

## July 7 Spirituality and Patriotism, Soulful Sunday

When I meet someone new here on the island at the store or post office or pharmacy or movie theater, the conversation inevitably comes round to asking what I do. I tell them I am the minister of the UU Meeting House and raise my gaze and point to the gold dome, visible from so many island vantage point.

The conversation that follows goes something like: So are you a reverend, pastor, or minister? I tell them that my official title is reverend and that I am the minister of the UU Meeting House.

And then they invariably feel the need to tell me why they do not attend any church services by saying something like, “Well Reverend Linda, my church is the beach, or the mores, or the ocean on a surfboard, or the meditation of a long bicycle ride.” And then I often say, “Well, you’d fit right in with us at the UU!”

Jarvis Jay Masters, a death row inmate, convicted of killing a prison guard while in prison wrote the book Finding Freedom and That Bird Has My Wings. He said during an interview:

“There’s so many things that happen to people, that happen to me, and we can look back and say *I’m glad I didn’t do this* or, *I’m glad I did that* or even, *I’m glad I’m able to think about this*....I wouldn’t have met my teacher or written *Finding Freedom* and *That Bird Has My Wings* and many other things, had I not been put on death row. That’s a strange thing to me and I’ll forever try to understand it. It’s something that will haunt me for the rest of my life—asking myself how I’m making sense of it.”

And we all do this don’t we, try to make sense of our lives.

Jay Jarvis tells a story about how when he was in prison but not yet on death row. One day out on the yard of San Quentin there was a seagull. It had been raining and the seagull was there paddling around in a puddle.

One of the inmates picked up something in the yard and was about to throw it at the bird. Jarvis didn’t even think about it—he automatically put out his hand to stop the man. Of course, this escalated the man’s aggression and he started yelling. Who the hell did Jarvis think he was? And why did Jarvis care so much about some blankety-blank bird?

Everyone started circling around, just waiting for the fight. The other inmate was screaming at Jarvis, “Why’d you do that?” And out of Jarvis’s mouth came the words, “I did that because that bird’s got my wings.”

That bird’s got our wings.

In trying to define spirituality, this spirituality that so many say they have, I have asked many questions and read a bit too. And for me, this one saying, *that bird's got my wings*, this understanding of connection to self, other, nature, earth- is at the heart of this spirituality.

I think too what defines this spirituality that so many mention, is that it does not require we let go of science or intellect to embody it. It is grounded enough to use doubt, inquiry and the experience of mystery to recognize the oneness of all that is.

I'll call it then an integrated spirituality which asks us to peel away the barriers between self and other until what sustains and destroys life is felt as shared: wings, the bleached bones of a migrant in the desert, a child's longing for comfort, the hand of one who has no home extended in greeting... this integrated spirituality is the sinew between bone and consciousness, self and other, inside and outside.

Integrated spirituality allows us to love, risk, seek and reach beyond ourselves in unexpected ways because it fosters the recognition that the bird has our wings, the migrant has our hopes, the environment has our breath, the caged child on our very borders has our cry for compassion, the person without a home has our longing for a place to rest.

But what to do with this integrated spirituality that we share, in silence, in music, in poetry, on the beach, in the ocean, riding our bicycles as the wind opens our eyes wider? How can this inform our moral core and action?

In case you missed the introduction this morning, I recently read that some people are quite upset that Halle Bailey, an African American singer, will be playing the fictional character of Ariel in the Little Mermaid.

One tweet on this subject reads, "No, I want the white, red headed mermaid! Do not incorporate diversity into this! Do not ruin our childhoods!"

Of course, all the young black children who have never had a mermaid or princess who looks like them, have long suffered the harm caused when goodness, beauty, talent and the ability to change the course of one's life belongs to white people alone.

Integrated spirituality, the awareness it builds, gives us the ears to hear this response about a white Ariel as racist. Integrated spirituality feels the outrage as tanks and jets, instruments of war, worn as garlands by our highest government officials were used to celebrate the birth of our nation. Integrated spirituality keeps our hearts open while pictures in our newsfeed role across our screens of children drowned beside their parents while trying to cross the Rio Grande, legal channels whittled down to nothing. America as safe harbor is no more.

And then what my dear friends? Is the awareness that integrated spirituality grants enough or is it the surfer without the board, the biker without the wheels, the hiker without the boots, the climber without the rope?

In other words, how can the cultivation of the awareness of integrated spirituality-that we are one people on one earth- be sustained, be useful, be that which makes a difference to us and others?

Combining integrated spirituality with intentional community, community that is bound by a willingness to do the hard work, to risk criticism, to assess and step out of the boxes we make and protect together, to forgive and to be accountable, becomes a call to compassion and action, reflection and resistance, hope and reaching out.

How can we learn who we are and what ours is to do next without noticing our reflection in the eyes of those also listening, ears pressed to the ground of humanity, for the call of love, the cry of dignity?

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrates the writing of a document that safeguards, through a government formed by the people and of the people, the inherent, inalienable rights of happiness and freedom. In fact, this Declaration declares that this is the purpose of government, to ensure that rights granted by god cannot be trampled by men and indeed must be sustained, consciously and systematically, by all.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>1</sup>

This WE of the Declaration of Independence was a narrow, white, educated, able bodied, propertied, male WE.

But by writing a document that included the words *inalienable rights* or rights not dependent on station, color, or gender, I believe the founding fathers knew that something they believed to be inherent, the right to happiness and safety, would lead to a revolution of inclusion. Using the logic of the Declaration itself, there can be no barriers of class, race, gender, ableism, identity to what is innately human.

Indeed, the Declaration of Independence was cited to destroy the institution of slavery, it was used in the fight for voting rights for women and by Martin Luther King to insist on the rights of Africans-Americans.

So, who are WE now? Which WE, in this diverse nation of ours, do we pledge to protect with our government built as a democracy to ensure the inalienable right to happiness and safety?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document>

What kind of happiness was intended here? What kind of safety? The right to get everything we want no matter the cost to others or the planet? The right to lock and shutter doors against the immigrant, the homeless, the children, to put them in cages without water or food until we figure out what is next?

I think this inherent right of happiness as understood in our Declaration of Independence is the bridge between integrated spirituality and intentional community, between self and other, between contemplation and action. It is the sinew connecting bone to consciousness.

According to an article by Jon Meacham, "Free to Be Happy" the Jeffersonian notion of happiness and its pursuit "was ancient...and reached back to Aristotle." Meacham writes that for Aristotle, "Happiness was the end of action, the whole point of life...not about smiley faces, self-esteem or even feelings...it was ultimate good..."<sup>2</sup>

For Jefferson, eudaimonia- the Greek word for happiness- evokes virtue, good conduct, and generous citizenship. It was about pursuit of the good of the whole, because the good of the whole was crucial to the genuine well being of the individual....This is the principle which founded our young nation.<sup>3</sup>

Happiness was a radical principle of contemplation and action for Jefferson, It makes caring for oneself a practice that creates the necessity to care for others. Because others uncared for leads to unhappiness for self. When the humanity of others is trampled, denied and abused, everyone's access to humanity dwindles. Do you feel it? As children die in detention centers, do you feel your own humanity, your own inherent goodness, grow more distant?

This field of integrated spiritual practice and intentional community roots us all in contemplation and action, communion with others, moral inquiry, holy doubt.

That bird's got my wings.

If we cannot consider, with community as our surfboard, with committed conversation as our bike paths, with salt water as our disagreements held in faith that we are all worthy of dignity, with our heart pressed to the dunes of the mores listening for the call of love, then happiness and its pursuit will be what divides us, chains us, marks some as we and others as them.

Patriotism belongs to us all. It is the right, protected in the Declaration of Independence, to reconsider, to remake WE, to be broken and rebuilt in committed community. It was written as a promise to be wide enough, strong enough to be rewritten, the heroes recast, the container broken and rebuilt.

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Meacham, "Free to be Happy," Time Magazine, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

It is written to leave us in one another's hands first and ties us to the responsibility to ask who is included in WE and to insist we mean one more each time.

Patriotism means protecting this essential right, the right of interconnection as the basis of our democracy, and to nurture a happiness born to as surely as our organs and breath, a happiness that reaches from self to other, from the singular to a WE wide enough for all people. Patriotism asks that we be a people who insists on this alone- that you and ze and per and her and he are worthy, you were born worthy and we will fight and pray and bike and surf and march and incite compassion and hike and wander to make sure that your right to a land in which your happiness can grow to its full fruition is maintained. That is what creates safety, not guns, not tanks, not white princesses, not war jets. This alone. This insistence that we, the people, were given the seeds of happiness to make the world a place in which all people can thrive. May we look back at our lives and find meaning that sustains us. We have one another wings.

Amen.