

UNITARIAN CHURCH SERVICE

8 OCTOBER 2023

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OPENING WORDS

We live in a great circle – a circle of time, a circle of seasons, an ever-expanding circle of community that eventually encompasses all that lives on this planet and then extends to the farthest reaches of the cosmos. I invite all to honor this circle as we meet and to carry this circle with you as you go out into the world.

I call in the powers of the East – the home of Spring, the place of the sunrise, the place of inspiration and new beginnings, and the home of Eagle. Then I call in the powers of the South – the place of Summer, the place of midday, the place of innocence and trust, the home of childhood, and the home of little Mouse. Next, I invite the powers of the West – the place of Fall, the place of the sunset, the place of the darkness and looking within, the home of adolescence, and the home of Bear. Lastly, I invite the powers of the North – the home of Winter, the place of night, the home of adulthood, the place of bringing our gifts into community, the home of the ancestors and those yet to be born, and the home of Snowy Owl. May this Circle of Life hold us in sacred time and space as we gather this morning.

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

Real maturity is the ability to imagine the humanity of every person as fully as you believe in your own humanity. Tobias Wolff

SERMON

REMEMBERING THE DISAPPEARED

Tomorrow is Indigenous Peoples' Day. In many states, it is still known as Columbus Day – the day to celebrate the “discovery” of the New World. This is how New Hampshire sees it. It is still Columbus Day here despite the fact we are replete with names reflecting the presence of the Algonquians and the Iroquoians. Names like Penacook, Winnepesaukee, Contoocook, Sunapee, Merrimack, Kearsarge, and Ossipee. It reflects the narcissistic belief that nothing existed before “we” white people from Europe discovered it. There is no acknowledgement that real people lived here long before we arrived. Thus, ever since landing in the New World, our governments and our society's institutions have covered up the truths, lived in denial, and actively sought to disappear the Indigenous Americans. All of us, white and red alike, cannot heal from the historical and present-day traumas visited upon our brothers and sisters without action to remember and to undo the mistakes and to acknowledge our culpability.

To provide a context for this statement, I would like to cite David Stannard who has written a history from the Indian perspective. He concludes, “the conquest and subsequent destruction of the indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere, beginning with the arrival of Columbus in 1492 to the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1891 was the most massive interrelated sequence of genocide in the history of the world with 90-95 percent of the indigenous population being destroyed by a holocaust of mass violence.” The enormity of this act of wanton destruction is difficult to grasp. Take a moment to consider this – men, women, and children tortured and killed, cultures erased, tormented survivors left to wander for centuries in the darkness of despair, depression, and poverty while our culture blames these survivors for their addictions, their domestic violence, their poor health, and their lack of motivation. These survivors carry centuries of historical trauma overlaid on the everyday trauma of trying to survive in today's America. We know about this in other parts of our world but here it continues to exist on our own soil and we try to not know it.

I would like to briefly share a few facts to continue to offer context.

- There are 574 tribes recognized by our federal government making these tribes eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At the same time there are more than 200 tribes that do not have federal recognition resulting in tens of thousands of Indigenous Americans without access to federal funding and services. New Hampshire has no federally recognized tribe. The process for gaining recognition is lengthy and costly and is administered by the Branch of Acknowledgement and Research which is staffed by 10 employees! When the Mohegan tribe of Connecticut received federal recognition, the estimated cost was 88 million dollars! The system is designed to keep disappearing Indigenous Americans while we keep alive our addictions to power and greed.

In summary, we have treated these people as less than human. We have made little effort to accord them respect nor to understand their cosmology – a cosmology that could help us to reconfigure our view of ourselves in relationship to all that exists on this planet and perhaps save ourselves and the planet.

I admit I knew little of this. I grew up in the age of cowboys and Indians and, despite being a history and government major, you can bet that the plight of our Native Americans never appeared in a course syllabus. I could get lost in asking “why” but this will not help me to feel any better about my lack of knowledge and action. There are bigger questions that take me beyond my ego. Questions like: How do I feel about this? Does this impact me and, if so, how? Do I have any responsibility for these ongoing atrocities? If so, how might I heal and how might I help others to heal? Some thoughts.

- First, I believe we are all in this together. We all carry the scars of genocide. Just as the German people carry the scars of the

holocaust, we carry the scars of what has been done to our Indigenous Americans-a genocide that exists to this very day. How can we not be affected if we wake up and become conscious? We need to gather facts. We need to listen to the stories. We need to educate ourselves. We need to move beyond our fears of the “other”, move beyond the guilt and shame of being silent bystanders over the centuries. Perhaps we could start by changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day in New Hampshire.

- How do we do that? We, I and you, need to wake up! We need to move into consciousness and then into action. I want to share a personal story here. Each June I am invited to participate in an opening Indigenous ceremony. The group meets throughout the year to plan a 4-day ceremony of sacrifice and celebration through dance and song at the time of the Summer Solstice. Indigenous blood courses through some while others come to honor the teachings and the cosmology of those who were here before us. Each year I help to open this gathering. I call in the four directions as well as the powers of Mother Earth and Father Sun. Before the lighting of the fire, I offer gifts representing the Indigenous people world-wide - water from the Grandmothers of Peru; sacred tobacco; seeds of corn, squash, and beans which are the basic foods from many cultures; and I offer prayers. The participants welcome me and I am honored to do this.

I am embarrassed to say that I really have not taken the time to know these people and I do not know their stories. I have no idea what it has been like for some to live in a state with no recognized tribe. What have been their traumas trying to live in a culture that tries to disappear them? What historical traumas do they carry? What are their stories? We all have stories! I need to bring my

open heart and my curiosity. I need to move beyond my focus on the task at hand. What might each of us do?

- I believe we need to listen to and read first-person stories of Indigenous Americans. Stories handed down over generations are one way to wake up from the lies and obfuscations we have lived with over the centuries. Open listening also helps to heal the scars we carry as white people having enslaved others. And who in your circle might you begin to share the stories you are reading or listening to?
- One of the most important points to remember is that listening to or reading these stories helps the Disappeared to heal their soul wound. What is a soul wound? A soul wound is the unhealed trauma from the past handed down from generation to generation. The wound is unhealed because the trauma has never been acknowledged by the dominant culture, has remained hidden in the Indigenous culture because of the emotional and psychic pain of revisiting it. Thus the story is never told, and the dominant culture continues to view these people as “less than.” Then the culture blames these “less than” people for their high rates of substance abuse, depression, domestic violence, poor health, suicide, and despair. Does this sound familiar? Here are some examples of the trauma that lead to intergenerational soul wound and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Long Walk of 1864 when nine thousand Navajos were forced to walk 300 miles in the bitter winter cold. As their horses died, they were eaten to sustain the walkers. With fewer horses, the elders could not keep up on this forced march. Those unable to keep up were left behind to die or were shot by the soldiers. A line of coyotes and crows followed. Bodies were eaten where they

fell. And remember elders are the most revered members of the tribe.

The compulsory Indian Education Law of 1887 led to Boarding Schools run by mission churches. Children were kidnapped at gun point wherever they could be found. Once at the schools, their names were taken away, their hair was cut, and their clothes were replaced with those of our dominant culture. They were forbidden to speak their native language and were taught that anything Indian was evil. They were severely punished for any infraction. Many died. Those who returned home after aging out, returned as strangers to their families.

The Missions of California were begun in 1713 by Father Junipero Serra. His plan was to convert “savages” to Christianity. Perhaps you have visited one or more of the Missions in California.

California Indians were taken into the Missions and used as forced labor. Punishment for the least infraction was brutal. In one of these Missions, 19,941 members of the Amah Matsun tribe died. None of this is ever acknowledged in any of the Missions. In the 1760’s, it is estimated that 310,000 Indians lived in California. By the beginning of the 20th century, 20,000 remained. Despite this wide-spread knowledge, Junipero Serra was recently made a saint in the Catholic Church.

On the eve of Indigenous Peoples’ Day, I return to my earlier questions. How do I feel about this? Does this impact me and, if so, how? Do I bear any responsibility for these atrocities? If so, how might I heal myself and others?

First, I am stunned by this information. They remind me again how cruel we can be when we fail to see others as human beings no different than you and I. How, in our hubris, we can believe we are superior and our mission becomes one of bringing others up to our standard or isolating them so we do not have to be reminded of their presence in our world. How fearful we

are when we meet others who are different in color, customs, or beliefs or who stand in the way of our greed.

Second, we, you and I, are members of the dominant culture and bear responsibility for what has gone on before and which continues to this day. We live in a society that has never taken responsibility for its actions against our Indigenous Americans. And no Church has ever apologized for what happened at the Mission Schools. I will continue to educate myself and others. I will seek out the stories of the Indigenous that I have met and I will apologize for the barbaric acts by my government and my society. I hope you will be moved to do likewise. How else might we turn ourselves into action?

Lastly, I am interested in healing. I have spent years healing my own history. In the end, my and your history are unalterably connected to our culture. This is my view: Over the span of history, each of us has had ancestors who have been killers and ancestors who have been victims. In the end, each time any one of us acts to heal a soul wound, each of us is healing the self and healing the world. It begins with each one of us. Each of us has the responsibility for healing the Circle in which we all live. Make tomorrow, Indigenous Peoples' Day, the day we recommit to healing the soul wounds we all carry.

CLOSING WORDS

I offer these quotes as we close:

If you think you are free and you don't know you are in a prison, you cannot escape.
Gurdjieff

A world that is not connected to its soul cannot heal. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee

As tomorrow dawns, take time to remember the Disappeared. And in the days and months ahead may we commit ourselves to be soul healers for ourselves and the Disappeared. Go in Peace. The Circle is released.