigenous people in Humboldt County. It turns out that the Wiyot tribe is reasserting its presence. The tribe, descendants of the survivors of the 1860 massacre, sued to regain federal recognition in 1981. It is now 600 strong and growing, and as the Wiyot website says, actively recovering the old ways, including language, ceremonies and lifeways.

They bought an acre and a half of the island where the massacre occurred. It's their center of the universe. They spent years clearing out industrial pollution left behind, and in 2019, the city of Eureka, which controlled most of the 280-acre island, transferred the land back to the Wiyots. What was called Gunther's island when I was a kid, then referred to as Indian island, is now known by its original name, Tuluwat, and renewal of the world ceremonies have resumed.

These aren't happy stories. Genocide and extinctions still happen. But the restoration of the Wiyot tribe, and the return of California condors, have brought hope and celebration to my hometown. It's a reminder that humans can change the world for the better. That we can make a difference.

## **UUA Statement: UUA Condemns Violence Against Gaza, Urges Immediate and Total Ceasefire**

There are crystallizing moments in the course of history when, in spite of the differences that exist among us, our common reverence for life demands that we speak with moral courage and clarity on the side of love. As people of faith and conviction, Unitarian Universalists share a belief that every human life is sacred, endowed with worth and dignity from the moment of birth, with no person more deserving of freedom and flourishing than any other. Our living tradition has long maintained that the only hells that exist are those that we create for one another, here on earth.

We are watching in real time as the people of Gaza exist in a human-made hell that grows more unimaginable every day. At this point, 28,000 Palestinian civilians have been killed and nearly 70,000 have been injured by Israeli attacks in Gaza since Hamas attacked Israeli citizens on October 7. The medical infrastructure in Gaza has been decimated, and the Israeli government continues to prevent humanitarian aid, including food and water, from reaching refugees. And this week, the Netanyahu administration has announced the forced evacuation and ground invasion of Rafah, where 1.3 million displaced Palestinians have set up a massive tent city as a last refuge. The UUA first joined the call for a ceasefire on October 17, rooted in our historic positions as an organization; nearly four months later, this situation could not be more urgent.

In their January 26 emergency interim ruling, the International Court of Justice found that these atrocities in Gaza plausibly constitute genocidal acts and issued an immediate order to the Israeli government to “take all measures within its power to prevent the commission of all acts within the scope of Article II,” the United Nation’s Convention on genocide. While the UUA has historically affirmed the importance of the Genocide Conventions, we know there is a wide range of opinion among Unitarian Universalists about how this terminology is used today. What should be clear to all of us, however, is that the Israeli government’s forced displacement, punishment, and intentional inflicting of suffering and death upon children and civilians in Gaza is a moral catastrophe that our faith demands we condemn and resist.

In that spirit, the Unitarian Universalist Association reiterates our condemnation of the Israeli military’s ongoing violence against Gaza and joins again with the growing chorus of voices across the globe urging immediate and total ceasefire, the provision of massive emergency humanitarian aid, and the safe return of all hostages and prisoners.

This terrifying moment calls all people of faith and conscience to do everything in our power to push our governments to interrupt genocide, address humanitarian crisis, avert multinational war, and weave just and lasting peace across the globe.

As longtime proponents of the crucial work of the United Nations and its official agencies (see resolutions from 1965, 1969, 1972, 1981 and 2010), the UUA is grateful for the nuance and thoroughness of the UN International Court of Justice’s January 26 findings. We decry the Israeli leadership’s ongoing rejection of all ceasefire proposals and outright flouting of the ICJ’s findings and directives in its ongoing military assault.

The UUA further condemns the US government’s unabated complicity in the crisis in Gaza, from providing massive military aid to Israel to slashing funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian Refugees. Without international pressure, the Netanyahu administration will undoubtedly follow through on their vow to achieve “total victory” by decimating the entirety of Gaza. We call for the US government to stop funding Israel’s military machine, and to leverage its unrivaled influence upon Israel and in the world community to intervene and stop the attacks on Gaza.

Each day the assault on Gaza continues brings us closer to the brink of calamitous international war. Tensions continue to escalate among nations, and violence has already transgressed national borders and international waters. As a faith community that has historically advocated for peaceful resolution of conflict and protection of international law, we believe it is imperative that the global community respond decisively to mitigate ongoing harm and prevent further catastrophic loss of life. This terrifying moment calls all people of faith and conscience to do everything in our power to push our governments to interrupt genocide, address humanitarian crisis, avert multinational war, and weave just and lasting peace across the globe.

In that spirit, we offer our prayers to all those working to mitigate harm and stop the atrocities, from journalists and doctors and humanitarian workers on the ground, to Israeli citizens and Jews across the diaspora faithfully engaging and courageously protesting the right-wing Netanyahu regime, to global multi-faith and secular movements advocating for ceasefire. We urge Unitarian Universalists to listen deeply, especially to the voices of Palestinians whose lives and communities have been the vast majority of casualties of this war, and to think critically about the ways the United States is complicit in enabling this disaster to continue.

Like many, we dream of an enduring peace in the Middle East. Israelis and Palestinians deserve real and lasting safety, as do all people in the Holy Land. Long-term diplomatic solutions that honor international human rights and religious freedom are essential. However, in this critical moment we must pressure our leaders to turn back from this precipice of unspeakable violence, or this dream will not have a future.

We call upon all Unitarian Universalists to open our hearts and be present to the depths of human suffering in this moment – not just by one group, but by people of many nationalities, identities, and religions. We commit to identifying and mitigating the evils of anti-Semitism, anti-Arabism, and Islamophobia in our own tradition and to address their toxic legacies wherever we encounter them. Our faith rejects all forms of nationalism and supremacy, and insists that we struggle for multiracial, multi-religious democracy in our own nation and across the world. We encourage all Unitarian Universalists to take action in solidarity not only with global movements for ceasefire, but with liberatory pro-democratic movements of all kinds that are working toward a future that contains the conditions of possibility for a true and enduring peace.

### ***The Extinction of Us©* by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

I am glad that February and our study of evil ends this week. I'm more than ready to move on to March and Freedom! It's hard to look straight into the face of the Windigo. It's important, but it's hard. I like the idea of a legendary monster onto which we can place our fears, which is what I suppose the Bogeyman or devil, zombies or vampires do for us. I think it's helpful to recognize these figures as mythic or legendary, rather than the alternative....directing all that fear and dread into other human beings – blaming all white people for the massacre of Wiyots (we-yacht), or people who are Jewish for Netanyahu's politics and war, or Muslims for the actions of Hamas or al-Qaeda... We've learned these last months how antisemitism and Islamophobia are alive and well. Those attitudes are not aligned with the values of Unitarian Universalism, even though we hear them expressed sometimes within our movement, which is made up of these darn imperfect human beings.

Our current geologic epoch is known as the Holocene. (I didn't actually know that until I read the *cli-fi* book I talked about last week, *The Ministry for the Future*. *Cli-fi* stands for climate fiction and is a take on the more familiar *sci-fi* for science fiction.) The Holocene epoch – some 11,700 years so far, followed the last glacial period – and is sometimes called The Age of Man, in that all of humanity's recorded history has taken place in this period. Humanity has greatly influenced the Holocene environment. All organisms influence their environments, but few have ever changed the globe as much or as fast as our species is doing. "Habitat destruction, pollution, and other factors are causing an ongoing mass extinction of plant and animal species; according to some projections, 20% of all plant and animal species on Earth will be extinct within the next 25 years." I got that data from an online exhibit by UC Berkely on the Holocene Epoch. It aligns with Deborah's learnings from elementary school about the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the dodo bird, and the then future of the California condor.

But her reflection is grounded in hope, as she learned of the reintroduction of condors and the Wiyot descendant survivors. Like Robin Wall Kimmerer, Deborah understands that Windigo is most powerful in the Hungry Time, in winter – and that to defeat the monster, we must pursue him in the Time of Plenty, *niibin*, summer, when abundance reigns. The way I understand that metaphor is that we need hope and gratitude, in order to defeat evil and the Windigo.

It is easy to feel hopeless in these times – with wars raging and species disappearing and the planet warming. Hopelessness and despair come naturally. But hope is a choice, and it's a choice that we cultivate with gratitude. We notice and recognize abundance and celebrate it.

I find it hard; I don't know about you. I understand that the human brain is wired to look for danger and problems and scarcity, so that we might find safety and solutions and abundance. But then it is so easy to look for the danger in our newfound safety, and the problems in our first solution, and the scarcity amidst the plenty, and so on ad nauseum. It is within our power to direct our thoughts and attitudes and attention and in our best interest to do so. As Kimmerer so eloquently explains in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, a culture and economy based on gratitude and gifting, cultivates relationships and that feeling of enoughness. "You are enough," "You are needed," "You are here and I am grateful" – I think that's why I took to the invitation to greet in worship using those words to heart. I first heard them in that service we broadcast from the UUA over Martin Luther King weekend when we canceled worship. They're words from adrienne maree brown's "radical gratitude spell." If you don't know adrienne maree brown, she's a writer, activist and movement facilitator. Radical gratitude spell. That's in line with Kimmerer's gift economy and ethic of generosity.

Writes Kimmerer,

"In an essay describing hunter-gatherer peoples with few possessions as the original affluent society, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins reminds us that, 'modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world's wealthiest peoples.' The shortage is due not to how much material wealth there actually is, but to the way in which it is exchanged or circulated. The market system artificially creates scarcity by blocking the flow between the source and the consumer. Grain may rot in the warehouse while hungry people starve because they cannot pay for it. The result is famine for some and diseases of excess for others. The very earth that sustains us is being destroyed to fuel injustice. An economy that grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings, this is a Windigo economy."

Something has to change. We know that. Whether you believe it is capitalism or government that has to change, it is we who must do the changing really – as we are who we have control over. I know I'm foreshadowing next week's topic already – reading the word and reading the world – but the fact that we exist interdependently with the world, with Nature and the planet, with Israelis and Palestinians, the ones who wore blue and the ones who wore gray, requires us to pay at least as much attention to our own development as that of the world we seek to change. My invitation this morning, to prevent the extinction of us, is that we begin with gratitude. Please join me in a closing prayer, this is one I learned from the Rev. Jill McAllister who I'm pretty sure learned it from someone else, but it goes like this.

*Touch the ground and remember that we stand on the earth.*

*Look around the room and remember we have friends everywhere.*

*Touch your heart beat and remember we are made of water and that blood flows through our veins.*

*Feel your breath and remember that we are alive.*

*Thank the universe for life and water friends and earth.*