

**What Do We Celebrate on the Fourth of July?—Reflections July 5, 2020**  
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**Being:**

Both Rev. Dr. McNatt and Dr. Amin wrote their words before the days of COVID became the days of mourning, protest, and agitation for justice. Can words that invite us to “to lay down the burden of our shortcomings,” to “lean into our humanness, in all of its messiness, complications, nuance, and imperfection” continue to have relevance? I think the answer, perhaps now more than ever, is “Yes.”

These times call each of us to know ourselves, to struggle to self-awareness about the shape of our lives and the ways we think about the world and our place within it. Now more than ever, we are all called to examine our being—not for short-comings and imperfections but for the reality of who we are, what our culture and our society allows us to be. Of how our society and culture enable us to thrive individually or thwart any one of us collectively. The times invite, rather they require us to cultivate full awareness our being—how we are oppressed, if we are, how we are privileged, in the ways that we are. But more than that, to know our inherent being—that we are the children of life, of the universe bringing forth that which knows itself to be life. As the children of such a universe, we may recognize within “the capacity for fullness, wholeness, and abundant life that resides in each of us.” We are loved and worthy, welcome and needed just as we are.

And if we acknowledge our shortcomings and short-sightedness, if we lay down the burden of shame or guilt for our pasts that we cannot change, if we commit to live our deepest values with integrity, if we “commit to simply live and grow in this moment,” “to begin anew,” then we may yet be the parents of life abundant for all of us. Life abundant, when each of us, where all of us can tap “our capacity for goodness and grace, for freedom and purpose and joy.” May we simply be, so that we may grow within the light of justice for all.

**Seeing:**

I see those images from Jean Shepherd's film, and they are comfortingly familiar to me even though dripping with nostalgia, maybe because of the nostalgia—the marching bands and majorettes. My mom was a majorette. The Shriners and the Boy Scouts, the Cub Scouts and decorated bicycles parade, the baseball on TV and the slow pitch softball on the dusty diamond, the flags and the decorated floats, the political dignitaries and the queen of the parade, glowing so-blondely in the sizzling summer heat, hot enough to fry an egg on the mayor's head. The small town or big city neighborhood, the working-class references, the gendered and religious language.

These images resonate for many of us as lived or almost-lived or wished-for experience. Highlighted by a bit of drama with the fireworks yet to come, the white, intact nuclear family all in their rightful roles is perfectly captioned by the date when this embodied memory takes place: the fourth of July.

I have celebrated the fourth of July—with these icons and others—and rarely thought much about Independence Day. I didn't think much about fireworks replicating the bombs of war and destruction, albeit to be free of tyranny. I did not imagine our howling hunting dogs might be traumatized by all the loud booms. I did not consider that the World War II vet who lived across the street was thoroughly undone by this seemingly innocuous yearly re-enactment of battle. The images were simply a backdrop to much of the cultural and social life I took for granted, the life that I did not for many years examine.

In 1852, Frederick Douglass would refer also to the day (the 4<sup>th</sup>) rather than to the day (of independence), but for reasons entirely and conspicuously examined. For him, the Fourth of July can never be a day of independence for people enslaved or descended from people enslaved. And Independence Day is not September 22, 1862, when Abraham Lincoln warned the Southern insurrectionists that he would proclaim the enslaved free. Nor the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1863, when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Nor January 31, 1865 when Congress passed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution. Nor December 6, 1865 when all states ratified the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the discriminatory Black Codes immediately emerged. No, July 4<sup>th</sup> is not Independence Day. Juneteenth comes closest. June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1865, when the enslaved people in Texas finally learn from a Union general about the Emancipation Proclamation. And even on that day in 1865, people remained enslaved in Delaware and Kentucky. But at least Juneteenth is a day Black Americans claim for themselves, since even freedom granted does not mean freedom realized.

Douglass spoke his words in 1852, trying to instill in his abolitionist audience that time is up, that white Americans need to be motivated for Black freedom as they had been for freedom from England. He appeals to strong emotion and bald truth-telling—the conscience of the nation must be roused, the propriety of the nation must be startled, the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed. No polite calls here. Time's up—because lives are being destroyed mentally and physically, because people live and die enslaved, because children are born enslaved, with no opportunity to live any other way.

These words, spoken by his descendants, ring painfully, because while chattel slavery is abolished, there are other ways to enslave people. Chattel slavery—slavery from cradle to grave—was not just a mean way people treated each other. It was an

institutionalized system to extract economic wealth out of Black bodies. Other institutions have taken the place of chattel slavery—the business incentive to encourage undocumented migration and then to disavow those who migrate. Jobs that offer low pay and no health benefits but put Black bodies at risk of poverty, homelessness, disease, and despair. The criminalization of mental illness, of being poor, of drug addiction. The prison industrial complex. The military as a path to education and job security, at the expense of health and life. And yet these beautiful young people, the evidence of human resilience and liveliness, they have hope.

If we are to be with ourselves as we are, with integrity, growing into new awareness from where we are, we are called to open ourselves to these contrasting stories of American, called to see them both as true, though painfully contradictory and evidence of commonplace and willful thoughtlessness.

**Doing:**

Can we bear to witness the coldness, the exclusion, the skepticism? Can we bear to witness the pain, the lack of surprise, the resilience? Can we bear the idea that this is how a Black man, a Black person awakes each morning—ready to guide and love their children, to move through daily routines and the calls of the human body for nourishment—and yet steeled against the rejection and suspicion, while lovingly protective and strong in a sense of self? Such is life if this Black person is a judge or a college professor returning home late at night to his own front porch. This is the life if a Black person is a jogger or a school cafeteria worker out for a ride with his family. This is the life if a Black person is an EMT asleep in her own bed or a homeowner looking for a fair real estate appraisal.

Our institutions need work, my friends, our institutions need work. Overturning and reversing laws and practices that prevent poor and Black people from exercising their right to vote. Racial profiling in policing. Admissions standards that consider school district statistics rather than evidence of intelligence. Real estate practices and neighborhood covenants that continue to steer people into racial and economic divides. Local regulations that tax disproportionately high those neighborhoods where Black and brown people concentrate, compared to actual property values. Banking regulations that make it difficult for people of color to get loans or survive banking fees when you have little money.

If we are the kind of people who such inequality and injustice does not touch, we need to recognize that it does touch other people in our society. It is real. And as caring, educated people, we can bring our privilege to bear on changing these institutions, because justice for those who are oppressed means that justice prevails for us all. My liberation is bound up in the liberation of my oppressed siblings, for how can I be free if

they are not? Let the scales be balanced, with all our human imperfection, all our frailty and selfishness, held in balance by the good that we all deserve simply because we are human beings, the children of life itself. Frederick Douglass's descendants have hope. The language of our founding documents—conceived by brilliant and flawed human men—contain promise yet unfulfilled. We, too, have reason to hope.

And we can also smile, show kindness, be open. We can love Americans, all Americans. We can remember that the strength of America is our diversity. And as Unitarian Universalists, we are especially aware that a variety of understandings and experiences enrich our lives, are sources of compassionate curiosity to be met with respect and consideration. That our human differences are a source of growth, the very will to growth and learning that is our intrinsic to our being, when we live with integrity and answer the call of love. May we grow ever more able to be human together, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may the people say together "Amen."

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