

“Being a Good Relative” A Special Service Honoring Indigenous People’s Day
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
October 10, 2021
Brief homily of introduction to our speakers
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

Last fall, I participated in a program created by the Unitarian Universalist Association called “Beloved Conversations.” It is a multi-week anti-racism program, with reflective exercises and dialogue groups and resources such as essays and films. Around the 4th week, we were asked to complete an exercise that vexed me, irritated me, and I would admit, even angered me. – The question was “What reparations do your ancestors owe to enslaved or marginalized peoples?”

When my dialogue group of four colleagues met the following week, I proclaimed that I had not done this exercise because I am Jewish. My own ancestors fled Eastern Europe to escape pogroms, cleansings, persecutions, and slaughter. Reparations? You’re barking up the wrong tree, bub. Yet - Did I benefit from walking around with a European face, did I benefit from the opportunities my family enjoyed – education, housing, relative safety? Yes, most definitely.

Then a lightbulb moment more recently as I reconsidered the question of reparations and complicity in preparation for today’s service. You see, I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – a city named for an English Lord. It is a melting pot place of immigrants flanked by three rivers, all with Native American names – the Allegheny, the Monongahela and the Ohio.

My first childhood home sat at the corner of Phillips and Pocasset Streets, another queasy confluence of colonialism and Native origins. I never really noticed these things. I was too secure (clueless?) in my bubble of Jewish Squirrel Hill culture, a modern day shtetl with a Mercedes standing in for the milk wagon.

Later in my life, I lived for many years in Concord, Massachusetts (there’s that cringe-worthy pairing again) - a leafy, bucolic, classically Yankee town, where I relished my hikes in the Punkatasset woods that merged with the adjoining Estabrook woods at a tranquil T intersection. Punkatasset means shallow brook in the Native language, and Estabrook, the anglicization meaning those who live East of the brook (the white settlers). Three rivers converge there too...the Sudbury named for an English town and the Assabet – an Algonquin word meaning “a place of fishing nets” flow together into the mouth of the Concord River.

So, I am not without complicity. I lived and prospered on those lands. And now I live here in Flagstaff, AZ– where it is nearly impossible to sidestep the truth...we live on Native land with Native Nations surrounding us. We worship today on Native land.

As Unitarian Universalists, we want to be perceived as the good guys, or at least, the better guys. We are progressive, open and affirming. We do partner with anti-racism and LGBTQ organizations, we support immigrants and Native people. But, being UU doesn’t nullify complicity and our historical record is not pristine.

Yes, we have evolved from a liberal Protestant perspective to a non-creedal, non-Christian, and largely humanist one. We are not where we were, but we cannot expunge

past errors or pat ourselves on the back too heartily for the more positive associations our denomination enjoys.

Here is the record, difficult as it may be to hear. But self-interrogation and commitment to action are the only paths to true intersectionality and justice making.

In 1787, Christians who later declared themselves Unitarians were participants in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel meant to Christianize Native Americans. They believed this process would be morally improving to Native people.

In 1870, the American Unitarian Association accepted charge over Colorado reservations at the request of President Ulysses S. Grant. This was meant to reduce government corruption and once again, “civilize” the Indians. The Unitarians eventually established the Montana Industrial School for Indians (a positive development).

In 1909, President Taft (a Unitarian himself) appointed the AUA President Samuel Atkins Eliot to the Board of Indian Commissioners. In that capacity, he gave an address meant to argue how only assimilation to White culture would save Native Americans from their own barbarism.

Yet, in 1970 (about 60 years later) in a whole new era of progressive activism, The General assembly of the UUA urged support for independent indigenous Nations, officially opposed the exploitation of Native people and their lands, and insisted on reparations. Again, in 1975, GA openly condemned violence at the Pine Ridge Reservation, and in 1980, LaDonna Harris, President of Americans for Indian Opportunity, offered the prestigious Ware Lecture at our Assembly.

In 1993 and then again in 1997, GA supported justice for and expressed solidarity with Indigenous People. In 2000, a resolution was passed supporting Native American treaty rights and the following year, asked that sports mascots cease using Native American symbols and images. Our connection with Native Nations goes on and on, admirably in the past few decades, with UUs from all over the US joining in witness and protest, beginning in 2016, with Sioux people at Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota.

Perhaps these actions and commitments between 1970 and 2021 can be viewed as redeeming. But there is more to be done and moving forward, this congregation can connect with that work by becoming partners with the Indigenous Circle of Flagstaff and other organizations that promote truth and reconciliation and the fight for Native sovereignty.

As you listen to the stirring testimony of these three remarkable women*, ask yourself, even to the point of being vexed or irritated, or even angry: What reparation do I and my ancestors and my descendants owe to the Native people upon whose land we gather and worship today?

*Cora Maxx-Phillips, Navajo Nation Human Rights commissioner

Annette McGivney, author and activist

Hilary Giovale, member of the Indigenous Circle of Flagstaff, committed to reparations

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