

Earth Day and Easter
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
April 20, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Kelly Kanyid

This is a story about how my family became involved in mutual aid in our neighborhood. Mutual aid is a system where individuals voluntarily cooperate to help each other, out of a sense of solidarity.

In 2021, my husband Bradon, my daughter Mathilda, and I had not heard of mutual aid. What we had heard of, though, was the upcoming “heat dome,” and Mathilda, then 5, was worried about the people who would have to walk up our hill in the heat, and she wanted to help. As the temperatures outside began to climb, we filled a cooler with ice and bottled water, shaded it with an old beach umbrella, and taped to it a sign encouraging the reader to take a water if they needed one.

In the coming days, other things began to show up in or near the cooler. Neighbors began to leave water, juice, and canned goods for others to take. Cyclists began to tap at our door to give us cash they had on hand to contribute. One day a man approached Bradon in our driveway and with startling emotion, thanked him for saving his life. The week prior he had hiked up our hill, experienced heat stroke, and was able to cool down with the water from the cooler as he waited for his wife to take him to the hospital.

It became really apparent really quickly that our neighborhood needed something like this, not just because there was a great need for food and water - which there was, and still is - but because our neighborhood needed an outlet for the love they feel for other people. And likewise, our neighborhood needed to feel that love from their neighbors just as badly.

We decided to leave the cooler out for the whole summer, as it seemed that some people needed a way to express their care for the neighborhood just as much as others needed the food and water that was left behind.

In August I got in touch with the Vancouver Free Fridge Project, and by Mathilda’s first day of first grade, I was painting the structure they had built in our driveway that now houses a refrigerator and a pantry. What started as a 5 year old’s concern for her neighbors turned into a cooler in our yard, which evolved into joining a local mutual aid organization. For the last three and a half years, we’ve hosted a “Free Fridge” in our driveway - a community fridge and pantry that is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, filled with food by neighbors and volunteers meant for anyone who needs it, no questions asked. Here is a photo of what the Free Fridge and Pantry looks like today.

Lots of people visit our Free Fridge and Pantry - both to take things they need, and to give things they can to others. Neighbors of all stripes bring homegrown vegetables, or drop off an extra carton of eggs or milk from their weekly grocery run. Volunteers clean and sanitize the fridge and ensure its running safely. There appears to be no lack of need in our community, both for food and water, and for an outlet to give and receive love.

In a time when it is easy to question whether human decency is still a national practice, whole neighborhoods made up of the housed and houseless, people on the far right to far left, children and

elders, veterans, rich and poor are quietly supporting each other's shared humanity. My heart fills with hope as I see the exchange of resources between neighbors, knowing that despite a chasm of differences, we can still humanize and care for one another. The Free Fridge and Pantry stands as a monument to that solidarity which has the power to save us. It is a love letter from our neighborhood to itself.

***Earth Day and Easter*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Alleluia! After 40 days we can finally sing *Alleluia!*

It took well into my first ministry and took me by surprise to learn that in some Christian churches you weren't allowed to sing *Alleluia* during the 40 days of Lent. After all, I was raised Unitarian Universalist mostly in the West, where Unitarian Universalist congregations tend to be a bit more humanist in orientation and the children, back then, weren't taught the Jewish and Christian stories.

In Unitarian Universalist congregations, we tend to condense Lent, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter all into a single celebration. I mean, it's a practical consideration. We also have Passover to celebrate, and March saw the colorful Indian Holi celebration and the Persian New Year of Nowruz. Not that we celebrate all the world's religions on Sundays, but they're there and always a possibility for us.

Over time I've come to appreciate the longer stories of Passover and Easter. In fact, it seems to me that by skipping the forty days of trial, testing, penance, and suffering, Unitarian Universalists have sometimes missed the point of Easter. Likewise, skipping the plagues of gnats and frogs, hail, locusts and death of the firstborn child to get to the Passover and liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery, rather misconceives the relevance of collective liberation. For what is an *Alleluia!* without the preceding trials and tribulations? What is life without death? What is freedom without oppression? Our forward-looking sometimes naively optimistic faith can leave us unprepared for, say, the election of Donald Trump, the crumbling of human rights, or the devastating impact of global climate change.

Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, warned us of this nearly a hundred years ago – his first trip to Germany was in 1927 – and he always believed that had the anti-Nazi Underground Church in Germany acted together in the 1920's they could have prevented Hitler from rising to power.

It's difficult to preach that now, knowing that we didn't prevent the election of our current president. But that doesn't mean we give up because we failed... twice.

Adams believed that a decisive institution was needed to ensure a viable democratic society. He called this decisive institution, the voluntary association – voluntary because members are free to join or to sever their membership in the institution, like this one and it was designed to “engender or affect public opinion as a social force, and thus to resist or promote social change.”

Adams believed that the church, as a voluntary association, defines and nurtures our inner lives as well as our public lives as an agent for collective action in the world, collective liberation, if you will. The role

of the church, Adams said, is to grapple with the meaning of human existence. By dealing with the meaning of human existence, we may then go on to preserve it.

I love that poem that Jacob read as our story for all ages ([link to full poem here](#)), for the hope and conviction it offers. It is not a naïve denial of the situation, but rather grounded in the reality of destruction and death. The truth is, we may not be able to stop the destruction of our planet, but the terror of that fact, the bleakness of that reality, cannot, will not stop us from doing what is within our power to do.

*because baby we are going to fight
your mommy daddy
and even though there are those
hidden behind platinum titles
who like to pretend
that we don't exist*

*still
there are those
who see us*

*hands reaching out
fists raising up
banners unfurling
megaphones booming*

And indeed the poet, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, has gone on to be Climate Envoy to the annual meeting of nations signed up to the UN Framework Convention on Climate change.

A couple of weeks ago, Danielle Garret from this pulpit pointed out the “sharp and false dichotomy between nature and humans, seeing us as only the weavers of the web and not part of it, dependent on every other part, including each other.” It’s important to recognize the misleading and dangerous nature of such a dichotomy, especially as we explore and affirm our interdependence – the reality of our interconnections and mutual reliance.

Danielle Garret called out “an environmentalism that fails to see one another as part of the planet we profess to protect” as false and dangerous. There is no way to understand the Free Fridge Project, for example, as separate from the effects of climate change that caused the “heat dome” which inspired at least, Mathilda and Kelly’s involvement in this volunteer-run mutual aid network.

And there is no way to understand the climate crisis itself without unpacking the exploitation of the humans on the land, as well as the land and other life forms. Which is another way to say that to work for human rights is to work for the health of the planet and that to work for the health of the planet is to work for human rights.

The political signs I saw yesterday at the corner of 4th Plain and Andresen, though often blaming two particular men – Donald Trump and Elon Musk – for their actions, drew connections among the many

administrative executive orders and policies – from deportations to federal firings, voting rights to women’s rights and trans rights, environmental protection and DEI programs and the rule of law.

Yesterday marked the semiquincentennial, 250th anniversary, of the historic first battles of the Revolutionary War, the battles of Concord and Lexington. This new nation was created, for all its flaws, with the ideals of liberty, equality, natural and civil rights and responsible citizenship. I personally needed to join the protest yesterday to mark those battles, lest we lose in the next four years, all that was fought in the 8 years between 1775 and 1783. I don’t pretend to understand the full motives of the rebels, but appreciated a question that National Public Radio host Scott Simon asked Pulitzer prize winning journalist and historian Rick Atkinson – this was the re-run of a story about the start of the Revolutionary War, when in 2019 Atkinson had just published his book, “The British Are Coming!” Simon asked:

“A question must be asked in this day and age. Was the American Revolution truly a revolution for freedom, or was it a white patriarchy of slave owners and apologists for slave owners who simply wanted a bigger slice of the money pie?”

Atkinson’s answer was that it’s a little bit of both. He argued that it is not romanticizing the era excessively to believe “that they had their eye on a grander future than simply a slaveholding country that was a nice place to be if you were white and rich.”

He argued that the language “that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator and all those other fine words out of the Declaration of Independence are things they really believed.” Though they didn’t apply to slaves, or women, or indigents, at the time, but he says “it does open a vista into a future in which you can see an egalitarian society that’s quite different from the society that existed here in 1775 and is quite different from anything that exists anywhere else on earth.”

It is that vista into a future – a future that was never realized, never completed – but always promised – that we rallied yesterday to protest for. What I realize now – and many of you always knew – is that our hold on democracy was always tentative and the idealized version of America we hoped for never actualized. You could say this has been our Good Friday of the Easter story when we grieve the death of our dreamed America. In the words of Langston Hughes ([link to full poem here](#)),

*Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)*

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me.)...*

*I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—*

(here comes the resurrection, here comes the Easter message)

*And yet I swear this oath -
America will be!
Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,*

*We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!*

Much like Jetñil-Kijiner Hughes speaks the truth in this poem – that America never was America to him, to the African American citizen of this country, to the mixed race American with both Native American and white slave owner ancestry. Jetñil-Kijiner native to the Marshall Islands, writes

*and even though there are those
hidden behind platinum titles
who like to pretend
that we don't exist
that the marshall islands...
don't exist*

*still there are those who see us
we are spreading the word*

*and there are thousands out on the street
marching with signs
hand in hand
chanting for change NOW*

*and they're marching for you, baby
they're marching for us*

One of my favorite signs I've seen from these recent US protests is: *the Founding Fathers called. They're pissed.*

Oh were it true. *Where law ends, tyranny begins. And you can't deport all of us.*

It was heartening this week that the Supreme Court blocked the deportations of any Venezuelans under the Alien Enemies act of 1798. This is the same law used during World War II to hold Japanese-

American civilians in ~~internment~~ incarceration camps*, for which the US government and Ronald Reagan apologized in 1988.

Now, the fact that the administration claims they have no power to bring back Kilmar Abrego Garcia from the El Salvadoran prison where they sent him against a court order, is still terrifying, but it helps that the Supreme Court is doing its job.

Because we're Unitarian Universalist and didn't hold a Good Friday service – some UU congregations do, but we didn't – we have to wrap up the whole of the story, grief and celebration, death and new life, oppression and freedom, all on a single Sunday.

And though Earth Day doesn't come until Tuesday, it has been 55 years since the founding, we know that this holiday, too, comes with great pain and near glimpses of hope. For we didn't have to turn it into a holiday at all, a special day to honor the earth and the environmental movement, until its life was threatened.

Before Earth Day was a holiday, every day was Earth Day. Every day we live and breathe on this planet and call it home. Only in recent history do we remove ourselves from identifying with the earth and thinking of it as 'other', or as yet another resource to exploit, another body to enslave, to abuse, to domesticate.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 woke people up to the environment and the inextricable links between pollution and public health. Since then, the realization of the effects of human activities driving climate change with the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas, have added to our growing recognition that unless we change our ways, we will kill our planet, our home, life on it, including ourselves.

I believe our exploitation of people and exploitation of the planet are inextricably related and that we can, through the miracle of community, learn to undo both. We can reconnect with the Earth and not treat it as other, but as our beloved home. We can connect with our neighbors and form systems of mutual aid, that provide food for the hungry, and confound those who would separate and divide us, keep us apart and disconnected.

Over time I've come to appreciate the longer stories of Passover and Easter. When we skip the forty days of trial, testing, penance, and suffering, we miss the point of Easter. Or skipping the plagues of lice and flies, pestilence and boils to get to the Passover and liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery, we misconceive the relevance of collective liberation. For what is an *Alleluia*! without the preceding trials and tribulations? What is life without death? What is freedom without oppression? What is spring without winter?

It may seem today like we're in the midst of those trials and tribulations. It may feel like Good Friday and our savoir has been murdered. But just the fact that we are here together, in defiance of those who would isolate and separate us, tells me it is Easter morning. The sun has risen, hope has been resurrected, and we have each other.

And all the strangers in the park last Saturday and on the street yesterday – all the people who hold our values who don't attend this church – give me hope.

“Our hearts and spirits already know how to express themselves;” says Tania Márquez, “we just have to open up our hearts and let both flor y canto spring forth in song, in poetry, in actions that help make the world more beautiful; that help reveal deeper truths; that help us connect to the source of life.”

As Earth Day approaches, may we learn from our Mother. May we let her pull us from her core and ground us. May we change, just a little bit, each and every day. May we surprise even ourselves with a splash of color. And may we keep a long view – remember the 4 and a half billion years it took her to arrive at this moment, and know that nothing is so urgent as to prevent us from being here now. Winter has gone. Spring has arrived. And as Tagore reminds us, “faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.”

*I used the inaccurate term “internment” in my sermon on Sunday to describe the incarceration of Japanese Americans. A helpful congregant shared with me [this website](#) with accurate information about the incarceration and terminology used to describe the government’s unjust actions. I regret the use of that term and any pain it may have caused those who were incarcerated or whose families suffered incarceration.