

“Cultivating Relationships with Indigenous Peoples”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Tomorrow, October 11th, is a holiday. Actually it is two holidays, Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Since 1971 Columbus Day has been a national holiday. It commemorates Christopher Columbus’ 1492 voyage across the Atlantic to an island in the Bahamas. That voyage, along with three subsequent ones he made, were precursors to widespread exploration and colonization of the Americas by Europeans. Indigenous Peoples’ Day is not a national holiday. Numerous states, counties and cities across the U.S. have adopted Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a holiday since South Dakota did so in 1989. In some states, Indigenous Peoples’ Day was established to replace Columbus Day. The City of Bozeman proclaimed Indigenous Peoples’ Day a holiday in 2016. And just two days ago, President Biden signed a proclamation designating October 11, 2021, Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

In a number of ways these two holidays are incongruent to the point of being complete opposites. Columbus Day recognizes one man for a particular accomplishment. Indigenous Peoples’ Day recognizes many, many people—people of all ages and genders. It recognizes them not for what they may or may not have done, but for who they are. Implicitly, Columbus Day lifts up the colonization of this nation by people of European descent. That colonization was based on a number of edicts set forth by Roman Catholic Popes in the 15th century. Those edicts asserted that Christians had a divine right, and with that right came an obligation. The obligation was to claim the land and property of non-Christian inhabitants of “discovered and to be discovered” lands and to enslave or kill the inhabitants to accomplish this. The inhabitants of this continent—the inhabitants the Papal decrees ordered to be vanquished and dispossessed—are the very people Indigenous Peoples’ Day honors and celebrates. Indigenous Peoples’ Day acknowledges the worth, the dignity and the rights of the people whose ancestors lived on this land centuries before Columbus, the Popes and even Christianity existed. As the examples I just gave indicate, these two holidays provide stark contrasts for us to contemplate. These two holidays exemplify how seriously divided the people of this nation are.

So on the eve of these two holidays, I would invite us to consider how we might seek to lessen at least a portion of the divide that exists—the divide between people of European descent and Indigenous peoples. I specifically identify people of European descent because the majority of UUFB members have an ancestral connection to Europe. Along with that, for a significant portion of this nation’s history, people of European descent have constituted a majority of the population. It is past time for those of us who are part of what some refer to as “the dominant culture” to come to terms with the history that made it possible for us to be where we are now. Seeking to cultivate relationships with Indigenous Peoples can help us learn about our history from those who view the history of this land from a very different perspective.

Our Story for All Ages this morning may offer us a chance to recognize one aspect of the different perspective I am referring to. Many tribes of Indigenous peoples of this land have a version of the story we heard about the three sisters and the boy who took them to his family’s lodge. In the process of planning today’s service, I shared this story with a few people. After reading the story two of these people shared with me the thoughts and questions that came up for them. One wondered how this story fit with the title of my sermon, “Cultivating Relationships with Indigenous Peoples.” The other told me that they weren’t able to discern the moral, or the teaching, the story held. I am grateful to those two people for what they shared with me. What they shared helped me realize that the meaning, and the lessons, of this story may not be obvious or clear to many of us since this story is outside of our cultural upbringing. This story comes from a very different way of perceiving and relating to the world than many of us have. I don’t know if the story has a specific moral, as I understand the concept of a moral in a story. I do know, however, that it holds and communicates a basic truth that Indigenous people passed on from generation to generation—a truth that would be beneficial for us all to recognize and understand.

The three sisters in the story are plants. The little sister is the bean family of plants. The middle sister is the squash family of plants. And the oldest sister is the corn family of plants. At the very outset of the story we are told that these three sisters, these plants, have always been very close and they were never apart from one another. These three plants provided a significant amount of the food that many Indigenous people of this land subsisted on. The native people of this land understood and respected the close relationship these plants had with one another. With this understanding, when Indigenous people planted these three families of plants they intermingled them, in very specific ways, such that the beans grew up the corn stalks and the squash covered the ground to keep the soil from drying out from the sun's rays. I would ask you to imagine such a garden of beans, squash and corn—a garden where there are no rows and no significant or intended separation between the three types of plants. Take a moment to let this image develop and expand.

Now I would invite you to recall images of fields of beans, corn and/or squash that you have seen as they are typically grown in this country today. These crops are now grown separately, often covering many acres of ground. In these monoculture fields, any plant other than the one that was planted is treated as an invader that needs to be removed.

The indigenous people recognized the interconnection of these three plants. Therefore they didn't grow them separately. The Indigenous people recognized the difference between, as well as the equal importance and value of, each of these plants. Our current growing practices, on the other hand, focus on growing each plant in its own separate space. While each plant is important and valuable, they do not share the same fields.

The European perspective in regards to these plants is analogous to how the Indigenous people have been perceived and treated. Many people of European descent viewed Indigenous people not just as different, but as undesirable and inferior. From the European settler's perspective, Indigenous people had to be removed from the land in order to make way for the ever expanding population of European immigrants and colonists.

This brings me back to a statement I made earlier about how divided the people of our nation are. I would assert that the cultural perspective of the European colonists—a perspective that continues to be widely held—has been a significant factor in bringing us to the point of separation we find ourselves at today. I would suggest that it would be beneficial for us to move away from this practice of only allowing like to associate and intermingle with like. How different would this nation, would the world be, if we would learn how to recognize and respect interconnectedness in the way that the story presents?

Our Seventh Principle calls us to have "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Our Sixth Principle sets forth "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." Here at UUFB, I have witnessed many ways that we, as a Fellowship, have sought to live into these principles. As individuals and as a Fellowship I am aware of ways we have sought to live into these principles with Indigenous Peoples. Let me offer a few examples. The first example involves today's offering. Our offering this morning will go to the Native American Rights Fund, which is the oldest and largest nonprofit legal organization asserting and defending the rights of Indian tribes, organizations, and individuals nationwide. In the past year we have also donated Sunday morning offerings to the Lodge Grass food bank, the Northern Cheyenne emergency fire relief fund and Utah Diné Bikéyah—a Native American organization that worked to re-establish protection for Bears Ears National Monument. The Fellowship, along with the UUA, has also demonstrated support for the Crow Tribe in southeastern Montana. Both the Fellowship and our parent organization, the UUA, have financially supported the Mountain Shadow Association, which is focused on the Crow Tribe. Here is a statement from the Mountain Shadow Association website. "Mountain Shadow Association is a community-based, Native-American non-profit focused on repairing and restoring relationships between children and their parents, citizens and their community, families and their culture, individuals and their environment."

I specifically mention the Fellowship's and UUA's recent efforts with the Crow Tribe for a reason. That reason involves a connection our Unitarian forbears here in Montana, as well as in Boston, had with the Crow Tribe. One hundred thirty-five years ago this month, the American Unitarian Association established the

Montana Industrial School for Indians on the Crow Reservation. The founders of the boarding school were Rev. Henry F. Bond, a Unitarian minister, and his wife, Pamela. The school closed after a decade when the federal government withdrew the \$108 per pupil annual subsidy. If you know anything about the history of such boarding schools in this country and Canada, you are aware that they often caused at least as much damage, if not more damage, than the benefit they provided. I know very little about the Montana Industrial School for Indians specifically, but I do know that the intention underpinning the federal government's funding of such schools was to dismantle Native American communities and culture.

With that history, it seems appropriate that our Fellowship and the UUA would have an interest in cultivating a relationship with the Crow Tribe and the people of the Crow Nation today. Instead of seeking to educate, as was supposedly the purpose of the Montana Industrial School for Indians, this time we might want to consider seeking to learn. We might want to consider seeking to learn with and from the Crow people about how to heal divides, not just between our communities, but also within our communities. I want to point out that my focus here is not on each of us individually cultivating relationships with an individual indigenous person. Instead, I am focusing on us collectively, as a Fellowship, working to establish a relationship with the people of the Crow Tribe through the tribal leadership as well as other organizations that already exist. I would suggest that such a focus, on the group instead of on the individual, takes us back to one of the differences that exists between Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples' Day. Columbus Day is about an individual. Indigenous Peoples' Day is about a group of people. Our dominant culture focuses on the individual because our culture values the individual very highly. We may even value the individual above the community, as the resistance to taking protective actions related to the spread of the COVID virus clearly demonstrates. Indigenous culture tends to hold a higher value on the community, as we heard in the descriptions of both the Native American Rights Fund and the Mountain Shadows Association.

So I wonder, as a Fellowship, might we seek to cultivate a relationship with the Crow Tribe? If the answer is yes, how might we go about doing so? And if the answer is yes, do we have the commitment, the humility and the courage that will be required to face the truth about the trauma that Columbus' voyages to this continent brought to the Crow people? I hope so. If we could establish heightened awareness and mutual trust, we just might be able to find ways to work and learn together. We might find ways to work and learn together to address the issues that are currently threatening our communities, our nation, our world and even life on our planet.

So may it be.