

UUCSS Sermon, "What Have We Done; Where Will We Go?"

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This summer a group UU's engaged in an extended conversation about this year's UUA "Common Read", a book entitled *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* by Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz. Dunbar-Ortiz, of Indigenous descent, is an historian and writer on Indigenous justice subjects. In our group, we talked about the attempted cultural destruction and ongoing physical displacement of U.S. Indigenous people during the "settlement" of the North American continent. I put settlement in quotes, because of course the Americas had been settled over the previous 20,000 years or more by the people who were there when the Europeans dawned on their scene. The settlers who came would not have survived without them.

Ms Dunbar-Ortiz's retelling of U.S. history presented us with a national heritage from which it is tempting to turn away. Yet, in his services on compassion and the blues, Reverend Joe has shown us that it is through our willingness to encounter suffering that we develop compassion for those who have suffered. Our compassion gives us the strength to acknowledge the difficult truths of U.S. history, and we become free to embark on the process of truth-telling and reconciliation. During our group's conversations, our hearts were opened to both Indigenous peoples and settler-colonists. The settlers were caught up in their culture of presumed superiority and entitlement, and often did not see the dissonance between their avowed Christian beliefs and their actions. The Indigenous people were seeking to be left alone to preserve their lifeways but were forced into conflict with the settlers. The eternal contradictions of being human! We offer you the following perspective on our heritage not to burden, but rather to offer an opportunity to encounter, acknowledge, and reconcile.

In 15th century Europe, people believed that their god had determined that they should be able to claim any land they wanted in North America. Even people who did not believe the Pope was useful for anything else, followed his Doctrine of Discovery that all newly discovered non-Christian lands were open for colonization by European monarchies.

The initial European settler-colonists in northeastern North America thus brought with them a world view that entitled them, under the guise of discovery, to seize Indigenous lands, leading a process of physical and cultural genocide that has continued since

then. Our ancestors attempted to erase tribes and individual Indigenous people physically, and our teachers and leaders have mostly erased them from the glossy historical and cultural narrative that we, the citizens of the United States, use as our origin story.

As Sue said in the welcome at the beginning of the service, we all live here on lands that were inhabited for thousands of years by Mohicans. Let that sink in. The Mohicans of the early 1600s heard about these people invading from the eastern sea, enacting violence, famine and disease among the peoples along the coast, and surging farther inland. The Mohicans' eastern relatives became refugees as they were driven off their land, and came to stay among the people here, in Schaghticoke where the Mohicans took them in generously. European farmers moved closer. Some bought land, others just moved in. Gradually the Mohicans found they no longer had enough land to support their people. They were squeezed out. They didn't fight, they didn't kill and scalp the invaders, instead they moved repeatedly, trying to find land where they could live in peace and be left alone.

They were received generously by other tribes. They went to Stockbridge in Massachusetts, and eventually to the Southern Tier where the Oneidas gave them land. But within ten years they were squeezed out again. They gathered with the Stockbridge Indians, made up of remnants of several Algonquin tribes driven out of land further east, and all moved together to Wisconsin. They still live on a reservation in Bowler, Wisconsin, where they make their way in the world. Reading their website, mohican.com, is an experience in resilience. I hope you will look at it.

The violence that was common during the European invasions was not visited much upon the Mohicans, but they certainly knew about it, as they took in their relatives from Massachusetts and Connecticut, and as they watched the rolling catastrophe come upon them. Dunbar-Ortiz introduced our group to the concept of extravagant violence used against Indigenous peoples as our forebears expanded their settlements. You can destroy, and you can destroy ferociously. Descriptions of what we did are almost impossible to read. Bloody footprints moved across the Indigenous lands. Settler-colonists justified their violence with self-righteousness that sounds grotesque to us today.

Once Manifest Destiny took its course and Indigenous peoples were herded and sealed into reservations, our ancestors believed that they needed to "civilize the Indians". Sometimes with evil in their hearts and other times with the best intentions, assimilationists took over. Even if we assume they were working with the best intentions, many religious groups "worked hard," which often meant abusively, on children far from home, to erase any vestiges of their traditional cultural beliefs. Indigenous children were seized from their and taken to boarding schools across the

US, where they were punished if they spoke their own languages or exercised their lifeways. Although the results were not completely negative for all, the residue of these schools in Indigenous life has “fueled the drive for political and cultural self-determination in the late 20th century.” [\[Julie Davis\]](#)

Other state and federal policies were enacted throughout the twentieth century aimed at constraining tribal lands and identities. We learned about how the land allotment system led to the loss of Indigenous-controlled reservation land, as well as how “termination” policies dissolved recognized tribal entities and forced Indigenous individuals to relocate to cities where the services that were theirs by treaty right were also relocated. How could treaty rights of a tribe, or even of individuals, be sought if the tribe was terminated? Very tricky. Strong Indigenous resistance, supported by some European-Americans, slowed and then stopped and reversed this destructive trend. Occupations of land in the Sixties including Alcatraz and Wounded Knee brought Indigenous voices to the airwaves and newspapers, resulting in reduced Federal pressure to destroy reservations and tribes.

The push to take Indigenous lands did not end, however. In 1960, for example, the Kinzua Dam, a flood control dam on the Allegheny River flooded 10,000 fertile bottomland acres of the 30,000-acre Seneca Reservation in western New York, which had been assured to them by George Washington. Suits and petitions were unsuccessful in reversing this process. You heard a reference to this in Buffy St. Marie’s song, “Now that the Buffalo’s Gone.” And of course, all of us know about the pipeline in the Midwest that will foul water and take more Indigenous land if allowed to go through.

SUE

Liza spoke about the reservation system and the “Indian schools” that shared in the goal of “civilizing” Indian youth or, as is commonly said among indigenous peoples, “killing the Indian and saving the man”. In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant invited Protestant denominations to take over the management of American Indian reservations and agencies in hopes of cutting down reported government corruption while simultaneously helping to “civilize” the Indians more effectively. The American Unitarian Association (AUA), still a relatively young denomination, accepted charge of the district covering the Colorado reservation occupied by various tribes of the Ute, who numbered about 8,000 people.

Four Unitarian ministers were assigned to work with the Utes , and their primary mission, as reported in the American Unitarian Association’s 1877 Yearbook, 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.” Though well intentioned, the agents carrying out these policies brought only distress to the Ute peoples. Hunter-gatherers by tradition, the Utes were encouraged to adopt farming in a country ill-suited to agriculture, leading to crop failures and misery, conflict, and death. After which, Congress passed the Ute Removal Act in 1881 that forcibly relocated the Utes to an Eastern Utah reservation, far from the land with which they had felt spiritually connected. Fortunately, our misguided Unitarians forebears largely bungled their attempts to “bring the Christian civilization to the Indians” and many Ute cultural traditions continue to be practiced on western reservations today.

While these observations about intent and efficacy ring true to us, knowing what we do of our fellow UU’s, William Sinkford, UUA President, decided to move beyond acknowledgement or truth-telling about our denomination’s complicity in 19th century attempts to eradicate Indigenous cultures within U.S. borders. In offering a formal apology to the Utes on behalf of the UUA during the opening service of the 2009 General Assembly, Sinkford moved us toward compassion and reconciliation. He stood before tribal representatives and assembled UU’s and said, “We participated, however ineptly, in a process that stole your land and forced a foreign way of life on you. We ask for your forgiveness, and we promise to stand with you as you chart your way forward.”

Let us now turn our historical revisioning away from our religious community and toward our civic community, Saratoga Springs. I expect that many of you have heard the story of the city’s founding, which tells us that Mohawk men brought their English settler friend, Sir William Johnson, to High Rock Spring in 1767 to partake of its healing waters to cure his ailments resulting from old French & Indian War wounds. This story is displayed on a plaque in High Rock Park, placed right next to the putative spring. This story carries the oft-repeated message that in the NE Whites were invited onto Indigenous lands and embraced as neighbors; that we occupied and assumed ownership of these former Indigenous homelands seems to be a natural outcome of the initial invitation. The thousands of years of Indigenous occupation of these lands prior to the arrival of White settlers is left unacknowledged, along with the fact that Saratoga Springs was part of Mohican territory in the centuries prior to contact. Any recognition of actual Indigenous cultural traditions is also lacking. We are left with the impression, as I used to tell my students, that Indigenous people came to North America just in time to set the stage for real history to begin with the arrival of White European settler-colonists.

I think that it is no coincidence that the structure of this story closely parallels our Thanksgiving story, a holiday whose mythology we are called to re-think. And, like the Thanksgiving story, it is filled with historical inaccuracies. For example, there is no clear historical evidence that Johnson ever visited High Rock or that his wounds were cured

by the healing spring waters. Nevertheless, the mythology surrounding the story, the Indigenous invitation to Whites to partake of the healing waters, has been carried over into the imaginative 19th century print that has been adopted as Saratoga Springs' city seal. Not surprisingly, the seal's is even more misleading than the story. It depicts an Indigenous family that looks more White than indigenous camped next to High Rock spring. The wife/mother figure is bare-breasted (a mode of dress not traditional for local Indigenous folk) and in the background we see a tipi, a type of shelter that is characteristic of Plains, not Northeastern Indigenous traditions. With such a story we erase true Indigenous history for our fair city.

Through learning about these and many other similar stories, the members of our reading group came to see the how our dominant culture has shaped U.S. history to create a sense of American exceptionalism. We were meant to have this land, "from sea to shining sea" and to do something extraordinary with it. Indigenous presence on these lands are simply a sidebar issue that we have had to resolve – by whatever means. In our summary conversation, our group agreed that speaking truth to the traditional narrative frees us from its bondage and asks us to develop compassion for the suffering of U.S. Indigenous peoples and for our forebears who lived with and often acted from fear, along with a false sense of entitlement. Opening up to the hurt of these truths and abandoning our fear is a spiritual process, one that generates humility and invites us to see the human in each other. It allows us start down the path toward truth and reconciliation. This is how we begin to enact Sinkford's promise to the Ute elders, that "we promise to stand with you as you chart your way forward".

We shared a very heavy story, but our group ended with a commitment to find ways to build bridges by continuing to learn about U.S. Indigenous history, to counter false narratives when we hear them, and to change the misleading sign in High Rock Park. We are even thinking about how to celebrate Thanksgiving more truthfully. How about you? Will you join us?