

Living with the Wrongs of the Past—10 9 22 (
UUFM—Rita Capezzi

Our Soul Matters worship theme for October is Courage. And so, we continue the journey today with stories and histories. Let us willingly explore together part of the Unitarian Universalist origin story, in all its complexity and pain and challenge. For we are a community with a history, and we can choose what to do with the stories which we have inherited.

Cherokee writer Thomas King says, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are.” Stories are all we are. And he reminds us that stories are both wondrous things and dangerous things. Stories reside in that space of complexity where simply good and simply bad simply do not exist. And King says, “Once a story is told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories you are told.” I agree with Thomas King—I think we are largely defined by the stories we have learned about ourselves and the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves, both individually and personally as well as culturally and collectively. I agree with King that stories are both wondrous and dangerous.

The Native and the Christian creation stories are an excellent case in point. These are stories that shape worldviews, even if you do not believe that either of them truly describes the creation of heaven, earth, and humans and all that populates our world. These are stories that show us ways of being in relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.

In the Native story, Skywoman, here called Charm, falls, pregnant, from the sky into a watery world. The water animals and birds see her coming and quickly figure out how to catch her. By asking her a series of questions—Can you float? Can you hold your breath?—they together begin to figure out what to do to make sure she lives. They place her on Turtle’s back, until that proves to be too small once she gives birth to the Twins. More questions, more conversation, more cooperation, and over time, mud is brought from far below the surface of the water. With songs and dance and ceremony which Charm brought with her from the sky, land is built among the water. Charm’s Twins grow and shape the land, some places flat and smooth, some places elevated and crooked. And they shape the forests together and made plants and food. And then they made the people. And it is good. It is one beautiful world. And there it sits, this whole beautiful earth floating above the back of the turtle.

As King says, details and the order of things might change from region and group of people, what with the telling and retelling. Some of us know a version of this Indigenous story. I first learned the Haudenosaunee version, back in Western New York. Some of us don’t know this story. But you can hear it, and King unfolds the worldview that the story emphasizes: “Through the good offices of Charm, her twins, and the animals, move by degrees and adjustments from a formless, featureless world to a world that is rich in its diversity, a world that is complex and complete.” This world is at peace and in balance. The world is cooperative.

Some of us know the Native story and some of us don't. But the Christian story, that one would be hard to escape, even if we were never church goers. All the People of the Book—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—know this story. And it is a story that resides within many elements of Western culture—art, literature, architecture, even our legal system. “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” And God made everything in and of the earth, and then made Man and then made Woman. And Man had dominion over the earth. But then came the eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Eve's temptation by the serpent, and Adam's weakness. And you know, then the expulsion out of the Garden into a world of pain and death, of sin and error. As King says, ‘In Genesis, we begin with a perfect world, but after the Fall, while we gain knowledge, we lose the harmony and the safety of the garden and are forced into a chaotic world of harsh landscapes and dangerous shadows.’ This world is at war, defined, not by cooperation but by competition.

The Christian monologue of devastation and competition has drowned out the Native stories of balance and cooperation. One reason for this reality is that the Genesis story of creation is wrapped up with the Western story of domination and hierarchy. And that story can be summarized through understanding the Doctrine of Discovery, “a principle of international law dating from the late 15th century, rooted in a papal decree from Pope Nicholas V in 1452 which sanctioned and promoted the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian territories and peoples. Hundreds of years of decisions and laws continuing right up to our own time can be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery—laws that invalidate or ignore the rights, sovereignty, and humanity of indigenous peoples in the United States and around the world.” So, a theological understanding of reality and relationship became a legal framework to justify conquest—to take, to dominate, and to justify as the will of God. This is a story that dominates the world.

And we have heard the story of Manifest Destiny—the tale that it was fated for white settlers to colonize the North American continent totally, taking all and obliterating the original inhabitants by force. Well, here are the words that codified the Doctrine of Discovery into our laws and governing structures: “In 1823, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Johnson v. M'Intosh* that the discovery rights of European sovereigns had been transferred to the new United States: *‘The United States, then, have unequivocally acceded to that great and broad rule by which its civilized inhabitants now hold this country. [. . .] They maintain, as all others have maintained, that discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or conquest; and gave also a right to such a degree of sovereignty, as the circumstances of the people would allow them to exercise.’*” No charming story of cooperation and mutual regard. Treaties were created to benefit the white settlers and the burgeoning government. Treaties were broken as soon as it proved convenient, and native peoples were displaced repeatedly, taken from the places where they felt sacred attachment as well as sustained a cooperative form of life with the land.

As Americans, we find ourselves in the middle of a story we did not write, and one we also do not want to live. The Doctrine of Discovery has produced devastation among us, and violation within us. Competition has not fostered compassion and respect, it has not honored the web of all existence, and

the principles we affirm and promote are at odds with the dominant culture. In our meditation this morning, Rabbi Kula asks, "How do we live at the traumatic center of death and life?" How, indeed? How to live with the trauma gets worse, too, when we not only witness and benefit from the continued effects of the Doctrine in our world, but we find also that our own faith tradition played a part in creating the sorrow and destruction that we now inherit. "It takes courage ... to endure the sharp pains of self-discovery rather than choose to take the dull pain of unconsciousness that would last the rest of our lives." Our strongest courage comes, of course, when we face the terrible together.

In 1823, when the Doctrine of Discovery was the law of the land in the US, the Supreme Court included Associate Justice Joseph Story. These are his words: "As infidels, heathens, and savages, [the Indigenous Peoples] were not allowed to possess the prerogatives belonging to absolute, sovereign and independent nations." Story upholds the hierarchies of domination, some people more real than others, more sacred, more entitled. And Associate Justice Joseph Story was, from 1844-1845, the President of the American Unitarian Association. Not just a Unitarian, but the leader of our movement. A sad but true reminder that we are not always the liberal prerogative on the right side of history. Stories like this need to lead us to ask how they continue shaping our present lives. "Oh, the ache, oh, the loss."

A particular practice emerged from the Doctrine of Discovery, a practice devastating to Indigenous lives and culture: the Residential School System, whose purpose was to suppress and ultimately destroy indigenous cultures and ways while also creating a subordinate labor force. The Native American assimilation era first began in 1819, with the Civilization Fund Act, encouraging American education to enforce the 'civilization process' of Native Peoples. The act led to federally funded Native American Boarding Schools, which began operating in 1860 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs established the first on-reservation boarding school on the Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington. The first off-reservation boarding school was established in 1879, the Carlisle Indian School located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and founded by Richard Henry Pratt. He modeled the boarding school on an education program he designed while overseeing Fort Marion Prison in St. Augustine, Florida [. . .] after experimenting [. . .] on imprisoned and captive Indigenous peoples. "Pratt served as the Headmaster of the Carlisle Indian School for 25 years and was famously known for his highly influential philosophy which he described in a speech he gave in 1892. He stated, 'A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.'"

And Unitarians had a role in this. The UU World Magazine published this story in the Winter 2009 issue. "In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant invited Protestant denominations to take over the management of American Indian reservations and agencies," in order to "cut down on reported government corruption while simultaneously helping to 'civilize' the Indians. The American Unitarian Association (AUA) accepted charge of the district covering the Colorado reservation occupied by various tribes of the Ute, consisting of about 8,000 people" Four Unitarian ministers were assigned to work with the Ute Peoples on two agencies in the reservation. Their primary mission was to maintain a 'strictly honest administration of government affairs' and 'to meet the Indians in a humane, Christian spirit, saving them from trickery, robbery, intemperance, and other vices of frontier life; and to present to them the better

phases of a Christian civilization.” But their effort to bring the Utes into the dominant culture were ‘largely failures,’ actions well-intentioned, but ultimately unwelcome and unproductive. They did not understand the culture of the people they were working with. Serious trouble started with an Agent Nathan Meeker (not a Unitarian) in 1878 with ‘a Utopian vision of turning the Indians into farmers.’” “Despite documented evidence of poor farming conditions in the area, Meeker kept pushing the Utes to embrace agriculture. Tensions eventually erupted, the military was sent in, Utes and soldiers died, and Meeker was murdered. In response, Congress passed the Ute Removal Act, which in 1881 forcibly relocated the Utes to an Eastern Utah reservation, far from the land with which they had felt spiritually connected. ‘It’s a sad story, and the Unitarians had a part in it. Not as bad people but as people who didn’t know what to do to represent the interests of the Utes.’”

Unitarians had a hand in cutting students hair off, preventing them from speaking in their languages and practicing their religious ceremonies. They were forced to learn manual labor and domestic service only. The only history they learned was that of Western domination, of Manifest Destiny, of the necessary and predictable demise of their ways, as if it was natural rather than enforced. And “These traumatic experiences have been passed down from generation to generation and continue to impact Indigenous communities today.” This is a story of trauma that lives on, traumatizing all our lives, though some more directly and horribly than others.

How can we have a part in shifting our ways of understanding? Associate Justice Joseph Story’s story is not our only story. This is also our story, as Unitarian Universalists: We do not need to believe alike to love alike. We can hear Ancient Mother calling to us, including us, if we allow ourselves to listen. We are part of the “All,” not apart from the earth. Gratitude is the way to see the web of connection. Justice demands truth-telling and repair. “Oh, the ache, oh, the ache, oh, the beauty, the loss, oh, the beauty, the loss, oh, the beauty.” Powerful and wondrous stories. We are part of culture, not above it, but our principles and sources enable us to resist the dominant stories of our time. Here are some things we can do, individually and collectively: Support native business and events. Help people make a living as Indigenous. Learn about your own immigration history, not just the self-congratulatory parts but the deeper parts less in the control of your ancestors. Learn about the history of people other than your people, histories from their perspective. These acts help us to sit with the discomfort of hard and painful realities, with the discomfort of the part our people played. Sit in compassion for all the mistakes that we made.

You’ve heard these stories now—stories of oppression, stories of complicity. But we are truth-seeking and truth-telling people. Our faith is a living tradition that adjusts and changes when we are called to live in better and more inclusive and more wholesome ways. And we seek to live with compassion for all of us in a fraught and imperfect world. We take these stories, do with them what we will. But we can’t say in the years to come that we would have lived our life differently if only we had heard the stories. We’ve heard them now. May we help each other live our lives with awareness and efforts to repair. May we keep going on until we find the love, the hope, the peace, the joy in us and among us and beyond us, goodness that will repair a broken world. May you remember that each of us can live our values in a

good way as you remember also 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 we say together "Amen."

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