Reflection on the Theme of Interdependence by Ronnie Mars

The 'pursuit of happiness' is a privilege not extended to all born in this country. We have seen in the last few months the systemic racism carried out in the streets of America on individuals that look like me. We are not a united state of its citizens. American democracy is a social experiment. Interdependence is something we strive to recognize.

The Supreme Court ruled against segregation in 1954. South Carolina, the state I was born in, did not comply until 1963. In 1969 I got an after school job to make popcorn for the concession stand and clean the lobby at the Capri movie theatre on Main St. in my hometown of Spartanburg. I was sixteen and in the tenth grade. I was asked to fill in as an usher one weekend when another usher quit. Before I went home that Sunday night after the last feature, I was asked if I would be interested in the job.

The following weekend, I arrived at the theatre to be greeted by a new usher who was white. I went to the manager's office to ask what became of the offer made to me. I was told the branch office did not approve of my hiring. I knew it was because I was black. I quit my other position and went across the street and was hired as assistant manager at another movie theater.

Dual school systems based on race were not eliminated until 1970. Black students from Carver High School were required to finish their senior year at Spartanburg High School. I was in that class. I was bused across town to a now integrated school. The socialization was very awkward. My senior year remains a blur in my memory.

My school years had not been stellar, nor had I stood out in any extracurricular activities. I prospered when I was hired as a cameraman at the local television station that summer following my graduation. I was a crewmember working on a variety of live and recorded broadcasts learning every aspect of television production. My tenure would last two years. I yearn to do and see more.

I enlisted in the Army and my first duty assignment was at the United States Military Academy at West Point. I was awarded this assignment because of my television experience. I was a staff member at the Information Technology Center in the television studio.

That was the beginning of my military and federal service that spanned over 35 years. I knew I was walking in the footsteps of those African Americans that sacrificed a lot to make it possible for me to have the life and career I had.
I was reminded in 2008 we still have a long way to go. I was sitting in the break area at work watching news coverage of Obama’s election. I was beaming with pride—proud that the United States elected its first African American president. A white coworker was quick to claim that Obama’s victory would not have been possible if black people had not voted in recorded numbers. I was speechless in her subtle disappointment and prejudice.

Interdependence Day© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Each time I hear the words of Frederick Douglass I have to shake myself to remember that there were slaves in America in 1852, and Juneteenth – that order to free slaves - didn’t take place until 1865. It is so recent in our national story. Shockingly recent. This is my stuff, I know, you may be keenly aware in your bones that slavery was legal so recent in our history.

And there are moments in our national life where we are all reminded, such as this one. In the midst of uprisings for Black lives sparked by the killing of George Floyd but whose embers had been glowing for hundreds of years… we are reminded.

We are all reminded in this moment of our national life when poverty, which already was taking an enormous toll on this country and its people every day, is on the rise now with the loss of jobs due to covid-19.

And we are all reminded in this moment with the rising number of people infected, sick, and dying of the coronavirus pandemic, disproportionally affecting Black, Indigenous and people of color.

“There is a pressing need to develop a new kind of consciousness, wrote Rabbi Michael Lerner,”—one that recognizes the interdependence of everyone on this planet. A new revolution is necessary—one in which our actions reflect a realization that our wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of everyone else on the planet and of the planet itself.”

Last week, I used Joanna Macy’s term, the Great Turning this shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a truly life-sustaining civilization. It matters not what we call it, but that we do it, that we make this shift that we develop this consciousness, that we revolt, demand the revolution in which our actions reflect the fact that our wellbeing indeed depends on the wellbeing of everyone else on the planet and the planet itself.

Interdependence is a word that simply means we depend on each other. We are related. We require support and cooperation of one another. We don’t exist alone. I like the idea of an interdependence day because it celebrates our relatedness – our connections and reliance on one another.

In September of 2002 an Interdependence Day was begun at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, but I like idea the Network of Spiritual Progressives in the U.S. had to use the 4th of July for that day, celebrating American values – the American values that are
meaningful to us, not the ones so often observed by the media or the majority or the powerful. Too often, I have simply ignored the 4th of July, embarrassed by the nationalism and the declaration that somehow America’s greatness is unique and special which seems like hubris to me.

I don’t ignore it entirely, however. Though it’s been many years since we’ve gone to see fireworks or a parade on the fourth, I have marked the holiday with one ritual that’s been important to me. I’d call it the 70’s version of Hamilton. I made my family watch the movie, 1776, every year near the 4th of July. (This was a Broadway musical telling the story leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence)

And I sing every song right along with the movie. But I’ve tired of it. It’s outdated. It was edgy in its day, but that day is long over. It was Hamilton this weekend. (This is the musical based on the life of founding father, Alexander Hamilton, with non-white actors playing the founding fathers, and hip hop and soul and R&B music)

But enjoyment of that was even dampened by the question, rightly asked, Where are the Natives in Hamilton?

Adrienne Keen and Native Appropriations asked this question in 2016, but somehow it took this General Assembly of the UUA for me to really take it in and understand. I notice now that there are no BIPOC characters in 1776 and no Indigenous characters in Hamilton, and yes, they are both fiction, and yes they are musicals, so I still enjoy them, but I notice.

Why did General Assembly of the UUA help understand this? Well, if you weren’t there, the Welcoming Ceremony was offered in solidarity with the Mashpee Wampanoag people in their struggle – our struggle – to defend their sacred lands. The People of the First Light, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, has inhabited present day Massachusetts and Eastern Rhode Island for more than 12,000 years. After an arduous process lasting more than three decades, the Mashpee Wampanoag were re-acknowledged as a federally recognized tribe in 2007. In 2015, the federal government declared 150 acres of land in Mashpee and 170 acres of land in Taunton as the Tribe’s initial reservation, on which the Tribe can exercise its full tribal sovereignty rights. The Mashpee tribe currently has approximately 2,600 enrolled citizens. Then, at the end of March of this year, in a pandemic, the Secretary of the Interior notified the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe that he had ordered the disestablishment of the Tribe’s reservation, an act that would take Mashpee’s tribal homelands out of trust status. It went to court and the DC District court ruled in favor of the tribe. But of course their status remains at risk as long as there are those in the current administration who wish to take away their land.

In contrast, the Welcoming Ceremony at General Assembly usually highlights a parade of banners from all the Unitarian Universalist congregations participating in the General Assembly. And though it is a thrill, especially to some of us who have belonged to many congregations over the years, to see these handmade banners depicting the places and congregations we come from, I became less and less fond of the parade as time went on. It felt sectarian – the
identification with one’s own religion and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of other religions – nationalistic, with all those flags, except in a religious kind of way. More recently I have become embarrassed by the sectarianism and the declaration that somehow Unitarian Universalism’s greatness is unique and special which seems like hubris to me. It became a celebration of our identity that I wasn’t sure had a larger point. In contrast, this year, by grounding the welcoming ceremony in the voice of Native peoples, gave rise to a celebration of higher values, more identities, grounding us in the place we were to have been for GA had the pandemic not kept us all at home.

Did I mention a pressing need to develop a new kind of consciousness?

“The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced,” said Frederick Douglass 168 years ago today.

“We need a moral revolution of values to repair the breach in our land” – that language is the fifth principle of the Poor People’s Moral Justice Jubilee Policy Platform. “We need a moral revolution of values to repair the breach in our land”

I am joining many preachers across this country this weekend to focus on this platform addressing three pandemics: COVID-19, systemic racism, and systemic poverty. The Poor People’s Campaign reached out to preachers all over the country to do so. It is connected to the voter registration drive aimed at impacting elections at local, state, and national levels around a unified policy agenda. UU the Vote, is our version of that voter registration campaign, but be clear, we are in it with other religious liberals and progressives who are organizing against systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation and militarism. As the Poor People’s Campaign says, “A society sick with these injustices and infirm with the distorted narrative of Christian nationalism needs a moral voice, rooted in our deepest Constitutional and moral values, to remind us of who we are and who we must be.”

“We have seen the brutal murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks and untold others at the hands of state violence. We have witnessed the death of more than 132,000 people from the novel coronavirus in the United States, more than one-quarter of all cases globally. But in addition to these losses which have made headlines, an unseen 700 people continue to die from poverty and inequality each day. Poverty kills 250,000 people every year in America and it is still not frontpage news. For every day we choose not to address systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted narrative of religious nationalism that justifies these evils, there is a death measurement.”

“There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.” Said Frederick Douglass
It's an ambitious agenda – this poor people’s moral justice jubilee policy platform, and I’m not going to outline it here in a sermon. There are too many details. You can read about it online. Go to the Poor People’s Campaign website. But I do want to highlight the principles it is grounded in. 5 principles:

1. Everybody in, nobody out. Everybody is deserving of our nation’s abundance.

2. When you lift from the bottom, everybody rises. Instead of “trickle-down, we start with the bottom up.

3. Prioritize the leadership of the poor, low-income and most impacted. Those who are on the frontlines of these crises, must also be in the lead in identifying their solutions.

4. Debts that cannot be paid must be relieved. We demand freedom from servicing the debts we cannot pay.

5. We need a moral revolution of values to repair the breach in our land. This platform abides by our deepest moral and Constitutional commitments to justice. Where harm has been done, it must be acknowledged and undone.

The Poor People’s Campaign has policy platforms on ending systemic racism, promoting general welfare, the right to work with dignity, the right to health and a healthy environment and reprioritizing our resources. Lots of policies, beginning with protecting and expanding the right to vote.

This is it. This is our moment. While we’re in this forced stoppage, upheaval where everything is different, we have the opportunity to do things differently, to reconstruct this nation on the principles rooted in our deepest Constitutional and moral values, to remind us of who we are and who we must be. To imagine the stories of 1776 and Hamilton, the signing of the constitution, and the life of a founding father, with all the honor and dignity that could have been were all humans included in the story – and make it so now. “It would be a quieter holiday, no fireworks or loud parades, no speeches, no salutes to any flag, a day of staying home instead of crowding away, a day we celebrate nothing gained in war but what we’re given — how the sun’s warmth is democratic, touching everyone, and the rain is democratic too...”

We know that our wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of all others on the planet. Nothing like a coronavirus pandemic teaches us this – the power an asymptomatic person has to cause illness in another is undeniable. We will not be well until all are well. And, so now that Nature has so clearly offered us this lesson, what will we do next? Develop a new kind of consciousness, focus on the next right thing to do, help our neighbors, and vote.