

Choosing Hope
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
December 14, 2025

Reflection on the Theme - Deborah Willoughby

These short days and long nights can lend themselves to despair, which means this is a perfect time to seek out hope, to resolve to live according to our values, to be on the side of love.

I'm pretty much an introvert, and I deeply enjoy quiet time with books, my garden and my dog. One of the gifts of retirement, for me, is unscheduled time. I mean no disrespect for those who thrive with a busy schedule, but I get a little snarly if I have more than three things I have to do in a day.

Despite how much I love unscheduled time, my values don't allow me to completely withdraw into my nest. I love my family, friends and community. I enjoy new experiences. And I'm called to participate in the world, to find ways to help protect this beautiful planet and the people near and far.

Which is a long way of telling you that during long winter nights, when I'm giving serious thought to my place in the world and how I want to use my time, I turn to my calendar.

As winter really sets in, I know my mental health is better if I have something on my calendar to look forward to. I need more than the scented candle and bubble bath version of self care—although there's nothing wrong with that. My goal is a calendar that reflects my values and that reminds me of opportunities for joy in the coming year.

I make sure there's time for weekly get togethers with friends, a weekly meal with my children, and for open hearted service to this church and this community. For much of this past year, I dedicated time on Monday mornings to writing letters to politicians and certain corporations expressing my views on current events. In the new year, I'm certain I'll find ways to participate in the incredibly important elections.

Next month, I'm looking forward to the discussion groups here at church for people who are taking the Transforming Hearts sessions on how to counter the anti-trans movement.

What else is going on the calendar? A couple of trips to the coast with friends. The Jane Austen conference in Tucson, and my 50-year high school reunion in Humboldt County, California.

I won't say I'm excited about regular dental and medical appointments, but I'm well aware that I'm lucky to have access to health care, so I try to treat those calendar events with gratitude.

My calendar reminds me of my place in the world. It reminds me that I have chosen to allocate time to care for myself, the people closest to me, and the world around me. It brings me hope.

Choosing Hopes© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

*Perhaps it does not begin.
Perhaps it is always.
Perhaps it takes a lifetime to open our eyes,
to learn to see what has forever shimmered in front of us*

John Murray suffered from depression throughout his life. He was born in 1741 to an upper class family in England. In his autobiography, he wrote, *"I believed that I had nothing to hope, but every thing to fear, both from my Creator, and my father."*

It was his move from fear, despair and depression to hope, from damnation to salvation, that has us refer to John Murray as the "father" of Universalism in America.

The truth is, as John Murray knew, life can be hard. John Murray knew tragedy all too well. Denied an education by his father who thought the only book he need read was the Bible, Murray was self-taught. He suffered personal losses when an early love interest broke his heart and his closest friend died. His father died when John was 19. He was thrown into a state of despair, about these life altering events and his uncertainty about the faith he had inherited.

"I believed that I had nothing to hope, but every thing to fear, both from my Creator, and my father; and these soul-appalling considerations, by forcing a conclusion, that I was but making provision for alternate torture, threw a cloud over innocent enjoyment."

As Murray listened to different preachers, he eventually found his way toward Universalism. He met Eliza, whom he called the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and married her. John and Eliza heard James Rely preach and they were both profoundly affected. *"The veil was taken from my heart,"* John wrote in his autobiography, explaining, *It was clear, as any testimony in divine revelation, that Christ Jesus, died for all, for the sins of the whole world; ... and that every one, for whom Christ died must finally be saved ...*

What a different view of the world than the Calvinism of his father's faith!

Murray wrote that, *"We now attended public worship, not only as a duty ... but it became our pleasure, our consolation, and our highest enjoyment. We began to feed upon the truth as it is in Jesus, and every discovery we made filled us with unutterable transport.... I conceived, if I had an opportunity of conversing with the whole world, the whole world would be convinced. It might truly have been said, that we had a taste of heaven below."*

Soon, Eliza and John were blessed with a son. But their good fortune was not to last. The infant son died, then Eliza died. Four of his siblings died, and Murray was thrown into debtor's prison.

His wife and his child die, and he is in prison. We often start the story of John Murray's life well after this point, but I think it is important to start here. While he is suffering.

Because suffering surrounds us. We don't have to look far, to find a story like John Murray's. This last week, just blocks from this church, about 6 blocks west of here in front of El Antojito restaurant, ICE agents arrested José Paniagua Calderón, aged 27 – they dragged him out of his vehicle, ran over his foot,

and sent him to the Tacoma ICE facility. Likewise, 51 year old, Ricardo Briceño Bretado, was taken from his vehicle after ICE agents smashed his windows – on the same day, after being cornered on highway 500, just north of here. Both men were then transferred to El Paso, Texas over a thousand miles from their arrests and their families. According to Tyler Brown in the Columbian, “Carmen Paniagua called her brother-in-law’s transfer a clear act of retaliation for his family speaking out. She called the move by federal authorities inhumane, saying it’s like ‘moving people like chess pieces to a judge that will favor their agenda.’”

The Columbian article said that “Court records show that Paniagua Calderon’s only known infraction is a 2022 fine in Lewis County District Court for fishing at a dam where it was not allowed. The fine was \$78 and paid in full. There was no hearing.” And that “A search of Washington and Oregon’s online judicial departments did not yield any records for Briceño Bretado.”

Sometimes our suffering is the result of the finitude of life and the natural order of things – we might say that Lee O’Neil and Arlene Rand’s deaths are like that. Lee died too soon and of a crippling disease, but was provided health care and solace in the end. But sometimes our suffering is caused by the cruelty of others, such as the abductions of José and Ricardo, or the debtor’s prison in John Murray’s time. Many of us had thought conditions had improved for the marginalized, but the vengeance with which this administration is pursuing it’s America First policies reveals a cruelty that must be stopped, for our own consciences and for our lives.

I gathered on Thursday with about 30 clergy in the Portland metro area who are organizing resistance to these abductions and disappearances – though we know where Ricardo Briceño Bretado is now – he was deported to Mexico, there was no record of his location between his arrest on Monday and Wednesday when he was relocated to El Paso. Hence, my use of the term disappearance.

According to Aaron Korthuis with the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, the government used to keep people local if they had legal counsel, but that is no longer true. They are trying to avoid habeas petitions - that legal procedure that allows people who have been detained by the government to challenge their detention in court. If a criminal defendant or an immigrant detainee believes that the government lacks legal authority to detain them, they can petition a court to order their release. The remedy is available to both citizens and noncitizens in the United States.

But not if they’ve been deported to Mexico before their attorney can catch up with them.....

In any case, the meeting I attended was to help us understand this situation in general, and to figure out how we might best lend our hand, use our power as clergy, to ease this suffering and bring this cruelty to an end. We have to harness the power of community, because as individuals we are pretty powerless, but together we have power – the power to return Jimmy Kimmel to the airwaves, as a recent example.

This church has found a home here in the Maplewood neighborhood. These abductions took place on 4th Plain which is the dividing line between the Maplewood neighborhood and what is called 4th Plain Village. This an immigrant neighborhood, as we know, with Spanish, Japanese, Ukranian, and Russian being spoken in the Maplewood Moseley Community Garden we host here on our property. Not too many of us in this church live in this neighborhood, but we all come here on a regular basis, at least on

Sundays. Many of us frequent the restaurants on 4th plain – Thai, Mexican, El Salvadoran food, and so it is not a stretch to imagine we will personally witness an ICE raid in these coming days and months.

In addition to keeping some phone numbers in my phone, LULAC – League of United Latin American Citizens, Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network, and Portland Immigration Rights Coalition – numbers I can use to report sightings of abductions, I now carry a whistle. You may have picked up a whistle and instructions at White Oak Bookstore in downtown Vancouver – they’ve been distributing them for a while. I don’t have a whistle for you this morning – I figure you can obtain your own, but I do have instructions so that you know what to do with that whistle, though I can explain it to you easy enough.

If you see ICE, blow your whistle in three short bursts. If you hear that whistle, either – and this depends on your visible social identity – get to safety or follow the sound, “form a crowd and get loud” and bear witness to ICE activity with others.

If you are witness to an abduction, blow continuously, making longer and sustained sounds. And report the abduction immediately to one of those numbers – LULAC, WAISN, or PIRC. The phone numbers are listed on the whistle instructions, which you’re invited to pick up this morning as interested. I’ve put them on a slide for those online, but if you’re here in the room you can pick them up on paper. If you email me at minister@uucvan.org, I can send you an electronic version of the handout.

I really urge us all to get educated and to attend trainings offered by any of these organizations or the ACLU. It’s important to know your rights, and it’s better to be prepared ahead of time, rather than try to figure it out as we become witnesses to these atrocities. There are lots of instructions online about how to film ICE agents and what your rights are in these circumstances – check out the websites of any of these organizations I mention.

Our Universalist heritage demands that we not ignore or pretend that this violence is not taking place, in our neighborhood, in our city, our nation. The theology that began with the idea that Christ Jesus died for the sins of all and saved humanity became a theology that simply taught the inherent worth and dignity of each and all, and the danger of considering anyone disposable or irredeemable. As Pastor Martin Niemöller wrote

*First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me*

*And there was no one left
To speak out for me*

John Murray's brother-in-law helped get him out of prison and helped him pay his debts. But Murray remained too depressed to preach. He said that he wished *"to pass through life, unheard, unseen, unknown to all, as though I ne'er had been."*

In 1770 he quit his life in the old world and resolved to start afresh in the new.

"We don't know what will happen – this is vital when we are dealing with hope." Says Alison Cornish. "Virginia Woolf wrote 'the future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.'

So Murray quits his life in the Old World and resolves to start afresh in the New.

"There followed an episode which has since passed into legend and become a foundational myth of American Universalism." This is how the story reads in our online dictionary of Unitarian Universalism.

"Shortly after arriving in the American colonies, the ship on which Murray was traveling, the brig *Hand-in-hand*, was grounded on a sandbar and remained for a time becalmed off the coast of New Jersey, near Good-Luck Point. The captain sent Murray ashore on a foraging expedition. While gathering supplies he ran into Thomas Potter, who had built a chapel on his property to accommodate itinerant preachers. Finding out that Murray had been a preacher, and possibly learning something of the young man's views, Potter invited him to preach from his pulpit. Murray had not intended to preach in America. That was one of the many aspects of his previous life that he sought to forget. He demurred, telling his host that he would have to leave as soon as there was a favourable wind. Nevertheless Potter extracted a promise from Murray that he would preach if his ship remained offshore on Sunday. The winds did not change, and Murray preached. Potter was greatly impressed and invited Murray to stay. Murray traveled with the ship to New York, but he soon returned to New Jersey and began a popular evangelical career." end quote (online dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist biography) passing along the good news of Universalist theology.

This episode is often called the only Universalist miracle in history.

John Murray then married Judith Sargent, the most prominent woman essayist of her day. Though John is often called the "father of Universalism in America," Judith's family had also reached a universalist position prior to Murray's landing near Good-Luck Point. Her first husband, John Stevens, had fled to the West Indies to avoid debtors prison himself and had died there.

Though John Murray suffered from depression throughout his life, writing *"I believed that I had nothing to hope, but every thing to fear, both from my Creator, and my father."* He embraced the essential unknowability of this world; he hoped that life would change.

Universalism is not just about the change from damnation to salvation, it is the change from fear, despair and depression to hope.

Hope is “not the belief that things will go well, it’s the belief that they could improve and that we don’t know what the future holds.” Says Jamil Zaki. Because we don’t know what the future holds, our actions matter. Like Deborah, we resolve to live our values and choose our activities with care.

*Perhaps this day
will be the mountain
over which
the dawn breaks*

May we remain ever hopeful and ever open to the light of change.