

On the Land of Others
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

The first reading is from a 1978 talk by Phillip Deere (1929-1985), a Muscogee (Creek) elder:

Only the Indian people are the original people of America. Our roots are buried deep in the soils of America. We are the only people who have continued with the oldest beliefs of this country. We are the people who still yet speak the languages given to us by the Creator.

This is our homeland. We came from no other country.
We have always looked at ourselves as human beings....
Every tribe has a trail of tears. We wonder when it is going to end.

The second reading is from “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings” by Joy Harjo, the current U.S. Poet Laureate and a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation:

Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand.
Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane.
Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill.
The land is a being who remembers everything.
You will have to answer to your children, and their children, and theirs –
The red shimmer of remembering will compel you up the night to walk the perimeter of truth for understanding.
As I brushed my hair over the hotel sink to get ready I heard:
By listening we will understand who we are in this holy realm of words.
Do not parade, pleased with yourself.
You must speak in the language of justice.

Sermon

My theme is “On the land of others” – keeping in mind that our relationship with land is not merely transactional, but is also spiritual – or ought to be.

Said Phillip Deere: “Only the Indian people are the original people of America. Our roots are buried deep in the soils of America.”

Said Joy Harjo: “Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand.”

Yet too often we learn our so-called American history as if this land “from sea to shining sea” was “discovered” by Europeans and was largely empty when they arrived... a wilderness.

As the Sioux writer Vine Deloria, Jr., wrote: “Americans in some manner will cling to the traditional idea that they suddenly came upon a vacant land on which they created the world’s most affluent society.”

Of course the land was hardly vacant. Indeed, by some estimates well over 100 million people lived in the Americas, north and south, prior to Columbus’s arrival in 1492. As historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, herself part-Cherokee, tells us in her “Indigenous History of the United

States,” the landscape here in North America “was not a virgin wilderness, but a network of Indigenous nations” woven together by a web of paths and roads and trading routes.

In short, those of us of European descent are living on the land of others.

Oh, but we’ve been here for four hundred years, so what does that matter? Well, those “others” were here for millennia before us, and many are here still. As we heard from the Muscogee (Creek) elder Phillip Deere: “This is our homeland. We came from no other country.”

To make this quite local. When the first English settlers arrived here in what they called Hingham (after the Hingham, England from which they had come), there were of course people already living here – though many fewer than even twenty years earlier, the local tribes having already been decimated by diseases brought by earlier settlers.

In any case, apparently mutual relations for the first years, even decades, were reasonably amicable.

Right at the outset, here’s what Peter Hobart, the first minister of our First Parish and among the leaders of the settlement said in an early sermon: Friendly relations “with the red people... will work only for good, and under their tutelage you will harvest crops and gather the abundance of the sea and from amongst the denizens of the forest.”

Well, that worked out for awhile, but the pace of settlement – in other words occupation and land-taking – here and throughout the colonies and westward across the continent was inexorable. Armed conflict was inevitable; and as we know, in one place or another it lasted for two hundred years.

One of the first major such wars was King Philip’s War, which enveloped most of New England in 1675-76, and was per capita the bloodiest war in American history.

Well, over the years all this history has come to feel more personal for me. As most of you know, not long after I arrived here at Old Ship, I discovered that I am a direct descendant of Peter Hobart, as well as of Ripleys, another of the early English settler families. Pretty cool! But this also means that my ancestors were among those who occupied the land of others. My ancestors were among those who a generation later built this Meeting House from old growth oak and pine, trees that had stood in some cases for six hundred or more years as the Massachusetts and Wompanoag and others hunted in the woods filled with what must have been truly majestic trees to have been turned into these huge beams.

So... how do I feel about this? How should I feel about this? Should it change anything about the way I live or the way we worship?

We can’t go back in time to change the course of history.

And I don’t believe the English settlers of Hingham and other New England towns thought of themselves as occupiers or conquerors. They were motivated by persecution back home, by their quest to freely practice their Puritan Christianity, and to better themselves economically. All of which, however, put them on collision course with those whose cultures and beliefs and ways of living were different enough that many of the English didn’t even think them fully human, in fact called them savages, as another of my ancestors, Governor Bradford, referred to them.

None of which, though, is to excuse their taking of the land on which those already here had lived for generation upon generation.

We have not yet collectively come to terms with what we, those who are not indigenous to this land, have done. Again, Phillip Deere’s words: “Every tribe has a trail of tears. We wonder when it is going to end.”

Because it hasn't ended yet. Witness the health care disparities on western reservations, all the more open to view during the pandemic. Witness the continuing political battles over sacred lands and mining rights. It goes on. In spite of some victories for justice, it goes on.

So – how are we to live? What are we to do?

To begin with, we need to continue to educate ourselves about the true history of this continent and of our own local towns, to name the crimes against humanity and not flinch at the feelings this naming may evoke in us. And to learn about the indigenous cultures... which still exist. Indeed, if you Google “Indigenous Peoples Day” you will find all sorts of resources and on-line events for tomorrow. In other words, we can start or continue our education right now.

Of course that's not enough.

So there are candidates and policies we can choose to support, policies that move us further along the path to a proper reckoning and recompense – to, for example, address inequities in health care, education, and access to social services; to partner in care of sacred land; and as much as possible to return to treaty rights so often broken. And, if we are able, we can make contributions to indigenous groups and organizations, to support their good work.

As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes: “While living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of that past. Assuming this responsibility provides a means of survival and liberation.”

Our own Unitarian Universalist “Principles” call us to no less, affirming as they do “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.”

At the very least, each Sunday here when we gather in this Meeting House, may we acknowledge in our hearts and in our words on whose land it stands.

I frequently refer to this house as our “ancient Meeting House” – but it is not nearly as old as the trees that became these beams, and has not been here anywhere near as long as the peoples who were here first.

To put some of this another way, let's have some perspective as to who and where we are. Let's have some humility. Let's not turn away from more fully knowing the deep history of this place, of our town, of our nation, of this continent known by many of the indigenous nations as Turtle Island.

So, today, the day before Indigenous Peoples Day, would be as good as any day to commit or re-commit to this journey of knowing, of truth-telling, of justice-making - closely related of course to our reckoning with racial justice.

And to remember, in the spirit of those who have been here for millennia, that all of us are but stewards and caretakers of the lands on which we live, and of our shared earth home – a deeply spiritual dimension of our lives.

So may it be.