

All Flourishing is Mutual
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
January 12, 2025

Welcome to the 90's Club – Arthur Metzger

This morning we welcome a new member of the club, Arthur Metzger.

Arthur Metzger is a progressive, an environmentalist, and a lifelong committed Unitarian Universalist with an abiding attachment to coffee hour after service. He turned 90 in November of 2024.

He was born November 19th 1934 in the panhandle of Nebraska. He was the middle child, with an older sister and a younger brother. He grew up on an isolated cattle ranch. He milked cows, watched over chickens, helped with all the ranch work, and rode his pony to school at a one room schoolhouse. He had to board in town to attend high school, which was common for kids from that region. He lost a cousin his age to cancer while in his early teens.

Arthur has a beautiful tenor voice and has sung in choirs his whole life. While in his college choir in Nebraska he met future wife Chlovena Byrd and they were married in the mid 50's. In 1964, after graduate school, Arthur and Chlovena moved to Vancouver Washington where Arthur worked as a reference librarian at the Ft. Vancouver Regional Library. Arthur and Chlovena joined the Unitarian Fellowship soon after they moved to Vancouver in 1965. They had three children, all of whom grew up at the UU church of Vancouver.

Arthur has volunteered in the UU Vancouver church since the 1960's, but landscaping and choir are his strongest volunteer connections. This church and the UU principles are a mainstay of his identity.

Many of the trees and all the bamboo you see on the UU Church grounds were planted and cared for by Arthur. In good weather he likes to go see how his bamboo and trees are doing on the grounds, so wave to the trees when you walk among them, and thank all the UU volunteers who have taken care of them over the years!

All Flourishing is Mutual© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Our theme this month is Justice. Justice is central to our understanding of ourselves as a people of faith. In our newly adopted language in the Unitarian Universalist bylaws, we say “We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.” But even before we adopted that particular language, it always seemed to me to be the point of Unitarian Universalism.

I've not always been very good at explaining why. In fact, early in my ministry, 20 years ago now, a graduate student studied my sermons – an accumulation of up to three years of sermons. He took a course series called Foundations and Critical Study of Liberal Theology– and the final project of the final quarter is to do a systematic analysis of the theology and ministry of a practical theologian – practical theologian being a minister. He chose me in part because we had the same theology professor, and it was an assignment in her class – I had been her teaching assistant - and because I was serving the church he had grown up in, having participated in their religious education program as a child and youth. He read a carefully curated set of sermons I shared with him, and wrote a critique. It's a bit strange, as you can imagine, having a student read your sermons and point out your contradictory statements and check to see if your theology is at all systematic and then interview you about those things.

As I recall – and I couldn't find his paper after all these years – but I do remember that his analysis of my call for justice was that I said we should strive for justice because we want to be treated fairly, and if we wanted to be treated fairly, we should treat others fairly. I'm not sure if he called my reasoning solipsistic or circular, but in any case he did not find my theological demand for justice compelling. In some ways, I've been trying to explain it ever sense.

I'm taking the class that many of you are taking right now, Intercultural Skills for a Diverse World. There's a discussion today at 12:30, but even if you didn't sign up for the discussion, you can take the class online, as I'm doing. There are a lot of great classes you can take online at the UU Institute. I'm taking this one for several reasons. It's a course I've taught and teach, and it's always interesting to see how others teach it. I also want to be in conversation with those of you who are taking it now, and so it's useful to follow along with you. And most importantly, like many of you, I'm concerned about what's next in our country and world as the certification of the election happened, peacefully, I might add, last Monday. Honing our intercultural skills will help us all navigate what comes next and welcome, particularly, those who will be targeted by the next administration because they don't fit their very narrow definition of who counts in this world.

We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. To me, that goal is baked into our faith tradition. Not that we've done it very well over the years. In fact, we haven't. But we've tried. Over and over again. And we keep trying because though we may not have had the skills to do it, we have understood on some level the importance of diversity for our survival and flourishing. "You cannot compete in a zero-sum game with creatures upon whom your existence depends," writes Robin Wall Kimmerer.

This is why justice work is so hard. It has never been as simple as good vs. evil, us and them. Killing the enemy was never a strategy that worked. Even talking about the enemy in dehumanizing terms doesn't work. Well, as we know, it **does** work to increase polarization and pull us apart even further.

UU theologian, Sharon Welch, instead invites us into what she calls "a feminist ethic of risk" in her book by the same title. She challenges the predominant ethic of control – one that would claim we could simply kill all the terrorists, or racists, or homophobes or MAGA Republicans, or foreigners, or whatever group we might consider *enemy*. She suggests an ethic of risk in which we will not and cannot be sure of the outcome of our actions or the results of our labor or our impact on generations to come. She says we have to learn to live in this uncertain space and take action anyway.

We often begin worship here with the words: *We like to thank those volunteers who keep this congregation thriving in these uncertain times.* All times are uncertain, truly, it's just that there are some moments in our history when that uncertainty is more apparent, and other times when we think we have more control over events. With the Trump presidencies and the COVID pandemic, and the wildfires in Los Angeles right now, we are living through one of those periods of history when we are painfully aware that we are not in control, that things could change in a heartbeat, and that uncertainty reigns. We have to learn to live in this uncertain time and take action anyway.

Additionally, "You cannot compete in a zero-sum game with creatures upon whom your existence depends," says Robin Wall Kimmerer. Zero-sum, meaning win or lose, players have no common interests and either win all or lose all. It's built on scarcity and competition.

For those of us who understand how interdependent our lives are, how much our existence depends on others, justice is not a zero-sum game. We cannot sacrifice the lives of some for the benefit of others, if we understand that all flourishing is mutual.

Kimmerer writes these beautiful essays describing natural laws and applying them to our understandings and misunderstandings. This serviceberry piece about economics from which the reading came, challenges our most basic understanding of how things work.

"In order for money to be made," she writes, "there must be commodities to be bought and sold. The scarcer those commodities, the greater the revenue...market economics demands that abundant, freely available, earthly gifts be converted to commodities and made scarce by privatization and a high price. This seems crazy," she writes "so let me test my understanding with the example of pure, beautiful water, a gift from the skies. It was previously unthinkable that one would pay for a drink of water; but as careless economic expansion pollutes fresh water, we now incentivize privatization of springs and aquifers. Sweet water, a free gift of the Earth, is pirated by faceless corporations who encase it in plastic shells to sell. And now many can't afford what was previously free, and we incentivize wrecking public waters to create demand for the privatized." End quote.

I can't help but think of America's original sin, that of commoditizing land and people – privatizing land that was freely inhabited by indigenous people who were displaced and killed, and kidnapping people from the African continent to sell and buy as commodities, as products and property.... "market economics demands that abundant, freely available, earthly gifts" (the land, the people) "be converted to commodities and made scarce by privatization and a high price."

And this economic system is at the root of so many of the injustices we seek to remedy: poverty and racism being quite high on the list. Gift economies are different and in the book *Sacred Economics*, Charles Eisenstein talks about how gifts help us participate in something greater than ourself and yet is not separate from ourself. "The axioms of rational self-interest change because the self has expanded to include something of the other."

I have to thank one of our newer members, Jonah Traverspowers, for his persistence in bringing up the concept of the mutual aid society, a community-based network that connects people in need with resources. A gift economy strategy. Rather than being a new idea, it is actually a very old one – and one that worshipping communities have practiced for ages. We may not do it to the extent possible, but we do it. When the self has expanded to include something of the other, our rational self-interest changes

to include that expanded sense of self. And Jonah's bringing this up to the Ministry Collaboration Team and other groups around church reminds me of how it is we as a church connect people with resources – from the 763 pounds of food shared with families at the local school to meals provided to our individual members after undergoing surgeries or hospitalizations.

At church, where we support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions, there is no *them*. There is only *us*. When we complain, for example, that we're not celebrating our successes enough, we understand that the complaint is on us, and we respond by taking photos and sharing our successes with each other in the bulletin. Or when it's pointed out that the land acknowledgment that begins worship feels like just words and no action, people begin to approach our Native American neighbors to figure out ways to do something more than a simple acknowledgement of injustice. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions, eliminating the *them*. We are only *us*. We either make it work, or we don't. But we're in it together, and we know that it takes all of us.

It's much easier in church to do this than it is on the larger scale – in the country at large. And it's quite hard to do it even in church. But I think of church as the place we start. Where we have gathered as an intergenerational community – a people who are mostly not related to each other as kin, but who choose to gather together and act as kin – to create the spiritual sustenance we need to survive in the world, and to build and practice our intercultural and conflict transformation skills, so that we might take our learnings out into the wider world. This world we are in desperately needs our values, especially the value of justice and fairness, that all people deserve to flourish and that all flourishing is mutual.

I recently got to hear Robin Wall Kimmerer at a Powell's books event, though it had to be held in a larger venue there were so many of us. I was struck by the contrast between the interviewer and Kimmerer. The interviewer asked a lot of questions about how to get things right, how to make things just. How, given the economic system we are in, how do we opt out or avoid contributing to the problem? To be fair to her, I don't remember which of these questions were her own, and which were from the audience that night. We were invited to submit questions. But she seemed deeply troubled by "getting it right" whereas Kimmerer's answers were so much more relaxed – "you do the best you can, given the circumstances you have." Of course, coffee came up. We're in the Pacific Northwest. Coffee which can't be grown locally, which has to be flown in from afar, which is purchased with money...I got the impression the interviewer wanted to be told she had to give up coffee entirely to create a gift economy, but Kimmerer's response was, it's not realistic that you're going to give up coffee, but you could buy it at a local coffee shop instead of a large chain, and get to know the people who make it for you. Develop relationships with those who work in your local coffee shop, and choose coffee shops who have developed relationships with the coffee growers, etc. etc.

The questions seemed based on a belief that an individual could on their own make the right choice, and the answers were grounded in an understanding that individuals are always embedded in networks of communities that are mutually influenced by and influence those networks. All Flourishing is Mutual. The questions were offered from a cultural perspective that holds an individualistic worldview, whereas the answers were from an indigenous perspective that understand our individual lives exist only in an interdependent network.

That's what I think happened with the student who read my sermons and interviewed me about my systematic theology of justice. I think he was coming from an assumption that an individual had to be

motivated by external factors to work for justice – especially justice for others. Whereas my growing understanding had been that in this interdependent world, justice is not a zero-sum game, but ever-expanding. When the self has expanded to include something of the other, our rational self-interest changes to include that expanded sense of self. My simple, maybe even banal, explanation that if we want to be treated fairly, we need to treat others fairly as motivation for social justice satisfies only if we understand that All Flourishing is Mutual.

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Wrote Martin Luther King Jr. in *Why We Can't Wait*. “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” In *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he wrote “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

To which I've learned to respond, justice anywhere is a threat to injustice everywhere. So, there's no reason to not take that first step, that first move: Be it the intercultural skills class this afternoon, or composting your holiday greenery and donating the metal for re-use, or donating food to the green bag program. Just one little action. One step at a time. Just one more step.