

Sermon: The Power of Cultural Practice (Laurel)

Our theme this month is heritage and we're talking a lot about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Last Sunday we went through the basics of who the Unitarians were, who the Universalists were, and how we came to be one blended tradition. And when we tell the story of who we are, it's easy to skip over the complexities and sometimes outright cruelty.

Tomorrow is Indigenous People's day, a day when we remember that this land was not discovered, for it was already someone's home. A day when we remember that Indigenous people are not a historical artifact, but a living, breathing people who are still deeply affected by all the ways this country has tried to suppress them and eliminate them.

There has been a lot more public awareness in the last few years about the reality of residential schools explicitly created to strip native youth of their culture and turn them into white men. The mandate of those "schools" was "kill the Indian to save the man."

My colleague Rev. Rachael Hayes wrote this about these residential schools: "The survivors of the system described the physical and psychological abuse they experienced there. Children were tortured for speaking their own language or observing their cultural and religious practices. RoseAnne Archibald says this about the system: "I don't like to call them schools — they were institutions of assimilation and genocide. And our survivors said that for the longest time they were told stories of the deaths and murders that happened in these schools." It is estimated that up to one in 20 children died in them. In the schools inspected by Indian Affairs chief medical officer Peter Bryce in 1907, 25% of children forced into the schools died. In one school, 69% of the children died. They suffered malnutrition, inadequate shelter, medical experimentation and tuberculosis in addition to other violence. When they were ill, they were removed without parental knowledge to segregated Indian hospitals, which were underfunded and also had abysmal survival rates. Only a fraction of the graves have been recovered."

It was not until the last few years that I had any idea that our own Unitarian

ancestors had participated in the horrific cruelty of these schools. But we did. And the silence of religious institutions around their own violent histories is its own act of cruelty. So, just as we learn the fun parts of our history, so must we own the reality of harm done and do what we can to live in contrast to violence. This country is, after all, *not* one entirely made of immigrants and our ancestors participated in the genocide of native people.

Again Rev. Hayes:

The Unitarians made three missionary attempts to run boarding schools. In 1855, a mission to the Chippewa/Ojibwa failed due to lack of funding. The mission to the Utes near White River, Colorado, failed “due to lack of encouragement” whatever that means, according to Unitarian historian Rev. George Willis Cooke. And the third, the Bond Mission School, was on the Crow reservation in Montana.

The Reverend Henry Bond and his wife Mrs. Bond set upon this mission to convert these children into proper, productive, civilized, assimilated members of his world. The records I found in this limited search all come from people who seemed to believe that this was a worthwhile project, but we still have records stating that parents wanted to visit their children but Bond would not permit it. Bond describes his inmates thus: “They are all bright promising boys. How such good appearing fellows come of an ignorant, lazy squalid, orphaned race is a constant surprise to us. I shall dread the time, if that comes, when they slip back into their old abodes and possibly leave.”

Bond and his wife ran the mission from 1886 to 1895, when it was taken over by the federal government.”

I took a class on religion and ecology in grad school and we had a guest speaker come in named Tiacasín Ghost Horse. He shared his own experience of growing up as a native person in a country where his culture was treated as a threat. He shared that, before the Freedom of Religion act was signed into law in 1978, they weren’t allowed to speak their own language. They weren’t even allowed to walk in groups of more than three because then it was a “riot.”

It is a particular trick of white supremacy to see people gathering and speaking

their own language and call that an act of violence.

It also points to the power of cultural practice precisely because it works to preserve the identity of persecuted people. This is why indigenous languages are so important, why indigenous practices and crafts are so important. And it's why we're using this month's share the plate to both raise funds for and spread awareness about the work of the Ohketeau cultural center.

The violence of residential schools was specifically targeted at breaking cultural practices and familial ties, to strip indigenous children of all marks of their identity. And so it is a powerful thing to resource the restoration of exactly those things.

To *not only* uncover the reality of extraordinary harm that our own Unitarian ancestors committed, *but also* to direct our resources towards indigenous communities' efforts to restore their cultural heritage and spread it to those whose families were cut from their culture. We are called to act with love and justice, we are called to live in contrast to the violence of our own ancestors.

We'll end with this prayer by the Rev. Jude Geiger: Teach Us to Remember Our History

Spirit of Life, God of Many Names, Source of Hope,
We come together at the end of another week,
some worn down by struggles of health, of home, or work.
May we be a community that makes space for the sharing of joys and sorrows,
angers and hopes, with grace and forbearance.
In our nation's life, we pause this holiday weekend
to remember the Native American lives lost from the European colonization on
what is now our soil.
Teach us to remember our history.
Though we can not make amends for what has come before,
may we learn from those ways, never to repeat them in our lives today.
May we develop new ways of relating to neighbor and stranger,
without violence or coercion, deceit or greed.
Mother of Grace, help us to find a sense of humility where we have privilege,

and strength where we face oppression.
In our struggles we may learn compassion;
and in our power, may we learn temperance.
As a community of faith, may we be a safe harbor
in a world that is often harsh toward difference.
Challenge us to use our presence as a healing force for justice and equity.
Knowing that although we have come far in the civil rights struggles of our times,
there are many people are still left behind,
and the work of building the beloved community,
is just as pressing as ever before.
Amen

(Source: [☰](#) 2021 10 10 Sacred Footprints Indigenous Peoples' Day script)