

# “Healing for the Wounds of Colonialism”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on November 29, 2020

Our reading this morning is from the book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. The book presents a perspective on the history of this country that is very different than the one I learned growing up. Last year it was chosen by the UUA to be the common read book for congregations across the country. Some of you may have read the book. In January and February Bill G. and Sandy K. led a 3 session discussion group of the book. There was so much interest that a second discussion group was scheduled. When the coronavirus arrived here in March, however, that second discussion group was cancelled. Currently plans are in the works to hold second discussion group some time in 2021.

It is obvious from the reading Carolyn shared with us that this book is not light reading. Each of the elements of colonialism mentioned in the reading, namely white supremacy, slavery, genocide and land theft are painful to face. Considering any one of these can be a significant challenge. Thinking about all of them at once can seem daunting or even overwhelming. Yet it is because of these elements of colonialism that most of us are currently living on this continent. Realizing this can lead to strong emotions—emotions such as sorrow, grief, guilt or even shame. Sorrow and grief are appropriate and necessary in order to recognize the severity of the wounds caused by colonialism. Guilt and shame, however, aren't beneficial to a healing process, whether that healing is related to the ongoing impacts of colonialism or a physical illness we might have. If we want to foster healing, each of us needs to find a way to recognize guilt and shame when they begin to arise. Only when we recognize these emotions can we move through and beyond them to emotions that will provide the energy and the impetus that is necessary to allow and support healing.

So before I go any further, I want to share the following statement by Rio Ramirez, a young man of the Tohono O'odham [toe-HO-no AWT-am] Nation, one of the indigenous peoples of this continent. “Knowing this country's history is the first step we need to take in the long process of repairing our people and our land. Look at the problems our people have now with things like substance abuse, lack of identity, and diabetes. Look at the crisis the earth is in with climate change and pollution. Our history tells how this came about. Sometimes when people learn about the broken treaties, relocation, and genocide, they feel guilty about what happened to Native Americans. Those feelings are okay as long as we move past them and try to help each other now as human beings. No one here today made these things happen. But we are the ones who are living now, and we need to understand that we are all in this together.” The last two lines deserve repeating. “No one here today made these things happen. But we are the ones who are living now, and we need to understand that we are all in this together.”

So what will it take to begin the healing that is needed? I would suggest that the place to begin can be found in our Fourth Principle: “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” As I stated earlier, what I was taught about the history of this country is very different than what actually happened. Let me offer an example. Like many of you, I was taught a story of the first Thanksgiving that took place 400 years ago in a place we now call Plymouth, Massachusetts. In that story a group of European colonists known to us as “Pilgrims” held a feast with a group of indigenous people from the area. When I was young I was taught quite a bit about the colonists, but very little information was shared about the indigenous people who were members of the Wampanoag [WAMP an og] Nation. I wasn't taught that the land the colonists settled on had been a Wampanoag settlement or that the prior Wampanoag village had been decimated by a plague prior to the Pilgrims arrival. That plague was yet another destructive element of colonial expansion, an element that was unintentionally brought to this continent years before by Europeans. I learned late in grade school that at

least one of the Native people who reached out to the Pilgrims spoke some English. It wasn't until I became an adult that I learned that person's name, Squanto. Squanto had learned English years earlier after he had been captured, sold into slavery, taken to England and after several years, managed to make his way back to his native land. By the time he made his way back to his former village, the location the Pilgrims eventually settled on, not a single person was left. All of his family and nearly all of the members of his village had lost their lives to the plague. In spite of all that he had suffered, Squanto provided essential support to the colonists who settled at Plymouth. He assisted them in spite of the fact that their intent was to take possession of and colonize the land on behalf of King James of England. Again, I didn't learn this part of the story in this way when I was in grade, Jr. High or High school.

You might ask why I feel it is important to share all of this today. Over the past few years, as truth has been brutally assaulted in this country, I have been reminded of how important it is to challenge myths. We need to challenge myths if we hope to ever come to know the truth, the full truth. The story I was taught as a child about the origins of Thanksgiving is, at best, a partial truth. Because of what I know today, I would call it a myth—a myth that holds bits of truth but obscures the truth that is required to foster healing. Today, more than ever, we need to seek out the truth. And we need to teach the truth to the children of our country—many of whom are still learning the myth of Thanksgiving that I learned so many years ago.

I believe allowing children to learn the truth is important. Because of my belief, I am part of a small group, including Bill and Sandy who I mentioned earlier, who are working to get a program that provides a more accurate and complete history into the public schools in Montana. The title of the program is "Roots of Injustice, Seeds of Change: Toward Right Relations with America's Native Peoples." It is 2 hours long and provides a historical perspective that is consistent with what Dunbar-Ortiz writes about in her book. Some of you have attended an adult version of this program and know the painful truths it contains. There is a young person's version of this workshop that is less involved but just as effective at conveying the difficult truths about the colonization of this continent. It is important for our children to learn the truth because if they, and we, remain ignorant of the truth, they and we will perpetuate the myths that continue to harm us and the Native Peoples of this land. And if we continue to believe the myths, there is little if any chance we will take the steps needed for all of us to heal.

A week ago today, Rabbi Mark Kula had an article in the Bozeman Chronicle titled "Giving Thanks and Being Thankful." In that article he wrote, and here I quote: "On Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Eastern Montana, Thanksgiving is viewed as "kind of like Columbus Day for Native people." Many Native Americans call this day "Takesgiving Day," more accurately reflecting what transpired 400 years ago. We are in a time of reckoning past behaviors and current sensibilities in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion."

I agree with Rabbi Kula that we are in a time of reckoning. I don't know for certain his motivation for writing about how Native people of this land think about Thanksgiving. I imagine that the impact on the Jewish People of the Shoah, or Holocaust, that Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz mentioned, may have been a factor. Today, the people of this country need to remember and address the white supremacy, the slavery, the genocide and the land theft that has been and continues to be perpetuated in this country.

Notice that I said continues to be perpetuated. As recently as March of this year, the current administration in the White House took action to end the federal recognition of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. Had that effort succeeded, the U.S. government would have taken possession of the 300 acres of Wampanoag land on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Thankfully that blatant attempt to steal the land was thwarted through a ruling by a U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C.

The European colonizers didn't just take the lands of indigenous people. As we heard in our Story for All Ages, the colonizers also took the children of the Native people. Countless Native children, like Ashley's uncle, were taken from their parents and sent away from their native lands to boarding schools. The purpose of these boarding schools was to "assimilate" the native children into the European culture. Another, probably more accurate way to describe the intention behind these schools was to kill the Indian in the child. One way

to accomplish that intention was to prevent the children from speaking their native language. Far too often the children in these schools suffered deep emotional, psychological and/or physical wounds, sometimes even death. Too few of us know about these schools and the long term damage they did. When I lived in Flathead County, Montana, I got to know a member of the Blackfeet Nation who spent several years of his childhood in one of these Boarding schools. He never told me about his experience in that school. In time however, I came to learn some of the long-term damage his time there had caused. The damage didn't occur just during his time at the school. And the damage wasn't limited just to him or the others at the school. The damage continued into his adult life and led to children I knew and worked with being harmed. The damage the Boarding Schools caused continues to this day.

In September of this year, a bill titled "Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policy Act" was proposed in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill was introduced by Representative Deb Haaland from New Mexico. Representative Haaland is an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe. As the name of this act indicates, getting to the truth, the whole truth, is essential for healing to occur. The fact that this bill was introduced is an important and positive step. I find it disappointing, to say the least, that it has taken so long for such a bill to come before the elected leaders of this nation.

That it has taken so long is one indication of how much denial the people of this country have in regards to the true and full history of our nation. As a nation, we need to continue to confront our collective denial of the white supremacy that is at the core of our country's founding and functioning. For it is only through moving past our denial that we will be able to take the steps which will be required to allow healing for the wounds of colonialism. May we all commit ourselves to questioning, and even challenging, the myths about our nation that perpetuate harm and injustice. And may we seek out and actively participate in the healing that is needed by learning and telling the truth about our nation's history.

So may it be.