

Subverting Columbus
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
October 18, 2026

Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

Our theme this month is courage, which takes many forms. Sometimes it's big and public. Other times it's quiet, persistent, and possibly overlooked. Because Indigenous Peoples Day was last week, my thoughts went to the courage and persistence of the indigenous people of California's North Coast, which is where I'm from. They carry on, despite brutal oppression dating back to the late 1800s when the gold miners and timber barons arrived.

In about 1981, I was working for my hometown newspaper, and I had the opportunity to accompany a couple of colleagues to attend part of the Karuk Renewal of the Earth ceremonies, which is a two-week cycle of dances and rituals intended, literally, to fix the world. The Karuk tradition of dancing, singing, fasting and feasting has sustained the people since ancient times.

Two reporters, one working for my hometown newspaper and one for a regional publication, were invited by the Karuk tribe to attend a white deerskin dance on the banks of the Klamath river, and I somehow was allowed to tag along. I like to think it was because I had some cultural knowledge from living in the area and had taken Native American studies classes from indigenous professors who taught at the local university. But I think it had more to do with the fact that I was dating one of the reporters. Regardless, I was there as an observer, not as a reporter, and that was a gift.

I was pretty green, but I did have a sense of how the simple presence of journalists can change the nature of the events we cover. But this was the first time I truly understood what I would have missed if I had been out in front asking questions, gathering facts, and finding people to explain what was happening.

Because I wasn't working, I was able to stay in the background and just observe quietly.

It wasn't a large event. The three of us who were visitors were welcomed warmly during the feast of roasted salmon, acorn soup and fresh cantaloupe. The elders gave us guidelines on what parts of the rituals we could observe. Dancers appeared in beautiful clothing and ornaments. They stayed near the camp for hours and then moved down the river. I slept on the sandy riverbank, surrounded by the sound of drums, whistles, prayers and singing, which continued long into the night. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced.

The next day, my colleagues joined a group that was fishing the old way. I stayed at a camp where women were preparing lunch. They didn't need my help, but we enjoyed chatting while they worked. At some point a quiet young man joined us. He looked exhausted. I realized he was the spiritual leader in training, the fatawenan, who had been running long miles from holy site to holy site. The training for a spiritual leader involved abstaining from food and water while visiting sacred places for prayers and rituals. His tasks were done, and he was greeted with respect and a warm meal. I was struck again with awe at the rightness of that moment in time.

The Karuks' world renewal ceremonies were beautiful, an ancient religion that continues today despite generations of oppression. The white deerskin dance wasn't being offered as a relic or curiosity for outsiders like me. I believe the journalists were there so they could remind the majority culture that the Karuks persevere, and that they dance and pray for the renewal of the world, an act of defiance but also an act of love for all creation.

Subverting Columbus © by Jacob Tennesen

It was just Indigenous People's Day, aka Columbus Day, which at best is kind of an awkward celebration. I always thought the 1996 sci-fi movie Independence Day,

in which aliens invade and kill millions of innocent people, was named for the wrong holiday. Those spaceships were a lot like Columbus's ships, which delivered a bloody half-millennium of American colonialism. Even those white settlers who didn't commit genocide still engaged in self-entitled trespassing and larceny. Like Goldilocks in the three bears story. Only that she never leaves at the end. And me? I'm a white man, born in the Midwest and now living in the Northwest. I feel perfectly within my rights to put down roots in Washington, just like the pioneers did. But should I, given my morally dubious heritage? Americans have gotten a lot better at admitting our messy history, renaming the holiday for Indigenous People and increasingly reciting land acknowledgements like we do weekly in this church. But none of that feels truly satisfying. We non-indigenous people are still here, on stolen land. I don't realistically think we're going to give everything back. Am I just supposed to feel vaguely uncomfortable about the whole thing?

Meanwhile, our country is taking a turn for the worse. White supremacists feel empowered by a government that largely endorses their worldview and has mobilized to deport anyone who they decree does not belong here. The old settler dream of an all-white America hasn't been abandoned but is still actively being pursued. I want to stand up for the rights of immigrants, but it gets complicated when I think about my own Goldilocks immigrant ancestors. How can I claim today's new arrivals have a right to be here, if I can't quite articulate a reason why I do?

Our church's theme this month is courage, which may be the key to resolving this dilemma. What is nationalism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, if not merely cowardice? Some people are so scared of anything different that they treat harmless changes like a threat. They want a belligerent bully to protect them from unfamiliar people and ideas. That's the coward's way. But facing those differences, reaching out and making meaningful connections with people who don't live exactly like you do, is a healing act. It's not easy; as emphasized by the fictional doctor in today's reading, other people are irritating. It takes courage and deliberate will to actively share love across cultural boundaries. If we do it well, everyone can find a sense of belonging.

In 1975 my newly married parents left Wisconsin, the state where they had lived their entire lives, and drove to Alaska to look for work as teachers. They found jobs in Angoon, a Native Tlingit village near Juneau. It was a different world for my folks, who had never seen mountains, or whales, or much of Native culture. They were embraced by the village and even assigned to clans. The

villagers had some fun with my parents' naiveté, telling them to be very quiet to sneak up on the clams they intended to dig. My parents decided to pursue long-term careers as Alaskan teachers, later moving to the school district on Kodiak Island. They always returned to Wisconsin for at least a few months each year. On one of those return trips, I was born. And thus I grew up, spending part of each year near my extended family amid the farms of Wisconsin, and the rest of the year surrounded by Sitka spruce and fishing boats in coastal Alaskan villages.

For most of my childhood we lived on Kodiak in a relatively new, unincorporated rural community. But when I started high school we moved to a very distinct village: Ouzinkie, population 221, on nearby Spruce Island. Most of the people in Ouzinkie are Alutiiq by blood and Russian Orthodox by faith. I was very much an outsider as a white Protestant teachers' kid, not to mention that I was nerdy and bad at basketball. However everyone was welcoming as long as we were willing to adapt to the customs. I attended the Alaska Federation of Natives conference in Anchorage, despite not being in any way a Native American, simply because that's just what all the high schoolers did, and I was the only white one. I played lapture, a baseball-like game seemingly found nowhere else that the whole village comes together for on the beach around Easter. I babysat for a single dad who was passionate about securing and preparing wild subsistence protein like deer and seafood, though he was also a big fan of spam. I also saw some of the challenges, including mental health issues like addiction and depression which are largely an aftereffect of colonialism and the resulting generational trauma. In Ouzinkie I got to experience being a minority who didn't quite fit in, something that has shaped my worldview in a more compassionate direction ever since.

Part of Ouzinkie culture is indigenous, but another part is Russian. The common surnames are Squartsoff, Panamarioff, Chichenoff. The prettiest building is the Orthodox church with its blue onion-shaped steeple. Most houses have a corner devoted to icons of saints. The most popular is St. Herman, the patron saint of North America, who actually lived there on Spruce Island. Holidays like Russian Christmas are celebrated two weeks later than their western counterparts. The festivities include "starring" in which a crowd travels from house to house and blesses the icons with a large sparkly spinning wheel resembling a star. The village is occasionally visited by monks from the monastery on the far side of the island, built on the site of St. Herman's hermitage and grave.

St. Herman had arrived in Alaska in 1794 as a missionary. He was a monk, and I imagine him a lot like the character Father Zosima, quoted in this mornings'

reading, as well as an embodiment of that patient and humble lifelong love that Zosima exalts. Herman had spent nearly a year traveling from Europe to Alaska by going east. At the time, Russian capitalists like Alexander Baranov had free reign to extract resources from the Russian colony using the most brutal and oppressive tactics available. The merchants forced the Native people to collect pelts of otters and other animals, often by kidnapping family members and holding them hostage until the ransom of furs was paid. Baranov and his buddies tried to hide their ghastly actions from the monks. But Herman saw. He spoke out against the abuse of Native peoples and stood with them in defense of their rights. When a deadly epidemic hit the Native population, St. Herman cared for the sick and dying like a nurse. He taught their children to read and to garden Russian vegetables. And when his fellow missionaries returned to Russia, tired of the bleak conditions and the harsh treatment by the fur traders, Herman stayed. He had found the place where he would live the most meaningful life he could.

To be clear, I'm not lobbying in support of missionaries in general. Missionaries can do a lot of harm when they assume their viewpoint is the only correct one and try to suppress local culture. Herman was a Christian evangelical who intended to, and did, convert thousands of people to his faith, with little regard to the value of their existing spiritual practices. That is to say, other than the fact that he was technically canonized, Herman was no saint. But the fact that he didn't head back to the motherland right after the baptisms says something. He remained the rest of his life on Spruce Island with its Native population. He saw their humanity. And they've honored him ever since.

The U.S. bought Alaska from Russia, but similar stories continued to be replayed. In Angoon, the U.S. Navy demanded hundreds of blankets as a tribute, and bombarded the village when the Native people couldn't deliver. The villagers had rebuilt their town from the ruins when my parents arrived there a century later. My folks were in a way doing what St. Herman would have done: bonding with a people traumatized by colonialism, sharing their knowledge, and joining in beloved community. They returned to Angoon for a visit just last year and were warmly welcomed.

In this world there are the exploiters and the exploited. The exploiters are Columbus and Baranov and some modern-day names. The exploited are not passive victims but resilient heroes who have defied oppression through their own indomitable spirit. But then there's another set of people, like St. Herman and my parents, who, with courage and kindness, have cared for the targets of

injustice. Together we can upend the colonial playbook and create a society for everyone. If I can craft a life like that, I will feel no shame about residing here in the house of the three bears instead of back on the land of my forebears.

Intercultural exchange is a good thing, if you can immerse yourself in it and learn from it. We should reach across the dividing water like Columbus did, if we do it for the opposite reasons: not for conquest but for concord. I left Ouzinkie having made the decision to spend a year as an exchange student in Venezuela –that’s another story, but it has the same point: everyone benefits if you can meet a different culture with an open heart.

Our world is interconnected. Actions in one place affect people all over the planet. The American military doesn’t only attack villages on our continent anymore. We extract resources elsewhere at the expense of the local peoples. We burn fuel that causes climate change, leading to floods or droughts in other countries. We create refugees with no homes. If all the colonizers left the Americas, the injustices would continue, just remotely. We have a responsibility to everyone on the planet because we’re all one global village. As St. Herman realized, we must strive to help the oppressed because the oppressors are, all too often, our own people.

This means indigenous issues and immigrant issues are actually the same problem. It’s all exploiters and exploited, and people in the middle who can intervene. Exploitation can happen from afar, but healing intervention works best with personal proximity. An influx of even more foreigners won’t make things worse for Native Americans. It will improve things for everyone, because it’s harder for one group to act like a bully when no group is the majority. But this requires a universally inclusive vision.

If my justification for living on colonized land is that multiculturalism is good, and I can help heal the world by building connections with different people, then that has to apply to everyone. The only logical reasoning I can find for why I should have a right to live in Clark County is if we extend that right to the whole world. If someone in Russia, or Mexico, or Kenya wants to become an American, they should be able to do so quickly and easily. Otherwise, we have two categories of human, determined entirely by the accident of where you were born. This is as morally abhorrent as South African apartheid, or Jim Crow segregation, or the yellow star badges mandated by the Nazis. But while today most people recognize those institutions as wrong, somehow we still think it’s fine for US citizenship to be unattainable if your birth certificate has the wrong latitude and longitude.

History will judge us harshly on this. And in the meantime, we miss out on making new friends, getting to try exceptional foods and customs, and all the other benefits of sharing our different lives with each other.

Furthermore, it's a simple fact of anthropology and math that all the world's peoples have a shared heritage of identical ancestors just a few thousand years ago. Long after distinct cultures were scattered all over the planet, ancient people were still always traveling and trysting, even back and forth across challenging barriers like the Bering Strait. Because we're a species of immigrants, it's what we do. That means everyone's ancestry is everywhere. The ancient people who witnessed the eruption of Mt Mazama which formed Crater Lake are the direct ancestors of today's northwest Native tribes. But they are also the direct ancestors of me, and you, and every other human alive. As were the ancient peoples living in the Congo or the Levant at that time. Of course Native Americans have a special claim to this land because the culture that they and their grandparents' grandparents grew up in is homegrown here. But everyone has family buried under them because all humans are family.

Intercultural interactions are the best antidote to nationalism. Physically moving to an isolated village isn't for everyone. But opportunities are everywhere. Just a few blocks from here I watched the Cowlitz Indian Tribe Drum Group celebrate the new Grandmother Camus statue at its unveiling in 2024. Go witness things like that. Befriend your neighbors who don't share your cultural background. Consider hosting an exchange student. Follow people in other countries on social media. Forging those relationships is the key to a peaceful world. We can reject the idea that any people are "others." We can build a land of empathy and inclusion out of the ruins of the failed colonialist project based on inequality and supremacy. And we can stand up against the powerful and greedy who want to dehumanize people for their own ends.

I haven't been back to Ouzinkie since high school, but I keep in touch with many of my old friends on social media. Some are doing great, some are struggling with mental health, and some are no longer with us. I don't have an easy answer for what Native Alaskans still need, but I keep in touch with many of my old friends on social media. Some are doing great, some are struggling with mental health, and some are no longer with us. I don't have an easy answer for what Native Alaskans still need, but ignoring them won't help, nor will launching some Baranov-style corporate project where a few people get rich at the expense of everyone else. It will take the kind of active love that Father Zosima speaks of:

courageous, patient, and humble. We can't undo Columbus, but we can discover something that he somehow never discovered in all his travels: that our lives are enriched when we treat all the world's people as our siblings in spirit, and the real New World will be the one we all build together.