

“The Country Where My Heart Is”

July 4, 2021

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice - Betsy Tabor & Youth

We come to you from the ancestral homeland of the Abenaki/Wabanaki, the “Ancient Ones,” who for generations have lived with gratitude and respect for these mountains, woods, and waterways.

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.

Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.

Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

“This is my home,” we sing, “the country where my heart is.” Where is your heart this 4th of July? And what will you, what *can* you, joyfully or gratefully or hopefully or thoughtfully celebrate this weekend? It’s easy to focus on problems, but as Stacey Abrams said to thousands of Unitarian Universalists at our General Assembly last week, it’s important to say what we are *for*!

If you’re someone engaged in social justice, even wishing someone a “Happy 4th” may give you pause. Some of us love this country; for some of us “love” may be too strong a word. Ditto with the flag, an honored possession in some of our homes, less welcome in others. And so a service about the 4th of July.

Centering - “America, America” Katharine Lee Bates (1893)

Played by UUFES Music Director Shana Aisenberg

Shared Affirmation

Hymn - “This is My Song”

A Time for All Ages - Alice Posner

I was thinking this week about yes, independence day, but also our global need for perhaps an interdependence day. This morning, I invite you to think on these long summer nights, and come out to see nature’s fireworks, fireflies.

They are silent, they are small, but I would argue just as sparky and fabulous as any firework display, perhaps more, as fireflies are the world's most efficient light! They turn almost 100 percent of the energy used for luminescence into light. Even our most efficient light bulb can’t get past about 90%.

You probably know that fireflies communicate using flashes of light. Using a chemical process called bioluminescence, their abdomens light up and they turn this light on and off in a flashing pattern. Different species of fireflies use different patterns. They flash presumably to attract a mate, but do we really know that is all they are talking about?

Fireflies have been seen to answer flashes of lightning. A phenomenon practiced by some species of fireflies, that no-one can quite explain as far as I can tell, is synchronous flashing. This is when all of the fireflies flashing in a place start to copy each other in patches, and eventually, all of the fireflies are flashing together, in unison. Apparently this happens in waves, across the landscape, for quite long distances. I've never seen this but I bet it is magnificent. Have any of you? Each firefly is so small but en masse I bet they light up the night. This is not two individuals signaling to each other any more, but something bigger that we don't quite understand.

What if we communicated with each other through our light? What if that is how we found each other, talked to each other, put all of our energy into.

Imagine you are in a summer field at night. I'm going to tell you about mine, yours might be a little different. The air is still warm and feels close, yet thankfully a soft breeze brushes against your skin. You hear the gentle sound of the river nearby. There are patchy clouds still reflecting the last sun, and the moon is perhaps a waxing gibbous moon high in the sky. You walk the edge of the field where the grass is kept short, and the woods are full of shadows and the heady smell of the last roses, and the sharp smell of pines, which mixes with the sweet smell of hay.

As you look up you see the first stars emerge out of the dusk, one, two, three, and the clouds slowly fade into the sky. As you start to look down, the first constellations of fireflies begin to come out. They are tiny sparks, one at a time, floating and dancing through the field, then soon you start to see more and more, and they are then everywhere flashing their own notes of light.

Now imagine just for a moment that you are a firefly. You are very small, the field is so very large. You shine your light out into the darkness, not knowing who else is out there. You are made to glow!

And what if, perhaps, just perhaps, you just focused and sent out your own light pattern, and saw it flashed back. So exciting! Someone gets you! Oh! They are across the field, can you get there? Find each other?

Just imagine if then, your light multiplied, and little lights all around you started copying the pattern YOU had started, and then this exponentially spread into the whole field, and the rhythm of light you carry changed the whole field, your world, in this way.

Beyonce once said "Don't try to lessen yourself for the world, Let the world catch up to you."

What if, like fireflies we let all of our energy translate right into light. I hope people would catch up!

Reflections - We have had a week of lively conversations at Monday Book Group, Tuesday Poetry, Thursday "Seriously" and on email about flags and banners, the 4th, and living up to this country's stated ideals. As Donna Antonio wrote, "Good to be part of a community having conversations that include a range of emotions – grief, anger, and also hope and striving toward

something better." So, to the question went out: What can you celebrate on the 4th?" Four UUFESians share their responses:

Betsy Loughran: I can celebrate America today because it's a place where I/we can grow and change. So much of what I thought was "true" fifty years ago, I now believe was wrong. But I am not stuck in that world. My country does not dictate my beliefs. It allows me to be wrong. Sometimes it encourages me to be wrong, but I have the freedom to do my own thinking, to analyze my current beliefs and to make changes. I am sure that some things I now believe to be true are also wrong, but I have the freedom to keep on educating myself – keep on exposing myself to new ideas. As a UU, I also have a responsibility to listen to others, to try to understand their realities, to adjust my actions when necessary. For me – this is what I mean when I say America is a "free" country.

Pamela Ambrose: Last Tuesday's poetry reading gave rise to the thought of placing small American flags beneath our Black Lives Matter Banner to recognize July 4th. As the idea was shared with our board, what started as an innocent and patriotic gesture grew into a multilayered, complex dialogue.

As my thoughts have settled, I've reflected on how I celebrate being an American in the face of this country's egregious history of genocide, slavery, social and economic injustices, and the climate catastrophe?

I am proud of the founding fathers' preamble to the Constitution of our United States of America: "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, ...life liberty and the pursuit of happiness." These revolutionary ideas were the guiding light for our fledgling, frail democracy. They indeed mirror UU principles I am closely aligned with.

If I were of the Abenaki first nation people, what would the American flag mean to me? If I were African American, what would the flag represent to me?

Despite the struggles of this nation's history, I cling to a loyalty to its values, its dreams and its attempts to live up to its stated principles. I don't have an answer to the divisive issues plaguing our country on this day. But...I am proud of and grateful for the opportunity to express my opinion, vote my conscience and my ability to fully participate to reckon with those issues which I find an intolerable departure from the soul of my home, sweet home.

Peggy Polo: Our UUFES Black Lives Matter banner, our LGBTQ Flag, our Butternut tree in honor of the Indigenous peoples who lived on and loved this land are important symbols to me. They signify an America that is a work in progress towards ideals that, in my mind, have not yet been fully achieved. The American ideals we celebrate today – "with liberty and justice for all," "we the people," "inalienable rights," "all people (not just men) are created equal" – were rights originally limited to white heterosexual men who were property owners. We've come a long way since then, but our country, in my opinion, still has a long way to go. My feeling on this Independence Day is the hope that the journey to strive towards "a more perfect Union" will continue for generations to come.

Peaco Todd: Today, on the fourth of July, with friends and family, flags and fireworks, we celebrate this beautiful place – the mountains, lakes and streams, fields and forests – that we cherish and call home, even as we acknowledge that this land wasn't always ours. We walk with, and beg forgiveness of, those who came before and whose beloved country was stolen from them. The only currency with which we can pay that debt is love.

I don't mean blind love, which chooses the illusion of flawlessness over the reality of potential. I mean love with eyes wide open, not denying the realities of past injustices or future perils but in accepting an imperfect past and present, believing that we can do better, that we have to do better, for America to fulfill its promise.

One potent symbol of our country is the flag. In recent decades, some groups, including white supremacists, have co-opted the flag in their attempts to claim that their view of American history and role in the world is the only patriotic one. It is incredibly damaging to the causes we espouse -- social justice, climate change, gender equality, police reform, wealth inequity, voter suppression, etc. etc. -- to be labeled as "unpatriotic." We need to reclaim that symbol in the spirit of healing and move forward in creating a more inclusive, just society. Loving my country means, for me, that I believe in the truth of my country, its deep flaws and soaring potential. That love is what we owe the people whose land we occupy. That belief, that we are capable of a more perfect union, is the essence of what it means to be a patriot.

Guitar Interlude

Joys & Concerns - Worship Associate Sandra Carr

“La Cathédrale Engloutie” (*Sunken Cathedral*) by Claude Debussy, played by Eve Goss

“Spirit of Life”

Meditation/Prayer

We give thanks for the rain and cool sleeping nights

We are grateful for community:

for open hearts and minds

and the courage and willingness to enter into honest dialogue

We are grateful for freedoms not even imagined in some places

Let us give thanks

We hold in our hearts Andrea Walsh, whose father has passed away. And it's a sad week for Barbara Bald and Kevin Connerton who said farewell to their dear cats, Catcher and Hudson.

And now a silence as we feel the movement of our thoughts and listen to our hearts' longings. In the name of all that is good and true and holy. Blessed be.

Reading - "One Today" by Richard Blanco

One sun rose on us today, kindled over our shores,
peeking over the Smokies, greeting the faces
of the Great Lakes, spreading a simple truth
across the Great Plains, then charging across the Rockies.
One light, waking up rooftops, under each one, a story
told by our silent gestures moving behind windows.
My face, your face, millions of faces in morning's mirrors,
each one yawning to life, crescendoing into our day:
pencil-yellow school buses, the rhythm of traffic lights,
fruit stands: apples, limes, and oranges arrayed like rainbows
begging our praise. Silver trucks heavy with oil or paper—
bricks or milk, teeming over highways alongside us,
on our way to clean tables, read ledgers, or save lives—
to teach geometry, or ring-up groceries as my mother did
for twenty years, so I could write this poem.

All of us as vital as the one light we move through,
the same light on blackboards with lessons for the day:
equations to solve, history to question, or atoms imagined,
the "I have a dream" we keep dreaming,
or the impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won't explain
the empty desks of twenty children marked absent
today, and forever. Many prayers, but one light
breathing color into stained glass windows,
life into the faces of bronze statues, warmth
onto the steps of our museums and park benches
as mothers watch children slide into the day.

One ground. Our ground, rooting us to every stalk
of corn, every head of wheat sown by sweat
and hands, hands gleaning coal or planting windmills
in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands
digging trenches, routing pipes and cables, hands
as worn as my father's cutting sugarcane
so my brother and I could have books and shoes.

The dust of farms and deserts, cities and plains
mingled by one wind—our breath. Breathe. Hear it
through the day's gorgeous din of honking cabs,
buses launching down avenues, the symphony
of footsteps, guitars, and screeching subways,
the unexpected song bird on your clothes line.

Hear: squeaky playground swings, trains whistling,
 or whispers across café tables, Hear: the doors we open
 for each other all day, saying: hello / shalom,
 buon giorno / howdy / namaste / or buenos días
 in the language my mother taught me—in every language
 spoken into one wind carrying our lives
 without prejudice, as these words break from my lips.

One sky: since the Appalachians and Sierras claimed
 their majesty, and the Mississippi and Colorado worked
 their way to the sea. Thank the work of our hands:
 weaving steel into bridges, finishing one more report
 for the boss on time, stitching another wound
 or uniform, the first brush stroke on a portrait,
 or the last floor on the Freedom Tower
 jutting into a sky that yields to our resilience.

One sky, toward which we sometimes lift our eyes
 tired from work: some days guessing at the weather
 of our lives, some days giving thanks for a love
 that loves you back, sometimes praising a mother
 who knew how to give, or forgiving a father
 who couldn't give what you wanted.

We head home: through the gloss of rain or weight
 of snow, or the plum blush of dusk, but always—home,
 always under one sky, our sky. And always one moon
 like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop
 and every window, of one country—all of us—
 facing the stars
 hope—a new constellation
 waiting for us to map it,
 waiting for us to name it—together

Reflection - Rev. Betsy Tabor

For a long time, it seems nothing's gone right for my neighbor. Her past several years look like Job's litany of plagues and disasters, a string of bad luck and bad choices – kids being kids, losing their way, the dog getting run over, and a daunting spate of increasingly perilous health setbacks. Even so, she and I found ourselves marveling the other day at how unspeakably beautiful the world is, how endlessly engaging and overflowing with possibility life is. Gratitude, she said, has gotten me through.

You can look at America that way, too. July 4th can bring up a torrent of bad choices and perilous consequences. This community of ours explores, laments, and reckons with them most every Sunday. We give thanks that, in so doing, our understandings grow and evolve.

The 4th of July *is* a complicated holiday, and it's a birthday, too. Let's think about that. Who dwells on the birthday girl's lack of exercise or her lousy life choices? We wouldn't say Happy Birthday to you even though you're sick, or Happy Birthday despite the fact that you've disappointed us terribly and fallen short of your potential!

No, on birthdays, we celebrate what we love in you. Your goodness, your smile, that way you have with words. We celebrate your heart, what makes you *you*. Your clothes, your friends, your favorite places. What makes you laugh. What makes you cry. On birthdays, we celebrate.

What do you celebrate about America? What *can* you celebrate? Betsy Loughran celebrates that this is a place where she can grow and change, where she's allowed to be wrong and keep on learning. America's a work in progress, says Peggy, and that gives her hope. Grateful for her vote and opportunities to reckon with the past, Pamela celebrates America's values and our attempts to live up to them. Peaco celebrates, with love, the truth of this country, its deep flaws and soaring potential. And Kevin's heart is with the mysterious tapestry of people and land waking up. What could you celebrate on this birthday?

My best 4th was when our kids were little (Laura lost her first tooth that day). We gathered with old friends on the Cape and all day long created a huge 30-foot mural of the 4th of July. Our host had unfurled a tall roll of corrugated cardboard. It ran the length of his house. Young and old, everyone had a big brush, and we passed tuna fish cans of paint back and forth. You could paint whatever you wanted as long as it had to do with the 4th.

It was a blast. I found out that my friend John had an artistic streak – he made a spectacular big, bright eagle in flight. Someone splashed out green and red and yellow fireworks. There was Paul Revere on horseback. We the People. The flag. The Statue of Liberty. The Liberty Bell. Rosie the Riveter. I made a giant apple pie.

I'd forgotten that day until it came up the other night on zoom, making a plan to bring the same group of business school friends together again this fall. Where can I find a roll of cardboard? Oh my!

Celebrating feels good. We should do that here! Run cardboard along the back wall of our building outside the thrift shop, invite the neighbors over, and paint what we love about America: a country with inspiring ideals, a free country where we put our values out there and welcome discussion. One sun. One ground. One light. One wind. One sky. One moon. One home. One country. What does it mean to be deeply troubled and patriotic at the same time? To want to do our utmost to make it the best it can be?

With these birthday thoughts of well wishes and blessings, let's sing Happy Birthday to America. With gusto! Shana, will you please give us a chord? I'll sing the first line, Shana, the second, and then Pamela and Ellen. Let's all sing together.

May it be so!

The Morning Offering - "Ashokan Farewell" by Jay Ungar (1982)

Community Response

1. The American flag, once a unifying symbol, has become a flash point of sorts in our culture. In a few words, what feelings do you have about the flag?

11:03:44 From Sam P: Stars and Stripes!

11:03:51 From Sandra C: Positive

11:03:54 From Cindy E: Symbol of our country!

11:03:55 From Kim H: Love for my country

11:04:02 From Joanne: Conflicted

11:04:08 From Peaco T: compromised

11:04:09 From Hope H: pride

11:04:10 From Ann & David W: We want it back as a symbol of our unity

11:04:11 From Sandra C: reminds me of the sacrifices made for our country

11:04:14 From Shana A: Conflicted

11:04:14 From Barbara B: Wish it were an international flag

11:04:16 From Margaret R: Flat; difficult to capture the complexity of meaning

11:04:23 From Laura C: need to reclaim for ALL

2. For what about America are you grateful this morning?

11:04:29 From Sam P: Work in progress — a 51st star some day, and more?

11:04:39 From Ellen W: A. Friend joining us said “Fierce”

11:04:55 From Sam P: No president has served under the same flag under which they were born!

11:05:00 From Deborah H: That the hope was still there....

11:05:13 From Melanie H: Sadness that the terrorists on Jan 6 used this a symbol of their movement

11:05:14 From Ellen W: Patience and perseverance

11:05:56 From Ann & David W: opportunities

11:05:57 From Cindy E: Freedom of belief

11:06:01 From Peaco T: free speech and a still-free press

11:06:01 From Barbara B: The natural world despite our actions

11:06:05 From Sandra C: values and vision to guide us to meet our challenges

11:06:07 From Ann & David W: Our beautiful nature

11:06:08 From Sam P: Apologies - Obama is the first (and only) president to serve under the same flag under which he was born! Correction!

11:06:10 From Shana A: freedom, vision of possibility

11:06:13 From Melanie H: I am grateful that Trump isn't president anymore

11:06:14 From Kim H: It's possibilities for freedom and equality for all...someday

11:06:24 From Barbara L: Grateful for the many voices this morning and the love we share.

11:06:36 From Donna San A: Hundreds of years of courageous struggle to live up to the ideals of America

11:06:50 From Joanne: The beauty of our country; the caring and love of so many people; the ability to make choices; freedom

11:07:09 From Deborah H: All of the above....

11:07:10 From Sam Perry to Everyone : The arc of history bends towards Justice

11:07:10 From Lynn Hatch to Everyone : Our open spaces NPS

11:07:20 From Pamela A: Living in this wonderful community

11:07:23 From Margaret R: Our ability, and our flag's ability, to transform

11:07:25 From Rod F: Grateful for the freedom to pursue my thoughts and beliefs wherever they lead, without fear.

Hymn - “If I Had a Hammer” by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays (1949)

Extinguishing of Chalice

Reminders --many reminders today

- Minister’s Discretionary Fund (Memo Line: Susan Bruce)
- Book Group tomorrow is cancelled and will be back in a week.
- 4 Zoom hosts needed
- Wednesday 11 a.m. meetings open to all: vision/tech for indoor services
- Coffee hour

Benediction - Betsy

How astoundedly beautiful the greens and the blues of the world are. And how endlessly engaging and overflowing with possibility is America. Let us go forth with purpose and with gratitude. Amen.

Postlude - “Liberty” (American fiddle tune)

This service can be viewed until October 4, 2021 at:

https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/2nPRrHT6MHIwskOG_D_U4DE-oGWFx8ygCKWYhwI_gWO0bnM_9jmaiM4Fuj7Zu0yo.4OOMWvMMIdIaALym
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