

Homily—How Ought We Hold the History of the “Dakota War”?

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In 2019, my spouse and I spent our first Christmas alone since before our children were born, newly together in a new town. And so, the day after Christmas we stood together in Reconciliation Park. We watched the riders coming in from The Land of Memories and the runners coming across the Veterans Bridge. We stood in the cold and listened to the speakers, including the Governor and Lieutenant Governor. We listened to the songs. We listened to the drums. We listened to the stories of the journey from South Dakota and Fort Snelling in 2019 and its connection to the death march in 1863. Though I wore wool socks inside of furry lined boots, a sweater under a parka, gloves inside of mittens, earmuffs under a hat, I was cold, growing colder the longer I stood there on the snowpack. But I was not about to leave until the Dakota people began to. I saw bare ankles and sports shoes in the crowd, t-shirts under thin coats, skin between waistbands and short jackets. The absence of hats and gloves, of earmuffs and mittens. And this cold creeping into my bones was nothing compared to that starvation march the Dakota and the Ho-Chunk endured, or did not, out of the state in 1863.

Though it was a sad ceremony, I relished my presence with it. That creeping cold I felt was more than a physical sensation. The cold was a realization that I now belonged to Mankato, to its history and its legacy. Back in 2015, when I announced to a friend where a call to ministry would take me, he, an Onondaga man, asked me, “Why would you go to that terrible place?” Though part of the Haudenosaunee Nation, the Iroquois, his words taught me that Indigenous people are all connected, that the treatment of one tribe is echoed in the treatment of other tribes. That the treatment of one tribe is an affront to all First Nations and indigenous people who lived on the continent long before Europeans arrived in waves over centuries, bringing with them the Doctrine of Discovery and then Manifest Destiny. Bringing devastation to people and to land then and impacting all our lives today. All you here today, you, too—just like me—you are now part of this history and legacy, whether or not you acknowledge it.

Our Land Acknowledgement, which I have newly re-written with the input of about 20% of the congregation, is a movement toward recognizing and accepting that living here, on this land, with this land, is to share in its whole history. The land itself is the only place where the whole history is held—non-judgmentally but inarticulately. The land cannot speak, not in language we humans understand, anyway. So, we speak that history, and we are obligated to do so with the fullest truth we can find, though always incomplete. Fuller truth comes from multiple stories, not just one story. Fuller truth comes from the intersections of many perspectives, even contradictory ones. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the search for truth and meaning. And so, we continue to search, adding more when we learn about it, rather than sitting with self-satisfaction in some partial truth. This is a difficult position to hold, hard to maintain. Most of us delight in being right. I certainly struggle with that attitude daily. But let us hold truth lightly in our hands, as something like an egg—a true thing, real and whole, and yet subject to cracking open to reveal a new and different thing altogether. Let us soften our gazes, rather than stare with hard eyes at one thing, so that out of the corners of our eyes we might notice more and add to our

vision. May our ongoing efforts—acknowledging and reconciling with the truths of this land and all our relatives—be as a prophesy, calling to the fullest truth that we might speak with bravest fire.

For prophecy is some of the most important work of our Fellowship. To be a voice in the community that speaks the truth, hard or unpopular as it can be. Theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote, I am paraphrasing very slightly, “The prophetic tasks of [a religious community] are to tell the truth in a society that lives in an illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.” Confronting relations between our Euro-American ancestors and our Dakota relatives prophetically is one way we ought to hold the so-called “Dakota War,” in our hearts and in our actions.

Let us tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion.

The Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny. Rooted in these doctrines is a disregard for the knowledges, experiences, and identities of non-Christian peoples. These ideas—created in documents written by powerful men—justified the extraction of so-called resources from any lands that European explorers encountered and could simply conquer. Trade routes and partnerships were established with other empires that could not simply be defeated through violence. But if violence yielded control, violence and control it was. Think of the fur trade that the French established with Indigenous Peoples. The people of the continent made the best arrangements with Europeans that they could, arrangements that benefited their own people and kept life peaceful. But think also of the killing that ensued if Europeans wanted a tract of land or felt threatened by Indigenous people who resisted efforts to deny them use of the land for food and shelter. Land that in Indigenous thought gave its gifts to sustain a people became in European thought “property,” a commodity to possess and to sell, a source of wealth, meant for extraction and sometimes abuse.

This reality is a truth, and it resides alongside the truth that your European immigrant ancestors and mine came to this continent largely poor, wanting more than they could have in European society. They were invited by a government that needed free white people to balance out the Indigenous and the enslaved and the workers from Asian countries recruited for menial jobs. Our immigrant ancestors labored afraid and lonely in unfamiliar and sometimes hostile territory, cut off from family and friends who they might never see again, desperately trying to save connection to their cultures even as they created new ones in efforts to adapt to this land. “What is done cannot be undone. What is done next must now be done with care. These are the wounds we must heal together—grief and anger for all that has been lost, guilt or fear in the reliving, pain that has gone without sufficient comfort, mistrust that was earned, that continues burning still.”

Let us grieve in a society that practices denial.

We know that people in Greater Mankato grieve for the dead settlers but cannot grieve for the exploited Dakota. We know that people also mourn for lost Dakota lives and culture and put to the side the suffering of settler ancestors and settler descendants. We get caught in the binary. If one is our friend, the other must be an enemy. And folk get into a “the Indigenous, they did bad things too” discourse. They warred amongst themselves. Well, yes, tribes competed for the same land, especially

when forced displacement drove groups from east to west, when people struggled in unfamiliar terrain and foods and supply, and shared language and custom was scarce. Yet, we are snared in this binary, and we need to break it open and grieve the devastation to humanity that lives on today in the form of racism and oppression. Europeans made Indigenous people into savages—noble or bloodthirsty, it doesn't matter, yet another binary—so that they could be dismissed, destroyed or exploited. Yes, there were good friendships among individuals. Yes, people intermarried, a sign, sometimes, of affection. Yet the same race-based prejudice that enslaved people endured, any black blood meant perpetual enslavement, so also so-called “half-breeds” could never be accepted into white society. Indigenous and mixed blood could be Christians, they could speak English, they could wear white clothes and eat white foods. But when push comes to shove, they are never white. They may work for whites but not be equal. Boarding schools would try to take the Indian out of the children, but those children would always be treated as less than in white society.

This we must admit, to end the denial so that we might grieve the reality of these terrors and the effects that endure in peoples' lives today. To end denial of the role of our families and the social policies that have benefited ourselves. To break with past exploitation and binary thinking without devolving into guilt and shame. It is the land that holds all of this conflict and bloodshed. The land does not distinguish between friend and enemy, between innocent and demonized. “These are the wounds that seek replacement—not cancellation or denial, wounds we will tend cautiously, applying the salve of understanding, forming scars that mark our history without disfiguring the future we might share.” May we weep the clean tears of true vision, accept responsibility for speaking the truth, and move forward.

Let us express hope in a society that lives in despair.

In this Fellowship, we have done better, and we know we can do better. We work as a community to discuss hard matters, one example being the new Land Acknowledgment. Take a look at the web when Melissa updates it next week. We did not shy away from disagreement. Why should we? Part of our religious tradition is that we don't have to think all the same way. We do not have to agree all the time. We continue to seek the truth, made as it is like a mosaic rather than of whole cloth. But despite disagreement, we try not to be disagreeable. We pledge to be in relationship. That is what covenant is. Covenants are the only things that hold Unitarian Universalists together. And thoughtful, respectful, humble, and gracious discussion is the heart of how to enact covenant. This is not to say that everyone gets what they want. As your religious leader, I do my best to craft messages and statements that reflect both what I think is right and good as well as what you tell me is right and good in this community. I craft as best I can and then we remain open to the change that may come from continued discussion—thoughtful, respectful, humble, and gracious discussion. Not demands. Not put downs. Not rejection. But ongoing dialogue, where a third way is found, where new developments emerge—adaptive, temporary, subject to change but always heart-felt and true and humble. Some of us “are new at this endeavor. New at listening, new at hearing. New at taking enough time to honestly receive one another's stories.”

And this is to live in hope—Listening, hearing, taking time to receive another's story. We cannot know the future, but we can hope for a good one. Hope means living as we want reality to be and bringing the

future into being with our living. This is what it means to have heaven on earth. Not some kind of fruitful paradise or garden of Eden but the way of peace and justice, of equity and liberation, of compassion and companionship lived now. Hope is acting now for the future we want, not simply building it to never see it, though that is a hopeful act, the building of cathedrals. Hope is living in a way that is not yet common or popular but reflects the goodness of reality that you want in your lives—in harmony with your neighbors, leaving as little impact as possible on the land, sharing your own bounty, making your voices heard for justice and liberation.

As Rev. Bowens-Wheatley and Rev. Grubbs urged us, it is up to us to speak prophesy and make the world anew. “The road of history is long, full of both hope and disappointment. In times past, there have been wars and rumors of wars, violence and exploitation, hunger and homelessness, and destruction of this earth, your creation. We have become a global village, with a growing realization of how fragile this earth is, and how interconnected we are to each other and to all creation. We cannot continue to live in the old way. We must make a change, see a new way. A way toward peace with justice and a healthy planet.”

As Rev. Haley reminded us, “You do not need to be already perfect—or even half-way—to belong in this circle where love resides in each of us yet is somehow more than all, where life still pulses and rages and heals and transforms creating us and this day anew once again.” We can all take our broken wings and fly. We can sing together, more than surviving. We can light the world with our hope. As Rev. Barker encourages us, “May the strength of this time together help us to [move] forward. May the wisdom of this experience help us to know our path. May we have the courage to return, as often as necessary, until our way is clear. May we have the perseverance, together, to see it through.”

O, Great Creative Spirit of Love and Life. We have a vision of the good. We yearn for a new way. We yearn with Isaiah, with Harriet Tubman, with Gandhi, with Chief Seattle. May we join “this great cloud of witnesses to a new way of living—the way of peace and justice, the way of justice lived according to the way of peace, the beloved community,” enfolded into Ancient Mother with renewal, respect, and resilience, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed.

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