

“This American [Indian] Life”  
Sermon written and delivered by  
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Today’s Reading

“Naming”  
for Vanessa, Toshi, Krista, and Tamarin  
by Joy Harjo  
<http://www.poetrymagazine.com/archives/2003/March03/harjo.htm>

I call my sisters to dress for the stomp dance  
As all the little creatures hum and sing  
in the thick grass around the grounds.  
Lightning bugs are tiny stars  
dancing in the river of dusk.  
Our stomachs are full of meat and fry bread  
and the talk of aunts and uncles.  
Beautiful fire at the center of the dance  
and the dusk has been lit.  
We lace up our turtle shells so we  
can dance into the circle.  
And in this spirit world is the grocery  
store over the hill, and all the houses,  
the river, the sky, and the highway.  
We have been here forever  
say our mother, our father.  
And this is the name we call ourselves  
i tell my sisters,  
this name that gives our legs the music  
to shake the shells--  
a name that is unspeakable  
by those who disrespect us  
--a name with power to thread us through  
the dark to dawn  
and leads us faithfully to the stars.

Remarks before the Hymn:

In the summer of 1979, a songwriter, poet and activist named Carolyn McDade attended the Riverside Church Disarmament Conference in New York City. She, like many women of that time, was deeply involved in the anti-war movement. But most of the visible leaders at events like this one were men. And so when a devout, Catholic feminist woman named Barbara Zanotti, took her place at the microphone as the first speaker at this conference, Carolyn McDade was inspired--so inspired that she wrote a hymn based on the text of that speech. The name she gave that hymn was "Creation of Peace"—we refer to it as Hymn #121-- We'll Build a Land

Sermon

"We'll build a Land" has always been one of my favorite hymns because it speaks of our responsibility to move the world toward freedom and justice. This hymn inspires us to act in the name of peace, to stand on the side of love, to reach out with our hands and speak out with our voices.

We are not waiting for a supernatural being to come save us from ourselves. We are not waiting for the second coming to establish justice on earth. We are the hands and feet of God. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

The words of this hymn are based on the central Israelite story of the Exodus—a story about a peoples' deliverance from slavery into the Promised Land. This story describes the human experience of captivity—both as literal bondage and a spiritual one. The words portray the Promised Land as a blank canvass, a way to start over, an empty space where possibility is born.

For thousands of years, these words have given hope to the Jewish people and to Christians all over the world. Those who have suffered oppression and injustice have found spiritual liberation in this narrative of deliverance. Particularly for African American and Latin American Christians, the liberation theology that grew out of the Exodus theme assured them that God was on their side – the side of the powerless, the oppressed—all the afflicted and all those who mourn.

Recently, some of my UU ministry colleagues who are Native American taught me that the imagery in this hymn does not speak to everyone in the same way.  
Not all the afflicted can find solace in this story.  
Not all those who mourn can place their faith in the Promised Land.

Many of our brothers and sisters who are American Indians hear the Exodus Story as one of conquest—not deliverance.

The God of Exodus does not lead the Israelites to an empty land, but to one that is already occupied by the indigenous people—the Canaanites. And what was God's instruction to the Israelites? Make peace with them? Live beside them in harmony?

No.

As we read in the book of Deuteronomy, “When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it... then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them.”

When the first preachers came to proclaim the gospel on this new land, they often referred to the Native Americans as Canaanites, sending the message that if the Indians could not be converted to Christianity, their annihilation would be justified. Because this message was based on a fundamental biblical narrative that everyone knew, it became a part of the American story. As the new inhabitants moved deeper into North America, this religious narrative became a central theme in the westward expansion. Embedded in the minds of those who shaped policies for this fledgling nation was the belief that this land was given by God, and the existing inhabitants were to be assimilated or destroyed.

As I listened to my colleagues, I realized that I knew very little about American Indian history and their current day struggles. And so I started to read and listen. The more I heard, the more I want to know. The more I learned, the more questions I had. And the answers broke my heart. Not just for our American Indian neighbors, but for everyone who stands just at the edge of the American dream--for the daily triumph of greed over generosity; domination over cooperation.

We hear of the life of American Indians through history books, museums and folklore. It's as though Indians no longer exist in our modern society. They have been silenced, marginalized, commercialized and objectified. One example of this can be found in our own commonwealth, where the Virginia Council on Indians is managed through the Secretary of Natural Resources, along with fish and wildlife, streams and fields and the natural history museum. No wonder some Virginia Indians have taken up the motto, “We're Still Here.”

For 400 years, Virginia has had a complicated relationship with the indigenoussness people of this land. Even though they were the first tribes, they have yet to be recognized by the US government. A bit of good news, though--last month, the House passed the bill and sent it on to the Senate. One of the complicating factors in pursuing federal recognition has been the ongoing legacy of the 34 year bureaucratic reign of a white Supremist named Walter Ashby Plecker. Walter Plecker was the registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, recording births, marriages and deaths from 1912 to 1946. Plecker led the effort to purify the white race in Virginia by forcing Indians and other nonwhites to classify themselves as blacks. There were only two boxes to check—either white or black. If you were Indian, you could not claim your heritage. You could not claim your identity; you could not claim your name. It was “genocide by paperwork.”

There is another kind of bloodless genocide: to kill off a people's cultural identity by forced assimilation. In the 1870s, the US Government separated small children from their families, shipping them off to Indian Boarding Schools.

One of those schools was the Carlisle Indian School, located on an abandoned military post in Pennsylvania. An Army Captain, named Richard Pratt operated this school. His ideas about educating children came from his experience running a prison for Indians. Here was his philosophy: “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.”

By the mid 20th century, children were still being sent to Indian Schools. As recently as 1945, Bill Wright, a Butwin Indian, was sent to the Stewart Indian School in Nevada. He was just 6 years old. Wright remembers matrons bathing him in kerosene and shaving his head. Students at federal boarding schools were forbidden to express their culture — everything from wearing long hair to speaking even a single Indian word. Wright said he lost not only his language, but also his Native American name. When he finally came home, his grandmother called him by his given name, Tutum. “That’s not my name,” he said to her. “My name is Billy—that’s what they told me.”

(<http://www.racialicious.com/2008/05/13/npr-reports-on-the-strange-history-of-native-american-boarding-schools/>)

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It’s tempting to say, well, that was a long time ago and those ideas have been buried with the past. We look around today and find great affinity and respect for Native American culture. Over the years, Native American spirituality has gained popularity among non-Indians. They are attracted to the mystery of sweat lodges, the Sun Dance, and Pow-Wows. One Oglala man observed that a hundred years ago, his people practiced their sacred ceremonies in secret “...for fear of white people finding out and shutting them down; today the fear is of white people finding out and waiting to join in.” (from On the Rez by Ian Frazier).

Unitarian Universalists often use the words of Native American sages in our worship services. Our hymnal lists nine prayers and poems from those traditions. We appreciate Native American spirituality because it aligns with our respect for all beings and the interconnected web. We will play the music, invoke the prayers, and hang dream catchers from our rear view mirror. But very few of us will take the time to learn our shared history and listen to the struggles of our American Indian neighbors.

The trauma of being removed from ancestral homelands, forced to assimilate to a foreign culture, and denied one's core identity may have happened decades ago. But the lifespan of a spiritual wound is longer than any one life. Deep pain, internalized shame, and rage reverberate through the generations.

What can I do to stand in solidarity with my Indian neighbors, friends, and colleagues?

I will keep asking questions. I will keep listening. I will keep learning. This summer, I will join the Building Goodness Foundation that is heading up the project to build the house for Emma and Matthew on the Mattaponi reservation. I will offer my incredible drywall mudding skills I learned in New Orleans this spring,

And when I lead worship, using the words of Native Americans, I will find out where the words came from and connect them to a people and to a place.

This morning's chalice lighting comes from the Ute Indians. They are descended from the Shoshone people. Before the arrival of European settlers, they roamed over vast areas of Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. At one point in the mid-1800's, a treaty with the United States guaranteed the Utes 12 million acres in Colorado and Utah in perpetuity. Today, they own just 1.3 million acres.

The Unitarians have an interesting connection to the Ute Indians. In 1871, President Grant charged the nation's churches to take on the education of Indian children. Their charge was to Christianize the Indians to aid in their "civilization." That policy ended seven years later, after a violent uprising resulted in the death of Nathan Meeker, the Unitarian agent to the Ute people. Nathan Meeker was from Ohio and came to the Utes with a dream of building a utopian agricultural community. He believed that farming was the solution to the so called, "Indian problem."

But the real problem was that the Ute Indians were not farmers. They were hunters and fishers. They were people of the mountain. The Ute were among the first gain horses from the Spaniards in the 1630's. On horseback, they traveled wide stretches of mountain lands where frost covered the ground 12 months a year.

Nathan Meeker's utopian vision, his worldview shaped by the narratives of his European Christian culture, collided with the Utes. A violent border skirmish between the US Cavalry and the Ute warriors led to the removal of four Ute bands from Colorado to a small corner to Eastern Utah.

In a letter home, one cavalry soldier wrote that within days of the Ute Indian removal, white settlers were already laying down railroad tracks and laying out towns. One of those towns was Grand Junction, Colorado, which was opened for settlement on the very day the Ute were removed from their ancestral homeland.

I have no doubt that the Unitarian men held good and noble intentions in their relations with the Ute. I have read first hand accounts from the Unitarian leaders of the time and

they seemed sincere in their desire to help. But they were trapped in a mindset that understood civilized society in just one narrow way.

Are we similarly trapped in a mindset? In some ways, I think we are. Take this hymn, #121. Unitarian Universalists have a tendency to see ourselves as the rescuers. We'll build it. We'll bind up the broken. We'll bring good tidings to the afflicted and those who mourn.

But let us not forget that we are also broken and we are afflicted and we mourn. We are captives of our stuck patterns of thinking and doing. We are captives of drink and drugs and overfunctioning. This song is as much for us as it is for anyone.

This hymn is worth singing. Because it strengthens our moral imagination and helps us to envision a future when we who are faint and weak in spirit stand strong, and justice shall roll down like waters.

And now, with a little bit more knowledge and some deeper understanding, let us sing together the last two verses, verses 3 and 4 of hymn #121.

Resources Used:

- On the Rez by Ian Frazier
- Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World, Ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah.
- Workshop at 2009 UUA General Assembly: Ute & Unitarians