

## ***Transformation of the World Through Liberating Love***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

February 23, 2025

### ***Reflection on the Theme (Time) by Stuart Campbell***

Good Morning. I was a Peace Corp volunteer in Honduras Central America from 1988 to 1991. I left a good city planning job in Austin Texas to help people in this far off country. I had hoped that my degrees in forestry and planning would come to great use. Well, they kind of did, but what I found is that I learned more than I thought.

We had no fun in Honduras. We suffered and waited for the term to end... and we changed as time went on. Mostly in good ways. Some changes were hard.

The things I learned had very little to do with planning or forestry, but more to do with life. I learned that you can earn the trust of people in a short time, that humor is a wonderful thing, that kids are adored wherever you go and that time, well, time is relative... I can't remember who said that... but I proved it true in Honduras.

It was not easy to prove that time is relative. It took a lot of waiting. Waiting behind desks for the underpaid employee to go through my mail for contraband, waiting for the team to assemble to hike up to the cloud forest, waiting for someone to have a chicken in my village so I could eat something other than hard dried meat, and waiting for the bus.

Ahhhh, the bus. As Peace Corp volunteers we did not have cars, sometimes bikes and even motorcycles, but no car. So we took local transportation, tired old busses belching smoke and packed to the brim with people and animals alike.

So, here I am with my western-thinking mind, I think that time is precious, efficiency is everything, and there is no time to waste. And there was nothing I could do. I would be waiting 3 hours for a bus to the highway just like everyone else. What does one do with three hours?

Well, the first month in country, I fretted, paced and cussed. After six months, I talked with folks about how late the bus was and what could be done! After a year in country, I played soccer with kids right there at the stop, I chatted up the farmers about what they were planting, I held babies and shared snacks. When the bus arrived, I was slightly irritated by it's arrival. Three hours was, well like 20 minutes.

So waiting it seems, helped me to realize that time is relative. Perhaps it is relative to your attitude and your engagement with the life that is around you? Perhaps waiting lowers your blood pressure and extends your life? I know from experience that once you give up counting the minutes, you see things differently.

OH how I wish I had taken this lesson to heart! I still clutch time closely, stay on schedule, try not to let others down, worry about time. But, I often remember those bus stops and the feelings I had at those bus stops and it helps me to put it all in perspective. Thank you my Honduran friends for this lesson:

The bus will come, in 20 minutes or in 3 hours. Either way is OK with me.

### ***Reflection on the Theme (The Watermelon) by Stacey Kim***

Food is my love language and my favorite cultural touchpoint. I love eating local specialties, learning how to cook local cuisine, and bonding with people over a shared meal.

Food from home was also the thing I missed most when I was a Peace Corps English teacher in Gabon, Central Africa, from 1994 to 1997. Well, I missed my family more than I missed food from home. Well, on most days I missed my family more. Occasionally, the truth is that I missed pizza more than I missed my mom (sorry mom, I know you're listening).

Not that there wasn't delicious food in Gabon! And lots of food that was completely new to me. Being a child of the 1980s, I grew up with the notion that Africa was nothing but vast empty desert and savannah, no water or crops to be found, a place where most people went hungry and children routinely starved. What an education it was for me to learn that Gabon is covered in dense, native rain forest and that while the majority of Gabonese people live in poverty, almost no one ever goes without food. Abundant food grows everywhere, and the forest is alive with animals that the local people would hunt and eat. I came to love cassava leaves cooked with smoked fish, palm nut stew, fried plantains, and grilled kebabs with a mayonnaise-y, onion-y relish and lots of hot pepper.

And the fruit! Pineapples, bananas, mangoes, guavas, and passionfruit were everywhere, as were lemons and limes. One day, when I was at the local market, I even saw a watermelon, one of those personal-sized ones. My mouth watered. I'd been in Gabon for about a year at that point, and while I'd eaten plenty of fruit, I had not had a watermelon since I left the States. I'm sure it was at least 95°F and 95% humidity the day I saw that watermelon—because it was always 95°F and 95% humidity in Gabon—and the idea of watermelon sounded so refreshing.

"Is that a WATERMELON???" I asked the small child who was running the stall where it was for sale.

"Oui madame!" he said, proudly.

"How much?" I asked.

I no longer remember the price of that precious fruit, because I would have paid that child all the money I had for it. I rushed home to tell my Peace Corps roommate what I had found. She was as excited as I was, and we decided to prolong the anticipation of a taste of home and have the watermelon for dessert that evening.

After dinner, we eagerly cut into the melon. The knife gave more resistance than I expected, but I kept the pressure on until it split open. To my extreme disappointment, what was revealed was not the beautiful red flesh of a watermelon, studded with black seeds, but rather the orange of winter squash, with a center of stringy fibers and pale, slimy seeds. Such a letdown. Sure, squash is delicious, but not when you think you're getting a WATERMELON.

In many ways, this is a trivial moment from my three years in Gabon, a passing disappointment, and a fleeting evening of homesickness. But it's also a moment I have thought about more than perhaps any other since my time as a volunteer. The experience I had with that "watermelon" taught me so much about communication, about assumptions, and about asking good questions. My eager query to the child in the market immediately revealed what I wanted, and the French word for watermelon is likely one he did not know. So he told me what I obviously wanted to hear: yes, it is a watermelon! All I was thinking about was what I was hoping for, what I assumed to be true. What I needed to be thinking about was what I didn't understand. What does that thing look like on the inside? That would have been a much better question to ask.

My time in the Peace Corps taught me many things, among them that I was not cut out for teaching. Instead, I became a communications professional when I returned home, one who prides herself on asking good questions, and one who certainly could not be as effective in her job—or life in general—without the watermelon-less experience she had in Gabon.

***On the Value of International Service*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

*We're all swimming to the other side.* We're all in it together, Pat Humphries tells us in that song. She understands our interdependence and all that we hold in common. I'm afraid our current government does not. The initial 90 day pause of all foreign development assistance and then the complete stop to nearly all foreign assistance funded through the state department and USAID... just illuminates the illusion of separation and independence that has taken hold. Approximately 14,000 USAid staff have been placed on leave. A freeze on new programs has been implemented. Existing programs have received stop-work orders. While this plays out in court, our relationships across the globe are threatened.

I immediately thought of all my Peace Corps buddies who went into development work, many through USAID, following their time in the Peace Corps. Our current Board Secretary, member Patricia O'Bannon, has a daughter and son-in-law stranded in Nepal because the work they were sent to do with USAID has been halted. Like so many federal employees, they were given notice to clear out their office. Told they were to be flown home, and then not. It turns out they are currently stranded with no work to do and no way to get home. Chaos, we know, is what Trump does best. And it keeps us guessing what next crisis will be created by this administration. Though I don't wish to feed the frenzy by following each and every crisis created, I did want to take note of this particular one because of its widespread global impact.

This last week of February leading up to March 1<sup>st</sup> is what we call Peace Corps week, recognizing the founding of the Peace Corps by President Kennedy 64 years ago next Saturday. The goal of the Peace Corps is to help the countries interested in meeting their need for trained people, to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. This is the business of peace-making – building relationships and building a peace that lasts: Transforming the world through a liberating love. We who are what we call RPCV's (Returned Peace Corps Volunteers) are expected to share our experiences when we return home with family, friends and the public, to the end of promoting cultural understanding, volunteerism, and public service. And so Stacey, Stuart, and I are fulfilling our 3<sup>rd</sup> goal requirements this morning in worship, sharing with you a little about the people we met in Gabon and Honduras.

I had wanted to go to Africa, but because I had studied Spanish in school and not French, I was sent to Central America. I was sent to a Black Carib village along the coast, so I got a little bit of Africa within Central America. Like in Gabon, a staple diet among the Garífuna people includes cassava, fish and

plantains. Here is a photo of a little kid in the village in front of the church with a bowl on his head – likely the bowl contains fresh *pan de coco* – coconut bread – that he was selling door to door. Here’s another photo of village children – the pot in the little girl’s hand suggests to me they were also selling *pan de coco* around the village.

It was unusual for a village to get two Peace Corps volunteers, but the local OFRANEH chapter had asked for all the volunteers they could get. OFRANEH stands for Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña – which you can roughly translate into the NAACP. The community was organized and they wanted help, so they got two volunteers – Gail, who went by Teresa in Spanish, and me, Kata.

Teresa and Kata were easier to say in Spanish and Garífuna than Gail and Kathryn. Gail’s middle name is Teresa. She worked in the health sector and here she is giving a cooking lesson.

Our house was just a wooden structure on stilts – stilts because of the flooding – with no windows – well no glass on windows, just holes, and no running water.

We were proud of this “shower” we built on the back of the house – just a porch with bamboo siding and a portable camp shower that Gail brought from home. Though it was frankly easier to just bathe out of a bucket than bother to fill the bladder with water, hang it up, and turn on the faucet – and sometimes the solar shower heated the water too much. In a tropical climate, a cold shower is often preferable.

I told the story about carrying water because carrying water to and from the well was a big part of one’s day. Here is a neighbor doing her laundry

Gail was in the health sector, and I was in education, like Stacey. I was teaching young adults to teach their elders how to read and write in Spanish.

We were field testing a curriculum that used some of their native language, Garífuna, to introduce reading and writing. Garífuna is a spoken language, so there’s no point in learning to read it because there aren’t any books besides the bible written in Garífuna, but we were using Garífuna words and culture to introduce reading and writing in Spanish, which all adults in Honduras, at least, learned to speak. Garífuna people in Belize learn to speak English.

Like both Stuart and Stacey, though I was officially the teacher, I felt like I learned more than I taught. It was a humbling experience, learning to carry water and wash everything by hand and not have refrigeration or running toilets, basically, living as most of the humans on this planet do. It gave me such appreciation for the water that comes out of my tap and the toilet that flushes in my house and the variety of food I’m able to eat on a daily basis.

I did learn patience like Stuart and better communication like Stacey – not that I consistently practice those learnings but they’re available to me - but mostly I learned the twin lessons that we are all so very different, and pretty much the same.

The Intercultural Skills class many of you are taking right now, was taught to us during Peace Corps training, and has served me well over the years – in all sorts of contexts. Following the Peace Corps, I became a bilingual teacher in Chelan, Orondo and Wenatchee, Washington – taught the children of mostly migrant workers. I eventually left teaching to go into the ministry because – well, I’ve shared this before –we can talk about values like the transforming power of love in the church more freely than in

the classroom. It was already getting hard in the classroom to cover all the required curriculum. Given the restrictions coming down from this administration – the banning of subjects like black history and intercultural understanding – it does feel safer to be serving a church that has no government funding. Though, this administration has found a way to threaten even our freedom, by removing protections that have historically existed to shield us from visits by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. I won't talk about the actions we're taking in a service broadcast over Zoom, but we are taking action to prepare for such intrusions.

I do wish to state clearly that I believe the current administration is motivated by power and money, racism and xenophobia – but I don't believe that all those who voted for him are motivated by those factors. I don't. I do believe his first election exposed a racism in this country that's been with us since our founding, and this second election has let loose the organized racists. But I don't believe the majority of citizens who voted for him were motivated by racism. I think there are all sorts of different reasons people made that choice.

It is so easy to divide – it is so easy to preach that we are right and they are wrong, and that is rarely helpful. I'm preaching to an audience that understands the dangers we face from this current administration. And though we cannot submit to the tyranny of their rule, we also must seek to understand the pain behind the reasons more than 77million people in this country voted for him. Because they are our neighbors. That's what the intercultural skills is all about – growing beyond our own perspective and seeking to understand the differences that come with other perspectives.

“Do you want to be right or do you want to be effective?” is one of the questions we ask in this intercultural work. If we want to be effective, we sometimes have to suspend belief in our own righteousness, at least enough to understand why someone else believes they're right in holding an opposite position. Immigration, which was the topic that took me down this rabbit hole, is not a simple matter with easy answers. It is complicated and complex and requires nuance... so many people I met in Honduras were convinced their lives would be so much better if they were to immigrate to the United States. And perhaps they would have been... certainly many of them have.

And who was I to question their desire to visit or even live in a foreign country? I was there representing mine. Peace Corps, if you think about it, is a brilliant idea – taking young, idealistic Americans and putting them in a completely foreign environment, with different languages and cultures. I don't know how it was when you were a young adult, but I had pretty much figured the world out and knew what I believed. Being thrust into an environment where I didn't even know how to flush a toilet or determine whether it was safe to drink the water, challenged me in ways I didn't know I needed to be challenged. But I did. And it changed me in ways I needed to grow.

As Stuart pointed out, it wasn't all hard work and drudgery. There was hardship for sure, and tragedy. But we also had fun. I learned to dance *punta*, the traditional dance of the Garifuna people. *Punta* is danced during Feria, a week of celebration, and in contests – competitive dancing, and also just for performance, and for fun.

It sure came in handy one summer night in Chicago, where I went to seminary a decade after returning from Honduras. They have a series downtown on Michigan Ave. called Summer Dance where different groups play music and teach dancing and the public can just show up to learn salsa or merengue or line dancing. There was a Garífuna troupe from Belize teaching *punta*, and was I in my element! They even called me up on stage when they saw, much to their amazement, this white woman dancing *punta*.

It came in handy another twenty years later, at my cousin's wedding on the island of Turks and Caicos inhabited by another people from Africa who landed on the shore in a slave ship but were freed upon arrival. The buzz the next morning among the employees at the resort was that I knew how to dance. I even got a marriage proposal from that night of dancing.

But I was already married by then. As you many of you know, or some of you may have guessed, I met my husband in the Peace Corps

We only overlapped a year in service, but wrote letters after that. You remember those? I wrote a lot of letters home – and my mom faithfully xeroxed them and sent them to other family members and kept them.

38 years after writing those letters, I still believe in foreign assistance and promoting world peace and friendship. I fully expect the pendulum to swing back and for our government once again to recognize the importance of our international relationships as mutual rather than unilateral and imposed, but we have a few more years of this one. In the meantime, we can do what we can do. We can learn and practice those intercultural skills and apply them to our relationships, our friendships, our congregation, our places of employment or residence. We can learn the history that is not taught in our schools, and help our children understand how very different we all are, and incredibly alike. We can be a loving transformative presence in the lives of others. We can make the world a better place.